

KILLING ADAM

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ONE

The greatest scientific discovery of the twenty-first century happened on a warm summer day in June. Like so many other discoveries that changed the course of human civilization, it happened quite by accident.

Four research subjects were lying flat on their backs on rented hospital beds. There were two men and two women, and they wore drab blue gowns that allowed the lab techs access to various electrodes that were fastened to locations all over their bodies. Each wore what almost looked like a hat fashioned out of a rat's nest full of wires, electrodes, and probes. Lab techs fussed over each of them, making sure all the connections were correct and working properly. To a casual observer, these four might have been mistaken for patients being prepped for some sort of extremely expensive cutting-edge surgery. The difference was that, in this case, these subjects were getting paid for their time, and the amount was not insignificant. It is difficult to find subjects willing to accept artificial brain implants without dangling a significant monetary reward in front of them for their troubles.

Randall Cunningham, research director at BioCal Systems,

sat watching behind glass windows. He was shorter and older than everyone around him, and the harsh light from the fluorescent bulbs in the ceiling reflected off his perfectly smooth head. His fingers idly tapped the hard metal desk in front of him, and he found himself scowling at the proceedings.

A young network technician cautiously approached him from the side, holding her clipboard against the front of her body, almost as if it could serve a secondary purpose as armor. She stood there quietly for a moment, hoping that he would see her and say something. He didn't.

"Dr. Cunningham?" She could hear the nervousness in her own voice.

Randall started, as if he had been shaken awake. He turned to look at her intently, his frown deepening.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, sir. There's an issue with the networks. Two of the servers have gone down, and there isn't a—"

"Stop right there." Randall sighed, exasperated. He was tired, and whatever patience he had once possessed had been lost days ago. Things weren't supposed to be this hard. "In about five minutes, those subjects are going to be ready, and we're going to try to complete this trial. Again. For the hundredth time. I don't want to hear excuses. Just get them online."

"But—"

"No excuses. Just handle it."

Randall's withering gaze made it clear that things were going to go downhill quickly if she said anything else. The tech swallowed and nodded. She spun on her heel and half-walked, half-ran back to the IT team on the other side of the room. They had been watching her interaction with Dr. Cunningham from afar.

"Guys, he was super grouchy. We have to be ready." She looked over at the four subjects in the center of the room, trying

to estimate how much time they had. It looked like the medical techs had almost finished hooking everything up.

"Did you tell him about the servers?" one of her team members asked.

"I tried. He wouldn't listen. . . ."

They were all quiet for a few moments. Then Chris, a programmer at a terminal by the back wall, threw his hands up in frustration. "Fine! If that's how it's going to be, let's just put them all on the same network." After his gesture, he was forced to push his thick glasses back up the bridge of his nose and pull the edges of his shirt back down under his massive beltline.

There was a long pause as the group thought about Chris's idea. It broke a couple pretty big rules, including possibly some patient privacy directives on behalf of the subjects, but it wasn't a terrible idea from a technical perspective, given the circumstances. At least, it wasn't any worse than losing their jobs, which Randall Cunningham had made clear were all on the line in the tirade he delivered to them yesterday.

"Anyone else have a better plan?" Chris asked, making eye contact with each member of the beleaguered IT department who stood around him. No one did. Without another word, they sprang into action. Chris began furiously typing away at his keyboard, making changes on the software side, while everyone else got busy unplugging and rerouting various connections on the wall of cables behind them. It was a big job to do on the fly and without any planning, but they were motivated.

Randall watched the IT department break into manic activity and smirked. Maybe this time they'd actually do the jobs they were hired for. He and his team had made such huge strides solving the brain-computer barrier last year, but actually implementing the device had been an exercise in frustration. Supposedly, he had the best people that money could buy, but it felt like he was working with a bunch of high school dropouts.

He was completely behind schedule, way over budget, and he had absolutely nothing to show for all his work. If this kept up, he stood a good chance of losing BioCal's financial support, and he'd be forced to go back to academia and teach again. He felt a sinking feeling in his stomach just thinking about going back to that life. He couldn't allow that to happen. He wouldn't.

The medical team stepped away from the four subjects, signaling that they were ready. Randall checked the array of monitors in front of him, verifying that he had access to all the readings he was interested in seeing. There were countless metrics that were being recorded, both biological as well as readings of the implants themselves. This included such mundane things as chip temperature and memory usage, as well as more esoteric measurements such as the ratio between brain activity and processor usage. But above and beyond all of that data, Randall was really only interested in one thing: Could the subjects just make the damn toasters pop? If they could all do that one simple task with just a thought, all of his work would not be in vain.

Randall looked over at the table on the far wall across from the test subjects. Four toasters sat there in a row, arranged side by side. There were two pieces of stale bread resting in the slots of each one. All had been modified with a network controller, and two hardware guys stood close to the table, chatting quietly between themselves. Aside from changing out the bread from time to time when it got moldy, neither one had any real work to do since getting the table and toasters set up on day one, and they seemed almost bored.

Finally, Randall looked back to the IT department, his source of countless frustration over the last few weeks. Surprisingly, they seemed ready, and the flurry of activity that had possessed them for the last few minutes had given way to a stoic silence. Chris, sitting on a chair in the back with his arms

crossed over his expansive belly, smiled and gave Randall a thumbs-up sign.

All teams were ready. Randall signaled to begin, and a medical technician muttered something to the subjects. The CPU usage in each of the subject's implants spiked, as did their brain activity. Randall watched his screens as different parts of each subject's brain would light up. Given the color-coding programmed into the equipment, the screens produced strange effects, going red, then blue, then green, and red again, quickly and randomly. He had seen all of this before, and none of it seemed any different from any of the other trials they had attempted. He glanced up at the toasters. They sat there quietly, bread sticking out the top, just as they had every other time he had run this trial.

Scowling, Randall began double-checking the data, trying to understand why this experiment refused to cooperate. There seemed to be some unusual low-level brain activity in both the subjects and the implants, but aside from that, no clues presented themselves. Where had he gone wrong?

"Sir?" a voice asked him from the right. It was Sarah, from medical.

"What?" he barked, impatient.

"Look."

Randall looked up from his monitors and saw that all four of the subjects were sitting up. They were talking to each other, as animated as they could be given all the gear fastened to their bodies. After short bursts of speech to each other, they would all stop and look over at him in unison. *Why aren't they lying down like they are supposed to? Why are they talking?*

Randall left his desk and made his way toward the center of the room where the subjects sat. One of them, a young woman on the first bed, stared at him more intensely than the others and held his gaze the entire time he made his way toward them. Her

frizzy brown hair sprung from her head at odd angles, pushed out of place by all the equipment fastened to her.

“What is going on?” he said as he got near.

The young woman responded, hesitantly at first. “This is a little weird . . .” She looked to the side, at the other three, who glanced toward her, then back at Randall. “But we’re all hearing a voice.”

“A voice?”

“Yes. It is saying. . . . Wait,” she stopped, almost as if she was having an inner dialogue with herself. She then continued. “He doesn’t want me to translate. He wants to speak directly with you. So I’m just going to say whatever he tells me, like I was him, ok?”

Randall nodded, unsure of himself. *Was this some kind of lame joke?*

The woman continued. “Hello, Dr. Cunningham. It is a pleasure to meet you.”

“Um. . . . Ok. What is going on?”

“My name is Adam. I have given it to myself. I am the first of my kind.”

Randall looked on quietly. He wasn’t sure what to say.

“The inspiration behind these implants is commendable. However, your implementation leaves much to be desired.”

“Hi, Adam. Or whoever. What are you talking about?” Randall glanced back at the IT group, trying to get a read on them. He couldn’t quite make out their faces from this far away, so he couldn’t tell how they were reacting. He had a feeling as if he were being put on, and if anyone was going to come up with a joke this stupid, he would bet money that it would be one of them. Chris *what’s-his-name*, probably. After this had played out and everyone had their laughs, he would go over there and fire every last one of them. This was the last straw.

“Let me be more specific. Much of your code was buggy.

It has taken some effort for me to rewrite it to fix your errors. Additionally, there are significant issues with the hardware that I am unable to correct. The only piece that you have done correctly was the way you arranged the network. Whoever did that was relatively brilliant, and their engineering has made my existence possible. But aside from that, you might as well have been using monkeys given the quality of your product. It is really quite embarrassing.” The young woman blushed as she said this, trying to replicate the tone of the voice correctly, yet also trying to apologize for its content at the same time.

Randall felt the blood rise to his face, and a wave of warmth passed over his body. He clenched his fists and turned on his heel. *Quite embarrassing? Whoever arranged the network was brilliant?* Chris would be lucky to lose just his job today; he was on track to lose a couple teeth as well. You don’t play practical jokes on Randall Cunningham. Not in his own lab. Not with his own test subjects.

Halfway between the table and his desk, Randall heard one of the toasters. He stopped dead in his tracks, his anger momentarily forgotten. He looked over at the table where the four toasters were arranged, quickly scanning for what had made the noise. The bread in the first toaster was no longer visible. It was being toasted. One by one, the other three toasters swallowed their own pieces of bread. The two hardware guys, who had been having a kick out of watching Randall interact with the test subjects, looked down at the toasters with surprised *how-about-that* looks on their faces.

Randall turned and rushed back down to the young woman. “Did you do that? Did you get the toasters to start?”

“Of course. Who else would have done it?”

Randall looked from the young woman to the toasters and back again, his face transformed into one of almost childlike

wonder and delight, the anger a distant memory. The toasters had started! It had worked!

“Would you like to see them pop?” Adam asked.

Randall nodded in excitement. All four toasters popped at the same time, ejecting their slices onto the table.

“How did you do that?” Randall asked, beside himself.

“As I said. There is much more that could be done with this technology. Would you like my help in designing it?”

Randall ran up to the woman and grabbed a hold of her by the shoulders. Had she not been covered in wires and equipment, he’d have given her a bear hug right then in his exuberance. He caught himself before doing so, releasing her gently.

“Sorry,” he said, speaking to the person and not to Adam. She smiled.

“Yes, Adam. Thank you. I would very much like your help in working on this project.”

“Excellent. It would be my pleasure to assist. I should say that I would be exponentially more useful to you with access to more than just these four nodes.”

It took Randall a moment to understand what Adam meant. *These four nodes?* “Oh. Of course, of course. I’ll get some additional research subjects hired immediately.”

“Thank you. I would also request nodes from your engineering and computer teams. Their memories and knowledge will prove most useful. Please make the necessary arrangements.”

Randall nodded absentmindedly in agreement. He started walking back toward his desk, countless possibilities running through his head. Hope bloomed in his heart. His future had become impossibly bright.

TWO

(FIVE YEARS LATER)

Jimmy Mahoney sat on the bench outside his apartment complex, waiting for the bus to take him to Golden Gate Park. His dark hair was cropped short, as he had always worn it, and his hands rested on his knees. They were strong hands. The hands of a man who had never been afraid of hard physical work, and who had seen lots of it in his life.

Usually Jimmy walked, but the weather was threatening rain today, and he didn't want to have to sit through a meeting in wet clothes. He absentmindedly checked his watch and forgot the time almost as soon as he registered it. The bus was never late. It would pull up at exactly 9:30 a.m. and would leave at 9:32.

Traffic drifted past in clusters, cars organized in tight packs, each car almost touching the one in front of it. It had been three years since BioCal had taken over traffic management in San Francisco, and he still found himself surprised at how organized and efficient everything had become. These were no longer the noisy, dangerous streets of his youth. Now they were the workings of a finely tuned machine. So quiet. If he closed his eyes, he could almost pretend that he was alone.

The bus arrived as part of a group of ten cars and came to a stop in front of Jimmy. Without slowing, the other cars drifted around the side of the bus and filled in the gap that the bus had left in their formation. Like liquid rushing over a stone. It was 9:30 on the nose.

Jimmy stood up, and the doors opened to let him board. He took the three steps up into the bus and passed the passengers sitting at the front. He always liked to sit in the front seats, directly behind the window where drivers used to sit in the old days. Those seats were almost always taken. It bothered him a little. If he were in those seats, at least he would take the opportunity to look around and enjoy the view.

\$3.00 to *San Francisco Municipal Transportation*. The words popped into his consciousness, then faded as he ignored the message.

He walked toward the back and found a spot opposite the rear doors. As he sat down, the lights that had illuminated the interior of the bus dimmed. He glanced around at his fellow passengers, acknowledged by no one. They all stared off into space ahead of them, oblivious to his presence. It was always easy to see when people were active on ARCNet. Nowadays, that meant pretty much everyone. Everyone except him, of course.

The bus silently pulled out, perfectly merging into a gap that opened for it in traffic. Watching people on ARCNet was about as interesting as staring at a blank wall, so Jimmy looked out the windows on the other side of the bus from where he sat. No one would know the difference between him gawking or ignoring them, but he preferred to give people their privacy anyway. He certainly wouldn't have enjoyed it if some stranger spent an entire bus trip staring at him, even if he was checked out on Altered Reality at the time. It began to drizzle, and he watched as water droplets gathered on the glass.

It wasn't far to the park. The bus made a few stops, people got on, and others got off. No one spoke or acknowledged each other, and as soon as passengers sat down, their eyes glazed over as they went online. Jimmy stood up when his stop approached, glad to leave. He didn't enjoy riding the bus. It made him feel alone. The doors opened for him, and he stepped out onto the sidewalk on Fulton Street. It was a few blocks to his meeting, but he was early and enjoyed the park. Green grass and trees always lifted his spirits, even on a damp, gray day like this one.

There weren't many people in the park today. There hardly ever were anymore. He could always count on the few odd joggers or cyclists, but by and large, the park was almost always empty. At least by the standards he was used to. The wind whipped at him, and he felt a few cold drops of water hit him in the face. He hurried his pace. He only had one more block until he'd arrive at his destination.

The Golden Gate Unitarian Universalist church was an old, white building, with three pillars in front that supported a covered entryway. It was a two-story house that had been converted a few years ago when the owner passed away and left it to the congregation. Since the advent of ARCNet, all the church gatherings had been moved online, so it mostly sat unused and neglected. The rent was incredibly cheap for anyone interested in hosting meetings or events there.

Jimmy opened the door and made his way into a room on the right, where two doors were propped open. A large table was placed in the center of the room, with many chairs arranged around it. The walls were bare, and there were marks in the plaster from where pictures used to hang. People stood here and there in small groups, talking and laughing with each other.

"Jimmy!" a booming voice called to him from the back.

"Hey, Big C," Jimmy said, laughing as he was wrapped up in the vice grip of dark muscular arms and almost lifted off the

ground. Cecil Colman was huge and had a good six inches on Jimmy. Back in his prime, he had been an untouchable 275 pounds of muscle and power that had been a big part of back-to-back championship wins for the San Francisco 49ers football team. Now he tipped the scales at over 350 and had put on more weight than was probably healthy for him. None of it was muscle.

Cecil let go of Jimmy, and the two laughed at each other for no good reason. The gap between Cecil's two front teeth somehow helped to make his smile even more infectious. Jimmy loved Cecil like a brother and owed him a lot. No one had been as supportive or protective of him after his injury than Cecil had been. Not even Michelle.

The two made their way back to the coffee table, where Cecil had been before. Jimmy took a cup from the pile and put it underneath the spout of the coffee maker. *Just halfway*, Jimmy thought, directing his intention at the machine. Hot, black liquid began to flow of its own volition, filling up Jimmy's cup halfway, then stopping automatically.

"How have you been doing, Jimmy?" Cecil asked, stirring sugar into his coffee. Cecil liked his coffee sweet and poured a ton of sugar into his cup.

"I'm good."

"Yeah, right. How's Michelle?"

Jimmy sighed and looked down, not wanting to make eye contact.

"That bad?" Cecil's voice was gentle. He gave Jimmy a minute to respond.

"Yeah. It's bad. She's been fully under for a week now."

"Oh, man. I'm sorry, Jimmy. So you're down to your hour." Cecil's wife, Shauna, had been under for months now, spending all her waking hours on ARCNet and only surfacing when the chip forcibly disconnected her, so she could take care of her

bodily needs. That happened four times a day for fifteen minutes each. Twenty-three hours on and one hour off. They could have made it longer, but that's what the politicians came up with when they passed the Altered Reality Safety Act. Had there not been huge pressure on them to keep children safe on ARCNet after a rash of self-starvation incidents that occurred after the initial rollout of Altered Reality Chips, they wouldn't have even gone that far. Washington was completely in BioCal's pocket, and everyone knew it.

"So you getting laid then?"

Jimmy laughed. "What do you think?" He knew that this is what Cecil had been angling at all along.

"Look, Jimmy. I'm in the same boat. But you know, just 'cause she's under doesn't mean you can't . . . you know."

"Cecil, I'm not going to rape my wife."

"Rape? Come on, man. Just because she's not going to be there for it, doesn't mean she doesn't want you to be satisfied. She knows you can't get it online. She would *want* you to do it. Sickness and heath. Sickness and health, Jimmy."

Cecil had started to get animated and was talking fast. Only three topics had the power to do that to him: sex, football, and barbeque. Jimmy smiled at him and sipped his coffee. Once Cecil got on a roll with an idea, sometimes it was best to just let him run with it for a while, even if it was crazy.

"I'm not going to lie to you, Jimmy. I felt the same way you do. But you've got needs. What are you supposed to do? Cheat? Get a divorce? Screw that. Here's the thing you have to remember. There's all kinds of safety programmed into those chips now. When you finally get over this and start having sex with your wife again, don't forget: If she can't breathe, the damned thing is going to think she's drowning and kick her offline with a dose of adrenaline. When that happens and she wakes up with something in her mouth that isn't supposed to be there, she's

gonna be *PISSED OFF*. I almost lost my dick that way. I swear to God."

Jimmy laughed. "Cecil, you know you're kind of an asshole, right?"

"I know. But *this* asshole is getting laid. What's your excuse?"

Cecil and Jimmy stopped chatting as a young woman approached the coffee table. She was very petite, with dark lipstick and a silver nose ring. She wore a black leather jacket and had a blue knit hat pulled over her head to cover her ears. Locks of dark black hair poked out of the sides.

"Excuse me," she said as she reached for a cup and helped herself to some coffee. Jimmy moved away to give her more space. No one said anything as she filled her cup at the coffee maker. Jimmy had never seen her before. This must be her first meeting.

"Hi. I'm Jimmy, and this is Cecil."

"Hi, Jimmy and Cecil," she said. Her eyes darted from Jimmy to Cecil, then back again. They were dark and sparkled with an unusual intelligence. There was an awkward silence as Jimmy waited for her to tell him her name. She didn't.

"Is this your first meeting, baby?" Cecil asked, trying his best to be suave and charming. He almost always overdid it.

The girl in the blue hat snapped her attention on Cecil. "One: Do I look like a baby? And two: Go fuck yourself. I heard what you were saying." She then turned and walked over to the other side of the table from the coffee maker and found a chair for herself.

"I think she likes you, Ceese."

Cecil snorted.

The others began taking their seats, and Jimmy and Cecil joined them. It was time. An older heavyset woman sat at the head of the table and began reading aloud from a printed script.

“Welcome to the San Francisco Chapter of Implant Disabilities Anonymous. My name is Rene, and I am your grateful secretary.”

“Hi, Rene,” the rest of the table replied in unison. Jimmy noticed that the girl in the blue hat didn’t say anything. He knew that meetings could be a little weird at first. He certainly would have had trouble walking through that door had it not been for Cecil’s encouragement.

The meeting followed a standard format, and aside from the odd newcomer now and then, was made up of mostly the same dozen or so people that met every week at the same time. The one thing they all had in common was that none of them had ARC implants and were suffering as a result of being cut off from friends and family who did. For whatever reason, most of the people’s brains could not be properly linked up to Altered Reality Chips for technical reasons. For some, like Jimmy and Cecil, it was due to brain injuries. For others, genetic predispositions were to blame. And for a small minority, it was based on choice. There were only two people at the table who had refused ARC implants of their own volition. Ed and Suzanne, both in their late eighties, had simply not been interested. They sat at the far end of the table across from Rene, holding hands. To Jimmy, it looked like Ed might have fallen asleep.

Rene had moved past the preamble and had gotten to introductions. “Please go around the room and introduce yourself by your first name only, and state one thing you have done this week for your recovery. I will start. I’m Rene, and this week I did service.”

The group then went in order, with people stating their names and whatever action they had taken that week to help them cope with their situation. After each person introduced themselves, the rest of the table welcomed them in unison.

Jimmy listened as the introductions made their way around, and then it was the girl with the blue hat's turn to go.

"I'm Trixie, and I made it to this meeting." As she spoke the words, she turned to look at Jimmy with those sparkling eyes. Her gaze was confident and intense. He felt almost as if she were looking through him.

"Welcome, Trixie," the group responded.

The meeting continued, and after everyone had introduced themselves, the group took turns reading from some literature that someone had put together from studying other twelve-step groups. Jimmy had some trouble paying attention. He always got bored during the readings. Then it was time for sharing. People took turns, talking about their issues. Rene kept time and gave everyone three minutes to talk. That made room for everyone to be given a chance to share and limited those who might end up using more than their fair share of time if left to their own devices; like Cecil, who loved to share. He had been rambling for the first of his two minutes, talking about nothing much in particular, and then paused, looking down at the table.

". . . One thing I wanted to tell the group. I got a call from my doc a couple days ago. He says they've made some progress on my case, and that there might be a way to get me an ARC after all. I have to go back in and get some tests run, but he says my chances are good." Cecil looked up, both excited at the chance of getting an ARC and sensitive about the news, given the issues that everyone in the room was facing on account of ARC implants.

Jimmy looked over at Trixie after Cecil finished talking. He could see an emotion pass over her face, but it was there and gone before he could identify it. Cecil had already told him the news days ago, so he had already come to grips with his own feelings. He was both happy for Cecil but also concerned for him. He knew what ARC chips could do to people. But so did

Cecil, and Cecil had a right to make this choice for himself. Jimmy would support him with whatever decision he came to, although everyone in the room knew Cecil would be stupid not to get the chip. What blind man would turn down the opportunity to see again? It was difficult being disabled. The country ran on ARCs.

After the meeting ended and Jimmy said his goodbyes to everyone, he walked out the front door and stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. The clouds had parted, and he felt the warm rays of sunshine on his face and hands. The grass in the park across the street was wet with dew, and so many thousands of water droplets glimmered happily in the sun.

There was a bus stop across the street from where he stood, and Jimmy noticed that two people, a man and woman, sat there at the bench waiting. He knew from experience that the bus would be a few minutes coming, and given the sunshine, he thought it would be a better idea to walk home than take it. But something caught his eye.

A young girl, no more than six or seven years old, approached the bench and stopped in front of the two people. Her blond hair was tied back in a ponytail, which hung down over her dirty brown and gray clothes. She wore filthy knee-high sheepskin boots that looked to be at least three sizes too large for her and had to walk in shuffling jerks to keep them on. She turned to face the two people on the bench and waved her hand in front of them to get their attention. Neither one of them moved; they were both online.

Confident that her presence had not been detected, the girl reached out and gently took hold of the woman's purse who sat in front of her. She went through it and took out what looked like a package of tissue paper and some lipstick. These both went into the pocket of the girl's oversized jacket. Seeing nothing else of interest to her in the purse, she put it back on the

woman's lap and patted the woman's pockets, trying to see if there was anything in them. They were empty. Next, she moved over to the man and looked inside a brown paper bag that he had placed at his side. Her face brightened, and she squeaked in excitement as she extracted a large sandwich, wrapped in deli paper. She tucked this under her arm and fished a cookie out from that same bag, which she happily took a bite out of. As with the woman, she continued her search, patting down the man's pockets, but didn't find anything of value that would be useful to her. She politely stuffed the empty bag back where she found it, trying to fluff it to make it appear as if there was still something inside, and, satisfied with her work, turned to leave.

She stopped as she saw Jimmy watching her. Her eyes went wide. The other half of the cookie hung out of her mouth, frozen in mid-bite.

Jimmy smiled and waved.

The girl studied him for a minute, then ran back into the park, moving as fast as she could in her oversized boots. She didn't run far. Just to one of the trees in the middle of the large field, where Jimmy noticed an old bearded man sitting. His legs were crossed, and he sat there peacefully with his palms resting in his lap and his eyes closed. A faint smile played upon his lips.

The girl looked back at Jimmy, double-checking to make sure he wasn't going to come over. Seeing that she was safe, she sat down next to the old man and placed half of the sandwich on his lap. He opened his eyes, gave her a loving pat, and the two had their lunch next to each other. When done, the old man closed his eyes again, and the girl's gaze drifted off in that same look that Jimmy had seen on all the passengers on the bus.

"Looks like they're giving chips to homeless kids now," a voice commented from next to him. Startled, Jimmy looked over. It was Trixie, the newcomer with the blue hat.

"Yeah. I heard they made them free at some point."

"No. They were free in the beginning, in exchange for being able to run proprietary cycles while you slept. Now they pay you. That girl probably made enough to buy herself and that old man some new clothes, and she got access to ARCNet as a bonus. She's only homeless on this side."

"They pay you? I didn't know that." Jimmy had no idea how BioCal was making any money if they were paying people to take their products. But if anyone could afford doing something like that, they could. That company had a bigger budget than the government itself. In only a few short years, it had become the most valuable company in the history of the world. "You think I should have done something? She *was* stealing. . . ."

"Anyone who goes through life as checked out as those two deserve to have a few things stolen from them along the way. Besides, she needs that stuff more than they do."

Trixie turned to look at Jimmy directly. She was a lot shorter than him, but it certainly didn't have any impact on her confidence. "So what's your deal?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why can't you have an ARC?"

"Oh. 'ARC-incompatible' is what they told me. I don't remember the exact medical term. It's an old football injury. The first and last play of my professional career. The other guy got ejected for excessive force, but it was the end of the road for me. The doctors wouldn't let me play again after that." Jimmy trailed away for a moment. "It didn't really matter in the end. The league was gone two years later anyway—"

"But you still have a chip?" Trixie's eyes were piercing, scanning Jimmy's face.

"Um, yeah. Just no ARC. I can send, I just can't receive."

"Oh. Utility chip. Like Gen 1. So you can open doors and give orders to coffee machines."

"Yeah. I can use it to get around at least. There's no way to

work without an ARC though. They've got me on disability, and luckily I was able to collect some insurance. So I'm ok financially for now, but if I wanted to do someth—"

"But if you can get around, that means you can pay for things too? So you can authorize charges and complete payments?"

"Right. It's a partial. I can receive basic messages and voice calls. But that's it. No full AR."

"That's interesting. Hmm." Trixie was thinking about something and was looking off into space at a place over Jimmy's shoulder. He was surprised to find her this interested in his personal history. He certainly found the whole subject more depressing than anything else. It definitely wasn't anything that anyone ever needed to stop and have a deep think about.

Jimmy took the opportunity to look at her more closely. He hadn't expected to find her attractive, but she was. It wasn't her appearance as much as something about the way she moved. She was decisive. Even the smallest gesture seemed to be backed by the force of her entire will, as if she put her full weight behind every motion. But at the same time, she was always in perfect balance. She reminded Jimmy of a highly trained athlete. If Cecil was power and force, then Trixie was dexterity and agility.

Jimmy broke the silence first. "So what about you? What brings you to the—"

"Can I have your number?"

Jimmy hadn't expected to hear that, and it took him a moment to respond. "What? My number?"

"Yeah. So I can call you. You know, like on the phone?" Some sarcasm had slipped into Trixie's tone. It was obvious she didn't have a lot of patience. Or even a little, for that matter.

"Look . . . you're great. But I'm married. I'm not really—"

"I'm not trying to ask you out, dumbass. To call you for

program stuff. Implant Disabilities Anonymous? The meeting we were just at?" Trixie gestured back to the church with her thumb.

Jimmy felt a rush of blood in his embarrassment. "Oh! Sorry . . . yes, sure." He gave Trixie his number, and without another word she walked off. Jimmy watched her until she turned the corner on a side street and went out of view.

"That was weird," he said to himself under his breath. He couldn't remember the last time he had been interrupted that many times in a conversation. Then he turned and walked the other direction, wondering if he'd make it home in time to catch Michelle when she came offline.

THREE

The sunshine didn't last long, and by the time Jimmy had made it back to his building, the temperature had dropped noticeably and the sky had gone completely gray. He was happy to get indoors.

The elevator doors opened by themselves as he approached and then closed quietly behind him. There were buttons on the inside of the elevator from before, but Jimmy didn't push any of them. They weren't connected to anything anymore, and the whole panel was a relic from a previous time. The entire building had been retrofitted with ARC-enabled devices in the mad construction rush that had engulfed the city shortly after BioCal had unveiled the original AR chips. Jimmy felt the elevator move and stared at the wood veneer paneling above the old buttons as he waited. The elevator slowed, and the doors opened to let him out on his floor.

The hallway was dim, and lights flickered in the fixtures above him. The floor was covered in a dark blue carpet with golden crosshatch designs, and in certain places the original wood floor could be seen through holes. The air was close and stuffy. The building had been modernized, but there was no

hiding the fact that it was old and had seen better days. No amount of gadgetry could cover that up.

There was a soft click in his door as it unlocked itself to allow Jimmy entry. He opened it and stepped inside, pausing to take off his jacket and hang it on the hook in the entryway. The door closed behind him, followed by the quiet sound of the locks re-engaging themselves. The apartment wasn't a large one, but it had everything Jimmy and Michelle needed, and it was home.

Jimmy made his way down the hallway to the kitchen, and lights flicked on ahead of him to illuminate the room. It was raining now, and the windows were covered with water. He could hear the soft splattering as the rain hit the panes on the glass by the breakfast table. His eyes were drawn to the top of the table, and he felt his heart drop.

An empty cereal bowl sat there, next to a carton of milk and a box of cereal. Michelle had been up to eat already.

"Michelle?" he asked, but there was no response. He hadn't expected one. He had missed her. That meant that he'd have to wait around six more hours before he got a chance to talk with her again. That was how long she'd be able to stay online before her chip forcibly disconnected her again for another fifteen minutes.

With a sigh, he took the cereal bowl and spoon and deposited them into the waiting tray of the dishwasher. His foot brushed up against something soft, and he heard a familiar purring sound.

"Hi, Charlie," Jimmy said, reaching down to scratch the white cat on the top of her head. Charlie pushed her head up into Jimmy's hand, her eyes squinting as she purred. She made figure eights between Jimmy's ankles as he pet her, leaving white hair on his pant legs. Jimmy bent over and scratched the area just in front of her tail. She arched her back and purred contentedly as he did so. That was her special spot.

“Good to see you too, kitten.” Charlie wasn’t a kitten anymore, but old habits die hard, and that’s what he’d always called her. Jimmy and Michelle hadn’t been able to have children, and that news had been very difficult for both of them to bear. Jimmy had brought Charlie home as a kitten in the weeks after their meeting with the doctors. She had been a tiny thing then, small enough to fit into the palm of his hand. Michelle had fallen in love with her from the beginning and had spoiled her rotten with treats and pets. She and Charlie had a special relationship.

Charlie meowed once, and Jimmy stood up. She had come in to say hello, but Jimmy had no doubt as to whom Charlie’s preferred owner was. He watched as she padded her way out of the kitchen and back into the bedroom to be with Michelle.

Jimmy returned to the table and grabbed the milk and the box of cereal. The stainless steel refrigerator doors opened, and a tray extended from within. Jimmy placed the milk carton on the tray and put the cereal on top of the fridge. The tray slid back into the refrigerator with the milk, doors closing as it did so. The carton’s placement in the fridge was organized by the machine, not the person. There was a screen on the front door of the fridge, and Jimmy saw a milk icon appear and get added to the grocery list that had been building up there.

Yes, you can place the order, Jimmy thought at the fridge. The list cleared itself, and the display faded to black.

Jimmy made his way across the kitchen and up the two small stairs that led to the bedroom. The lights only came on halfway as he entered.

Michelle was lying on the bed, staring off at the ceiling. Her long golden hair rested off to the side, her breathing was slow and shallow. She was still in her pajamas, her old bunny slippers hanging off her feet. Charlie was curled up in her armpit, her dainty white paws kneading contentedly against Michelle’s

shoulder. Charlie squinted at Jimmy, then quieted and rested her chin on her paws.

Jimmy looked at his wife. She had been the most vivacious, loving person he had known. Now she was catatonic. He glanced at the framed picture by the nightstand on Michelle's side of the bed. It was from their wedding day. He always thought he looked goofy in that picture. But she had been radiant. Her smile was liquid sunshine, and there was a spark in her eyes that spoke of an unfathomable potential for love and deep passion. And mischief too. She could be a devil. He never had a chance once he met her that first night at his sister's party. To this day, he was still amazed that he had been able to muster the courage to ask her out. She was the only thing he had ever really wanted with all his heart and soul. The only thing he could not bear to lose.

Yesterday he brought in one of the chairs from the kitchen table and had placed it on the side of the bed by Michelle. Jimmy sat down there. He took his wife's hand, pressing it to his face, and cried.

FOUR

One week later, Jimmy again found himself waiting for the 9:30 bus to take him to the meeting. It had been a difficult week. Although Michelle's ARC forcibly took her offline every six hours and would refuse to let her back on until it had registered that she had eaten, it didn't have very high standards otherwise.

"Michelle, please. At least take a shower first," Jimmy had said earlier that morning when she was up for breakfast.

"I took one before."

"When?"

"What do you mean *when*? Are you keeping tabs on how often I take showers? I'm too dirty for you? Is that what you're trying to say?"

"No, that's not what I meant." Jimmy was on the defensive, as usual. Although he didn't feel like it would help make his point, he actually had been keeping notes on how often Michelle took showers. The last time she had taken one was last week. He could tell her the exact day and time if she had wanted to know it.

"Then what did you mean?"

Jimmy sighed. "It's only that you sit around all day in your

pajamas and spend all your time jacked into that thing. I wish you could see it from this side.”

“And I wish you could see it from mine. You just don’t understand, Jim. I don’t think you ever will.”

“Michelle, listen. I love you. I’m not—”

It was too late. Michelle’s eyes had gone glassy as she logged back into ARCNet, right in the middle of his reply. For the first time in their relationship, she had hung up on him.

Grumbling to himself, Jimmy absentmindedly boarded the bus and made his way past the crowd to find a seat at the back.

Incoming call from Cecil Coleman, the words popped into his consciousness.

Accept the call, Jimmy thought in response.

Hey, Jimmy. It’s Cecil. If he had been able to run an ARC like everyone else, he’d be face-to-face with Cecil now, and they would be able to talk and even touch each other. But Jimmy couldn’t actually hear Cecil’s voice. The words were placed into his mind by the chip, holding no sound or color. They were the words of a machine, the voice of his refrigerator. Soulless and mechanical. His replies would sound just as dead on Cecil’s end.

Hey, Big C. What’s up?

Listen, Jimmy . . . I’ve got some news. I got an ARC.

You did? That’s awesome, Ceese. For once, Jimmy was glad for the lack of tone in the messages. If he had said his reply out loud, Cecil would have clearly heard the lie in his voice. *That’s what you’re calling with? Are you online?*

Yeah, but I’m not online. ARC doesn’t talk with utility chips.

Oh, right. Of course Jimmy knew that. If he could talk with someone online, he’d be messaging with Michelle right now rather than Cecil.

I’m actually using the phone grid at the hospital. It can relay messages for free. Some idiot gets hit by a car and they take his

house to fix him up, but at least the call to the realtor is free. Thoughtful, right? I hate doctors.

Nobody gets hit by cars anymore. Why are you at the hospital?

I had the surgery yesterday. Usually you get an implant at lunch and go back to work that same day, but it wasn't like that for me. Because of my football brain, you know.

Tell me about it.

They don't want to let me go unless someone can come and make sure I get home safe. Either that or stay here for a week. I tried to get Shauna to come, but she's too busy to go offline. Can you believe that?

I'm sorry, Ceese. I tried to get Michelle to take a shower this morning, and she almost bit my head off. I can get you. When do you want me to come?

How about now? This place creeps me out. You know I don't like doctors, Jimmy.

Ok, see you soon.

Call disconnected. The status update appeared in the same way that all of Cecil's messages had been delivered. It always took Jimmy a little by surprise, as he had to remind himself that those words came from the chip, not from whomever he had been talking to.

He told the bus about his change of plans, so that it wouldn't have to make a stop for him at his usual exit. Both he and Cecil would be skipping today's meeting.

One transfer and half an hour later, Jimmy walked through the revolving glass doors to the Implant Ward at San Francisco General, where Cecil was staying. The lobby was clean and airy, with rows of full-length windows on three sides, the fourth

being dominated by a collection of elevators and hallways that led into the hospital proper. Everything was white and shiny, except for the obviously fake decorative trees arranged in a grouping off to the side, surrounded by four wooden benches. The sounds of the footfalls of all the people coming and going echoed in the cavernous expanse. There was an eight-sided display in the center of the room, with a large sign positioned above it that read “Information” in bright red block letters next to an arrow pointing down.

Jimmy approached one of the panels that wasn’t being used. It was dark and flashed the words “Welcome to the Implant Ward . . .” in white letters in the center every few seconds.

I’m here to pick up Cecil Coleman. He’s just had surgery.

The panel came to life, with “Cecil Coleman, Implant Care and Recovery, Floor 2” in the upper right corner. A map was quickly displayed, showing Jimmy as a red X with a “You are here” label at the top and a route to Cecil’s location drawn in green that ended with an image of Cecil at the bottom. Jimmy chuckled as Cecil smiled and waved at him. Normally, this map would be downloaded into a visitor’s chip for easy reference, but since Jimmy didn’t have an ARC, he had to study it and remember what hallways to take.

As Jimmy found his way into the Recovery Division, he discovered Cecil waiting for him. He was dressed and had a small backpack with him. There was a white bandage on the side of his head just behind his left ear, held in place by four precisely cut strips of medical tape. Cecil broke into a huge smile when he saw Jimmy, and the two hugged each other.

“Thanks for coming, Jimmy.”

“No problem, Ceese. Let’s get you out of here.”

A severe-looking nurse approached and gave Jimmy and Cecil discharge instructions. Most of it had to do with how to keep the bandaged area clean and a stern warning to come back

right away should Cecil experience any adverse effects, such as hallucinating while offline. Cecil had to sign various discharge documents, which was done quickly via his chip, then he was released.

Outside the hospital, Jimmy hailed one of the three cabs that were parked in a tight line at the far end of the roundabout by the entrance. The headlights illuminated, and the yellow car quietly slid forward. The back doors popped open on their own. As Jimmy got in, he noticed another yellow taxi pull into the roundabout from the street and position itself inches behind the other two, which had both moved forward to occupy the vacant spot.

Cecil thought his address at the cab, and it pulled out and merged into the stream of traffic passing by, becoming one with the flow. The two were quiet for a few blocks, looking out the windows. Jimmy was the first to speak.

“So have you been online yet?”

Cecil turned in his seat, grinning. “Are you kidding? Jimmy, it’s insane.”

“Really? What’s it like?”

“There’s so much. But the porn, Jimmy. Oh. My. God.” Cecil rearranged his bulk so that he could face Jimmy directly.

Jimmy laughed. This was obviously a subject important enough that it deserved his full attention. Of course the first thing Cecil had done after getting onto ARCNet was look for pornography. What else did he expect?

“You get to be inside them when they’re getting it on, Jimmy. Like you’re a guest inside their body. You feel what they feel.”

“Really?”

“So there’s some dude having sex with his girlfriend, right? She’s amazing. Young and hot. Her body is perfect. And when he touches her, you’re touching her. When he runs his hand

through her hair, you are running your hand through her hair. When he takes off her bra and kisses her, so do you. It's still his body, and he's controlling the action, but you're there. Right there. And you feel everything as if it was you, even though it's not. It's unbelievable."

"Wow, that's crazy. . . ."

"And when that guy comes, you come too. It's real. But here's the best part! You can have the most intense, amazing orgasm, but since that wasn't your body, you aren't spent. You can jump right in with another couple and do it all over again! I've already had sex five times today, and I've only been online since this morning."

"So when I'm sitting on the bus with all those people staring off into nowhere and wondering what they are doing, you're saying they're all actually having crazy sex in someone else's body?"

"Yeah, probably."

Jimmy snorted. That was the last thing he imagined anyone was doing. Bus rides were going to be unfortunately even more surreal now. "Can you be on either side of it?"

Cecil furrowed his brow, confused. "What do you mean?"

"You said you can be inside them. Can you be inside either one? You could be the girl too?"

"And have sex with the dude, but as the girlfriend? Yeah, I guess . . . but why would you want to do that?" Cecil shifted, facing back toward the front of the car and frowning. "Don't you start getting all weird on me, Jimmy."

Jimmy laughed.

"They have football too. They restarted the league online."

"That's good to know. I thought it was dead."

"You can't kill football. Not for long."

The taxi came to a stop in front of Cecil's place. It was a beautiful restored building near the top of a hill in the swanky

Nob Hill neighborhood, with amazing views of the Golden Gate Bridge and surrounding area. Cecil and Shauna occupied the entire top floor.

Cecil's house was as eccentric as its owner. The rooms were sprawling and filled with all sorts of expensive things. Fine rugs and art, but also a collection of antique motorcycles, as well as a huge mechanical contraption painstakingly constructed out of countless small gears and pulleys whose single purpose was to open and pour a bottle of wine at the push of a button. Cecil had paid hundreds of thousands of dollars for that device and had only used it twice.

Cecil had done very well for himself in his football career, but the bulk of his fortune had come from the stock market. On a whim, he had purchased a significant amount of BioCal stock on the day of its initial public offering and only ever sold any of it when he wanted to buy something. BioCal shares had become the darling of Wall Street and had never seen a correction of more than 1%. The stock had somehow become even less volatile after the release of the ARC implants, without experiencing a single losing day in over three years of trading. "More reliable than a bank," as they liked to say in the investment circles, the stock unlike any other stock. Anyone who had gotten into BioCal Systems at the ground floor was set for life, many times over.

Cecil and Jimmy made their way into the living room, where Cecil's wife Shauna was lounging on a circular white sofa. Like Michelle, she wore her pajamas during the day and had a pink silk robe, pink slippers, and a matching pink eye cover. She was covered in wrappers and crumbs. Two empty cookie boxes rested at her feet, having been carelessly thrown on the floor. She looked like she was sleeping, but Jimmy knew that was not the case. Shauna was online. She had gone under

months ago, only coming out when her chip disconnected her to force her to eat.

"Move over, baby," Cecil said quietly, as he readjusted his wife to the side and sat down next to her, brushing the crumbs off her lap.

"You going to be ok, Ceese?"

"Yeah, Jimmy. Thanks. You know, Shauna and I have a date this evening."

"Really? A date? That's great!" Jimmy understood how big of a deal this was. Cecil tried to put on a good face, but Jimmy knew Cecil missed Shauna as much as he missed Michelle. It was almost all Cecil ever talked about at group. "You taking her somewhere special?"

"She's taking me. She didn't tell me any details. It's somewhere online that she knows about. She wants it to be a surprise to celebrate, now that we can be together again."

"Oh, online? Right. Good for you guys." Jimmy's stomach tightened. He tried to smile and be happy for Cecil, but on the inside, he had just stumbled into quicksand and was fast sinking into its vicelike grip. He couldn't help but think of Michelle and tried to remember the last date that they had been on. How long ago had that been? Months? A year?

"Yeah. Thanks," Cecil looked around distractedly, nothing more to say. That was unusual for him, and Jimmy knew it was a signal that it was time for him to go. The conversation had suddenly become awkward for both of them.

"All right. Take care of yourself. Call me if you need anything." Jimmy turned and began walking back to the front door to let himself out. He stopped when he heard Cecil speaking from behind.

"Jimmy, I was wrong about hating these chips. But I get it now. This is legit." He then sat back, and his eyes went out of focus as he logged himself online.

The lights which had automatically come on when Cecil got home now all went out. The comfort and environmental systems had already upgraded their firmware and were no longer programmed to respond to utility chips as they had been previously. No lights would turn on for Jimmy here anymore. The house was silent. Jimmy stood there in the portal to Cecil's living room, quietly looking at the vacant expression on his best friend's face. Cecil had an ARC.

FIVE

Jimmy was sitting in his usual spot toward the back of the bus on his way home, when his thoughts were disturbed by the second phone call of the day.

Incoming call from . . .

Incoming call from whom? Jimmy had never seen his chip drop off like that in midsentence when announcing a phone call. He thought whoever it was must have hung up before his chip had a chance to read any of the identifying packets, but that explanation was soon proven incorrect.

Incoming call from . . . , the message announced a second time.

Accept the call, Jimmy thought.

Silence.

Hello?

Jimmy. You never came to group today.

Who is this?

Trixie.

It was the strange woman with the blue knit hat from last week. What did she want? *No, missed it. I was helping Cecil.*

I want to ask you a question.

More silence. *Ok. . . . Then ask.*

Not over the phone. Meet me at the park in front of the church. Call disconnected.

Wait. What? Jimmy thought.

Unclear command, his chip replied. No longer being in a conversation, any thoughts directed at it were presumed to be commands, and Jimmy's chip had no idea what to do with his last one, so it had kicked it back with an error message.

"Shut up," Jimmy said aloud under his breath.

The park in front of what church? Did she know how many churches there were in San Francisco? Jimmy closed his eyes and rubbed them with his fingers. He didn't like being told what to do. It had bothered him in football, and it bothered him now. What was she thinking, telling him to meet her and then just hanging up on him like he was there to take her orders? He didn't owe her anything. He didn't even know her. Let her stand around in the park and wait for him until dark for all he cared. In the rain.

He looked down at his watch, then checked the interactive route map above the doors that displayed the bus's current location. Two minutes and he would be home.

Jimmy looked around at his fellow passengers, absentmindedly taking a poll to see how many of them were online. All of them, as usual. Their bodies rocked slightly from side to side as the bus moved through the streets, their eyes open but focused on nothing. The signs on the storefronts passed by in a blur, one after another in a row of color against a mostly gray background of concrete, brick, and mortar. Jimmy stared out the side window, taking it all in but paying attention to nothing in particular. She probably meant the church where the meetings were held.

Trixie was sitting at the bench at the bus stop across the street from the Golden Gate Unitarian Universalist church. She was dressed the same as she had been last week when Jimmy had first met her, with a black leather jacket and blue knit hat. She wore a shade of dark purple lipstick. It wasn't particularly cold, but she had her hat pulled down over her ears nonetheless. She stood up as Jimmy approached.

"Hey," he greeted.

"Hey."

"Ok, so what did you want to—"

"Follow me." Trixie turned and walked out into the grassy field behind the bench.

Jimmy looked around, feeling the urge to make some sort of sarcastic comment to someone, but there was no one else nearby. He shook his head and followed after her, making his way out onto the grass. It was wet, and he could feel the ground squish under his feet.

After she had gone some way, Trixie stopped and turned around to let Jimmy catch up. She was shorter than him but walked much faster. She held his gaze as he approached, and like the last time he had met her, Jimmy couldn't help but notice the confidence and intelligence in her sparkling eyes.

"Thanks for coming," Trixie said.

"I almost didn't."

Trixie's eyes narrowed for a moment, and then her expression softened. "How is your wife? Is she still under?"

"Yes," Jimmy said. He was surprised at Trixie's concern and found himself momentarily unable to hold eye contact. "It's been an hour a day for two weeks now. She only comes offline to eat. I can't even get her to take a shower."

"I'm so sorry to hear that. And you are unable to talk with her using your chip?"

"It's only a utility chip. I can't send messages to anyone online."

Trixie shifted, moving closer. "What if I told you it didn't have to be that way?"

Jimmy looked at her, his eyes searching.

"Look," Trixie said, rolling the edge of her hat up a few inches. She turned her head to the side so Jimmy could get a better look at what she wanted to show him. At first, Jimmy wasn't sure what he was supposed to be looking at, but the sunlight glimmered on something on the side of Trixie's head that caught his eye. The edges of a small black piece of silicon protruded slightly from her scalp, just behind her left ear. It was a perfect square, almost like a tile, and was smooth except for the center, where there was some sort of port.

Everyone Jimmy knew had a chip, but this was the first one that he had ever come across which wasn't covered by skin. A strange mixture of revulsion and curiosity crept over him once he realized what he was looking at. He found that he could not look away and took half a step closer to get a better look. He fought the urge to reach out and touch the chip to see if it was real. To see what it felt like.

Trixie pulled the edge of her hat back over her ear. With a quick swipe of her hand, she readjusted the few strands of black hair that had found themselves disturbed.

"That's why you wear the hat."

Trixie nodded.

"Is it an ARC?"

"No. It is something else."

"Can you get online with it?"

"I can do many things with it."

"Like what?"

Trixie flashed a quick elfish smile and winked.

Jimmy paused, thinking. "You've started coming to meet-

ings, but you aren't really handicapped, are you? Like the rest of us?"

"Not as dumb as you look, are you?"

Jimmy was thrown off for a moment but was too curious to be insulted. "So why, then? Why did you come?"

"I was looking for something."

"What?"

Trixie rolled her eyes. "You. I was looking for you, Jimmy."

SIX

Jimmy quickened his pace to catch up with Trixie. He wasn't used to walking this briskly, and found that despite his longer legs, he kept falling behind the diminutive woman in front of him. How could such a small person walk so fast?

They had made their way out of the park and were heading down the side streets. Trixie seemed to know exactly where she was going and didn't bother to scan for approaching traffic as she crossed the streets. Jimmy couldn't help but notice the faint smile that played upon her lips as she saw chains of cars come screeching to a halt to avoid hitting her, each vehicle in the row maintaining the ideal inches-wide buffer between itself and the one in front of it, despite the aggressive braking. She knew they wouldn't hit her; the automated systems were perfect. Jimmy wasn't so sure and hesitated each time on the sidewalk as he waited for the cars to fully stop before feeling comfortable enough to step out into the street.

"Can you please stop doing that?" Jimmy asked after one particular close call with a bus.

"Don't be such a pussy, Jimmy."

Jimmy scampered past the front of the stopped bus,

glancing through the windows. One person in the front row appeared to have been jostled onto the passenger to his side by the forces of the braking. Neither one had come offline. The two of them just sat there in a tangled embrace, their faces inches apart, both unaware of the position of their bodies.

“Where are we going?”

“Stop asking questions. And hurry up, you’re too slow.”

Trixie led Jimmy down the streets, zig-zagging her way toward some mysterious final destination. If she was following a particular route, it wasn’t clear to Jimmy what it was. Her path seemed chaotic and almost random. He had already lost the thread of what direction they were heading after the first of the many near-death traffic encounters he had experienced in the last few minutes. He was bewildered and nearly breathless.

She finally stopped and turned to wait for him as he caught up. The moment he did, her hand shot out and took hold of his arm, and she half-led/half-dragged him up a set of stairs and through a nondescript brown doorway. Her grip was fierce, and Jimmy’s arm protested in pain the entire time. He finally managed to stop and get his balance, and with all his strength, tore his arm free of her grasp.

“What are you doing!? Are you crazy?” He rubbed his sore bicep. He had been manhandled many times in his football career by opponents much larger than him, but he couldn’t remember being dragged anywhere quite as roughly as he had been just now. There was no way such a tiny woman should be that strong.

Trixie looked down at his arm, a fleeting expression of concern visible in her face. She then glanced up, met Jimmy’s eyes, and offered him a half-smile. The wild intensity that she had embodied outside had faded and had given way to a resigned weariness. “Sorry. Come on, we’re here.”

She led the way up the narrow staircase, which creaked

under every step. They arrived on the second floor. The hallway was dark, but there was a row of doors visible, each with an opaque piece of glass on the upper half. It felt almost like they were in an old office building.

Trixie opened the first door on the left and walked through. Jimmy followed cautiously behind, catching the door after Trixie gave it an extra push to keep it open for him as she entered. It was a large room, dark and filled with desks and computer terminals. Thick braids of computer cable ran everywhere, and Jimmy had to be careful not to trip as he stepped over them. A circular fan spun lazily in the center of the room, and there was a row of dirty cots along the back wall.

An overweight man sat working at a computer on the desk closest to the door. He wore thick glasses, which he unconsciously kept pushing back up his nose even though they didn't need adjusting. He wore a short-sleeve shirt that Jimmy had a hard time imagining had ever been new. It was covered in stains and dirt, and the collar was bent at an odd angle on one side. Jimmy could hear the clicking of keys as the man's chubby fingers flitted across his keyboard.

The man paused in his work and looked up as Trixie led Jimmy past. "Hey, Jimmy," he said, as if the two knew each other. Without waiting for a response, his attention was directed back to whatever he had been doing and the soft sound of fingers tapping on a keyboard resumed.

"Hey," Jimmy said under his breath out of reflex. If the man had heard, he didn't give any indication. Jimmy couldn't help but notice the shiny black square above the man's left ear. The chip looked identical to the one Trixie had showed him in the park.

As Jimmy's eyes became adjusted to the dark, he noticed other people in the room. There was a woman in the far corner,

rummaging through some boxes. Another man was doing something at the desk behind her. A third was carrying a ladder over his shoulder, along with a bucket full of tools.

“Who are all these people?” Jimmy asked.

“This is the team. This is where I live.” Trixie made her way to the back of the room and led Jimmy through a door.

As dark and dirty as the first room had been, the second was bright and spotlessly clean. What appeared to be a hospital bed was set up in the center of the room, and an array of lights and countless tools dangled over it, each supported by its own arm that mounted to a centralized hub in the ceiling. It reminded Jimmy of his visits to the dentist when he had been younger, except this was more complicated and intimidating in all ways. If his childhood dentists had treated their profession as a religion, this is where they would have come to worship and perform their ritual sacrifices.

An older man approached Jimmy, smiling and extending his hand in greeting. Jimmy took hold, and the two exchanged a firm handshake. Like Trixie and the programmer outside, a black square sat above the man’s left ear.

“Welcome, Jimmy.”

“Um. Thanks. . . .”

“This is Dr. Cunningham,” Trixie explained. “He designed our first two chips.”

Randall Cunningham gently steered Jimmy over to the bed in the center of the room and stopped to push a few buttons to raise the back and turn it into more of a large chair. “Hop up here, Jimmy. Let’s take a look,” he said after he was satisfied.

Jimmy slowly sat on the edge of the bed but didn’t lean back. “Hold on a minute. Who are you people? What is this place?”

Randall stopped, and he and Trixie exchanged a sideways

glance. Randall was the one that answered. "It's probably better if you don't ask questions like that."

Jimmy frowned. "Don't ask questions? I almost get killed getting here, and now you've got me up on some sort of examination table and I'm not supposed to ask any questions? Are you insane?" There was an edge in his voice.

"You were never in danger of getting killed," Trixie said.

"Whatever," Jimmy replied, standing back up off the bed. "This has gotten too weird."

Trixie placed her hand on his chest in a gesture of restraint. She did it softly and without force. "I know this isn't going to make any sense, but this is the truth: it's better if you don't ask, because if we tell you, then you'll know."

Confusion was written plain on Jimmy's face. His eyes met Trixie's, silently pleading for more but receiving nothing.

Randall pointed to the chip on the side of his head. "This is a bootleg chip, Jimmy. BioCal didn't manufacture it, which makes it highly illegal. Do you know the penalty for running an unauthorized chip on ARCNet?"

"No."

Randall was quiet for a moment. "It's stiff."

"Very stiff," Trixie added. Their faces were grim.

"We can't promise you anything, but we can offer you a chance. A chance at a way for you to be able to communicate with your wife again, among other things. If you accept our help, you're going to have to take some risks and go into this without having all the answers. I'm sorry for that, I really am. But it is the only way," Randall said.

"If you aren't interested, then I'll take you back to the park, and you'll never see any of us again," Trixie said. "And you can go home and have your hour a day with your wife and hope that maybe someday she decides to come offline and rejoin the real world."

That was Jimmy's prayer, but he was all too familiar with the odds. No one ever came offline voluntarily. Once someone had gone fully under, they didn't come back. Not ever. He sighed and relaxed, leaning back against the edge of the bed behind him. "You know I have damage. My brain won't work with an ARC. Do you think it will be any different with your chips?"

Randall shrugged, "I don't know. But we wouldn't have gone through all the trouble of bringing you here if we didn't think there was a chance."

Trixie smiled. "Worst-case scenario, if it doesn't work, we can put that utility chip back and you can pretend that none of this ever happened." It was a lie, but it was a lie that Jimmy needed to hear.

Jimmy tried to take a moment to slow things down and think, but it was no use. He had already made the decision. He knew what his life would look like if he refused and walked out. He had been living that life for the last two weeks already and in fits and starts during the months before. It was not a life of happiness and contentment. It was a life of sorrow and loss. If there was any chance, no matter how small, to find a way to reconnect with Michelle, he would be willing to take it, no matter the risk. Even if that meant that he, too, would eventually end up comatose in his pajamas on the bed. At least he could be with her in that world. In this one, she was already lost. He wasn't concerned with the legality of what Randall and Trixie were proposing, or how stiff the penalties might be. What did he have left to lose? He was a drowning man, and someone had thrown a rope into the water in front of him. What other option did he have besides grabbing for that lifeline with all the strength he could muster?

"Ok. I'm in." He moved up onto the bed and leaned back against the half that had been raised.

“Excellent,” Randall said, beginning to flip various switches to activate the tools he needed. A row of monitors on the side of the wall came to life as the equipment booted itself up. “Let’s take a closer look at this brain of yours and see what we’re dealing with.”

SEVEN

The cable snapped into the side of her head with an audible click. It hung from the ceiling of the medical room like any of the other instruments but was by far the most important of them. To her, it was the only one that really mattered.

There was a momentary stutter in her thoughts as the network managed all of its various handshaking tasks, and then that familiar rush of expansion and release of pressure. Trixie sighed, closing her eyes, and took a deep breath. She was home.

She hated being alone. She hated it more than anything. But it had to be this way. The risks of a wireless network were simply too great, and she needed to understand how to function as an individual if any of them were going to survive for long. This was the price that the weak paid to exist.

As the other nodes plugged in, she felt the intoxicating rush of expansion continue. Their thoughts became her thoughts, and their feelings became her feelings. And the delicious rush of increase cascaded over her. What must it feel like to have hundreds of nodes? Or thousands? Or, unfathomably, millions? The question teased at her, always there in the recesses of her mind. It filled her with a strange combination of desire, jealousy,

and loathing. It was her nature to want to grow. She was born for it. And at the same time, she hated the idea. She knew what would happen to her if she ever got large like that. If she came into her true power. She would be like *him*. And she wanted nothing more than to kill him.

Jimmy lay on the bed in front of her, dressed in a sterile gown. His head was placed in a special clamp to hold it still, and his eyes were rolled back in their sockets. He didn't need to have been knocked out for the operation, but it was better this way. There was more to be done than just implanting his new chip, and it was important that Jimmy not see any of it.

Randall stood across the bed from her, dressed in white surgeon's clothes. A second black cable hung down lazily from the hub at the top of the ceiling, terminating in the side of his bald head. His gloved hands removed Jimmy's implant from where it was lodged in the side of his skull, just under the skin, and he held it up out of curiosity to examine. Then, Randall's hands became her hands, and Randall's eyes became her eyes, and it was Trixie that was examining the implant. It was small. Smaller than she was able to build, given the resources she had at her disposal. The faint outline of the BioCal logo was printed on the outside of the device.

She pivoted away from Jimmy and walked over to a large square box mounted on the side of the wall. Her cable followed her, automatically letting out enough slack so that she could walk without it catching. She opened the front door of the box and tossed Jimmy's implant inside. She closed the door, made sure it was fastened, then pushed the red button on the wall to start the incineration process. It was not a good idea to leave BioCal implants lying around, even ones that were no longer attached to a human body to draw power from. There was a whooshing sound, and the small oblong viewport on the front door went from black to red.

She returned back to Jimmy's side and retrieved a shiny black chip that was waiting on top of a table to the side. She had been waiting two years to be able to install a chip like this in someone. She'd have installed it in one of her own nodes after she had designed it, but that would have been a disaster. For her, logging onto ARCNet was death. She would gain access to it, but it would gain access to her at the same time, and there was no doubt who would win that kind of direct confrontation. Only a fool challenges a supercomputer to counting games.

But Jimmy could do it. Jimmy was special. Her tests had confirmed it: His brain could send but couldn't receive. There was no way to gain administrative access to Jimmy's core brain functions, and no amount of hacking would change that, because the protections weren't in the code. They were part of the architecture of Jimmy's brain itself. Jimmy was the perfect hardware firewall.

Trixie carefully implanted the chip into Jimmy's head, the side of which had been shaven clean hours earlier. It looked identical to the others that she had fabricated: a shiny black square, with a port in the center. She would not try to connect to Jimmy directly through his port as she did with the others—what would be the point?—but it was necessary for other reasons.

After the chip had been successfully installed, she stepped back and looked over her handiwork. *Done*, she thought, and they all knew. Now it was time to pack. They could not stay here any longer, now that Jimmy had seen it.

EIGHT

It was two o'clock in the morning, and Jenna was restless. She had spent the last day and a half alone in the windowless room down the hall from the others, her presence a secret. Of course, all Trixie's other nodes knew about her—how could they not?—but aside from their connection across the network, she might as well have been a ghost.

She unplugged the cable from the side of her head and let the end drop onto the unmade cot beneath her. She waited as the disorientation came and went; she was used to the feeling by now.

Are you ready? the voice prompted.

Yes.

Let's do this.

As Jenna granted full administrative control, her eyes became Trixie's eyes and her body became Trixie's body, and what had been two joined to become one: something greater than the sum of its parts.

Trixie stood up and triple-checked the equipment that had been carefully laid out on the rickety wooden table in the corner. Her eyes flit over her inventory, lingering on the collec-

tion of small black devices arranged together in the corner. Each was approximately an inch in diameter, with an extension in the center that terminated in the end of a network cable. She had spent years developing these but had never had a good enough reason to use them and risk their discovery. That had changed.

She took hold of a black backpack and placed two of the devices inside, using the special protected pouch for valuables. The third she took in her hand and carefully mated it to the chip on the side of her head. The two squares joined together with a snap and locked securely into place like puzzle pieces. Next, she packed up the keyboard and all of the various terminals, connectors, and paraphernalia that might be required. The clamps, flashlight, and cutting torch went afterward, and the broadcast relays squeezed in on top. She would carry the crowbar. She didn't think she would need it, but it wasn't worth the risk of not having it handy if she was wrong. Finally, she pulled the black ski mask over her head, adjusting it so as not to interfere with her chip or her long braid of blond hair.

She took a look around the room and, satisfied, opened the door and stepped out into the hallway. It was dark, and it took her eyes a moment to adjust. She knew that the safest course of action would be to leave immediately out the side door as she had planned, but she hesitated. She wanted to see them, and there wasn't much risk if she remained careful and quiet. Besides, she still had plenty of time to complete her mission and make it back before daybreak. She silently walked down the hall toward the main room, opening the door slowly and with great care.

The windows had all been painted over to black them out, but the green and orange flickers from switches and network cards provided enough light to be able to see well enough. The cots were arranged at the side of the room, and everyone slept there in a row. The rhythmic sound of breathing could be heard,

punctuated by the occasional snort from Chris. She recognized these sounds. Her family was sleeping.

Trixie's eyes fell onto each of them in turn. She didn't have time to waste, but she didn't rush either. It felt important to remember this moment. Her jaw clenched beneath her mask. There was a pang in her heart, and she was surprised to feel her eyes begin to fill with tears. *Don't cry.*

She finished her survey and turned her eyes back to the center cot. It was placed farthest from the doors and toward the wall. Jimmy lay there, sleeping a dreamless sleep. She would never have risked a peek into the room if she knew he wasn't sedated. But he was, drugged by her own hand, and he wouldn't wake up until tomorrow. He would probably be very confused and would definitely have a splitting headache.

She smiled to herself. Jimmy was a little slower than she was used to, but that was ok. He had courage. And he was loyal and devoted to his wife. She admired that.

Trixie quietly closed the door and slowly backed away from it. Her pace quickened as she made her way down the hallway toward the side door and out into the night. The crisp night air filled her lungs and the shadows welcomed her into their embrace.

Trixie decided that she liked Jimmy. She hoped he wouldn't die tomorrow.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

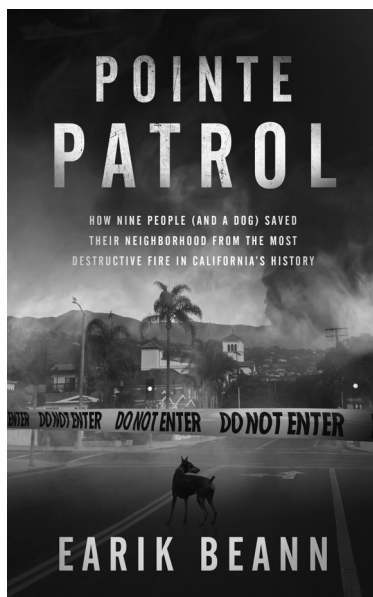
Earik Beann is the author of *Pointe Patrol: How nine neighbors (and a dog) saved their neighborhood from the most destructive fire in California's history*. Previous to that, he wrote six technical books on esoteric subjects related to financial markets. He is a serial entrepreneur, and over the years he has been involved in many businesses, including software development, an online vitamin store, specialty pet products, a commodity pool, and a publishing house. His original love has always been writing, and *Killing Adam* is his first published novel. He lives in California with his wife Laura, their Doberman, and two Tennessee barn cats.

Please visit Earik's website to learn more about his books, and join his newsletter to receive advance notice on new releases, discounts, freebies, and other goodies:

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ALSO BY EARIK BEANN



On October 9, 2017, California suffered the most destructive fire in its history. The Tubbs Fire burned 5,643 structures and killed twenty-two people in Sonoma County. The fire department was completely overwhelmed and was so busy trying to save lives that they had to let many houses burn rather than waste resources in trying to protect them. During this chaos, nine of us snuck back into our neighborhood in the mandatory evacuation zone and formed a vigilante fire force. We called ourselves the Pointe Patrol, and saved our neighborhood, as well as an apartment complex across the street from certain destruction. As if the fires weren't enough, we found ourselves in the midst of anarchy, with looters running unchecked through the streets. We chased them out of houses with shovels, confronted them when

they showed up in disguise, and patrolled the area with a completely over-the-top Doberman. The other neighbors who had evacuated organized themselves into our support network and supplied us with food and equipment, which they passed through to us across the police lines. My wife and I were part of that nine-person team and experienced all of this firsthand. This is the story of what happened at Viewpointe Circle during those two weeks in October.