



HE STUMBLES UPON HIS BOSS'S SECRET PROJECT.  
JEOPARDIZING THE AMERICAN WAY OF LIFE, AND HIS OWN.

ROBERT VALDIN  
NEWTON'S  
CRADLE

A TECHNO-THRILLER



# NEWTON'S CRADLE

by

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Soliquest Publishing

## *Newton's Cradle*

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ISBN: 978-82-692003-0-0

## TO THE READER,

**T**HE LITERARY JOURNEY YOU NOW are about to embark on, originally reached shore as a movie script. Now, screenplays, some would argue, are the hardest thing to do in literature. First you have to learn the craft, the rules, the countless dos and don'ts. Then you have to buckle down and actually write the damned thing. And then rewrite it ten times. But, as you have guessed, the job got done. A blueprint for a movie, 105 pages complying with industry standards (12-point Courier, single sided). Only to be transferred into an entirely different format. But again, I'm grateful to say, land in sight. The job got done.

As we all know, no such project is an island. My unconditional gratitude to Jim Mercurio (LA) and Keil Troisi (NYC), along with Industrial Scripts (London), for helping me learn the craft and bring this "thing" (for lack of a better word) to life. And, of course, a profound Thank You to Alisa Hamilton for making sure nothing got lost in translation.

ROBERT VALDIN,  
December 18, 2019

*The only way of discovering the limits of the possible is  
to venture a little way past them into the impossible.*

**Arthur C. Clarke, "Profiles of the Future"**

## **PART I**

## CHAPTER 1

**T**HE V12 SPORTS CAR thunders through the bare, arid landscape like a racehorse breaking free from its reins. A solitary man is strapped behind the wheel, his focus as sharp as a race-car driver's. To the west, out in the distance, he can just glimpse the Sierra Nevada Mountains, a barely there mirage of jagged peaks where springtime's snow is in retreat, soon to be nothing more than a memory.

Something that once was.

But it's the present. The car radio is tuned to KFCK or something like that—the driver didn't really catch the name. Not that it matters. It's about the only station he can get out here in the middle of nowhere. The station plays political talk shows syndicated from one of the large national channels. Harshly opinionated talking heads debate the new strict environmental regulations the government is trying to force through. The driver has long ceased paying much attention to these regulations and is barely listening. He has more important things to think about: the obligations he'd prefer to be free from, his hectic schedule, the idiots he's had to deal with this week, business operations, stock purchases, the case of vintage wine in the back of his car, the woman waiting for him back home.

It's a gorgeous day. Almost too good to be true. The storms that have plagued the coast over the past few days haven't come inland. The car's air conditioner is working overtime

to combat the early summer heat. And the spark plugs in the engine block are doing their part, firing like synapses in the brain of some supernatural giant.

The driver is calm and relaxed, at ease in the soft leather seats. Italian. The seats, that is, not the man. He's a true-blue Buckeye whose ancestors haven't always operated on the right side of the law, not that this should be held against him. He looks like what he is, a man who has travelled a long way in order to get home safe and sound. He can't hear the ticking of the device beneath him, fastened to the underside of the car's body. Placed there by a shady figure intent on doing harm.

A homemade bomb.

It's made from parts of a mechanical watch attached to a detonator and three hundred grams of Semtex. Plastic explosive. There are more sophisticated devices on the market, but the person behind this wasn't aspiring to perfection. Sure, some consideration was given to details like when, where and how. This will get the job done well enough. Someone once said something about perfection being the enemy of the good, but this probably isn't exactly what he had in mind.

The driver is halfway home now. The narrow, awe-inspiring Interstate system, drawn up once upon a time on a map with a ruler, gradually wends its way southwest, and the low, late-afternoon sun makes it difficult to see. The driver's eyes squint against the sharp light. He has to fix that. He takes his right hand from the wheel. A beautifully crafted signet ring glints in the sunlight. He reaches his right hand over to the glove compartment, opens it and rummages around, eventually finding what he's looking for. He removes this practical invention. If it isn't exactly an enemy of the light, it certainly makes for a comfortable barrier.

*Tik-tik-tik-tik.* The merciless countdown. The radio talk show has long since changed topics. Now they're arguing,

relentlessly but in a civilized fashion, about preparations for the Olympics next summer. A thought about potential new world records manages to drift through the driver's head.

The point of impact.

Ground zero.

His last thought.

The hands of the timer come together and a fatal signal pulses through the wires of the deadly device. A monstrous explosion tears through the car, throwing it up into the air around itself and back down onto the desolate highway. The vehicle continues a short distance before coming to a stop, like a wounded, limping animal fleeing a hunter. It's no longer a car, just a warped, twisted, burned-out heap of metal on the gray asphalt.

Somewhere, far back, an object falls from the sky. Unbelievably, it has come out of the violent explosion largely unscathed. It hits the pavement with a little click. A sound that no one hears. A Buddhist or some other philosophically inclined soul might ask if the object actually made a sound. That is, if this wondering soul were still alive. The man behind the wheel will never ask another question. His voice has been silenced. His eyes can no longer see.

A pair of sunglasses remains on the asphalt, a blind, silent witness.

The soldiers move through the steaming-hot rain forest like zombies through a fog, their tense faces covered in grime and sweat. Their eyes are bleak and sunken beneath their helmets, as if heat and thirst have dried out the irises and whites to leave a dark film of filth behind that merges with their pupils. They're on constant watch for enemies, both real and imagined. A tropical bird flies at them from out of nowhere like a missile, shrieking threateningly through the chaos and almost causing one of the soldiers to fire in pure fright.

A young, newly appointed lieutenant leads the troops. He chops his way through with a machete. It's working. The rain forest is crammed with lions and all kinds of enormous ferns, which have apparently survived unchanged from the time when dinosaurs ruled the earth. Plants they barely have names for grow in an organic, impenetrable web.

Their operation, or surveillance mission, has already taken much longer than expected. They've been following a path they thought would lead back to civilization, meaning their garrison, but they've only managed to lose themselves deeper in the rain forest. The hills make things difficult, and the trees hide most of the terrain. There isn't a river nearby they can follow. And at any moment, they risk running into insurgents who are very familiar with the area—or guerilla soldiers waiting in ambush.

It's important to not panic. They're too experienced and hardened to give in to that kind of thinking, but they need to find the main path before nightfall.

A shriek cuts through the forest, causing some of the colorful, exotic birds to take flight from the treetops. The lieutenant turns. He sees some of his troops dive towards a hollow in the hill. It turns out one of his soldiers has stepped into a trap. The lieutenant hurries over and sees the tragic result. The soldier who has fallen in has been slashed by sharp wooden stakes. His screams rise up towards them.

All they can do is lift him out as gently as possible. They have to admit it doesn't look good. The wounds themselves are horrible, but not life-threatening. Except it isn't unusual for the stakes in these kinds of traps to be covered in manure. That means infection, which requires extensive medical treatment in a hospital—something that drains resources from all other operations and slows the war machine down, wears it out. In a way, this is an even better tactic on the part of the enemy than to kill their opponents directly.

They patch the wounded soldier up as best they can and give him some morphine from the medicine chest they always carry with them. Even so, he's groaning horribly, and it doesn't get any better when they pour iodine in his wounds. It's a gut-wrenching scene.

The lieutenant barks out orders. Confident, cool, rational. A troop leader can never appear unsure in front of his men in situations like these. But on the inside, he's anything but calm. Shit, he could be court-martialed for this.

Should he admit defeat and use the field telephone to call for help? It looks like he'll have to. But it could still take time for them to be found. The lieutenant looks up at the gray sky. There aren't many hours of daylight left. If the injured soldier can't walk on his own, they might have to leave him behind. The alternative is to wait for him to die.

The lieutenant turns his head. He thinks he hears something. A flapping sound? Could it be . . . ? He listens hard. The sound of a rotating propeller is unmistakable. A reconnaissance helicopter is close by. One of theirs. The lieutenant shouts out orders to let off a signal. A soldier jumps up as if he's walked into a hornet's nest, quickly grabs a flare gun and fires. The colorful signal reaches out beyond the treetops, up to freedom and safety. They wait thirty seconds and fire off another one. Eventually the helicopter comes closer—they've been seen, and the lieutenant feels about a hundred pounds lighter.

The reconnaissance personnel finds a clearing close by in the forest where they can land. It's a miracle, almost on par with the parting of the Red Sea. Or that's how it feels. His men go to work, following the sound, springing over the rough terrain, and eventually they're able to greet their fellow soldiers and countrymen. The injured man is first priority; they quickly place him on a stretcher and lift him onto the helicopter. Safe.

And then without warning a rocket comes flying through the air and tears through the helicopter, ripping it to shreds before their eyes as if it were made from cardboard and Styrofoam.

The door to the sparsely furnished interrogation room opens, and the investigator stomps in with a suit-clad young man in tow. They've met once before but under very different circumstances. This time it's official. Noise from the ceaseless traffic and heat from the late summer sun oppress the streets outside. Indian summer is approaching. But inside the dim interrogation room, it's cool and comfortable. And quiet. The only sound is a soft whir from the ventilation system.

The investigator gestures to the young man, showing him where to sit, and they each take their places at opposite sides of the table. The investigator wearily produces a Dictaphone from his suit pocket, turns it on and places it in front of him. He mechanically lists his title and name, the name of the man he is about to interrogate, then the objective and the date and time.

All according to procedure.

The investigator explains the young man's involvement with the case and makes it clear he's being called as a witness. Finally, the actual interrogation can begin. The investigation is well underway and a number of facts have already been established; both the investigator and the witness are aware of this. Even so, the information needs to be double-checked, the picture filled in, and the facts of the crime crafted into a complete, credible mosaic. This is why the young man has been brought in.

The investigator begins by asking the witness to state everything he knows about the case.

"Happy to," replies the young man. He wants to help as much as he can, he just doesn't know where to start. Despite everything, it's a long story.

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"It's always a good idea to begin at the beginning," the investigator says to help the witness get going. He smiles a smile he hopes is reassuring, but the witness only finds it presumptuous.

The young man tries to think back. When did it begin? Does everything have a beginning and an end? There must have been a beginning to the whole complicated, disastrous mess. His sluggish thoughts flit back through time to a rainy morning—some place, some time ago. Something about a funeral.

A funeral he chose not to take part in.

## CHAPTER 2

**T**HERE WAS FINALLY A break in the rain on this gray June day on the outskirts of Los Angeles. It had been a while since they'd had one. The city and county of the same name had been through an unusual period of heavy rains, the likes of which even adults native to the area hadn't seen before. Or at least not since the great floods of 1938. Not only was the rain unusual for the time of year, it was fiercer than ever. The area's rivers had defiantly overrun their banks, commandeering the surrounding streets and train tracks, making them impassable. It was as if nature herself was rising up against the structures man had forced upon her.

Terence Whitfield sat on a bench beside a patch of green and looked up at the force behind these events, the bleak, gray monsoon clouds blowing in from the Pacific. He seemed indifferent to it all, almost bored.

He looked younger than his thirty-six years. Boyishly handsome in his immaculate suit. His brown hair had a slight wave to it and paired well with his intelligent hazel eyes. Puppy eyes, designed to make women weak in the knees, though he hadn't been very good about using them for that purpose. Those who didn't know better might think he was a student just finishing up at Harvard, or perhaps a realtor. Those who had gotten to know him—and over time there had been a few of these—knew there was something deeper and darker under the surface, a maelstrom of pain, avoidance and intelligence.

A life lived in spite of everything.

He'd woken early that morning, and for some reason he'd sat there wondering why. He wasn't exactly an early riser. Maybe it was the daylight streaming through the new white tulle curtains Jillian had hung in their bedroom. Her creative ideas didn't always work out in practice. Maybe it was the argument they'd had the night before. Or was it simply the big meeting coming up that was churning in his head, not letting him rest?

He thought about Jillian. Things had been off between them for weeks. They'd gotten into a pointless fight last night over absolutely nothing. But there'd been something real behind it. The repeated complaints that he wasn't there enough for her, that his job took too much of his time and attention. At the same time, she was also trying to jumpstart her own career. This had involved many sacrifices and resulted in more expenditures than income so far.

Terence took stock of their relationship. Almost without noticing it, they were drifting apart. It had been happening slowly over time. Enough was enough. He'd fix things, take her out to one of the city's nicer restaurants. Something like that. This was much too important to let it peter out.

It was never too late to change course.

He thought about the big meeting. Negotiations. Contracts. The head of the company had told him what was at stake: the company's very existence. It was fine to lose a battle as long as you came through the war victorious. His boss loved military metaphors regardless of whether they suited the situation or not. Terence was beginning to tire of them, though naturally he kept this to himself.

The boss just kept going.

He felt something inside his jacket. The day's *Los Angeles Times*. He'd forgotten he had it with him. Strange for such a news junkie. He had something right here to while away the

time with before the meeting. It was the Wednesday edition. The twenty-first of June, the longest day of the year.

The year was 1995.

Duncan Riley stole a glance at his wristwatch. He seemed somewhat preoccupied. The funeral had taken longer than planned.

He'd placed himself at the back of the somber, black-clad gathering, distant, as if he'd been dragged there by force. He looked around at all the grieving people whose umbrellas created a complex, uneven pattern of color. The downpour had chosen to take a break for the burial, so the umbrellas had stayed closed. Nature was done crying. The storm had just about worn itself out.

The pastor took a handful of earth and began the symbolic incantation handed down through the centuries.

"Ashes to ashes . . ." Riley thought about this simple, significant ritual. He'd encountered enough authoritarian religious masters of ceremonies in his childhood and was not overly fond of the clergy. But the words echoed inside Riley and touched something larger than himself.

The formal ceremony ended, as quiet and dignified as it had begun. People nodded to one another, said their goodbyes and started to take their leave. At length, Riley found an opportunity to approach the sorrowful young woman beside the grave. He took her hand and said in a heavy Scottish accent, "He will be deeply missed. If there is anything I can do . . ."

She nodded silently.

Riley was in his late sixties and had a face well suited to funerals. Otherwise he had a lean, imposing figure, like that of a long-distance runner. He almost always dressed formally, in a dark overcoat and suit, as if the whole world were one big somber event. As if to further emphasize this old-fashioned

style, he preferred suspenders to a belt. His shoes were always polished to perfection, a habit tracing back to his time in the military.

His dark hair had thinned somewhat, but his passion for business had never waned. He had a cool, analytical gaze that would meet yours and stare right through you. A complex man, full of contradictions. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, he had an excellent head for business.

Riley didn't like being called an entrepreneur. He preferred the term businessman, and in many ways he was a businessman of the old, hierarchical school. As time passed he had become more and more a rarity in the dawning era of flat organization, home offices, casual dress and that new phenomenon rushing them at top speed, the Internet.

Riley didn't have any hobbies that meant much to him, except perhaps his maritime interests. He'd always been attracted to the sea. Sailing called to him, and he was a highly knowledgeable seaman. Ever since he'd been a young boy, he'd dreamed of sailing around the world. But there had never been enough time to pursue that dream. When it came down to it, his company was his hobby, and there simply wasn't time to think about much else.

He'd reached that stage of life where most people began to think about retirement. He'd also achieved more than most people ever did. Sometimes he thought maybe he should forget the damned quest for profit, status and success. Maybe it was time to bury the alarm clock in the bottom drawer of the nightstand. Turn his dream into reality while he still could and enjoy the time he had left. Sail around the world. Stop at small, picturesque ports. Find some hidden cove under faraway skies, a place to call his own, where he could eat fruit right from the tree and live a life free from worry and stress.

Rather than regret working himself to death.

If he entertained such thoughts, he pushed them quickly aside. He hadn't built up a successful company with a hundred and fifty million dollars in annual sales and nine hundred employees for nothing. It had been targeted, farsighted and extremely difficult work. Cyloscape Industries was the name of his life's work, and it was too important to be left in the hands of dilettantes. One day he'd have to turn the reigns over to someone else. It was unavoidable. But he would decide when and how to step back from the company's daily operations.

And he would choose his successor.

Riley wandered away from the cemetery along a paved path, passing the bench where Terence sat reading the paper. Wordlessly, Terence folded his paper and got up to follow.

Riley let out a resigned sigh as he contemplated the fate of the deceased who'd left them all too soon. "What a way to go. The world is crazy, Terry."

Terence shook his head.

"The whole thing is . . ." He shrugged his shoulders and asked, "Have the police made any progress?"

"Not much. They don't even know where to start. He didn't have any enemies—none that I know of anyway."

Their gloomy conversation trailed off. There was nothing they could do. They walked until they came to a parking lot where a solitary car was waiting for them, costly and elegant without being showy. Riley took the door handle but hesitated a moment. He looked over the top of the car at Terence, who'd chosen not to take part in the ceremony.

"You don't like funerals, Terry?"

Terence shrugged. "Let the dead bury their own dead, I guess."

Riley smiled. He was surprised. He hadn't expected a deep reply from Terence. Not that he underestimated Terence's

intelligence or abilities, not at all. But something brought Riley's thoughts back to the here and now. He checked his watch again. They would be late for their crucial meeting.

"While we ordinary mortals negotiate contracts. Let's get going."

They got inside the car, the doors echoing as they slammed shut.

Terence was behind the wheel, following the directions of the signs along the freeway. The heavens had opened up again and a fierce rain beat against the car, so loud it drowned out the rhythmic hum of the windshield wipers and the sound of wet tires speeding along the asphalt.

Eventually Riley felt like talking. The title of a song had come to mind.

"It never rains in Southern California." Weakly, he added, "That's a joke."

"Technically it isn't exactly raining, sir," said Terence. "It's pissing down." It was like there was no in-between around these parts. As an afterthought, Terence added, "That said, rain does power our turbines."

Something that looked like a smile briefly crossed Riley's face before he once again became serious. A brochure on the dashboard caught his attention. He took it and opened it. It had pictures of a technologically advanced piece of machinery, a power generator. This was Cyloscape Industries' latest achievement, the jewel in their crown. And the very existence of the company depended on its success.

"We have to land this deal, Terry. The future of the whole fucking company is at stake. These guys are ruthless."

Terence respectfully disagreed. "They're tough negotiators, I'll give them that. But they're about to meet their match."

Riley clenched his teeth and hissed softly. "I hope so."

Terence scanned the road before him intently, past the windshield wipers frantically working against the cascades of water streaming over the windshield. He stole a quick glance at Riley, still engrossed in the brochure, still preoccupied and tense.

Terence knew his boss was in absolute agony over the new generator. It had been a huge risk, and Riley had fought hard against Cyloscape's board of directors to get the necessary resources allocated and make them believe in such a complex, lengthy process. Even more, Riley had taken a close, active interest in its development. He'd kept himself informed the whole way through and immersed himself in the technical details to such an extent that he had almost become an expert himself, if an untrained one. He'd mastered the industry jargon and knew all the numbers by heart.

It had been an enormous undertaking. Each suggested innovation had needed to be tested until it could be discarded, kept, or further improved. They'd had to overcome mammoth obstacles before breathing a satisfied sigh over the final product. Riley himself had been the catalyst, setting requirements the engineers had said were impossible to fulfill. Riley had simply refused to accept this. "We put a man on the moon twenty-five years ago, and you're telling me a lousy laser turbine is impossible today?" They had gone back to the drawing board and made it happen. Engineers really could achieve the impossible.

Terence tried to say something positive to set his boss at ease. "It's an impressive machine, sir. Absolutely worth the effort." These words had no appreciable effect on Riley, who wasn't always optimistic where his company was concerned. There was too much at stake.

"Well, without the Chinese investors on board, it's just a bunch of scrap." He set the brochure down and stared off into the distance. "Technologically advanced scrap, but scrap all the same."

The car battled its way down the freeway.

## CHAPTER 3

**T**HE RAIN HAD STOPPED for good this time, and the sun was starting to find its way through the clouds. A large, impressive building dominated the otherwise deserted landscape, its marble façade glistening like an enormous sarcophagus after the rain. Warehouses, parking lots and a security fence surrounded the building, and a large sign marked the entrance gate:

Cyloscape Industries  
Production Facility 1

The location of Production Facility 2 was a well-kept secret. Or so it seemed. The company was built on a number of suppliers, both domestic and foreign. All tech companies had this in common. But Riley saw it as the first step toward a more ambitious goal—to be able to handle more of the production in-house rather than outsource it.

Always think big.

The car carrying Terence and Riley finally reached its destination. They found themselves on the outskirts of Greater Los Angeles. Though the company's main office was in downtown LA, Riley felt like he was home.

It had been his idea to build a new building on this very spot. He'd gone several rounds with the local authorities to get the necessary permits for a factory of this size, but he'd gotten it through. Riley had dug the symbolic first shovelful of dirt three years earlier, before the excavators had taken over to prepare for

the laying of the foundation. Of course he had also been present for the formal opening, surrounded by the local business community and representatives from California's energy agencies.

As he looked up, Riley felt immeasurably proud of his life's work. Proud, yet humble. Some things really were bigger than oneself.

Maybe that was why it was so hard to let it all go.

Terence drove through the gates and up to the building's entrance, where they climbed out of the car. The head of production was waiting for them on the steps, dressed in white coveralls and a safety helmet and with his ID badge clipped to his chest pocket. He was a stocky man, built like a short block of wood, with a weather-beaten face and small, lively eyes. One of the most important men in the company, he reported directly to Riley.

He came forward and greeted them formally. Every detail had been planned out weeks ago. The boss was visiting, and everything would go smoothly.

They entered the facility. The head of production waved his badge and the doors sprang open automatically. As they walked purposefully down the corridor, the head of production described their important guests, the delegation from China who had flown in earlier that day.

"They're waiting in the conference room. They seem a little . . ." He paused a moment.

Riley snapped like a Rottweiler, "Spit it out, man."

The head of production shrugged his shoulders and continued, "Unhappy."

Riley grimaced. This didn't sound promising.

"Damn traffic . . . OK Terry, kid gloves on."

The conference room was perfectly arrayed. Soft, pleasant light came from small, carefully placed recessed bulbs. The

décor was tasteful, the furniture beautifully crafted out of dark wood. There was a small bar and kitchenette. The low coffee table held champagne glasses filled to the brim and a selection of hors d'oeuvre from one of LA's finest caterers.

All exquisite. All untouched.

The luxurious plush chairs contained two representatives from a Chinese firm. The delegation sat straight up in the chairs as if frozen in time.

There was a clear difference in rank between the two immaculately dressed men. The elder, Zhang, was in his mid-sixties and had the air of an elder statesman—reflective, dignified and restrained. He made the decisions. He didn't say much, but when he did he weighed each word carefully. His fingers revealed a bad habit.

But then no one was perfect.

The younger gentleman, Tuan, was in his mid-thirties. He asked more questions during the proceedings but wisely kept quiet when his boss had something to say. They both spoke English. Terence was glad they wouldn't need an interpreter. Interpreters could say whatever they liked or neglect to translate everything that was said, and there was no way to correct them.

The door opened and the head of production entered, followed closely by Riley and Terence. The latter noticed the untouched champagne glasses. The bubbles had gone flat, the liquid reduced to an exclusive white wine.

*A promising start*, thought Terence.

The head of production performed a brief introduction. "Gentlemen, Mr. Riley and Mr. Whitfield."

Zhang rose slowly and greeted them individually. He was extremely formal, as if afraid of making a mistake. Tuan hesitated a moment before following his superior's example. Neither of them smiled.

Riley on the other hand was friendliness itself, determined to smooth over any discontent his guests might harbor. "Welcome to Cyloscape Industries, gentlemen. We're honored to have you here. I apologize for the delay." *Explanations be damned*, he thought to himself. "We've come straight from a funeral."

Zhang replied, firm and dignified, "Completely understandable, Mr. Riley. You have our deepest sympathy. But we've had a bit of a journey. We'd like to get down to business."

"A bit" was an understatement if ever there was one. People from Southeast Asia were the last to complain about trifles, and they had travelled halfway around the world for an agreement that might not work out.

Even so, Riley felt a kind of relief. "Of course." He nodded to the head of production, who leapt into action. It was time for a tour. White coveralls and safety helmets identical to those worn by the head of production had been placed on a shelf running along one wall. He took them one by one and passed them out carefully. As the delegation put the sterile uniforms on, the stylish conference room began to resemble a locker room, or a military barracks.

The large, modern factory floor was really a sight to see. It was lit to resemble a bright day at the equator and filled with the most technologically advanced equipment. Lasers cut and customized and fused parts at furious speeds with the precision of a tenth of a millimeter. An assembly line packed with the most intricate machinery and busy workers hovering around like bees in a hive. Engineers behind screens and control panels watching over these machines and making sure all went according to plan.

There were always production targets to meet.

Riley, Terence and their guests made their way through the factory. Dressed as they were now in their white coveralls

and safety helmets, they looked like all the other workers. The head of production led the way. The sharp, clicking footsteps of the Chinese delegation were barely audible over the hum of the machinery. The sound of industrial progress. It was music to Riley's ears.

Terence explained, "The new facility is equipped with the latest technology and produces the most effective turbines on the market. Wind power, water power, nuclear power, coal, oil—we can meet any need and offer an unparalleled selection of generators and turbines in unique dimensions. Absolutely everything can be tailored to meet the needs of our customers."

Tuan listened attentively and took careful notes.

Terence continued, "Most people are blissfully unaware that the world is rushing headlong into an energy crisis. The world's energy needs will double in the next thirty years, in part because there will be so many more people on earth. All that energy has to come from somewhere. More effective generators will help meet this need and reduce our dependence on fossil fuel. Good for the environment, good for the world, good for all of us."

They walked along the footbridge. Below them, under a glass roof, was an enormous machine. A newly developed energy-producing generator, as large as the locomotive on a freight train and even more powerful. Part of its outer casing had been removed, granting a view of the advanced inner workings. The glass roof was necessary to reduce the high-frequency noise produced when the generator was tested. Without it, those present would be at risk of hearing loss.

"And this is the reason we're here, gentlemen. Our new prototype." Terence gestured to the machine below. "It's all about excess energy. Surplus power that would otherwise go to waste is taken up and managed in part by induction technology and laser transfer. New patents have reduced the number of moveable parts, which in itself means less wasted

energy and higher efficiency. This is really a quantum leap in generator design.”

The investors were listening, but it was impossible to tell what they were thinking.

Terence made another gesture. “Allow us to demonstrate.”

He nodded to the head of production, who pressed a button on the panel in front of him. The process was completely automated; all they had to do was enjoy the show.

The generator sprang to life with a click. The different parts both inside and outside the machine began to adjust themselves to each other. The machine transformed itself from a collection of lifeless components without any deeper meaning to a living, organic entity. A technological monster ready to take on anyone stupid enough to get too close. “Engineer porn,” as one of Terence’s wittier colleagues had put it.

The buzz of electrical and mechanical noises could be heard up on the footbridge, as if from a beehive. At the back of the generator was a device that looked like an enlarged fire hydrant. It emitted a stream of water that hit a rotor inside the generator, the heart of the turbine.

A series of ghostly blue beams of light became visible in the belly of the monster. The jet of water gradually increased in strength and the low, buzzing sound rose to a shriek until finally the rotor was spinning so fast it was almost a blur. The blue laser beams now shone very powerfully.

“Attaboy,” said Riley under his breath, happy his baby had delivered as promised. The investors studied the generator as closely as a nervous Riley studied them, watching their reactions. It seemed like they had allowed themselves to be almost swept away for a moment.

Terence could sense their growing interest and hid a smile. He’d said this would be a success. To hell with the boss’s incessant pessimism.

Tuan broke the silence. “There’s a lot of energy to be captured, I take it?”

“At today’s rate, about 20 percent,” answered Terence.

The investors exchanged glances and nodded almost imperceptibly. They didn’t show any outward signs of enthusiasm, but those were impressive numbers. In this context, an improvement of 20 percent was more than they could calculate.

Riley exhaled, relieved.

Below him, the blue laser beams continued shining.

The tour through the factory had been well and good, but now it was time for serious negotiations—negotiations that would hopefully end with a signed agreement. They were all experienced in this game and knew the give and take, the necessity of sometimes playing their cards close to the chest.

*A highly advanced form of poker*, thought Terence. What could be better?

What Terence hadn’t mentioned during his presentation on the factory floor, but which informed everything they were working on, was that energy was top-level international politics. A strategic resource that influenced national security policy and stability across the globe. Oil was the most obvious example. The oil crisis of 1973 had marked the end of history’s longest period of growth, the three decades following World War II. The crisis had also shown the whole world that Western countries were hostage to the unstable regimes of the Middle East. When you got down to it, every war had its origin in the control of various resources, and oil was a highly explosive commodity in more ways than one.

They had to tread carefully.

But at least this dependence on oil had put the need for renewable energy in the spotlight. Far more than half of the world’s power plants were still using fossil fuels, mostly coal,

but also large amounts of oil. And the entire car industry was based on petroleum, a truth that didn't sit well with those concerned about man-made global warming. Neither coal nor oil could exactly be characterized as a renewable resource. The world's alarming thirst for hydrocarbons was disturbing to think about. Roughly eight hundred barrels a second. Seventy million barrels a day. Twenty-five billion barrels a year. That was what it took to keep modern civilization humming along. And the amount was constantly on the rise. In ten years' time, the need was expected to exceed a thousand barrels a second.

That said, it wasn't easy to see how they could be replaced. The world's reserves of hydropower were mostly developed. Nuclear fission was an alternative, but interest in it had been dwindling for years. No new nuclear power facilities had been built in the United States since the Three Mile Island accident in Harrisburg, PA in 1979, a disaster that had shown the world what nuclear power really was—an extremely complicated and dangerous mechanism used for something as prosaic as boiling water. And one whose original purpose had been the manufacture of hazardous radioactive material for use in nuclear weapons. But despite its dangers, it created enormous quantities of energy. And the modern world couldn't get by without it.

Fusion reactors had been a kind of ideal in the quest for a bright future, something that would make limitless quantities of electricity possible without so much of the dangerous waste produced by traditional nuclear power. But fusion energy was always thirty years away because of the enormous technological challenges involved.

Cheap, limitless energy. It was still a mirage.

But alternative sources of energy were needed. This had become more and more apparent in a country where many had air conditioning units in their homes, in addition to an

ever-increasing number of other electronic appliances meant to simplify life. And other countries were hot on the heels of the United States, looking to challenge the hegemony of the world's one superpower. Countries with global ambitions and huge potential like China, India, Russia and Brazil. All this would place enormous strain on the world's energy reserves.

You can't squeeze blood out of a turnip.

There was hope, however. Solar cells, hydrogen vehicles, lithium batteries, biofuel, wind power, wave power, geothermal energy—all were being intensively researched, and all pointed to a new, sustainable economy. Likewise, there was much to be gained through more efficient use of energy and upgrades to existing systems. And this was where Cyloscape's new generator came in.

The two parties had reached one of the factory's conference rooms and had taken their places on either side of the table. The younger generation got the ball rolling. There were a few uncertain details to clear up before there could be any talk of a potential agreement.

Terence got right to the point. "Of course there is a challenge here. Or a snag, depending on how you look at it. Rare-earth metals. Our concept requires a steady supply of them so that the generators can be mass-produced." He gave a friendly nod to the Chinese delegation. "We're hoping for a collaborative agreement."

"Rare earth metals" was the term for a group of seventeen elements that were essential to an increasing number of technological devices, among these power generators. Most of the rare earth elements were heavier than iron and had special magnetic and conductive properties. They had exotic names like thulium, scandium, gadolinium, erbium and neodymium. Many of them were not actually that rare, but they tended to be scattered throughout the earth's crust, and sources that

could be mined in a traditional commercial manner were the exception rather than the rule.

As it so happened, China was sitting on a large percentage of the world's supply of these elusive metals. Sixty thousand tons of them were mined each year, half of which came from the homeland of the honorable trade delegation seated opposite Riley and Terence. For some of the metals, that share had reached 95 percent. Sixty thousand tons sounded like a lot, but in comparison, the world's annual production of copper was fifteen million tons, and its annual production of iron was nine hundred million tons. Production of rare earth metals had a long way to go, making them a powerful negotiating tool for anyone with a stake in the industry.

Tuan wanted to know about patents. "You've secured all the rights, of course?"

Terence kept a lid on his pride and replied, "There are thirty-two groundbreaking patents. Cyloscape holds the rights to each and every one of them worldwide." He made a gesture. "It's airtight."

Terence slid a sheaf of documents across the table that backed up this impressive statement. Every innovation in American engineering was represented and accounted for—resonance frequencies, inductive circuits, electrostatic field coupling, evanescent wave coupling. The magicians in Cyloscape's R&D division had definitely outdone themselves on this project.

The investors studied the documents in silence, and Zhang's face could have been made of stone for all the feeling he showed. There was a lot to take in.

Tuan continued to lead the conversation for their side by bringing up another potential sticking point. "Twelve tons of rare earth metals for each turbine . . . that's a tremendous amount. Won't that make the generators too expensive to mass produce?"

Terence had already thought of this one. "You have a point, Mr. Tuan. The turbines will be on the high end of the market in terms of price. But the increase in efficiency will more than make up for the higher price point." Terence was saying there was an enormous amount of energy on which they could profit by updating old equipment.

Tuan thought this over. His opponent had answered well. It was all organized and clear. There was no reason to doubt the seriousness of their proposal. The next move was his.

"As you know, our company is one of the world's largest suppliers of rare earth metals. And we are not at all opposed to a binding collaborative agreement. But we, and our parent company, need some kind of concession."

"A concession?" asked Terence.

Tuan nodded. "Something to ensure this proposed agreement gets a favorable response back home."

"Like what?"

"Access to the patents," snapped Tuan.

It was time for the older generation to step in. The ones who made the world go round. The decision-makers.

Riley countered readily, "We can't do that. We've spent a fortune on R&D. We can't just give that away to a competing firm." He leaned back in his chair and looked coolly out the conference-room window for a moment before adding, "Not for all the tea in China."

A heavy silence followed. Were the negotiations over before they'd even begun? Terence was worried. But Riley didn't bat an eyelash. He knew this game. His last remark hadn't been especially tactful, but he couldn't rely on polite phrases when the future of his company was at stake.

He needed to make his point.

Zhang leaned forward and folded his hands. *The most important thing: Never lose face.*

He explained in a quiet but decisive voice, “Mr. Riley, Many new power plants will be built in my country in the next decade. Prestigious national development projects that will benefit the Chinese people, and hence the rest of the world. I feel certain your company would like to be part of that.”

Riley thought it over. Access to the enormous Chinese market—that would be a dream come true. Something he hadn’t dared to hope for.

“That would be an honor, sir,” Riley replied.

“But our agreement must be beneficial to all parties. Development is rushing forward in my country. Modern China is determined to be more than a supplier of raw materials for Western industry. Our government will not approve an agreement that isn’t . . . mutually beneficial . . .”

Riley mulled this statement over. His opponent had spoken with the gravity of a wise older statesman. And Zhang was a master at the art of suggestion. They each represented not only different cultures, but fundamentally different systems of government. It would be naive not to take this into account in a discussion on something as crucial as patent rights. This was turning into a minefield. But the opportunity to be part of a huge Chinese development project was not something to walk away from. They’d have to compromise. One way or another, they had to get this damn agreement signed.

Riley quickly scribbled something on a notepad, tore off the sheet of paper and passed it to Terence.

Aloud he said, “My senior advisor will make a fair, constructive offer.”

Terence looked at the three words on the piece of paper he’d just been given.

*Any big ideas?*

He was caught off guard. Riley had given him full responsibility. The investors watched him intently, waiting to see what

kind of rabbit he was going to pull out of his hat. He got ahold of himself. Thought hard and fast. It was a good skill to have in highly stressful situations. He cleared his throat.

“Fine, gentlemen. Here’s our offer. You supply us with the raw materials for the turbines at a 60 percent discount. We give you rights to the patents for your domestic use.”

Riley sat with one hand under his chin, listening. His eyes went from Terence to the investors. He was surprised and more than a little impressed.

Terence’s offer was placed upon an invisible scale, weighed and checked. Would it be accepted? Tuan whispered a few words to his superior, and Zhang eventually made his decision. He issued his pronouncement as if he were an old sage sitting on a carpet outside his temple.

“There’s an old proverb in my country: ‘He who plants a tree has not lived in vain.’”

Riley replied, “Wise words, Mr. Zhang”

“Wise words don’t mean much in uncertain times like these. Action matters more. Like you, I’m a man of action.” The sly old fox grabbed the tabletop with both hands and looked down, as if to draw out the suspense a little longer. Then he loosened his grip, made an accommodating gesture and stood up. “As you say here in the US, we have a deal.”

Everyone smiled. They all got up and heartily shook hands across the table.

The game was over. They were in the car on the way home, headed back down the freeway. Terence sat behind the wheel, with Riley beside him. The sun had finally come out, and the barren landscape was beginning to dry out. Riley glanced through the newly signed agreement. The ink was barely dry. He studied the signatures that heralded a whole new era for the company, entry into the world’s

largest developing economy and part of the enormous East Asia market.

After the negotiations, all parties had gone back into the lounge to celebrate. The head of production had supplied fresh champagne, and they had devoured the waiting canapés amidst their good wishes.

Riley had complemented his Chinese counterpart on his excellent command of English, rare for someone of Zhang's age. Zhang let him know that he also spoke French. Had he been a diplomat in an earlier life? "Not all Chinese are uneducated, Mr. Riley," Zhang had replied with a slightly patronizing smile.

The sage had become a jovial businessman. His language capabilities were simply the sign of a sleeping giant waking from hibernation.

There was some casual talk about which sights their visitors should see in LA, and then the head of production drove them to their hotel.

Riley pondered the new agreement. He was definitely relieved, but there was something else . . . He had a nagging feeling that he'd missed something. The old trick horse was suddenly uncomfortable in the ring. He snorted, surprised at himself.

"The patents? Joining the Chinese development project? I didn't see any of that coming. Am I losing it?" He looked at Terence, who remained silent.

"You saw the whole thing coming!" Terence allowed himself to smile.

"Well, nevertheless," Riley continued, looking forward again. "That was well done. You landed this damn deal. We've got a strategic partnership with the Chinese—this is really the goose that laid the golden egg."

Terence's smile disappeared, replaced by a wrinkled brow. He saw a potential bump in the road. "It's still going to be a tough deal to sell. To the board, I mean."

## NEWTON'S CRADLE

Riley dismissed this. "The board will approve the deal, trust me. They've gone for crazier things over the years."

The car shot deliberately down the freeway.

## CHAPTER 4

**T**ERENCE HAD CHOSEN ONE of the city's best restaurants, 24 Carat, for the occasion. He'd been there a couple times before and knew it wouldn't disappoint. Elegant, tuxedo-clad waiters glided by almost imperceptibly, as if on invisible roller skates, ready to attend to their guests' every wish. Though it wasn't the busiest day of the week, there were still a number of relaxed guests sprinkled around the room, people who had something to celebrate or who wanted to mark an important event as well as those who didn't need an excuse to treat themselves to good food and drink.

Terence knew LA's restaurant scene like the back of his hand, partially because of all the work dinners he'd attended on behalf of his employers throughout the years. But mostly because he was genuinely interested in culinary experiences. He'd even written several reviews for a local magazine—short, witty articles containing sharp observations of both the restaurant world and life itself.

Whenever the Michelin Guide was updated, he pored over it with great interest. He'd spent a good deal of money on his hobby, if you could call it that, but this didn't bother him. When he retired, he would open his own restaurant some place. He'd design it himself, choose the menu and the wine and be actively involved in the day-to-day operations.

That was the plan, anyway.

Terence was seated at a table deep inside the restaurant, absorbed in the wine list. A young woman sat across from him. As with all young women, it was difficult to determine her exact age, and you couldn't exactly ask. She was actually in her late twenties and had shoulder-length dark hair. There was something reserved and secretive about her, a dark and attractive charm. This was Jillian, Terence's fiancée.

Terence put the wine list down. He'd made his choice. A server who had been waiting in the wings stepped forward.

"A bottle of Cristal, please." Only the best for a day like today. The waiter nodded and disappeared. Jillian smiled, slightly curious.

"Champagne? Is this a special occasion?"

"It's a celebration. In honor of a great day at the office." He smiled, delighted. "And of you and me." Jillian smiled back at him and picked up her menu.

"So what happened at the office?"

"We landed a huge deal. We got very lucky."

"Nice," Jillian answered absentmindedly, distracted by the menu. Terence stared at her, struck by her lack of enthusiasm.

"Listen, Jill. I'm not going to be some underpaid office drone for the rest of my life. Riley is going to step down one day. And incidentally, he has a lot of faith in me. And I have my own ideas about taking the company forward."