

The Collectioni\$t

Book One of the Calder Halloway Series

by Charlie Clayton

They say you should never judge a book by its cover.

I sure hope you don't, cause this book doesn't really have
one.

Not yet anyway.

This novella is dedicated to my day job at the bank which was the inspiration for this story. And to my wife who is my inspiration for everything else.

My name is Calder Holloway and I get even with people. It's what I do.

I'm not talking about leveling the score with a bully on the playground or some high school football star that picks on pimple-faced dorks in the bathroom. The stakes aren't high enough and frankly, it doesn't pay the rent.

But let's face it, high school bears striking resemblance to the adult world, except without all the pimples, exams, and awkward group showers after gym class. In both worlds you got rich folks and poor folks, smarties and dummies, popularity contests and cliques, winners and losers, the weak and the strong. And just like high school there are takers; people who steal by force or deception without regard for those they've taken from.

So I find them, track them down and take it back. If I can't get it back, then I get even.

This particular job was supposed to be easy, and that should have tipped me off to the colossally bad day fate was cooking up.

I stopped along the edge of a sidewalk and bent down to tie the laces on my black combat boots as a pretty brunette co-ed just shy of drinking age walked past me, a pair of ear-buds dangling around her neck nestled into the cleavage of her sports bra. She pulled out her key card from the elastic waistband of her sleek yoga pants and held it up to the card reader beside the door. I grabbed my red tool box and hurriedly caught the door before it shut behind her. I stepped out of the mid-afternoon sunshine into the artificial lighting of a stairwell. The jogger disappeared up the stairs in a flurry of tight workout clothed motion. I tapped my finger on the Bluetooth ear-piece synced to my phone in my toolbox.

"Bout time, Calder," Freckles said. "You stop for coffee on the way?"

"Shut it, Freckles," I said. "I haven't slept in twenty-four hours or so and this toolbox is heavy."

Freckles, whose real name is Lyndsey, is the 'Grey Hat' on my team. That's just a fancy word for a hacker who is a bit morally ambiguous. Basically, she helps me track down my targets using her skills on the keyboard. She might break a few laws here and there to make that happen. A man's gotta break a few eggs and all that.

"Cry me a river," Freckles replied. "It had to be now. Finals are over in a few days and the target will be gone by then. We couldn't risk waiting on your nap."

"Easy for you to say." I started up the stairs. "You didn't just get off a plane from the Ukraine job, and you certainly haven't missed any sleep."

"Well I need my beauty sleep. And you gotta work to keep me off the streets."

Aside from her computer related activities, Freckles also lines up my jobs. Technically she works for me, but most of the time it feels like I work for her. Sort of like a marriage without all the tax breaks.

"So what's the room number?" I asked.

"The housing roster has him in 516."

I looked up the long row of stairs in tired frustration.

"Why are these danglebags never on the ground floor?" I muttered, panting.

"You need the cardio," she said. "I noticed you got a bit of a belly forming."

"That hurts. The cheap hotels you book me never have an exercise room." I reached the fourth floor landing of the stairwell, and stopped to compose myself. I opened the toolbox, removed my black leather gloves and put them on. I wore a dark blue maintenance employee uniform with a name patch on the left of the chest that read "Chet" in white embroidered letters, black cargo pants and my combat boots. I know, dark clothing is a cliché, but what can I say, I'm a sucker for the classics. And I look good in black. I pulled out a mirror from the toolbox and checked my face. Everything was still in place.

Most people assume for something like this, you should break in at night or wear a ski mask to cover your face. But if you're there to rough someone up, night time isn't opportune because you run the risk of waking up someone sleeping, especially in a dorm full of college students. And one doesn't walk anywhere on a college campus these days in a ski mask in ninety degree heat, unless one wants to be shot to death by campus security guards. Besides, I have Darius, so I almost never need masks.

My face looked just like it should, which is to say as far from my real one as possible. My normally sandy blonde hair was dyed dark with wings of white at the temples, and cut short in military fashion. Hair dyes, cuts and wigs only go so far. From there, things get a lot more difficult to change. And by difficult, I mean painful.

Thanks to Darius's implants I'm able to change anything about my face and eyes.

Normally I have green eyes, but today they were brown. My chin was blockier than normal, my forehead more pronounced, my skin darker and prematurely aged to look like that of a man in his forties instead of his early thirties.

Years ago I found Darius holed up in a cash hotel in downtown New Orleans. Some government goons had put two bullets into him, trying to confiscate his implant technology. I helped him fake his death, and I keep him hidden. Now he works for me, providing different faces for me in a day of limitless surveillance cameras. Along with those in my face, I have a few spread out throughout other parts of my body that aid in tissue regeneration, blood clotting, and a bunch of other things I don't really understand. His tech is light years ahead of anything the Feds can field. Pretty lucky for me really. Not so much for Darius, but hey, life's full of disappointment, right?

I packed my things back into the toolbox, and walked up the remaining flight of stairs, careful to keep my heart rate down. Most of this job is about the first impression - hiding all your weaknesses and appearing as imposing as possible. Let's face it, a guy huffing and puffing like a middle aged, out-of-breath, chain-smoker never scared anyone.

"The target's name is Drew Banks," Freckles said, her tone serious. She knows what she's about, and when to joke and when not to. Most of the time anyway. "He stole about two hundred thousand dollars from the client. His attack was simple really, but quite effective. First he acquired a list of usernames and passwords from somewhere, I haven't figured out where yet, but it's not important. Then he wrote a bot that infected several college computers here on campus to try online banking applications at various banks, betting on all the lazy people who use the same username and password for all their

online stuff." She laughed. "People are so stupid these days. I can't believe anyone would do that."

"Yeah people suck," I replied. I made a mental note to change my usernames and passwords when I got home. I was thankful she couldn't see my blush.

"Well when he got through, he drained the money from the victim's accounts, moved it around from one account to another, then finally offshore. Our client wants his two hundred grand back."

"I'm here." I stopped outside a wooden door with the number 516 painted in gold lettering. I took a deep calming breath, and looked down both sides of the hallway. It was empty as expected, with most of the students in class at that time of day. From behind the door, loud rock music thumped and wailed.

I knocked. I heard shuffling footsteps from the other side of the door, and then what sounded like someone stumbling. A muffled voice came through the door muttering something, then laughing.

"Hang on," the voice called out.

A few seconds later the door opened to reveal a young man with dark, curly hair hanging to his shoulders, wearing only a pair of plaid boxers and white tube socks. I looked him up and down for a second and squinted at the haze of smoke that crept from the room into the hallway. He squinted back at me, and laughed; a goofy idiot's laugh. Between the clothes, the general upheaval of the room behind him, the acrid marijuana smoke and the glossy look in his eyes, I didn't need a PhD to know what he'd been doing prior to my arrival.

"You Drew Banks?" I asked.

"Yeah." The idiot laughed again.

I rolled my eyes and stepped into the room, pushing the door closed behind me.

"Hey man what're you doing?" Drew said as I locked the deadbolt.

I turned around to face him as he backed away from me further into the room.

"You stole some money from my client and I'm here to get it back." I said, my voice calm and level.

"What're you talking about?" He squinted at the name on my shirt, "Chet? I didn't steal anything."

"Look, I'm tired." I sighed, rubbing my eyes. It was always the same. They always deny it first. "I want to get this over quick. The sooner you tell me the routing numbers on the account, the sooner I can get what I need, the sooner I'll be gone and you'll be back to..." I looked around the room. Clothes lay scattered in small heaps across the floor, along with scraps of paper, pen caps and assorted food wrappers. "Making poor life choices."

"Seriously dude, I don't know what you're talking about but I think you should-"

I interrupted him with a punch to the gut. He coughed, doubling over in pain. I didn't really care what he had to say. All I cared about was finishing the job and going home to bed. Well my hotel bed anyway.

"Dude," he whined, "Why'd you hit me man? What kind of maintenance guy are

you?"

I was getting frustrated. In his present state, it was clear Drew could barely think. I looked around the room again, and spotted a laptop at a desk in the corner of the room. I started walking over to the desk to sit down when Drew spoke.

"Wait a minute," he said, his eyes opening wide as though he'd just had a major revelation, or was pissing his pants. "Maybe you aren't even a maintenance guy? Dude." He groaned.

I sat down in the chair.

"What're you doing man? That's mine! I'm calling the cops, dude." I turned and looked at Drew, who was fumbling at his bed under another pile of clothes. His hand emerged grasping a smartphone and a pair of underwear. He separated the two and typed in his key-code to unlock the phone. I calmly walked over to him and grabbed the phone from his hand. He tried to fight back, and I shoved him against the wall. I returned to the desk chair, sat down, and smashed the face of the phone with a metal coffee mug sitting among the detritus.

"Ah man," Drew whined. "Why'd you do that?"

I pulled out the USB key fob from my pocket and placed it in the USB slot of the laptop. Immediately the software within the USB drive kicked on, broke through his password on his machine and began scanning the hard drive.

"What's the account routing number I need to access the money you stole?" I asked him impatiently.

"What money are you talking about man? I haven't stolen any money." He slid down the wall dejectedly.

"Alright the feed is up," Freckles said into my ear. "Yeah I see the virus signature here on the network traffic. But something's odd."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well it's not what I'd expect to-"

"What'd you say?" Drew asked. I snapped my fingers at him to tell him to be quiet.

"Wait say that again Freckles," I said. She started to speak, but Drew interrupted again.

"Who's Freckles man? Who're you talking to?"

"Shut up!" I said.

"You asked me to repeat myself!" Freckles replied sharply.

"Hey dude, there's no need to get nasty." Drew said.

"Not you Freckles." This was getting out of hand. "Drew, shut up."

"Whatever," Drew mumbled. He rested his head back against the wall as though he might fall asleep. I was jealous.

"I was saying," Freckles said, a slight edge in her tone. "It just doesn't look like what I'd expect to see. Gimme a second."

"Drew," I turned to face the moron, who was staring at the palms of his hands as though they had suddenly appeared out of thin air. "Where's the money?"

"Man, I don't know what you're talking about."

Frustrated, I ran a hand through my hair. Was he telling the truth or was he so high he couldn't think straight? I looked around the room for the doorway to the bathroom. If he didn't start making sense I was going to have to make him drink out of the toilet to jog his memory. Along one wall a series of photos were arraigned in matching wooden frames. Drew was in many of them, along with people I assumed were his parents and siblings or friends. Apparently Drew came from money. That or he was part of some sort of poor-kid outreach where rich people took him on yachts and horseback riding and expensive vacations.

I stood up, intending to grab Drew and give him a full faced drink, when I noticed a small black box similar to an external hard drive behind the laptop plugged into a rear USB port. It looked odd and out of place. I held it up.

"What's this?" I asked Drew.

"I don't really know man. Someone gave it to me."

"What's it do?"

"Sticks it to those money grubbing bastards dude." Drew laughed again.

"What does that mean?" I said, a cold tone coming over my voice.

"I don't know man; I only know it's supposed to attack banks or something. That's what the chick said."

Banks. That was it.

"You stole money from my client using a virus, probably using this," I held up the device again. "I tracked it here."

"Wait," Drew said slowly, his face expanding as he had an idea. From the looks of things, it was his first idea in a very long time. "Your client is a bank?"

"Yeah." I replied.

I know what you're thinking. I collect stolen money for banks? But big business and banks are the devil though, right? Always oppressing the little guy. How can I do that? Yeah, I've heard it all before. But it pays the bills. Besides, it's not like I'm the CEO of Goldman Sachs just before the subprime mortgage collapse or anything. Still, collecting stolen money for Banks isn't the sort of thing you can tell people at dinner parties.

Luckily nobody invites me to dinner parties.

"Oh man," Drew sputtered. "That's wrong dude. Banks?"

"Listen, you stole two hundred thousand dollars from the Southwest Regional Bank and I'm here to get it back."

"Dude, I didn't take money from anyone. I keep telling you that. I wouldn't even know how. I can barely type a term paper. I'm a philosophy major." He laughed again, that goofy idiot laugh that made me want to smack him in the face in frustration. "But if a bank lost some money what's that to me? Why should anyone care man? All those rich guys in suits are ruining this country."

I sighed in boredom. Here we go again.

See this is the problem with most people. They don't consider cause and effect regarding their actions. A thief robs a gas station, damages the store, steals cash and beats up the clerk. The thief wants the money and the business owner must be rolling in it,

right? But now the clerk's in the hospital so the owner has to cover medical expenses, repair the store, and more than likely write off his losses on the theft. Or he claims them against insurance, and then his rates go up. He has to hire a new clerk, but no one wants the job since they heard about what happened to the other clerk who just got out of the hospital. Business declines because customers avoid the store since they heard about the robbery. So costs go up, the owner must raise his prices, and business suffers again. Maybe the business stays afloat and recovers. Maybe not. None of that matters to the thief.

Cause and effect.

"Where's the money?" I asked slowly.

"How can you live with yourself man?" Drew said. I stood up, leisurely walking over to him as he continued talking. "You really should watch that documentary about how investment bankers ripped off America. I can't remember the name but-

I interrupted him by punching him in the stomach again.

"Save me the speech. I don't care. Where's the money?"

"Dude," Drew cried, clutching his gut. "Stop hitting me man! What's with all the violence? It's just like those rich jerks to hire a thug like you to come after the people trying to knock them off their pedestals."

"I don't care," I repeated, looking down at Drew, huddled against the wall. Tears streaked his cheeks. I couldn't help but feel a bit sorry for him. I might think he was gullible, but at least he still cared about something. Living had not yet sucked all the life from him. That made one of us. "Listen, I get it, the rich get richer and all that. And yes, I'm sure they all go out and club baby seals to death. Yada yada. But you're missing a fundamental truth Drew. I-don't-care about any of it. I care about getting paid, and you're in the way of that."

"Well I don't care about some rich bankers losing money." Drew said defiantly.

"Kid," I said, looking him up and down. "You're stupider than you look. And that's saying something." I walked away from him, leaving him slouching against the paneled wall. "When people steal from the bank, whose money do you think they steal? It's not the banker's." I said the last part in air quotes. Leave it to me to nail a good air quote. I pulled a picture from the wall and tossed it to him. "It's their money," I said, pointing at the photo. "Your mom and dad's." I tossed another photo. "Or theirs."

Drew looked down at the pictures in his hands. His face took on a distant uncaring expression. Great, another rich kid with parental issues.

"Look Drew, you seem like a good kid, and I'm tired so I'll make you a deal." I slouched back down into the chair with a deep breath. It was time to go for broke. "I don't care about your baggage, your parents, or their money. It don't amount to a hill of beans if you hate your family's money, or think your folks were horrible for taking you on yachting trips, vacations to Europe, and buying you a Mercedes while people down the street worked minimum wage to scrape by. Don't know; don't care. But that money was taken from my client, from their customers, and they are paying me to get it back by any means necessary. You didn't hurt the CEO of that bank, kid. He's still at his vacation

home somewhere on the beach. The Bank's just going to raise the rates he charges all those mommies and daddies that bank there to cover his losses and his increased insurance payments. Or better yet, he's going to fire some mommies and daddies to save the money. Thing is, I'm too tired to care about that too. But let me make one thing perfectly clear."

Slowly, I opened the lid to the toolbox and pulled out my .9mm Beretta handgun. Drew took in a sharp breath, eyes widening in shock. I reached back into the toolbox and pulled out the suppressor and began screwing it onto the muzzle of the barrel.

The quiet stuff gets 'em every time.

"You know what this is Drew?" I pointed to the silencer.

He nodded, the fog disappearing from his eyes.

"Good." I pointed the gun at him in a relaxed pose. "The thing is Drew, before I got here, I knew the schedules of all the kids in this dorm. I know most of them on this floor are in class. I know it'll be three hours before the kids in the rooms next to you will be back. I know that with walls this thick, I can unload this clip into your body and anyone within fifteen feet of us will hear some popping and think you're cooking popcorn. See Drew, I don't care about you, or whose money it is, or who's bad and who's good. I just want to know where it is, and I want to know right now."

Drew's lips tightened and his chin quivered as more tears ran down his face. He spluttered something unintelligible, saliva pooling around the corners of his mouth to fall down one side of his chin.

"Please don't kill me." His thin body shook with sobs. I chambered a round, and pulled back the hammer. "I don't have any money. I swear. I didn't take it."

"Well Drew, that's bad news for you. My orders are to get it back if I can. And if I can't I get even. It's what I do."

"No, no, no," Drew pleaded.

"Calder, hold up," Freckles said into my ear. "I think he's right."

I hesitated.

"I've been analyzing the data and I think he's telling you the truth. I need you to grab his hard drive and the device you were talking about. See if you can get any more details."

"Alright," I said.

I turned back to the computer and set my gun on the table beside me. I grabbed a screwdriver from the toolbox at my feet and flipped the laptop over to begin unscrewing the chassis. How long would that take? I didn't have all day, and I wanted to get to bed. So I picked it up and slammed it to the floor. The laptop broke into several pieces, keys scattering across the floor like roaches.

"What are you doing?" Drew shouted. "Ah man, I haven't finished my term paper yet!"

"Be quiet." I reached down and picked up the laptop carcass. I ripped it apart and pulled out the hard drive. I tossed the useless laptop back to the ground. "Where did you get that box?" I gestured with my head to the device I'd held up before.

"From some chick at an Occupy Movement rally. She said it would help in the fight against economic inequality."

I rolled my eyes again. God bless the ignorant, ideological masses.

"So you just took her word for it and plugged it into your PC?" I asked.

He nodded. "Besides, she was kinda hot."

I was wrong about him. There was no maybe. He really was stupider than he looked.

I reached around to the back of the desk and grabbed the box. I placed it and the hard drive in the toolbox along with my gun.

"I'm not gonna let you take that, man." Drew stood up as though to block me from leaving. It was sort of cute really.

I pulled out a package from my back pocket that looked like a moist towelette. I tore the package open, and placed the paper wrapper back into my pocket.

"Sorry for the trouble Drew," I said, "but I'll be going now. Two pieces of advice. First, when you wake up, call campus security and file a report that your room was broken into and your computer destroyed. I'm sure they'll give you an extension on your paper. Second," I looked back over the mess of his room. "Try to get your life together."

"What do you mean when I wake up?"

"Like I said, I'm sorry."

I punched him in the stomach again, and he doubled over in pain. I caught him before he fell and pressed the chloroform drenched wet wipe to his face. He struggled for a moment until his body went slack. I almost let him fall to the ground, but then my conscience got the better of me. I dragged his body over to his bed, and laid him on it. Then, as an additional measure of precaution, I found a rolled up joint on his bedside table, lit it with a lighter, and left it in an ashtray.

With any luck, when he woke up he'd think the whole thing was just one messed up dream.

I opened the side door of The Beast, and climbed up into front cabin. The Beast is my team's RV that we painstakingly modified into our mobile operations center. The living room section was gutted, table, couches and all to fit our needs. A small aisle ran the length of the area and separated the workspaces of Freckles and Darius. Freckles' side housed a collection of LCD monitors attached to the wall above a desk. Along the opposite side was Darius' workstation, complete with vials and a large microscope. Under the table, built into the wall was the special fridge he called 'The Cooler' where he kept most of the materials he needed to transform my face. I own the RV but I'm not allowed to touch any of their things. It's better that way, 'cause usually I break stuff.

Beyond the workspace was a kitchen area with a stove, microwave, and fridge. There was a toilet and stand up shower, and then the sleeping area. We had converted the master bed into a series of four bunks in racks of two that hung on the walls. Everything was small and cramped, but we manage to get along.

Most of the time.

I swiveled the captain's chair around to face the work area and sat down. I had stowed my toolbox outside in a storage locker under the belly of the RV. Freckles sat typing at the keyboard at her workstation, but raised her hand in brief acknowledgment of my arrival. She was pretty, with shoulder length brown hair, shocking blue eyes and a kind smile that covered her sharp witty tongue. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and she wore her headset, the microphone stretching over her cheek. She was chewing her lip. I'd worked with her long enough to know that meant she was concentrating on something and I should be quiet, or she would begin chewing me out. Sheesh, I really should just marry her.

Darius was nowhere to be seen, so I assumed that meant he was in the back, probably sleeping.

"Hang on a sec," Freckles said. She typed a few more letters onto her keyboard, the last she pressed with a sense of finality. "And, done." She spun in her chair to look at me.

"Here," I said. I tossed the device I'd taken from Drew's dorm. "Think you can make something useful out of it?"

"Have I ever let you down?" she asked.

I frowned. "Yeah. I can think of about ten times you've let me down." I held up my hand ticking off my fingers. "There was Ukraine, and that time in Birmingham and-

"Whatever." She rolled her eyes. "Ukraine wasn't my fault. There was no way I could've known that guy had a pet Raccoon. Who does that? And you deserved what you got in Birmingham."

"Not this again." I sighed. "You're so high maintenance."

She rolled her eyes at me again. Which is adult woman speak for: "Everything you're saying right now is dumb and you're embarrassing yourself."

My dad taught a great truism of life: 'Behind every great man there's a woman, rolling her eyes.'

That was Freckles.

"Did you bring me anything else?" She asked. "Is that a hard drive in your pocket or

are you just-"

"Gimme a break," I pulled the drives from my pocket. "You're not even trying."

"That it?" She asked.

"Yeah, why?" I reviewed our prior phone conversation in my head. "You didn't tell me anything else to bring."

She pursed her lips in an exaggerated pouting expression. "I thought you would've at least brought me some chocolate."

I held back another comment about her being high maintenance. Telling a woman she was high maintenance would be like telling a flaming log it was hot. Whatever you did you were likely to get burned, so I let it go.

"What's up with you going all grumpy gunman on that kid?" She asked.

"He was never in any danger." I shrugged. "I just wanted to cut to the chase. Figured he'd never had that happen to him before and it would loosen his memory up a bit."

"And his bowels," Freckles said. "He's probably upstairs right now looking for a clean pair of tighty-whities."

"Nah, he's a boxer guy," I grumbled.

Behind me the bathroom door opened and Darius stepped out into the aisle, closing the door behind him. He turned and noticed me for the first time.

"Hey boss," He said. I nodded to him.

Darius was African-American, tall and thin with dark hair and eyes. He kept his hair cut close to his scalp, and, like usual, he wore a pair of jeans and a dark blue t-shirt with a Super Mario brothers cartoon mushroom on the chest. He had to have a million t-shirts, each with a different eclectic or ironic picture on the front. But come to think of it, I've only seen that one pair of jeans on him.

"Ah jeez, Darius!" Freckles exclaimed, pinching her nose.

I wasn't sure what the commotion was about until the smell hit me. In hindsight I'm surprised I couldn't see it coming it was so powerful. My throat tightened as the potent aroma of cayenne peppers, wet gym socks and old pennies wafted up my nose.

"Calder, we need a new rule," Freckles said. "Curry needs to go on Darius' no-eat list. That or we need to rip the bathroom ceiling out and install an exhaust fan the size of a jet engine."

"What can I say?" Darius shrugged, and walked up to his chair at his workstation. "I like me some food with flavor, Vanilla," he said to Freckles. Vanilla was his nickname for her.

"That's it," Freckles said. "I'm sick of you boys stinking everything up. I'm ordering some candles online and you're paying for it Calder."

I nodded. It's easier sometimes to give in. Another one of my father's truisms: "You can be right or you can be happy."

God bless the man for teaching me a thing or two about women before he died.

Darius checked his watch. "Boss you'd better shoot up, cause you're stims are going to wear off soon."

He reached down and opened The Cooler, pulled out a Ziploc bag of three small

pinky-sized glass vials. Each was brightly colored, one yellow-gold like antifreeze, one a dark sapphire blue like Windex, and the last was Christmas candle red. He pulled open a drawer and handed me a small plastic box along with the baggie. The vials were nearly ice cold and burned a bit when they touched my palm. I took a deep breath and walked back to the bathroom, dreading what I knew was coming next.

I opened the bathroom door, and nearly gagged again. "Darius," I shouted down the hall. "Next time at least use the exhaust fan we do have!"

Outside, the jerk started laughing.

Like everything else in the RV, the bathroom was small. There was a toilet inside the stand-up shower behind me, and I stood at the bathroom vanity and sink. Two stylish metal hand towel rings hung empty on either wall between the sink and the mirror. The room was lit by a row of bright lights above the vanity mirror. I ran my finger along the bottom edge of the mirror and pressed my finger into the biometrics scanner.

"Identify yourself," a digital voice said.

"Calder Halloway," I said.

"Voice recognition successful. Good afternoon Mr. Halloway. PIN please."

"Nine, Seven, Six, Three, Five."

"Your PIN was successfully validated. Thank you."

There was a soft clicking of gears from behind the mirror. Slowly the mirror rose, retracting into the top of the vanity to be replaced by a LCD monitor. Attached to the bottom of the monitor a small black cable hung loose from a retractable spool. I pulled the end of the line, towards myself, and opened the button of my shirt to reveal the tiny port just beneath my collar bone, no bigger than a smartphone adapter. I plugged the cable into the port and the monitor lit up from sleep mode.

A 3D model of my skull rotated on the screen. The skull image was grey, but superimposed on it were small sections that glowed a bright blue along the nose, chin, brow line and cheeks. Each glowing area represented one of Darius' implants. It looked like something from a comic book, similar to a mapping of Wolverine's body where the Adamantium had been injected and fused to his skull. Where the eyes should have been there were two circles, representing pupils, that were colored brown. As the model rotated, a new layer was added to represent skin, showing what my face looked like with the implants activated.

I set the Ziploc baggie on the sink, along with the plastic box, which I opened. I pulled out the hydraulic mini-syringe. Simple in design, it looked like a gun the size of a pen with a small needle at one end, a cradle for the vials in the center, and a handle for grip. I opened the baggie and grabbed the first vial and snapped it into place in the cradle. The golden liquid reflected the light from the vanity bulbs all around me. I set the syringe down, and unbuttoned my left sleeve at the wrist and rolled it up to above my forearm to reveal the tiny port in the cradle of my elbow. After picking up the syringe, I inserted the needle into the port, and squeezed the trigger, injecting the liquid directly into my bloodstream.

Here's a fun fact about your body. It's normal temperature is 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit.

When you inject a vial of liquid being held in cold storage just above freezing temperatures it feels as though you actually squirted lava into your veins. Which is odd I know, since the liquid is cold and your blood is hot, but still, there it is. Or maybe it's more like razor blades, I don't know it's hard to describe.

Regardless, it hurts. The pain lanced up my arm, the flame searing past my shoulder, and into my neck, the razors tearing and biting every centimeter of the way.

The first one's the easy one.

It's a pain killer, and a numbing agent. It's like Novocain on steroids. Something in the wonder chemicals that Darius plays with makes it attract to the implants in my face. Don't ask me how it works, it's way over my head. I'm just glad it does.

Almost immediately my face went numb, and slack. I opened the drawer on the right side of the sink and pulled out a heavy braided rope that was connected to a strap on either end. I opened my mouth and placed the rope between my teeth and the strap around my head to hold it in place. I had done this once before without the rope and strap. After nearly biting my own tongue off from the pain, I never want to do it again.

I leaned over the sink as the numbing agent took hold of my face. Drool fell from the corners of my mouth around the rope and into the sink. I ejected the empty vial, replacing it with the second one - the blue one - which was an anti-coagulant and anti-inflammatory. When the implants relaxed, resetting my face to normal, the blue vial kept it from swelling and my blood from clotting. I squeezed the trigger, and clenched my teeth as the frigid liquid hit my bloodstream again, setting my arm, shoulder and neck aflame.

Two down, one to go.

I ejected the now empty second vial, placing it back into the baggie. I took a deep breath. I hated this part.

I loaded the third vial - the red one - into the syringe. It would trigger the implants to relax, setting my face back to normal. But I had to be quick. I only had three seconds tops. If I were too slow... well let's just say I never want to be too slow again. My hand shook nervously as I held the needle over the port in my arm. I slid the sliver of metal into the port, and squeezed the trigger.

One.

As quickly as I could, I pulled the needle out of the port, and dropped it into the sink. I could feel the flaming liquid racing up my arm toward the implants in my face.

Two.

I knelt down on the ground in front of the sink, pushing my chest against the small cabinet underneath. I reached up and grabbed the empty hand towel rings. These were no ordinary sink decorations, but rather reinforced steel mounts, affixed to studs under the walls.

Three.

Even with the first injection of painkillers having my face reset is an exercise in pain threshold management. I've never given birth to a child, being a man and all, but I hear it's just about the worst pain a human being can endure. That and being shot. To me,

having the implants reset feels like giving birth to a horde of minuscule, angry fire-demons armed with shotguns loaded with salt pellets firing underneath every square inch of skin on my face.

I screamed.

Not the sort of scream you hear on those ridiculous B-horror movies, but a genuine old fashioned scream of anguish, like a civil war soldier having his leg hacked off by a field medic using a dull saw.

My arms pulled against the metal hoops, the veins and tendons rising under the skin in stark contrast to the rigid muscles straining in agony. I didn't let go, but only because I learned long ago it helps to keep a hold of them. I surrendered to the pain, like I have had to do every time I change faces. I keep telling myself it will get easier someday.

But it never does.

At least I no longer blackout, so that's something. I slumped against the sink as the pain subsided, my breath coming in ragged pants like I'd just ran a several mile sprint. I pushed myself to my feet. The LCD screen now displayed my green eyes once more, and the outline of skin looked much more like my natural self.

I ejected the third vial, now empty, and replaced it in the baggie, which had fallen on the floor due to my thrashing. I set the syringe back in its container. After unplugging myself from the connection under my collarbone, I ran my finger over the print scanner again. The LCD screen retracted and the mirror settled back into place.

The reflection showed my face, red and blotchy, and slightly swollen in spite of the anti-inflammatory injection. Instinctively, my hands reached up, and felt along the lines of my face. I could feel the implants above my cheekbones, along my chin, like small ridges barely perceptible beneath the skin.

I walked out of the bathroom. As always, Freckles was trying to look busy and unconcerned, typing away at her keyboard. Darius stood up and walked over to me. He held up a pen light, shining it in my eyes.

"You alright boss?" Darius asked.

"Just peaches," I said. My voice was ragged and my throat hurt. It was almost like I'd just been screaming or something.

"You don't look so good," Darius said.

"Har, har," I replied. "I get it; my face is ugly without your implants. You need new material."

"That's not what I'm saying," Darius said. "Though yeah, your momma gave you one ugly mug." He grabbed my wrist and took my pulse while looking at his watch. "I mean you don't look well. When's the last time you ate something?"

"I think I grabbed a bag of peanuts on the flight."

"You sleep at all?"

"You know I can't sleep on planes," I said.

"It's the safest way to travel you goob," Freckles interrupted.

Darius pulled out a blood pressure cuff from under his workstation and attached it to my arm. I suffered in silence. Safest way to travel my butt-cheek. I would much rather

drive and risk a thousand idiot commuters texting and eating fast food than fly. At least I can try to swerve to miss the prom queen texting 'OMG' and 'LOL' to her Facebook friends. When the engines go out thirty thousand feet in the air, there's nothing you can do but sit and wait the last few minutes while you plummet to your death. I don't care what people say, give me a car. I'll take the car any day.

Darius let out a low whistle that sounded less than pleased. "Boss," he said, "you better take it easy. I think you're pushing it too hard."

"What are you talking about?" I asked. "I'm fine."

"No you're not." Darius said. "Your blood pressure and pulse are through the roof. Your body is taxed to the limit. You need to rest."

"Why?"

"Cause of how the implants work," Darius said, assuming a lecturing tone. "It's never really come up before 'cause our jobs don't pile on top of one another like this one did. But the implants use your body, specifically your metabolism to work."

"Didn't I say I was short on sleep? English please."

"The energy has to come from somewhere." Darius said. "The implants in your face, skin and abdomen have to get energy to make the changes they do. That comes from your body. They speed up your metabolism at the cellular level. But you're running on empty boss, and I ain't sure what'll happen if they try to do something and you got no energy to give."

"What could happen?" I asked.

"Unconsciousness." Darius started ticking items off his fingers. "Paralysis, stroke, maybe death."

"All bad things," I said, holding up a hand to stop him. "All bad things. Got it."

Darius nodded.

"Alright," I said, removing the blood pressure cuff from my arm. "Then I'm going back to my hotel to get some rest."

"Eat something too," Darius reminded me.

"Just no curry," Freckles said. "Or I quit!"

I got back to my dingy little hotel room later that evening. In spite of Darius' admonition to eat, I took a cab straight to my hotel. I dropped onto the bed, and contemplated going to sleep, but I knew it would be fruitless. I was too tired to sleep now, and had too much work to do.

So I got up, went into the bathroom and washed my face. After showering, I sat down on the bed and opened up my laptop to begin the ritual I had conducted nearly every night for the past five years.

I'm no hacker, that's why I pay Freckles. But I know enough to be dangerous, and I have written my own virus. Don't worry, it's harmless. It's more of a bot really, attaching to a host computer and utilizing spare processor cycles to browse the net, and log data. Each night, I try my best to sort through all the information collected that day, in an attempt to track down someone who has eluded me for more than half a decade.

It's hard to say how I got into this line of work exactly. I don't always work for Banks, but my clients are almost always large corporations. At some point some CEO looked me up and offered me a job. Eventually, I started an ad on Craigslist. It's true you really can find anything out there. The ad says "CH Collections Specialist: Fixer, strong back, hard working. Specializing in finding and returning misplaced things". The email in the ad goes to an account that Freckles monitors for me. She vets the clients, evaluates the work, and takes care of all the finances. See what I mean about it being like marriage?

Apparently CEOs are a close knit group because word spread pretty quickly and the work came flooding in from these big companies who were sick of being stolen from and were willing to pay handsomely for some payback. I don't know why a business man would pay me half a million dollars to get back two hundred thousand, but what do I care? If I had to guess, I would say it's got something to do with the fact that no one likes to feel powerless, and companies are just about powerless to stop most forms of fraud and theft these days. I figure rich people are not accustomed to feeling powerless, so that's probably got something to do with it.

Before you ask, no, I don't know where they get the money. I'd guess one of their projects comes in under budget or another's over budget, whatever. They shuffle funds, and I get paid. I find it's best to know as little as possible. All I know is Bankers and Business men know a thing or two about moving money around, keeping it from prying eyes. I'm sure they've got plenty of clever ways to finance me.

Sure the FBI is there with their FDIC insurance, backing up the banks. But you have to steal quite a bit of money to even get the Fed's attention and they're pretty busy trying to stop terrorists from blowing stuff up that the backlog of cases in the White Collar division is pretty significant. I mean think about it, who is more motivated, the government employee making thirty-six thousand dollars a year working eighty hours a week trying to catch criminals online, or the thieves stealing millions each year. Besides, in most cases the thieves are not even in the US and the Feds can't do much overseas. Thus the Ukraine job.

That's where I come in.

So these companies pay me and my team big money to find out who did it, retrieve what we can and break up and destroy what we cannot. Rather than wait on the Feds to maybe someday catch the bad guy, they call me, I skirt the law and do what I do. No court fees, no attorneys, no years of trials and retrials. Plus, I get a bonus of whatever I retrieve as added incentive.

And I use those resources as a means to spend my nights searching through log files looking for a ghost of my past. Some part of me deep down knows I should let her go, just move on. Get a life. But I can't.

Just as I was about to begin looking through the vast sums of information my bots have collected for me throughout the last day my phone rang. I put my Bluetooth earpiece back into my ear and activated it with a tap.

"This is Calder," I said.

"I know who it is dummy," Freckles said. "I called you. I found something interesting from that device from Drew's dorm room. Looks like it's some sort of firmware bot virus procreator. It's constantly replicating bots onto machines it can infect."

"Yeah Freckles," I said, "that's nothing new."

"I agree, but there's something about it that's familiar. I don't know. Looking at the code it just seems like I've seen something like this before. Something about the style."

"That's what you called me about?"

"No, you jerk," Freckles said. "The device is designed to check in with a parent module of code, across a wireless signal like a mothership sort of thing. Like from Independence Day. You know, that movie with Will Smith-"

"Freckles, can we stay on topic here? Mothership, got it."

"Well anyway, because it's wireless I figured it had to be local. So, I did a little magic and traced the communication back to where it was checking in, and it's pretty close to your hotel. I know it's late but you could get there in about fifteen minutes."

I blew out a deep breath. I didn't want to go. I wanted to sort through my logs and get some sleep. At this point sleep seemed like a distant memory.

"I know you're not sleeping," Freckles said, all the playfulness gone from her voice. "You're probably on your laptop sorting through those logs again, looking for her." She filled the final word with disdain.

"Freckles," I said warningly. "Did you put another spy bot on my machine? I told you last time-"

"I don't need to plant a bot to know you're obsessed. She's never coming back you know."

"I know," I whispered.

"Then why do you do this to yourself?"

"That," I paused, "I do not know."

"I wish you'd just forget about her and move on with your life. There are other people who are still here, that didn't leave. But you ignore them. Maybe if you forgot her, you could build a life, a real life you know, with someone who cared enough about you to stick around."

I didn't know what to say. This wasn't the first time this had come up, and I expected it wouldn't be the last. I knew how she felt about me, though I tried to ignore it as best as I could. But I couldn't just move on, it wasn't that simple.

"I..." I stuttered.

"I'll text you the address."

She disconnected.

I stood outside the building address from Freckles' text. It was a large square building that looked as though it might have been a factory in a previous life, before time and progress had left it behind. I walked across the empty street, my boots making soft thudding sounds on the blacktop in the silent night air. I stalked up to the side door, where a lamp hung overhead illuminating the entrance. I looked around and reached up and unscrewed the bulb with my gloved hands. Once I was blanketed in complete darkness, I knelt down and pulled out my lock pick set to unlock the door. To my surprise it was open, barely ajar. I glanced over my shoulder to ensure the street was still empty. Without Darius having proper time to prep another face, I was on my own. That was fine to me, I didn't relish going through the face-morph twice in one day. I pulled out a black ski mask from my back pocket and slipped it on.

Like I said, I usually don't need them.

I walked into the building. I checked my phone, and pulled up the building schematics that Freckles had sent me on the drive over. She still wasn't talking to me, but she wouldn't leave me high and dry either. At least I didn't think she would. I made my way through the main area of the building, where a series of chains hung from the rafters over what looked to be some sort of factory floor. Off to my right was a doorway where the schematics showed some newly renovated office space. I made my way over to it, and sneaked a peek through the glass window set in the door. All clear. I quietly opened the door and crept through into a hallway.

The air was stale, and musty, like the area had been unoccupied for long stretches of time. The carpet looked brand new and expensive. However for an office space so clearly empty one thing jumped out to me right away.

It was cold.

Outside the evening air must have been close to eighty degrees with high humidity, and even the large cavernous factory area had been swelteringly hot. But it had to be close to sixty-five degrees or so in there. Only an idiot paid utility bills to keep unoccupied office space that cool at night. That probably meant only one thing: computers.

I crept down the dark hallway and noticed a window set in the wall up ahead to my right. Light flooded the hallway through the window, spilling onto the opposite wall like a splash of bright, azure paint. I stopped just below the glass and listened for any sounds coming from the other room. I held my breath straining to hear. Nothing. I pressed my cheek hard against the drywall beneath the window trying to feel any movement from the other room. Again, nothing. After concentrating for several moments I heard it; a gentle buzzing noise like a swarm of bees flying in the distance. I felt the slightest of vibrations through the wall, a faint thrumming of constant steady motion. Confident of what I would find in the other room, I chanced a glance through the window.

The small room held a series of four server racks, line upon line of the machines stacked atop one another in large metal devices reminiscent of bookshelves. They were stacked nearly up to the drop ceiling tiles, the lights on the front of the machines flickering wildly with activity like a bunch of maddened pixies. A series of PC monitors

hung suspended - one on each rack - facing me. It was odd to see a server room in the midst of an old abandoned factory in the middle of nowhere. But that was not the strangest thing in the room.

In front of those machines, a man sat in a chair with his back to me, his hands on the desk. I watched for several heartbeats, and the man never seemed to move, not even to breathe. He was completely still, yet the way he was sitting was totally alien and unnatural. I stayed crouched uncomfortably in that position, trying not to move, hoping and waiting for any sign of life from the other man. My legs began to burn and when I could take no more, I stood up and walked into the room.

I walked quietly behind the man, my steps agonizingly slow. With each step I grew more and more certain the man was dead, yet my heart hoped for some other explanation. The air was not stale in this room, on the contrary, it hung thick with the scent of dust, and plastic and something else. Something metallic, coppery.

Blood.

My vision was locked on the back of the man's head as though his thick dark curly hair had some physical hold on my eyesight it would not release. I reached my hand out slowly to touch the man's shoulder, and to swivel him around to face me. My mind was screaming at me to stop, to get out of there. What was wrong with me it shouted. Ignoring it, I pulled on his shoulder, but nothing happened, it was like he was stuck. Something pulled against him the opposite direction.

That's when my eyes broke from staring at the man's head and took in the rest of the room.

The floor was coated in blood, a large pool of it had settled below the chair, and crept into the cracks of the elevated floor commonly used in server rooms to improve airflow and ventilation. I leaned over the man, and found his throat cut open, leaving a bloodstain across his chest that looked like one of those bibs they give you when you order a rack of ribs. He wore a short sleeved shirt and blood had crusted and pooled a bit in the crooks of his elbows. I followed the lines of his arms, tracing the trail of blood that had been trapped between his thick forearms and the table, to his hands which both had been impaled with sleek knives. That had been what held him in place when I tried to turn him around, his hands stapled like that to the table. The room felt like a tomb, quiet, somber and hallowed, and I an intruder in a holy place. I half expected to see death himself materialize from the darkness around me, and demand my life for my intrusion.

And naturally that's when my phone rang.

The ringer shattered the silence like a gunshot blast to a vase, and the vibrations - normally such a slight thing - felt like a grenade going off in my pocket. I don't know how I didn't piss myself right then and there, but to this day I still occasionally thank my bladder for its admirable restraint in the midst of trying circumstances. I jumped and screamed in what I can only hope was a manly scream and not one of those teenage girl's horror movie screams.

I tapped my Bluetooth earpiece again.

"Yeah," I said, my voice harsh from the scream.

"Calder, it's me Freckles."

Freckles never announced herself. She just expected me to always know her voice.

"What's wrong?" I asked, not wanting to add to the wrongness of the situation. No. There were already truckloads of wrongness in this room. A lifetime of truckloads.

"I recognized where I'd seen this style of code before. It's been a while, so I looked back over some old archives I've got. I haven't seen it in five years."

"What?" I said, my throat dry.

"It's Sara, Calder. It's her code."

I stood there dumbstruck for a moment while I let that sink in. I was tired, hungry and did I mention tired? All day I had been thinking about something, planning my next move, driving from one place to another. Suddenly I had a lead on someone I'd been searching the past five years for and my brain chose that precise moment to go blank. Stupid brain.

And then things got really weird.

The four computer screens - which had glowed with a pale blue screen saver up till that point - all went black. The momentary darkness made me feel like the floor dropped out from beneath me. My heart beat furiously and it took a few seconds for my mind to reorient myself to the room. Then I noticed a tiny little green dot in the darkness in front of me, just above where one of the monitors was located. My eyes adjusted to the lack of light and I could make out the orb shaped outline of a webcam, mounted just atop the monitor in front of me.

"Calder," Freckles said. "Whatever's going on, you need to get out of there. Something doesn't seem right."

"I couldn't agree more." I replied.

I turned to leave, and as I faced the doorway, a light flickered on behind me. In spite of my better judgement, which seemed to have taken the entire night off, I turned around to look at it.

On the screen to my left a single word was printed in all capital letters.

"PICK"

Pick? What did that mean? Pick what? Then the second screen lit up with a different word.

"UP"

Pick up?

"Well it's been fun," I said to the room, the monitors, and the dead man's body. "But I think it's time for me to grab a stiff drink, a nap, and an appointment with a shrink."

Before I could turn away again the third monitor flashed a single word.

"THE"

Whatever was coming next, I was pretty sure I did not, in fact, want to pick it up.

The fourth and final screen lit up, a single word again, like the others all in capital letters.

"PHONE"

What phone? Technically I was already on the phone with Freckles. The entire

evening was now circling the toilet bowl of weird-and-freaky and I didn't want to be flushed down that drain, so I decided to bolt for it.

Then, a phone rang.

I cursed a few choice phrases at a pitch that I was rather surprised did not shatter the ample amounts of glass around me.

The words on the screens changed colors from simple white on black, to a deep blood red, while the unseen phone rang mercilessly.

I searched all around for a phone but saw none. Then a nasty thought occurred to me.

I leaned forward again, to look at the dead man, and noticed inside his shirt pocket the outline of a phone. With each ring, the vibrations created tiny shockwaves along the stained, bloody fabric of his shirt. I reached my hand down into the pocket of his shirt and pulled out the phone ignoring the insane mental image of the dead man going all zombie on me and grabbing my arm, biting my hand off, and then killing me for trying to take his phone. Once I extracted the phone, I checked the screen. Unknown caller. Go figure. A man can't ever get lucky and have caller ID actually identify a caller when you're scared out of your mind.

"Hello," I said as I placed the phone to my other ear.

"Calder," A female voice said. The word echoed through my head like a BB rolling around in a soda can. It wasn't the word that caused the reaction. It was the voice. A voice I hadn't heard in five long years.

"Sara?" I asked.

"Calder, listen to me. You need to get out of there. You don't know what you're doing."

"What are you talking about?" I said. Thankfully Freckles opted to stay quiet on her end of the call in my other ear.

"Calder, you don't know who you're working for."

"I don't care about that."

"You used to care," she said.

"A lot's changed since you left, Sara," I said coolly.

"I guess it has, Calder."

"You do this to this guy?" I pointed at the dead man, unsure if she could see me or not.

"No, it wasn't me." She said.

"Who did?"

"I can't be sure, but you have to--"

"Who was he?" I interrupted.

"An employee of your client. He did some work for me too. His name isn't important."

"It is to me."

"Listen, there's not much time. The police are on their way. You have to leave, and drop this case."

"You know I won't do that. Besides, what gives you the right to tell me what I have to

do?"

"You're in a lot of danger. You don't know what you're doing."

"Did you steal the money?"

"No." She took a deep breath. "Well it's complicated."

"Not really," I said. "Either you did or you didn't."

"I did, but—"

"So now you're a thief? Guess I'm not the only one who's changed."

She groaned in frustration. "I didn't steal the money for myself. I used it to buy information and to draw attention to your client."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"Your client, Silas Lockwood, is into some nasty stuff. But he likes to stay low, and under the radar. I used half of the money performing transactions that would get the attention of the FBI and the SEC. The other half was going to my informant."

"The dead guy?"

"Yes," she said. "He told me a few days ago that Silas ordered this place evacuated, but he wouldn't tell me what they did here until I got him the money. He called me tonight and said that the building was supposed to be empty but he was ordered back to execute a server backup. I think they found out about him working for me."

"And whoever wanted him back in here killed him?"

"That's my guess," she said. "I looked over the security logs and I see two people entered the building just before you. My mole and someone else I don't recognize. The logs indicate neither left. That's why you have to get out; whoever did this to him is probably still in there with you."

"That explains why the door was open. But I'm not leaving without the money you stole."

"Calder, listen to me—"

"No, you listen to me. I'm here to collect what was stolen. I don't care about any of this or who the client is, I just want the money."

"You have changed," She whispered.

"Yeah life'll do that."

"Calder, I'm sorry, I—"

"Save it. I've looked for you for five years, wanting answers, and now that I can get them, I find I don't want them. I just want the money so I can be done with this contract."

"Calder, you really don't get it to you? You think you're the only one looking for me? You think I'm hiding because of you? Why do you think Silas hired you for this job?"

I stood there in stunned silence as the meaning of those words made their way through my weary brain. Was she saying what I thought she was saying?

"Wait," I said, "are you saying this Silas person had something to do with you leaving?"

"I'm not getting into that with you right now, you have to get out of there."

"No." I shook my head. "Not without the money. I've got no reason to believe anything you say."

"Fine," she said through gritted teeth. "I'll transfer the remaining money back to you along with the rest from my own accounts. You'll see the transfer momentarily."

I waited for a moment, and then Freckles said, "It's in the account, Calder."

"It's there." I told Sara.

"Calder," Sara said, "now will you please just listen to me? I had to do what I did, I had to leave and stay hidden. You don't understand. You don't know who you're working for, what he's capable of. You need to get away from this."

"What is this place?" I asked, curiosity getting the better of me. "Why would someone remodel this old factory and put a server room in the middle of it? What did they do here?"

"Don't worry about it, Calder," Sara said, her voice urgent. "Just get out of there."

"You know, don't you?"

She groaned in exasperation. "Just get out of there!"

"First," I said, "you tell me I don't know who I'm working for, and I tell you I don't care. Then you proceed to berate me for that. Now I am asking, and that's wrong too?"

"Calder," She said through gritted teeth. "You're still as frustrating as ever. I guess some things never change."

"What can I say, I'm a timeless classic."

"You're not going to let this go, are you? Why do you suddenly care so much?"

"Mostly 'cause it bothers you."

"Fine," she said. There was some clicking on the other end of the line, like fingers racing across keys. One of the screens in front of me came to life, various documents lighting up the LCD panel. "I don't have time to explain, but from what I can gather this is some sort of research facility. I've been sniffing the network traffic, but so far I can only look over invoices and emails and such. But Silas is more than just some uber-wealthy business man. Over the past five years he's been investing heavily in genetics and bioengineering technologies and getting some massive classified government contracts. The stolen money started linking him to some dark secrets, that's why he wants it back. He's trying to cover his tracks. There's more to it, I'm sure, but I can't tell from out here, that's where the guy in front of you comes in. He was playing mole for me, but he was killed before I could get anything useful from him. I don't know anything else. There's a camera system there, but it's closed circuit-

"Closed circuit?" I mumbled to myself thinking.

"Yeah, Calder, as in I can't access it remotely," Sara said.

"I know what closed circuit means, I was thinking about what that meant." Realizing I was speaking gibberish circles, I said, "I mean why it would be closed circuit?"

"Well," she said, "I don't know what they're hiding, but the place is dangerous. There were all sorts of things going in and out of that place, explosives, poisons, toxins not to mention all the high-end lab and research equipment. Until recently when it was evacuated."

I checked my phone, reviewing the building schematics again. If I were going to install a closed circuit security system, where would I put it? I found the most logical

place; a small room off a branch in the hallway ahead.

"I think I know where the security system is," I said, all my fatigue forgotten for the moment. "I'm close by; it'll only take a minute."

"No!" two voices shouted in my ears. One was Freckles breaking her silence to yell at me, the other was Sara.

"Calder," Freckles said, "We've got the money, the job is done, now get out of there."

Sara was shouting profanity at me so I let my hand holding the phone fall to my waist. I ignored them both and moved back out into the hallway, retracing my steps to the intersection. Once there, I turned down the branch in the direction of the small security room. I approached and risked a glance through a small square window in the steel door. The room was empty and dark.

I slowly twisted the doorknob, careful to not make any noise and slipped inside. I pulled out a small penlight from my pocket and held it in my teeth. The desk was a cluttered mess of papers, Styrofoam coffee cups and other desktop litter. A large monitor sat on the desk. I slid my fingers along the sides to find the power switch. I turned it on, and a cross section of camera views appeared on the screen.

Each camera showed a different location within the building. Some were hallways; others were differing angles from within what appeared to be some sort of laboratory. But what drew my attention were the cells.

They were empty, so I was unable to determine what they might have held at one point. The cells appeared to have been built out of a section of a large room. They were brick on three sides and had a clear plastic door several inches thick in the front, presumably so that the researchers could look in on their subjects. They matched in nearly every way.

Except one was open.

Abruptly the display shifted to show a different angle of the room with the cells. This new angle revealed something I couldn't have seen from the first shot. The body of a man lay in a crumpled heap in the corner of the room outside the cells. A thick smear of dark blood ran across the floor from his body like the train of a robe.

"What do you see?" Freckles asked in my ear.

"Not sure," I said. It was true. With my lack of sleep and the tension of the past twenty-four hours, my mind was having a hard time processing things. I explained it to her the best that I could. "Looks like some sort of holding cells, and there's a dead guy in the corner. I'm getting out of here," I said when I was finished.

I returned to the hallway, crouching in a low walk to avoid being seen. Though it appeared that the only three people in this building were me and the two dead guys. That wasn't great company as far as I was concerned. As I moved along, I heard more chatter from the other phone still in my hand. I picked it up to my ear for a better listen.

"Calder, are you there?" Sara said frantically.

"Yeah, relax. Sheesh."

"Don't sheesh me you idiot. You must have set off some sort of silent alarm. The servers are executing a flash backup. Wait a minute..." She trailed off; the only sounds

coming through the phone were that of keys clicking and the occasional tap-tap-tap of a mouse button.

"By the way," I said. "I think I found the guy who killed your mole. Well, at least his body anyway."

I was so tired; my legs began to cramp so I stood up. If someone caught me, I didn't care. At least there would be a cot or a floor in my prison cell.

"Calder," Sara said, ignoring the news, panic raising her voice. "You have to get out of there now. If you doubt me, just think of that man back in that room."

"I remember him well enough," I said. Five years of hurt and suppressed anger that had welled up burst forth. I wanted to hurt her, get even, get some payback. Anything I could say and do to crush her like she had crushed me when she left. "That's what happens to a man who got involved with you."

"Jerk!" She shouted at me. "I should leave you there for that. I can't be sure, but I think someone remotely kicked off a self-destruct on the building. Besides that, I'm seeing loads of traffic on the network, backups followed by instantaneous file deletions. I'm not sure how long you have, but I'd guess when the backups are complete it will det-

That's when it hit me.

Usually when people use that expression, it's another way of saying, that's when it occurred to me. As in, they've just had an epiphany like, nuclear weapons are bad, or getting kicked in the face really hurts. That's not how I'm using that expression. I mean that's when **IT** hit me.

The creature.

It barreled into me, slamming into my back from the shadows with all the force of a freight train. Granted I've never been hit by a freight train, but I assume it has to be pretty close. It hit me so hard that it pushed me several feet down the narrow hallway. I was so surprised I had no time to react.

Of all things, my fatigue saved my life. For a split second my feet kept me upright during the onslaught of force from the creature behind me, but eventually they simply gave out and I fell. I hit the ground in an exhausted ball of clothing, sweat and confusion. My only thought was to try to ball up and allow the creature to stumble over me. It worked.

I heard it roll down the hallway into the darkness ahead of me. I stood and felt a searing pain in my lower back. I reached my hand to feel above my belt line and it came away slick with blood.

From down the dark hallway I could hear scratching and an odd, clicking sound. I retrieved my pen light again and pointed it toward the alien sounds. What was that thing? For that matter, what was this place, some sort of haunted house for the criminally insane? It just kept getting weirder and weirder. As the clicking drew closer, I realized this place had just graduated from the undergraduate program straight into the doctorate level of freaky.

What emerged from the darkness, illuminated by my penlight, could only be described as the love-child of an ant, a scorpion and a nightmare. If it was something I

could have stepped on though, I wouldn't have been freaking out like I was. It was big, easily the size of a mastiff or one of those other ridiculously small ponies people call a 'large dog breed'. It moved like a spider, and had the same form, but had the odd, oblong head of an ant with mandibles and all. I never took a bug anatomy class, so I can't be sure of the terminology but the last part of its body - the abdomen I think - looked like a scorpions tail, but instead of curling up over its back, it curled down under the belly. The carapace was black mottled with green in places and looked thick and tough in the pale light.

At that moment a few pieces of information clicked together in my mind. The mole, the money, the cells, the dead guy in the corner, abandoned building, Silas Lockwood - reclusive billionaire, government contracts, genetics and bioengineering. I'd found the stuff from the cells. What they had been creating here.

More specifically it had found me.

It moved with a lurching sort of gait and I realized it was dragging one of its rear legs. That must have happened before I got there because I was pretty sure I got the losing end of its charge into my back. Maybe the dead hitman in the corner got a couple lucky shots on the thing before being turned into a bloody carpet runner.

I would like to say I sauntered up to the thing, kicked it in the face and in general put on a fighting display worthy of the movie greats of yore like John Wayne or Clint Eastwood. Sadly I'm pretty sure it looked more like one of the expendable cheerleaders in just about every horror film ever made.

It charged at me again, and in spite of its wounded leg, was on me in a heartbeat. I stood panicked, watching in stunned silence as it barreled into me. It drove me to the ground, the force of the impact driving the breath from me in a whoosh. Only then did my body respond, reflexes dampened by lack of rest and performance enhancing drugs. Understand, I don't take steroids. But being attacked by a creature so scary even Stephen King wouldn't write about it makes a guy wish for anything to level the field.

I managed to pull my legs up hoping to avoid that disgustingly sharp scorpion tail as the thing bit and lunged at my face. I reached my hands up to push it away from me, dropping my flashlight and Sara's mobile phone in the process. While my hands were occupied pushing at what I thought was the creature's throat, trying to hold back it's mandibles from removing portions of my skull, its remaining functioning legs drove down onto my body, piercing my leg and shin. I screamed in defiance, my body finally grasping the severity of the situation, and I managed to kick the thing in the belly a few times and shove it off of me.

Darius's stims saved me. Aside from the ones in my face, he's implanted a few newer ones in my body. When I get hurt, they speed up the metabolic healing process, so a paper cut will heal completely in a few hours, more severe wounds in days.

Ahead of me in the darkness of the hallway I heard the creature moving and cursed myself for dropping my light. It was still a few feet behind me, but if I retrieved it I would be turning my back to the creature, and that was something I wasn't willing to do, stims or not. I stumbled to get to my feet and felt a familiar pressure along the inside of

my ribcage. My gun.

Idiot! I had completely forgotten about it.

I reached my hand down and pulled out the gun, aiming toward the approaching sounds. I didn't hesitate but fired off a series of rounds. It was deafening firing in those close quarters, and each shot lit up the hallway in a stroboscopic effect of light. I waited, listening, hunched down, my gun pointed in the direction of the creature. After what felt like an eternity of silence, I stood again.

I crawled along the ground to my penlight, confident that the creature was dead or dying. Still, I wasn't going anywhere near it without a light. As I approached the light along the floor a few steps away, I heard the scuttling of the creature once more.

I spun, gun at the ready as the nightmare burst out of the darkness slamming into me again. The creature's head was bleeding; sickly orange-yellow goo fell from a series of holes in the head and midsection to land on me. I felt the gun slip in my hand as it was coated in slime and viscera from the creature. Somehow I managed to hold onto the sidearm and I brought it up, just as the creature bit down on my shoulder.

Pain exploded in my shoulder as the skin was torn. I felt my collarbone snap, sending shockwaves of agony up my neck then down to my groin. I screamed as I squeezed the trigger, ignoring the blood that spouted from the monster and fell down onto me. I kept squeezing the trigger until the gun was empty. I don't know how long I kept firing the empty gun, but eventually I recognized the clicking sound and stopped.

I pushed the creature off me. It was dead, thankfully. I crawled along the floor, looking for Sara's phone. I pressed my good hand to my ear to activate the Bluetooth but it was gone. It must have fallen from my ear during the struggle. Ahead in the distance of the dark hallway I saw a blinking red light. Sara's cell phone. I stood to retrieve the phone.

That's when Darius's warning about the stims and my metabolism became real. A staggering wave of nausea swept over me and my vision blurred. I fell to the ground. My body must have reached the point where it had nothing left to give. I lay panting while my body slowly recovered.

When I had enough strength, I crawled to the phone, and held it up to my ear, but the earpiece was broken, the top of the phone smashed. The screen was marred by a long jagged crack down the middle.

"Sara?" My voice was harsh, ragged. "You there?"

There was static on the line, but I couldn't hear anything. I looked at the phone again. It was covered in blood, some mine, some the creature's.

"Sara, I can't hear you," I croaked. "Something's wrong with the phone."

The line went dead. I leaned my head back against the wall, trying to take inventory of myself. My head was spinning from the fight and my body was a cocktail of pain, hunger and fatigue.

The phone vibrated in my hand. There was a text message. I had to wipe the blood and gore from the screen using my shirt before I could press on the screen to open the text and read the contents.

'Get out! Building to blow!'

The events just before the creature's arrival came back into my mind. The last things Sara had said. Something about a backup, and the building set to explode.

I stood up, gritting my teeth in pain. I fought off another wave of nausea and a nearly overwhelming urge to fall to the floor and take a nap. I dropped the phone and did my best to stumble back the way I had come to get out of the building.

I had no idea how much time I had. A minute? Five? There was no clock, no timer. No red flashing light. I simply tried to put one foot in front of the other, terrified that at any moment the building would explode, killing me.

I reached the door and tumbled out into the night. The impact sent waves of torment up my damaged shoulder again. I stumbled down the stairs. I had to get away from the building. Whoever had set that place up, clearly did not want to leave any evidence behind of what they had been doing, and I did not want to know what sort of explosion that would take.

I crawled along the sidewalk, unable to walk anymore. I slid down the curb and out into the empty street. I heard the roaring of an engine behind me. I turned to look as two headlights approached at high speed.

I couldn't help but laugh. That's just my luck. Survive a fight with some biochemist's wet-dream, crawl out of the building before it explodes, only to get hit in the street by someone coming home from the graveyard shift.

The headlights slowed and a door opened. I recognized the grill of the vehicle. I was certainly close enough. It was The Beast. Darius came around into the glow of the headlights and bent to pick me up.

"Boss, you okay?" He asked.

"We've got to get out of here," I croaked. "Buildings going to blow."

"You sure?" He asked.

"Wanna stick around if I'm wrong?"

He reached down and grabbed me under the arms, I screamed in protest, but he pulled me around the side of The Beast and shoved me through the door. I collapsed onto the aisle floor panting.

"Get out of here!" Darius shouted at Freckles in the driver's seat. He knelt over me, ripping my shirt open to inspect my wounds. Freckles slammed on the gas, and The Beast lurched away from the building.

For a brief moment I thought I had been wrong. Maybe it wasn't going to explode after all.

Nope.

We were perhaps four hundred feet down the street from the building when it erupted in smoke and fire. A shockwave of energy hit the back of The Beast and the windows rattled all around us.

"Are we sure we got the money?" I asked.

Darius nodded.

"Good," I said. "I'd hate nearly dying for nothing."

"Calder?" Freckles said from up front. "You ok?"

"Yeah," I said. Darius poked my chest, inspecting my collarbone. I gritted my teeth. "Freckles, remind me to talk to you about tightening our rules for vetting clients."

"Was that her?" she asked. "Sara, I mean?"

"Yeah," I replied.

Darius whistled, shaking his head.

"What did she say?" Darius asked.

"Told me to stop looking for her," I said. "To take the money and go."

There was a momentary pause before Freckles responded, her voice soft and tinged with a faint trace of hopefulness. "And are you? Going to stop I mean?"

Suddenly it all made sense. I should stop. Obviously I wasn't wanted, and isn't that all the closure a man should need? I got my jab in at her before it all went down the toilet. That should have been good enough. Now I could move on, start a new chapter in my life. Maybe take Freckles out to dinner. I liked her well enough; maybe it would even turn into love someday.

"No," I replied, well aware of how it must hurt Freckles to hear me say those words. "Not until I get my answers."

Since that day I've often found myself wondering about my client. Who he really is, and what he's into. Usually it's safer not knowing. Honestly, I like it that way. But now I sometimes wake up from nightmares of being chased by that creature from the warehouse. That thing would have made Lovecraft cry himself to sleep at night. Part of me thinks I should just forget the whole debacle. Part of me is telling the other part to shut up. That's probably the same part that won't let me stop looking for Sara even though I know it's useless. But maybe someday I'll find Sara again. And maybe someday I'll run into Silas.

Then I'll run him over with The Beast.

So I keep searching, every night checking my files for any hint of where Sara has disappeared to. Until then I keep working odd jobs, 'cause that's what I do. I'm in collections. If you or anyone you know find yourself missing something stolen, and you've got money to burn to get it back, you know where to find me.

Craigslist.