

## ABSTRACT

REIMERS, DOUGLAS HENRY. Chance Destination. (Under the direction of Thomas Lisk.)

What would you give to know your future? What would you pay for the insight into the future of others? What would you do if that power were within your grasp?

Kristin Schouler: Mentally exhausted from the grind of completing her Ph.D. in Electrical Engineering, she limps towards the vacation cabin of her youth looking for nothing more than the three R's - Rest, Recreation, and Romance.

Nate Fisher: Although mired in poverty, he dreams on a grand scale. He will rule the high Sierra sports scene from the small town of Arnolds - if he solves his money woes.

Jeremy Bracken: He takes command whatever the situation. He knows what he wants, whom he wants, and how to get both.

Psychological Encephalograph: If it works, the world will never be the same.

CHANCE DESTINATION

by  
DOUGLAS HENRY REIMERS

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
North Carolina State University  
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requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

ENGLISH

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APPROVED BY:

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Chair of Advisory Committee

## BIOGRAPHY

Doug Reimers was born in the historic gold rush town of Marysville, CA on March 18, 1972. Throughout childhood, his summers were spent at a 1950's hunting cabin on Lake Alpine in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. In 1995, he received a Bachelor's of Arts and Sciences degree from the University of California at Davis for his double major in Zoology and English with an emphasis in Creative Writing. In 1998, Doug received his teaching credential also from UCD. He taught science for three years at CK McClatchy High School in Sacramento, CA. Upon completion of his MA in English at North Carolina State University, Doug plans to continue writing novels while returning to teaching in California's Central Valley.

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Psychological Encephalograph

Beta Version 3.5

Subject Recommendations:

1. Take control of all aspects of your life.
2. Your needs and desires supersede all other concerns.
3. You have bowed to other people's will too long and must position yourself above all others.
4. Any lucrative opportunity that presents itself needs to be taken under your control.
5. Let no individual stop you from directing your future or the future of those around you.
6. Pay close attention for opportunities in technology. They will change your life.
7. Don't let others dictate to you.
8. The way for you to enjoy life is to trust your desires and act upon them.
9. If you feel stalled by others expectations, take a break and get away from the day-to-day problems that weigh you down.
10. Your cunning and resourcefulness will solve most of your problems; physicality will defeat the rest.
11. No problem will hold you back.
12. Every action you take or is taken against you will lead to greater opportunities for success and wealth.
13. Follow these tenets and you will be happier than ever before in your life.

Patent Pending  
Property of Kristen Schouler

## Chapter 1

Mountain Ski and Sport hadn't had a customer all morning. The bell had hung silently just inside the front door, except for one chime when Nate arrived at eight to open the store. Ruby wouldn't come in until after 4:00 PM when she got out of school, leaving Nate tied to the lone cash register with nothing to do but think. He sat comfortably on the padded brass barstool that he'd bought at a flea market down in Murphys. The only other chairs were in Bob's office and up against the wall on the other side of the store waiting for someone to sit down and try on the newest hiking boots.

No one, of course, was going to stop by on a Tuesday. Especially not with the expensive selection of equipment that Bob insisted the shop carry. Skis lined a wall free of snow-boards. Rugged hiking boots made for fifty-mile treks in the Sierras climbed up tiny plastic shelves on an endless push to the ceiling. Not a Nike, Reebok or Saucony for the eye to see, not a single thing a teenager would die to have. No cleats for the football team, no jock straps for the baseball team and no Speedos for swimming team could be found in the sports store. Nate appreciated the quality of the store's wares, but would rather have a store full of customers than merchandise. He'd tried to convince

Bob to sell things the store could make money on, but the boss had firmly said no.

"I'll only have the best merchandise in my store," he'd said. "No cheap slop turned out in sweat shops in South Korea. Only the best equipment for Mountain Sports."

Nate often wondered why baseball, football, and soccer played in the mountains couldn't be called mountain sports.

The front windows that took up an entire wall and faced the strip mall's parking lot displayed an arrangement of apparel that typified Bob's taste. Amazingly expensive Marmot jackets, nearly indestructible Obermeyer ski bibs and Calvin Klein silk long underwear blocked the view of the parking lot and Highway 4 beyond. Not a single item in front of the windows had moved in the last two weeks, except to be dusted. If there had been a couple thousand Bobs living in Arnolds, the store would be in great shape. Nate decided for the hundredth time that morning to convince Bob to stock an amended inventory or die trying.

Nate lifted his feet to rest on the corner of the L-shaped glass case that housed sunglasses and didn't have to worry about knocking over any sun block, Croakies, sunglasses wipes, or Chapstick. None of the little things that cost shop owners nothing to buy by the thousands and sell for a considerable mark up littered the display case.



It was a good thing Bob owned the strip mall and didn't have to pay someone rent. Nate had to convince Bob to add something that would sell. He would be failing his role as assistant manager if he didn't.

Just before one o'clock, the backdoor's deadbolt rattled loudly, announcing Bob's arrival. Nate sat up, took his feet off the counter top and made sure he hadn't left a scuff on the glass. Bob was meticulous about the store, and Nate didn't want anything to annoy Bob when he made his suggestions. The list of alternate merchandise swam through his mind as he waited for Bob to emerge from his office. The items chosen could make the difference between success and failure; the failed suggestions two weeks ago had proved that.

A small creak from the office told Nate that Bob had settled in at his desk to read the mail or call one of the suppliers. Bob had refused to get a computer to keep the store's records and to communicate with suppliers a long time ago. That wasn't his type of business; the personal touch was the best. Nate shifted his weight on the stool and tried his best to wait patiently. The minutes ticked by silently on the digital clock as the temperature rose in the store along with Nate's frustration.

He got up and slid quietly across the store to a large oscillating fan that sat in the corner, next to the long underwear. Nate switched the fan on, and sighed contentedly in its cooling stream. He couldn't hear anything in the store now except the fan, but returning to the register he didn't care. It was going to be another day of 90 or above. The moving air made all the difference; he could cool off now and wait for Bob.

Nate sat back on the stool, propped his elbows on the glass countertop and wondered how Bob would respond to his suggestions for the store. Last time, Nate thought he'd signed and delivered his own pink slip—Bob had gotten so red faced. The suggestion to sell snowboards and boarding apparel seemed like a good one to Nate. Angered, Bob had pointed towards the door and suggested Nate take the rest of the day off. It'd been 11 a.m. The rest of the day and that night, wondering if he'd lost the only job he'd ever had, was the worst of Nate's life.

Bob had hired him the summer between his sophomore and junior year in high school. Without the job as cashier and stock boy, Nate could never have moved out on his own away from his stepmom. If his dad had still been around, he could have moved in with him but the old man had been up in Oregon working at a pulp mill. Nate considered himself on

his own after his dad left and couldn't wait to move out. Bob offering him a full-time summer job had made that dream a reality.

He had worked at Mountain Ski and Sports ever since, six good years. Nate was grateful, but he was determined to have his say this time no matter how upset Bob got. He was pretty sure nothing short of burning down the store would cause Bob to fire him after all and, he hoped, his latest ideas would go over more smoothly. No holds barred, he'd talk the talk and walk the businessman's walk.

Nate heard Bob's chair creak just above the fan's noise, causing Nate's stomach to clench up. Bob was coming out. Nate turned his head to stare at the door, waiting for an immeasurably long time before Bob opened his office door and entered the room. Nate resisted the urge to jump over the counter and start in on his advice for the store, instead he swung his head as slowly as he could to meet Bob's gaze.

"Good afternoon, Nathan," said Bob coming to a stop just outside his office. The office door stood halfway open, allowing Nate a view of the rusted, oscillating fan on Bob's desk. It's swish-swish-swish-click barely reached Nate's ears over the newer floor fan across the display room.

"We need to talk, Bob," said Nate, starting to rise but Bob waved him back in to his seat and skirted a collection of ski parkas hanging on a round clothing rack. The black and tan parkas went well with the olive and rust colored clothes on the table, and gave Nate a jumping off point.

"Look at these displays, Bob," said Nate. "No one has bought or even looked through this stuff for a week, maybe even two weeks. Something else might move better."

Bob stood facing the register, hands on his hips—a life sized mannequin showing off boots, pants and shirts sold in the store. He said nothing.

"This merchandise is good," said Nate. "But it's designed for serious hikers who buy one thing that is good and use it for years. We, I mean you, have got to switch out some of the merchandise for things that will sell. Baseball gloves or whatever you might choose would of course be of the highest quality."

"Absolutely, not," said Bob firmly. "We talked about this before Nate and I haven't changed my mind."

"If you'd only sell something that teenagers could and would want to buy. They'd flock into the store for the right clothes or snow bo...sports equipment. It, I mean, you could get more people into the store."

"I'm not interested in running that type of store.

"But you could work less hours, hire another employee and enjoy more free time. You'd have more time to spend with your mom at the home."

"Nate, I enjoy spending time in the store and meeting the people who depend on it for their sporting needs. Someday, probably not that far in the future when Rob takes over, you'll get your chance to turn this store into a snowboard shop. But until then, keep your ideas to yourself and concentrate on your job."

"Bob, I just want the store to do well. We haven't sold anything today and little the last couple of weeks. I'm worried."

"I understand, Nate. And you're right, we haven't moved much stock lately. Realistically, with the low customer traffic and low sales I will need to cut down on expenses. The greatest being employee salaries."

"Huh?"

"I can no longer keep two employees here at the store. It doesn't make sense to have more than one person around with the limited clientele that we serve. Too many employees is not cost effective." Nate tensed, not wanting to ask the obvious question but unable to stop himself from jumping into his own grave.

"How many...um employees...can you...keep?" The question had to be wrestled out of his mouth.

"Only one," said Bob. Nate felt something inside him shrivel up into a ball and wedge itself under his heart. His breathing became more difficult and he wanted badly to sit or fall down.

"Why?"

"Well, you diagnosed part of the problem. The wares I carry don't appeal to everyone and those who buy them usually take good care of what they buy. The other side is the San Andreas Sportzone. What little impulse sales I received from vacationers have fallen off completely since it opened. It's on the road up here and people stop there for any last minute items that they forgot. I've got to change some things if I want to last through Christmas. If I can survive 'til then, I'll be OK. My regulars will return when next year's models arrive and a little extra advertising and special sales will make up for the Sportzone."

"I understand." It was just business. Nate knew his boss and knew how much he loved the store. He'd probably endangered the whole enterprise by allowing Ruby and him to work as long as they had.

"With one employee and myself, I could make ends meet. I just can't afford paying both of you."

"Uh-huh," said Nate.

There wasn't much money in his savings account and only a little left in checking. A month, maybe two, and he would have to be back with Lois and his step-sister. Nate fingered the bar stool's arm rest and wondered if he might be able to sell it at the same flea market where he'd bought it. The store was getting a little gray around the edges.

"When Ruby gets in, please tell her I'm letting her go," said Bob, standing halfway through his office door. "I'll bring you her last paycheck as soon as I get back from the bank. Feel free to eat your lunch while I'm gone. You're looking a little pale."

The office door closed before the words fully registered to Nate. His breathing returned to normal and he shook his head to clear it. Of course, Bob still needed someone to work for him. Otherwise, he wouldn't be able to keep the store open as long or on Sundays when he went to church. It was so obvious. Nate wanted to jump up and dance, but felt bad for Ruby. Any relief at not being fired melted away when he realized he'd have to tell her the bad news.

Ruby walked in a few minutes before four o'clock, right on time for her closing shift. The combination of her blue tank top clinging tightly across her chest and her skintight white jeans reminded Nate that he didn't have a girlfriend and that high school juniors were jailbait. Still, he regretted what he had to do.

"Hey, Nate. How's business today?" said Ruby crossing the store to the register.

"It's been slow."

Nate thought about waiting to give her the bad news, but decided that would be cruel. He'd want to know immediately if he was being fired. He reached for her last check and handing it to her over the register's counter.

"What's this?" she said taking the check from his hand.

"Bob wanted you to know that he's enjoyed having you work here, but unfortunately he can't afford to keep you on. The store just isn't making enough money."

"I can't believe this! Why me? Why not you?" she'd said, poking her paycheck at him to punctuate her anger.

"Ruby, this has nothing to do with me. I don't run the store. Bob just..."

"Bullshit." She'd fixed her eyes on to Nate's and glared. The frustration and anger glowing through her



eyes had nailed Nate to the spot; all he could do was lean back out of her reach. "I'm not dumb, no matter what you think. I know the store doesn't make much money, but I'll bet you I sell more than you do. And I know I make less than you. So why is it that I'm being axed and you're sitting pretty?"

"Hey! I had nothing to do with it. I just found out about this. What are you trying to say?"

"It's pretty obvious what I'm saying. I make less. I sell more and can do everything that you do. I'm sure you had nothing to do with this."

"It wasn't my decision. If you want to talk to Bob, he's in his office. As assistant manager, I have to do some of the hard things around here," Nate improvised. "This is nothing personal. Haven't you ever heard of last hired, first fired?"

"Yeah, I've heard of that. I'm not stupid. As for talking to Bob, he'll just back up everything you've said. A little good ol' boys situation you've carved out for your self, eh?"

"No. I don't think I'll waste my time by talking to Bob. But for you, the ring leader of this charade..."

Nate had had enough. He stood up and shoved his face right into Ruby's, causing her to take a step back.

"It doesn't matter what you say or think. Bob's made his decision and you are fired! Nothing is going to change that. So take your pet theories and get the Hell out." He towered over the girl and trembled slightly from the adrenaline rush he'd gotten from the confrontation. Ruby hesitated, stared at him for what seemed like a minute and walked over to the door. She tried to slam it on her way out, but the pneumatic hinge caught the door and returned it quietly to the frame.

#

Nate pulled his beat up '84 Ranger into Guppies' dirt parking lot and turned off the engine. The confrontation with Ruby less than an hour ago still swirled around his head as he stepped into Guppies Bar, looking for some relief from the heat outside and the furious image he couldn't get out of his head. Only a couple of people sat at one of the back booths, talking about one of the twenty fish tanks positioned around the bar. Nate ignored the all too familiar conversation and marched over to the bar where his stool stood empty. He settled down on it and nodded a greeting to Natalie. A moment later, a cold beer slid in front of him.

Guppies had originally been called The In-Land Sea, but the previous owner's obsession with expensive saltwater

fish had cost him his business lock, stock and aquariums. Natalie, an animal nut herself but a shrewder businesswoman than the last owner, bought the bar and replaced the saltwater with freshwater—the tanks weren't going to cost her the dream of owning her own business. No expensive fish would deep six her dream; she went to the local pet store and bought the cheapest fish they had available. Those fish happened to be fancy tailed guppies.

Now, little streaks of silver, blue and orange shot around behind the glass of all the fish tanks, since the one tank of guppies she'd bought had bred enough fish for every gallon of water, including a couple of pitchers glued to each end of the bar, the place could hold. To make the atmosphere complete, the only lights in the bar came from the fish tanks, since the bulbs in the jukebox had burned out before Natalie bought the place.

"How's tricks, kid?" said Natalie, resting her small frame against the back of the bar. Nate grinned. She was older than Nate, but he was hardly a kid in comparison.

"Not so good. Today has sucked all around."

"How so?"

"Well, Bob had me fire Ruby. Hardly any customers came in and I keep wondering when Bob will drop the ax on me too." He took a sip of his beer while Natalie waited

for him to continue. Natalie always waited to hear you out before she told you what she thought. Sometimes you had to tell her it was OK to speak, she waited so long thinking.

"Bob is going to run the shop into the ground if he doesn't bring in some movable merchandise. I've been there for years and never seen so few people stop in. If he doesn't change something to get people back into the store, there'll be a Starbucks in the store's space."

Nate stared at Natalie and she just stared back at him. His gaze drifted to the long aquarium behind the bar where bottles of hard alcohol and mirrors normally hung out. The fish swam back and forth across the top of the tank pleading for anyone to feed them. They'd been fed at noon when Natalie opened the bar and would be fed again at two a.m. when everything shut down.

"You could quit and find a new job," said Natalie bringing Nate's attention back to the bartender. "A young, strong kid like yourself could easily do construction or logging around here. It'd probably pay better too."

"No, no, no. Construction and logging are the last jobs I'd ever want to work. You have to travel a lot and the work isn't consistent. I need something that I can depend on. They're no better than going down into the valley to find a job." Nate shuddered at the thought.

"What about finding another job? Doing something on the side? There are a lot of places that need some extra help."

"Maybe, but I like my job. In fact, I love it. I just wish Bob would listen to me. I know that my ideas would help the store."

"Not all of your ideas are good ones, kid. Where would I be if I had taken your advice about the juke? I get half or more of my business on Friday and Saturday night because of that thing." She punctuated the statement with a jab at the jukebox with her left hand. "Are you sure you just aren't trying to get more control over Mountain Ski and Sports?"

She had him there. He'd always wanted more say in the shop; even before the money problems had started. Ideas to sell skateboards and baseball bats and car decals had come and gone without being taken seriously by Bob. Looking back at it now, Nate saw how foolish some of his ideas had been. Back then, he had wanted to be heard, considered as a businessman, but now all he wanted was for the shop to keep its doors open. Yes, he got paid well – probably better than any other job he could get in town. But he'd come to love Mountain Ski and Sports, he wanted it to survive and not just for himself.

"No," said Nate, finally responding to Natalie's question. "I just want the store to turn a profit, to be successful. I don't care who gets credit, me or Bob. I just want the store to stay open." Nate finished the last inch of beer sitting at the bottom of his mug and put it back down on the bar. Natalie took the empty glass and stashed it under the bar out of sight. "So. How am I paying for tonight's beer?"

Natalie tossed Nate a suggestive glance and they both laughed. "Beer shipment came in today," she said coming around the bar and heading towards the back storage room. She caught Nate around the waist and led him towards the back. "You've done it before," she sighed. "You should still remember where it goes."

"No problem," said Nate stepping away from Natalie and opening the storage room ahead of her. He strode between the boxes of Budweiser and Corona, making his way to the outer door where the new cases would be piled.

"I hope you take care of it soon." He just caught Natalie's last words as he reached the outer door. A look over his shoulder showed him nothing but the other side of the door he'd just come through. He shrugged and undid the myriad of deadbolt locks holding the door in place. He

swung the door open and gave a quiet whistle to the large pile of crates just outside the door.

Nate brought the first few cases in and took a break. More boxes of booze had been delivered this time than he'd ever seen before. It'd almost double the supply in the storeroom. Business must be booming, if only that could be said for everyone. With a sigh, he stepped back into the cooling evening and grabbed another box. For all of this sweating, he might even get another beer out of it.

## Chapter 2

Dry, golden foothills fell away to scrub oak and manzanita as Kristen drove along Highway 4. The road's twists and turns became more irregular and unpredictable, causing her to wonder what the engineers who laid the road had thought. Ups and downs and lefts and rights reminded her more of the Top Gun roller coaster at Great America Theme Park than a highway, leaving her a little nauseated when the road came to a straight stretch.

Her project sat snugly in the back seat of her Prelude, surrounded by all the bedding from her apartment in case an accident occurred. She would take no chance with the device. It was her future; it would make her famous and help a lot of people. Getting the device out of Davis before the University could gobble it up to help pay off another budget cut had been all that mattered to her. Her baby was only a side project, not connected to her Ph.D. work on an advanced encephalograph, which promised to be a cash cow for Davis.

She'd expected more of a pitched battle with Professor Zho who always wanted a share of whatever one of his students worked on, but to her surprise he had agreed without hesitation. His words still seemed odd to her,



considering how much they both had to gain from the P'Ceph's predictions.

"It would be safer to have your project away from the lab for a little while," he had said. "It's summer. Go on vacation and take it with you. It'd be better for all of us." She had wondered many times on the way up to the cabin how her leaving would be better for the lab than her staying.

Her car swept through a long curve in the road and passed a turn off for the town of Copperopolis. Shadows, cast by the hills behind her and blocking the sun, cut the pavement into sections of dark and light. The worst of the road behind her, she was glad she had taken Zho on his advice to go on vacation. The encephalograph was complete, all her classes taken and her orals in the past, all she had left to do was say, "I'm done," and a doctorate in electrical engineering would be hers. A little vacation, some time to fine tune the P'Ceph and she'd be ready to turn in her patent and change the world.

The intersection where Highway 4 and 49 met sported a new stoplight. It seemed that progress moved on even in the small mountain communities of the Sierras. As she came up on the light, Kristen hesitated for a moment then decided a small detour wouldn't kill anybody. She turned

right at the light and made an immediate left into the parking lot of The Jumping Frog restaurant. She turned off the engine and stepped out of her car, making sure that all the doors were locked. Kristen remembered the many times her family had stopped here on their way to the cabin.

She fondly passed a hand over the giant green frog sitting in front of the restaurant. A burger and shake were soon in the making and Kristen stepped over to a table under the restaurant's eaves to sit down. She watched the cars scoot past on the highway and breathed in the fragrant smells of car exhaust and grease. She eyed the giant frog lovingly, remembering times spent crawling over its surface with her little brother and squealing in delight as they mimicked sitting like a frog and then hurtling themselves onto the grass next to the statue.

"Kristen, your order's ready." She stood up and retrieved her food. The burger was different, but the shake still tasted rich and sugary.

Fewer cars rumbled past on the highway telling her that rush hour in the mountains had come to an end. The burger disappeared rapidly and Kristen stood with her strawberry shake in hand. She walked to her car, savoring the thick, sweet taste of the shake and decided to take her time finishing it. The sides of her face were already

feeling a little sore from sucking on the straw; she'd need to let it melt a little. It was a price she was willing to pay for a shake that contained more ice cream than milk.

She ignored the puddle of water leaking out from under her car as she took another sip of the shake. The car was old and she had used the air conditioner all the way from Davis trying to keep the summer heat at bay. Without a second thought, she hopped back in her car and merged with the little bit of traffic left on the road. The weak sunlight of dusk colored everything with a soft yellow hue that made Kristen think that she was living in a memory. She sucked thoughtfully on her shake, enjoying the passing scenery that had changed so little in the last twenty years. No need to hurry, she thought. I'll be at the cabin in no time.

#

Standing beside her car, Kristen listened to the hissing steam coming out from under the car's hood. Even without the failing light of early evening, she knew that the radiator was toast. The hoses, belts, spark plugs, water pump and alternator had all been replaced in the last year. Of all the things she would have worried about, the radiator never crossed her mind.

The steam shooting out from her hood had lessened, but Kristen didn't even think about taking a peek. The temp gauge had slid into the red on the far right of the gauge just before she pulled off the road. The steam hardly hissed any more, and a quick look under the car assured her that the flow of water from her engine had stopped. She regretted not carrying water in her emergency roadside kit.

Not wanting things to go from bad to ridiculously worse, Kristen went around the car and opened the trunk. A minute or two passed while she pushed her bags and books around trying to find the emergency kit in the trunk's dark recesses. She took a break, trying her cell phone but discovered that she had no coverage and returned to digging for the kit. Thinking that it must have slid to the back just to be malicious, Kristen found the red plastic briefcase that contained her emergency gear hiding under her human psychology textbook. She propped it on the lip of the trunk and opened it under the dim light of the stars above.

Everything lay unused, protected in clear plastic bags, proving how many times she had needed the emergency kit since her dad gave it to her. She ignored the package of four road flares and took the triangular reflectors out instead; the flares would burn out almost as fast as her

car battery if she left the hazards on, but considering their inability to biodegrade the reflectors would last until the year 5000 or longer.

She walked back down the road, wondering if any passing motorist would even come across the reflectors on a Tuesday evening and placed the first one two hundred steps away from her car. The next reflector found itself placed one hundred steps from the car while the last one stood only a few feet off the Prelude's bumper. With nothing left to do for the car, Kristen tried to decide what, if anything, she should carry back towards Arnolds.

She wanted to take the P'Ceph. It was by far the most valuable thing to her in the car, but knew that she wouldn't be able to carry it all the way back to town. The size of the machine finally brought her to her senses as she pulled away the blankets piled over it on the passenger side of the car. It looked like a laser printer, an old one, but none-the-less a standard laser printer. She'd used a plastic printer casing to house all the circuit boards, chips and wires that made the P'Ceph what it was. Without the covering, the mass of wires that looked like piles of black spaghetti thrown over the working parts of the device might pull free and cause trouble.

She covered the thing up again and closed the back passenger door. A quick foray into the front seat for her purse and to lock all the doors brought her back to the trunk. The books were useless, unless she wanted to bludgeon someone to death with the twenty-pound back breakers. The laptop was valuable, and completely useless as well. At least the bag that contained her clothes could roll along on wheels, though the road's crumbling asphalt hardly resembled the smooth tiles at Sacramento International Airport. She decided to leave everything behind except her purse. Nobody would think that the dented, old Prelude would have anything valuable in it anyway.

With that decision made, she slammed the trunk closed and started walking back towards town. The air had finally cooled down from the blistering heat she had left on the valley floor, 4000 feet below. She kept looking back at her car until it finally disappeared around a bend and she began to feel less comfortable alone in the middle of nowhere. Who knew what type of crazy person might jump out of the woods and attack her? She knew how to deal with problems in Davis or even South San Francisco where she grew up, but she'd never met any whackos up here in the hills.

A quick glance at the still dead cell phone prompted her to reach inside her purse and grab the familiar cylinder that always rested within her purse. The reassuring feel of the mace canister helped her relax. It wouldn't do much against a wild animal or a drunk behind the wheel of a car, but it would deflate any man's passions if they tried to attack her. Like a trusted friend, the canister banished the fear brought on by stunted trees that looked like men crouching by the side of the road.

The night darkened, making Kristen wish for a little more light. She could easily see the road stretched out in front of her, a flat void cutting through the trees and hills. When the bright gibbous moon lit up the scenery creating impenetrable shadows and limiting Kristen's night vision, she reminded herself to be careful what she wished for. Her sight had been adjusted to the starlit gloom, but now she could only see patches of complete blackness at the base of every tree and under the hillsides butting up against the road.

A loud snap to her left caused Kristen to whirl around. The trees stood silently, keeping any secrets to themselves. Kristen stared into the darkness, willing her eyes to adjust to the shadows beneath the trees even if there was nothing to see except pine needles and roadside

trash. As hard as she wanted her eyes to adjust, they refused to push away the slightest shade of darkness. She shivered.

The air had cooled down significantly since she'd stopped for a burger in Angel's Camp. Though it would take hours for the valley to cool down, the foothills were already cooler than Davis would be at two a.m. She regretted not grabbing her jacket. The wind didn't help matters, slicing through her T-shirt and raising goose bumps all over her body. Another crack came from the bushes in front of her and Kristen wasn't sure what to do.

She didn't want to stay, but she didn't want to turn her back either. She weighed her options and decided she had only one. With its promise of civilization and building up some warmth in her legs, walking won out over waiting. The last thing she had seen outside of Arnolds was a bar called Puppies or something. A hot toddy would be perfect right about now, she thought.

The asphalt passed quickly under her feet, with her body warming to the fast pace she set. Kristen had almost forgotten the unexplained noises from the forest and felt comfortable again with the canister of mace clenched tightly in her hand when something large moved in the middle of the road in front of her. A startled gasp



escaped her lips as she stopped dead in her tracks, only to feel that whatever was in the road had just turned its eyes on her. It was big, much larger than a dog, and stood perfectly still. The quiet, eternal patience unnerved Kristen more than its size.

The memory of a news story where a woman in the foothills had been chased down by a mountain lion and killed flashed through her head. Kristen remembered cursing the woman for putting herself in such a dangerous position, but realized she had only been projecting her fear of becoming that woman. She tried to remember what to do when face-to-face with a large cat, but couldn't remember anything useful. The thing moved, scraping something across the asphalt that sounded clearly non-cat-like to Kristen. She began to relax, but stiffened up as another possibility came to her—a bear.

The idea frightened her more than coming across a mountain lion. All the stories of bears breaking into cars or rushing into people's tents down in Yosemite came back to her. Bears were becoming fearless of human beings. She imagined them looking at humans as a fast way to a tasty treat. At least mountain lions knew enough to be scared of humans and stay away from them except in the strangest circumstances.

Before she even had a chance to form a plan, a pair of car lights came up from behind the buck, not a bear after all, scaring him off the road and up into the woods on the far side of the road. A doe followed by a tiny faun shot from the trees only twenty feet in front of Kristen and followed the large male up the hill, safely disappearing in the trees. The headlights disappeared once, getting cut off by a bend in the road and then appeared again less than a quarter of a mile ahead. Kristen couldn't remember the last time she'd been so glad to see someone driving with high beams on. She waited happily for the vehicle to approach, waving her arms to get the driver's attention.

The good-sized truck slowed down as it approached her and angled towards the road's shoulder where she stood. The driver seemed to use her as a target for the grill of the truck, bearing down on her. Kristen began to slide backward towards the trees away from the road, wondering what the driver was doing. Tiny thorns impaled the back of her naked calves, but instead of jumping away she pushed deeper into the knee high bushes, flailing her arms out to her sides to keep her balance as she struggled to increase her distance from the road. The truck stopped a few feet from where she had been standing, spraying small rocks and a cloud of dust from its wheels.

Her anger rose as she stepped toward the truck. Fighting the urge of taking out her mace and spray the driver out of spite, Kristen reached carefully down to investigate the numerous little pricks from the thorny bushes. Her legs itched painfully from the stings covering her legs from ankle to knee. She wanted to shout and curse at the person, who'd forced her off the shoulder into the thorns, but held her tongue.

The passenger window rolled down with an irritating squeak, interrupting the scathing speech that had been playing itself out in Kristen's head. A shaggy head poked partially out of the window, lit by moonlight streaming through the windshield that showed a glowing spider web of cracks in front of the passenger side of the truck. The person's face was completely hidden in shadow.

"Hey there. What's the matter? Why you walking around so late at night?" said the man with a pronounced slur to his words. A strong whiff of beer floated out of the open window. Kristen cursed her luck and backed away.

"Just taking a walk."

"Huh? Why were you waving your arms then?"

He had her there.

"Just waving hello?"

Apparently he wasn't that drunk after all or still could think pretty straight. Either way, Kristen had decided there was no way she'd sit behind that broken windshield. The sound of the passenger door opening brought her attention immediately back to the driver.

"Let me give ya a ride. You need one, don't you? Nobody walks along this road. It's dangerous."

Kristen forced herself to endure more pricks from the thorny bushes as she slid towards the back of the truck.

"No, no, that's all right," she stammered. A low branch from a nearby oak swept across her face, its branches pulling at her hair. She slapped the branch away and hurried to get back on the shoulder and away from this truck. "I'm fine, really. Thanks for stopping. I'll keep what you said in mind."

"But..."

"Thanks again. I really appreciate it. You go along now and have a good night." She could care less what actually happened to the drunk, she'd say anything to get rid of him. The dark, lonely road appeared far safer than any future with him.

Kristen stepped back on the shoulder behind the truck and started walking briskly down the road. "Thanks again," she yelled over her shoulder as she half walked, half

jogged away from the truck. The sound of the wind shifting through the trees and her steady footsteps filled her ears while she tried to listen for the truck starting up or the man trying to catch her. She increased the distance between herself and the truck wondering, hoping and praying that he'd just continue on his way. Finally, not being able to suppress her curiosity anymore, Kristen looked back over her shoulder. Nothing but the empty road; the truck was gone.

She breathed a sigh of relief and took a moment to check her legs. The thorny bushes left only a few pricklers imbedded in her flesh, which she'd hardly noticed since walking away from the truck. In the strengthening moonlight, she saw that the thorns looked like tiny acupuncture needles. It must have been star thistle; the weed was all over California roadways. The little needle-like thorns didn't hurt that much, but Kristen wanted to get rid of any reminder of the drunk and began to brush and pull the thorns away. It only took a couple of minutes before she was back walking down the road.

She wondered if she needed or wanted anyone's help to get back to town. It was getting late and the people that would be out at this time of night wouldn't necessarily be the pillars of society. Walking a couple of more miles

would be easy and definitely safer than trusting in some odd stranger. I'm in good shape too, she thought. She'd grown up playing soccer and had transferred her physical competitive edge to running. No need for marathons or 10 Ks. Competing against her own best time was good enough for her. She began to look forward to the challenge of getting back to town on her own. Deep down inside her, she knew that she could do it. She didn't need anyone's help.

The practical side of her, though, realized that if another car came along and offered help she'd be open to accepting that help. Though stubborn about some things, passing up safe and useful help would be impossible for her. If she had declined assistance from friends and family in high school, she would never have gotten into Cal Poly. The professors at Cal Poly, especially Doctor Johanson, paved the way for her Ph.D. at Davis. No, turning down help was dumb. People liked to help and it was completely stupid to not take advantage of honest generosity. She could make it to town on her own, but if another person offered help and they seemed safe, she knew that she would be riding back to town instead of walking.

With this decision firmly made in her mind, Kristen set a pace she could keep up for a long time and headed towards Puppies or whatever the bar had been called. The

P'Ceph and the rest of her stuff would be safe out here in the middle of nowhere. Much safer than it would be in Davis where Honda's were a thief's first choice. It might take a little time, but she was confident. This start to her vacation was a disappointment, but she looked forward to tackling another problem life threw at her and beating it. She'd be at the cabin in no time.

### Chapter 3

The Ranger rattled along the road away from Guppies; the revving of the engine shifting between second and third gear to tackle the ascending road hardly broke through Nate's consciousness as he concentrated on a new clank coming from the rear of the truck. A cold wind rushed into the cab adding to the noise, interfering with his diagnosis. He and the Ranger had been together for four years now, and Nate felt that he knew every sound, sputter of the engine or smell it could give off. He prided himself in his knowledge of the Ranger.

Things just went from bad to worse it seemed. Mountain Ski and Sport was struggling, Ruby blamed him for being the messenger of bad news, all his work at Guppies only got him a single beer, and now something new might be wrong with the Ranger. Nate massaged his neck with his right hand, continuing to listen to the clank. Something else to burn through my savings, he thought.

How would he ever save enough for a down payment on a house if things like this kept popping up? If he could fix the problem himself, which he doubted, he'd be able to keep the cost down, but it would still mean buying the part he needed and that meant less money going into savings this month. It wasn't fair. The clank came again, pushing away



any other thoughts. The noise sounded ominous, but Nate was in no hurry to return to his little cottage. The one bedroom house was lonelier than Highway 4 at 10 PM on a weeknight. Nate slowed down and looked for a spot to pull off the road.

He slowed down to 25 and crept along the road hoping to see a wide spot to stop on. It took a few minutes to find some gravel wide enough for his truck. Thankfully, he pulled the Ranger off the road and came to a quiet stop. Parking brake in place and the hazards on, Nate began to rummage under the bench in the cab in a search for a flashlight. He was pretty sure it was still in the truck, but its batteries might be dead. An old shirt, two empty cans of Coke, an old movie stub from the Angel's Camp drive-in and a copy of Backpacker magazine appeared before Nate closed his hand around the flashlight.

He pulled it out and slid the plastic switch up to the on position, half-dreading that the batteries were dead. The light fluttered once and then came on to chase away the shadows enveloping a tree branch over the truck's windshield. With this small victory in hand, Nate hopped out of the truck feeling more optimistic and walked around behind the truck to take a look.

The moon almost made the flashlight unnecessary as Nate knelt down to take a look under the truck. Without the light, he could dimly see the muffler, fuel tank and rear axle. Nothing looked out of place, even when he focused his light on the undercarriage. There would be only one way to be sure about the new clank. Nate sat down on the gravel, pointed his feet towards the woods and carefully snaked his upper body under the truck. He started looking for any couplings or fasteners that might have come loose.

Fruitless minutes passed. He knew he was no mechanic, but four years of doing his own oil changes and replacing brake pads had taught him a lot about his truck. If he couldn't fix a problem, he could at least find it. No cars had driven by yet. The streets pretty much rolled up onto the sidewalks around here as soon as the sun went down. Everything but Guppies and a couple of gas stations would be closed. There was no danger in looking for the problem here by the side of the road and no reason to hurry home.

His eyes scanned the undercarriage again and saw nothing wrong. He checked the digital display on his watch, mentally deciding on three more minutes to either find something or give up. Nate didn't stop looking until he'd checked the muffler and rear axle twice, ending up a

minute over the time limit he'd set for himself. He shrugged and levered himself out from under the truck.

"Car trouble?" The woman's voice startled Nate. He had just sat up and pulled his legs Indian-style under him when she spoke, causing him to jerk back. The back of his head smacked into the truck's side and Nate cursed. He curbed his tongue in favor of cradling his head in his hands.

"You startled me there. I didn't hear you pull up," said Nate, slowly rising, with his truck lending him support.

"That's because I'm walking. My car broke down up the road a couple miles." He raised his gaze quickly up along the woman's slim body to look her eye to eye. She was pretty. It wasn't her hair or eyes or face, so much as the way she stood there looking back at him. Something about her stance, her demeanor exuded a calm assurance, even out in the middle of nowhere alone with a stranger.

Her confidence flowed off of her and rolled over him. His back straightened and he stopped leaning against the truck, coming to his full height that allowed him to look easily over her head. She fidgeted with something in her left hand, but Nate took little notice of it. Here he was in the middle of nowhere with a pretty young woman who

wasn't a kook or drunk, but needed his help. He took a step towards her.

She raised her left hand at exactly the same moment he extended his right hand to greet her. The words, "Hello, I'm Nate," died in his throat as he realized her hand held a canister just like Natalie's brawl-stopper mace. He froze. He'd seen Natalie use it on numerous occasions. Giants of construction or lumbering fell to their knees a heartbeat after the spray hit them. What would it do to him when he was a mere willow to those redwoods? Time stretched out until finally the woman dropped her left hand and caught his right hand to shake it.

"Nice to meet you." She didn't mention the mace and Nate didn't care as long as it wasn't pointed at him.

Still rigid as a rock, Nate squeezed her hand. "Hi," he croaked out and then cleared his throat. "I'm Nate."

"Kristen." She didn't put the mace away and Nate didn't stop staring at it. He wondered if all of her confidence had come from that can or something else in her purse. Either way, he wanted some distance between himself and the mace. A step backward and he slid around the end of the truck, putting it between him and the offensive canister. Kristen remained where she was.

"So, car trouble?" she said, shooting a quick glance to where he had emerged from under the truck.

"Not really. The Ranger works fine, I just heard a new clank from back here and decided to stop and look." His nod towards the back of the truck was as quick as her glance.

"Oh, good," Kristen said. "About how far to Puppies?"

"Puppies?"

"Or something like that. I think it was a bar." She had walked out from the side of the truck and now stepped down the road towards town, keeping her back to the trees. It forced her to side step a little awkwardly on the uneven shoulder.

"You mean Guppies Bar?" asked Nate.

Kristen nodded. She continued to edge away from him down towards town, causing Nate to turn to keep facing her. Nate realized that she meant to walk all the way back to Guppies. He started to take a step toward her, but stopped fearing the mace might make a command performance.

"Wait Kristen." Still side stepping away from Nate, she had moved about thirty feet down the road. She hesitated, encouraging him to continue. "Let me give you a hand. The least I can do is give you a ride back to the

bar and introduce you to Natalie, she owns the place. It'll save you at least a half an hour or so."

"Well..."

"Look, I understand. You're all alone in the middle of nowhere and don't know if you should trust me. You probably don't live around here and were just passing through to go up to Bear Valley."

"Actually, Lake Alpine."

"Right. Well, you can trust me. I'm just an assistant manager at a sporting goods store who's spent his entire life here in Arnolds. You won't be the first traveler in need that I lended a hand to. But what can I do to make you believe me?"

After a moment, Kristen said, "Let me drive."

"No problem," said Nate reaching into his jeans to pull out his keys. "Friends have borrowed my truck dozens of times while I had to work." With a flick, he tossed them towards her in a smooth high arc that resembled a softball pitch. The keys soared over the pavement and came down a few feet short of Kristen who had kept her eyes on Nate the entire time. She reached down and picked them up with her right hand, leaving three or four keys sticking out between her fingers.

"I'll tell you what," said Nate. "I'll even sit here in the back of the truck while we go back to Guppies. What d'ya say?" He hopped up into the truck and slid back against the passenger side of the bed, putting room between the two of them in case she accept the offer. "The door's unlocked. As soon as you're ready."

Kristen still stood a good thirty feet away from him. There was no way he would let her flat out take the truck and leave him hoofing it, so this had to be the best way to handle the situation.

"That's very nice of you," she said. She walked right along the side of the Ranger, opened the driver's side door and slid in. Before he could even think that she had begun to trust him, Kristen reached across the cab and slapped the door lock closed. A quick look told Nate the driver's side was also locked.

She turned the engine over smoothly and got the truck in gear without a hitch. She made a U-turn and started back towards town. This woman couldn't do anything worse than what some of his friends from high school had done to the Ranger on an off-roading fishing trip. Even the worst driver would have no problem getting back to Guppies. Plus, she was handling the Ranger nice and gently—better than he would around the first couple of turns.

Sitting in the back of the truck, Nate could slide down to the end of the bed, put his head down out of the wind and listen for the clank. It didn't take long for him to realize it was coming from the bumper or tailgate. He was relieved. The fix might be as easy as tightening the bolts that kept the bumper in place or fishing something out from between the tailgate and a sidewall. Meeting this strange woman on the road was starting to look like a blessing. She was very pretty, and his mom, not his step-mom, had always insisted that people who lived in the mountains should take pity on tourists who had car problems.

"Help in the city comes easy," she would say. "The mountains can be very lonely when you're in trouble. You should always offer to help unless the person looks sketchy." When Nate saw a hood sticking up into the air, he always followed his mom's advice and stopped to offer help. It was his way of staying true to her memory.

The truck slowed down and came to a complete stop. Nate raised his head, expecting to see Guppies on his right, but he only saw trees and a mileage marker before Kristen's head stuck out the window and eyed him sideways. "I want to get my stuff," she said, and without waiting for a word from him, she pulled her head back into the truck.



A quick U-turn turned them back up the mountain and away from town.

Nate shook his head. Just like someone from the city to worry about some clothes and maybe a CD player. Heck, most people didn't even lock their front doors around here. He settled back against the cab of the truck unable to blame her for worrying but amused nonetheless. The news stories that he caught at Guppies only spoke of two things coming from San Francisco, Sacramento and Stockton—murder and robbery.

There had been a time when he'd wanted to move out of the hills and into one of these big cities, but now he couldn't imagine why he had felt that way. Sure, you got some conveniences in the city, but he felt sorry for people growing up in cities that thought wildlife meant pigeons and squirrels in the park. Nate never wanted to be separated from the stellar jays, deer, mountain king snakes and the occasional bears found around Arnolds. It just wasn't living when the only animals around were cooped up in Pet Stores and people's backyards.

His thoughts continued to wander with the cold night wind rushing around him until the truck pulled off the road. He jumped over the side of the Ranger's bed, landed on the shoulder and walked to the front of the truck

watching Kristen walk over to stand next to her car. She fiddled with her keys next to the driver's side door. Nate walked up to the other side of the car and leaned his elbows against its roof. Cradling his head in his hands, he asked, "Need any help?"

Kristen didn't even look up as she finally slid the right key into the lock. She reached inside the door, hit a switch that must have opened all the doors by the sound of it and then hit another switch that popped the trunk.

"Could you get the bags out of the back?" she said beginning to pull blankets out of the back seat and piling them on the car's roof. Nate stood a second longer watching her uncover something in the back seat, and shrugged. By the time he'd carried her three suitcases and thrown them into the back of the truck, a small mountain of blankets sat on top of the car. Kristen motioned him to her side, staying bent over looking into the car.

"I need you to help me with this device. It's very valuable, so I'll need you to be careful," she said.

"What is it?"

"It's just something I'm working on."

"Something like?" asked Nate peering through a window.

"Well, I call it the P'Ceph."

"Is that something like a caliph? Because you don't really look Muslim. Not that it makes any difference to me. I'm Presbyterian."

Kristen laughed. "No, nothing like that. P'Ceph's a nickname and a shortened one at that. It stands for Plastic Cephalopod."

"It doesn't look much like an octopus," said Nate trying to get a better view of the device by pressing his face to the window. "So what does it do?"

"It can predict what someone needs to do to be happy. At least, it will when I work out the last few bugs from the programs."

"Programs? It looks like an old laser printer. Even my high school had newer tech than this dinosaur."

"I needed a large casing to hold all the wires, circuit boards, fans, etc. The new printer cases were too small."

Nate waited for more explanation, but nothing more came. Kristen turned back to the project and tugged at some wires. The wind had died down, but it was getting colder by the moment. Nate anticipated a long day tomorrow at the shop with Bob gone for some reason he hadn't felt necessary to share. The sooner this thing was in the truck, the sooner he'd be home.

"Are you ready?"

"Sure," said Nate, making room for Kristen as she pulled the project half out of the car. Nate grabbed his end of the device and eased it the rest of the way out.

"Be careful," Kristen said indicating that he should back up towards the truck. Nate opened the truck's passenger side door, eliciting a sharp intake of breath from Kristen, even though he never lost control of her precious project when he balanced it against the truck and one raised knee. The thing slid across the truck's bench to rest just in front of the gearbox. Kristen slid into the passenger seat.

"Are you sure it's OK to let me drive?" said Nate getting behind the wheel.

Kristen smiled. A moment later, they were heading back to town. Nate flipped on the radio and a quick glance revealed Kristen with her left arm thrown around the P' Ceph to keep it from sliding on the seat and her right hand gently caressing the case. The road slipped by beneath them.

"My high school had a really good computer classes," said Nate. "They were my favorite classes. We learned to write code, install hardware, find and repair electrical shorts. Maybe I could help you with those bugs you

mentioned while your car is getting fixed. There really isn't a lot to do around here."

"Thanks," said Kristen. "But I'm pretty sure I can handle it. So what's the best hotel around here that won't cost me an arm and a leg?"

"Probably, the Motorlodge. It doesn't sound like much, but it's the only motel in town that hasn't been broken into in the last two months."

"What?"

"There's been some problems with the other two motels in town this last month. The sheriffs caught one of the maids rifling through people's drawers when she should have been vacuuming at the Redwood Inn and someone stole the Best Western's computers out of the lobby when the guy on the grave-yard shift took a break. People in town think that was an inside job."

"Oh God."

"What is it?" he asked. She looked at him for a second and shook her head.

"It's, it's nothing."

"Of course it's something. Otherwise you wouldn't have said anything. What's wrong?" Nate glanced over at Kristen, but she stayed quiet. "You can tell me."

"You know. You remind me a lot of my little brother."

"Little brother?"

"I could always count on him growing up. He didn't pester me or slip frogs in my backpack to scare me. Mark always looked out for me even though I'm older. You're just like him, always trying to help."

"Blame my mom," said Nate smiling. "She beat that into me good."

Kristen stayed silent for a while. Nate was so focused on her that he let the truck slow down below the speed limit and crept back towards town.

"I don't know what I'm going to do with the P'Ceph?"

"Simple. Put it into your hotel room."

"But what about when I go out to eat or go to check on my car? Anyone could just come in, mess with it and take it. I can't leave it alone in some hotel where the maid might spill Windex on it. With all that you've said about the hotels in town, who knows what might happen to it? Can't you see?"

"It'll be fine. I shouldn't have scared you with those stories about the motels. I'm sure that's all taken care of by now. You shouldn't worry."

"I can't help it," Kristen said. "It's my future, it's my life. I can't, will not, leave it alone in some strange place where anyone can mess it up."

"OK. What about a bank? People keep valuable things at banks."

"I don't think the P'Ceph would fit into a safety deposit box."

"True. How about your brother, Mark? Or someone you know back home."

"Mark's in Vegas teaching and, to be honest, there's nobody back in Davis that I would trust with it. The engineering world can be pretty cutthroat, if you understand what I mean."

"Someone might steal it from you."

"More likely, they'd delete all the files stored on the P'Ceph's motherboard or rip out a few specialty circuit boards that would take months to replace."

"What about your mom and dad?"

"The last thing I want to do is run back to them begging for help."

"That I fully understand."

"All my closest friends from Cal Poly have scattered all around the country since we graduated from undergrad. I don't know where half of them are. There just isn't anyone I can call on who I completely trust."

"You can trust me," said Nate quietly.

Kristen stared at him for a while then nodded. "I believe you, Nate. You and Mark were cut from the same cloth, I bet. But I'm still not sure. I don't know where you live or really know you that well."

Nate stayed quiet for a couple of minutes, trying to figure out some solution.

"You'll be able to keep an eye on it tonight at the Travelodge."

"Sure, but I won't be able to get my car fixed or leave the room unless I'm sure the P'Ceph won't be bothered."

"I could pick it up tomorrow on my way to work and lock it in the storeroom at Mountain Ski and Sport," said Nate. "I'm going to be the only one at work tomorrow and no one goes into the storage room. For that matter, no one comes into the shop. You could come by whenever you needed to check on the P'Ceph and I'll take it back to the motel when I'm off work. That should keep it safe." Nate was sure she would shoot this plan down, but to his surprise she just sat quietly as if thinking it over. Guppies Bar passed on his side and the Travelodge loomed in the distance before she spoke.

"I don't really have any other ideas or a better choice," she said. "You've been extraordinarily nice to



me, Nate. But I still wonder why you're willing to help me so much."

Nate felt his face flush with heat and was glad it was dark in the cab. "It's no problem really. I'm just trying to follow what my mom tried to teach me."

"Well, thank you Nate. I really appreciate all your help." He was struck again by how pretty she was and found himself hoping that her car might take a while to get fixed.

## Chapter 4

Kristen handed her car keys to the mechanic and flashed him a winning smile. His grin answered hers as he turned away to attend to a car already suspended off the ground. She'd dated a mechanic back at Cal Poly, looking to rebel against her parents and the straight-laced nerds clogging up the engineering school. When they broke-up, she hadn't counted on how much she'd miss his strong arms and smell, a combination of grease and oranges from the hand soap he used. Ever since those days, even a trip to Minute Lube sent a tingle through her entire body.

The air felt crisp and tasted scrubbed clean to her city acclimated senses as she walked across the parking lot to Nate's truck. It stood in its parking space patiently, just waiting for her to tell it where to go. She would have preferred to rent her own vehicle, but the phone book had proven Nate right. There weren't any rental places this far up the hill unless she wanted a snow mobile. The mechanic, Joe, had offered a car, but why take one from him when she already had Nate's truck. It ran well and Nate had insisted she take it. Part of her thought of the truck as collateral for the P'Ceph.

He had arrived at seven-thirty sharp with a ceramic mug full of coffee for her, ready to move the P'Ceph to the

store. She had still been uneasy about giving the P'Ceph to Nate and leaving it in the storeroom, but the pure honesty written across Nate's face and him allowing her to borrow the truck had put her slightly at ease. She started up his truck and sighed. Ease or not, Kristen needed to check in again on the P'Ceph.

Nate still had reminded her of Mark, when he had handed over the keys to his truck with a smile. It wasn't in the way he looked or acted; the two of them couldn't be more different with Nate's sandy blond hair and tall, lean physique. No, it was the total lack of deception that they shared. Neither Mark nor Nate tried to hold anything back, their entire soul was constantly written across their faces.

The clinching proof had come out this morning when she suggested renting a car. Nate had told her about the lack of rental places and implied she was too young to rent a car anyway. She'd laughed and he did too. Kristen had realized a moment or two later that he wasn't just flirting, but actually thought she wasn't 25. Five years had passed since she'd been that young and, after a question or two she realized, a couple more before he was that old.

A glance at her watch told Kristen that lunchtime had arrived. She drove the last few blocks to the strip mall and pulled into a spot in front of the Mountain Ski and Sports. Numerous open spots were available.

Displays cluttering up the windows blocked most of the view of the interior of the store and what little space was left to peer through revealed nothing but more racks of clothing and equipment. Nate was nowhere to be seen. What if he was messing with the P'Ceph? She shook the idea away and pushed open the door, setting a small bell swinging.

"Be with you in a second," came Nate's voice from the storeroom. Kristen's suspicions grew, walking quickly across the store. She'd specifically asked him to leave her project alone. If he'd damaged it or the programming she'd been working on for the last 4 years, he'd find out how it felt to have a sneaker inserted up his ass. She increased her pace, only to come face to face with Nate leaving the storeroom with a large box in his hands.

"Good morning, or is it afternoon already?" Nate passed her on his way to a display case on the other side of the store. She stole a glance back into the storeroom and found the P'Ceph exactly where they had put it. The same tarp hid its features and the same boxes were stacked

around it. She turned towards Nate, feeling a little bit foolish.

"I thought we could go out to lunch, my treat—a little something to repay your generosity. I'll even let you drive." Nate turned his head towards her, revealing a smile that reached up to his eyes. Those eyes clouded over, and Kristen could almost see his brain working something through before he responded. His beaming smile became more of a grimace.

"I can't. Bob won't be in today and I'm in charge of the store. I have to stay here all day. The shop closes at six on Wednesdays, that'll be the first time I can leave."

"What if you have to go to the bathroom?"

"Well, I can leave for a couple of minutes and stick a sign to the door." He finished replacing a couple pairs of dusty shoes from the wall display and approached her, arms full of shoeboxes. "I really appreciate it, but the boss is counting on me. Rain check?"

Kristen didn't even have to smile and pretend she didn't mind, since Nate was already back in the storeroom replacing the boxes he'd brought out. She didn't like being turned down for any reason. She liked getting her

own way, so Kristen moved in front of the storeroom's only exit and was about to speak when Nate spoke.

"So the P'Ceph can predict the future. How does it do it?"

For a second or two, she struggled between forcing her hand about lunch and talking about her project, but ended up leaning towards the P'Ceph.

"It doesn't predict the future. I told you last night that it predicts the path someone should take to be happy. The P'Ceph can map out someone's life, helping them make the right decisions, so they can enjoy all the time they have on Earth. I can't wait to see what it has in mind for me. I could have used its advice dozens of times in the past." She stepped into the storeroom and sat down on a large box near the door. "I'm sure that by the end of the summer, it'll be ready to be introduced to the world. It'll be the biggest breakthrough in psychological precognition that ever hit the scientific community."

"OK. But why name it the Plastic Cephalopod? Why not something that relates to its function like the pleasure predictor or contented path?"

"Oh, that. The abbreviation comes from Precognitive Encephalograph. I just think of it as the plastic cephalopod because that's what it reminds me of."

"Encephalograph? Is that like an electric cardiograph? We fixed an old broken one my senior year. A local clinic donated it to the school."

"I'm impressed."

"Oh, it's nothing. I'm a big fan of the Discovery Channel. I watch it every chance I get. Science was one of my favorite subjects in school, after computers that is."

Kristen nodded. It made sense; she was a Learning Channel junkie after all. Why couldn't a store clerk love computers, science and nature? Up here in the hills, everyone was either an environmentalist or hunter and close to the natural world. People in S.F. protested and talked about the environment, but did they really understand it the same way as people who were surrounded by wild, undeveloped country.

"So how does it work?" Kristen relinquished her perch and crossed the small room to the P'Ceph. One good tug pulled the tarp away.

"Well, you plug it into any wall socket and turn it on by flicking this switch." The electrical cord exited the device just below the large black on and off switch on the back of the case. Kristen mimicked turning the device on and reached for a tangle of wires, each ending in a clear

suction cup, that came out a small hole on the top of the plastic case. "You place these cups against the skin of a person's skull to help the P'Ceph read the electrical signals from their brain. Then comes the tricky part."

Kristen motioned Nate over to stand behind her. When he was in position, she pulled open the side of the P'Ceph, revealing a small computer screen and keyboard.

"That's a PDA, isn't it? I've always wanted one of those."

"Yep." She extended a folded-up keyboard out away from the device, and hit a couple of keys. "I have my subjects answer a set of questions while the electrodes are attached to their head. When they finish, I hit 'run', which would be flashing on the screen if it were on. The computer inside processes the answers, along with the data from the electrodes, making a complete picture of the person's identity. A few minutes later, if everything went well, the P'Ceph prints out a plan for the individual."

Kristen turned to Nate and found him nodding, staring intently over the P'Ceph with a far away look on his face. "The plan," Kristen continued, "should detail each step to take to reach the pinnacle of happiness for the subject. Unfortunately, I've had only partial printouts so far. I'm



not sure if there is a software conflict, a hardware problem or if the thing just never will work properly."

"Hmmm. What kind of questions do you ask?" The fierce look of concentration spread across his features impressing her. No one but her had taken it this seriously for years.

"Well, there are questions about the person's family, birthday, height, weight and so forth. All the types of questions that can be answered numerically or with a word or two."

"What about hobbies, like sports?"

"Nothing like that. I've tried to keep the questions important."

"But don't you understand?" he said moving up to her to stand just inches away. "Sports and hobbies are what keep people alive."

"Nate, I realize sports are your livelihood but I hardly believe that they're that important. Sports are something to kill time, not base your life on."

"You couldn't be more wrong, Kristen." He grabbed her hand, gently, and pulled her into the store's main room.

"Look at all this stuff. People buy it and use it to escape their lives. Sometimes this stuff is more important to them than jobs or family. I know people that'd rather

snowboard than do anything else. It makes them happy. Don't you see?"

"Well maybe."

"I like my job, heck I love it. But it isn't what I dream about. It pays the rent, keeps gas in my car, puts food in my stomach and keeps me busy, but that's all. I like my family too, but I try to avoid them. As for how old I am, I've known children more responsible than adults old enough to have grand children.

"What I really care about, what I really want out of life has less to do with the numbers you mentioned than my hobbies. I can't tell you the amount of times I wished it was Thursday, just so I could go play softball with the team I'm on. If it hadn't been for baseball in high school, I may not have kept my grades up and graduate. Science and computers were no problem, but Math and History—yuck.

"Hobbies keep people alive. They are some of the funnest things we do in life. I can't imagine a world without them. And I'll bet that most people feel the same way. Just try telling a gardener that they can't tinker with their lawn or rows of vegetables."

"Yes. I, I see what you mean." Amazed at Nate's sincerity, Kristen wished she had realized years, or at

least months ago that she'd been ignoring a huge part of people's lives just because her life was her project, her hobby. Without the P'Ceph, Professor Zho's encephalogram would have driven her crazy.

"You do see, don't you? You aren't just patronizing me?" said Nate.

She nodded.

"I see more clearly now than I have in a long time. I'm not sure why I ignored hobbies before, but I won't ignore them again. Your fresh pair of eyes may have produced the answer I've been searching for to complete the P'Ceph and rid it of the last few glitches."

It occurred to her that he might be able to see other things she had missed, other parts of people's lives that were important, but she had ignored. Nate couldn't help her with code or hardware, but completing the list of questions that the P'Ceph counted on might be right up his alley.

"Would you like to help me with the P'Ceph?" she asked.

"Sure. But what can I do? This device is nothing like a simple monitor or swapping out minor component of a computer. And the code I learned in high school was obsolete when I learned it."

"Nothing as complicated as all that. How about coming up with a bunch of questions based on hobbies and anything else you can think of? Things that a person really cares about."

"OK. It might help if I see the questions that you already have. That way I won't waste time duplicating what you've already come up with."

"Makes sense. All we need to do is plug in the P'Ceph and I'll show you the questions." Nate squeezed by her, pulled a surge protector from a box near the door and slipped the plug between two large boxes a couple feet from Kristen. She saw the surge protector's on and off switch light up a moment before Nate connected the P'Ceph's power cord to it.

Kristen brought up list of questions and moved out of the way, so Nate could take a look. A minute passed before he looked up.

"I'll get started right away." He walked out to the register and Kristen followed. He dug around for a pencil, but couldn't find any paper that he could use.

"I'll find something to write on in the storeroom, don't worry. You should go get something to eat. You must be starving. I'll have the list done by the time you get back." With that, Nate walked into the storeroom.

Visions of the P'Ceph working flawlessly flew through her head. Images of podiums and awards filled her mind along with conversations on morning talk shows and Oprah—Doctor Phil sat next to her helpless as she showed the world that all they needed to do was hook up into the P'Ceph and answer some question to know how to be happy. No getting real or emotional integrity needed.

She watched Nate navigate through her existing platform, proving his computer savvy through his speed. Kristen felt better about leaving him with her baby to go eat lunch in peace. Nate had the PDA's stylus out and was tapping gently away on the screen to bring up question after question. The PDA held only a few programs beside the P'Ceph's question database. Another reason not to worry. Nate typed answers to the questions and scribbled notes on the paper filler that kept new sneakers and boots full. The P'Ceph appeared to be in good hands.

"I'll add whichever questions I think are necessary when I get back from lunch. Thanks again for the help, Nate. I really do appreciate it."

"Your welcome, Kristen. It's my pleasure."

Kristen walked out of the storeroom and was halfway across the store when she heard him add, "And maybe then it'll work. And we can..." The last few words failed to

reach her as she stepped out onto the sidewalk in front of the store, the bell above the door chiming behind her. It'd been a long time since anyone else had been as fired up as she was. Professor Zho had slowly lost interest in the P'Ceph after each failed trial. Nate might lose interest to, but at least for now she had someone whose energy she could feed off.

She hopped into the truck, fastened her seat belt and started it up. A decision stood in front of her, not the most important decision of the day—that had been allowing Nate to fiddle with her future. No, she needed to decide which direction to take on highway four in her search for lunch. If she headed down the hill, all that the town offered was a strip mall with the usual businesses—grocery store, pizza joint, Chinese, or subs. The heart of the town lay just around a bend in the road and offered a wider variety of choices one would expect to find in a town as big as Arnolds.

There was the burger joint her parents liked to stop at on the way to the cabin. She must have eaten there a hundred times or more growing up and taking the traditional 4<sup>th</sup> of July and Labor Day trips to the cabin, but she didn't feel like a burger today. Something different than the same ol' same ol' sounded better. She knew vaguely where a

Mexican and an Italian restaurant were, but neither one jumped out and said, "Try me, try me" to her taste buds. The only democratic way to solve this problem would be to let the people decide, so Kristen drove slowly up the highway, watching carefully.

A converted house on the other side of the road caught her eye because the full parking lot was full, and the bright blue paint covering every inch of it stood out from the surrounding evergreens. If the cars hadn't been enough to convince her of the restaurant's quality, the fresh, obnoxious paint did. Rundown, failing businesses never sported bright, fresh paint. Only the successful ones looked like this café.

She slowed down to pull into its parking lot. No empty spaces were available in front of the restaurant, but it looked like there might be parking around the back. She turned out to be right, there was one spot left next to the dumpster.

She got out of the truck ready to be assaulted by the thick smell of garbage wafting out of the dumpster, and was pleasantly surprised by only the slightest vegetable order coming from it. Must have gotten lucky and picked the day after the garbage man picked up the trash. She nearly skipped around to the front of the restaurant. Everything

was going so smoothly today with the cute mechanic flirting with her and saying there was only one car in front of hers to be worked on and then the unexpected help from Nate. The little motel she'd stayed in had even had the most comfortable bed she'd slept on in years. Except for her car being sick, she really had started to enjoy this vacation.

She stepped through the front door of the Full Moon Café and breathed in the delicious aroma of fresh baked bread. It was a little warmer inside than out, explaining why the deck was packed with customers and a couple of tables remained empty inside. A group of four people stood in front of her waiting for the hostess, but luck had it that they were all together and Kristen soon found herself sitting at the last empty table, off near the entrance to the bathrooms. She didn't mind because it was a booth with a nice view of the deck and the trees outside.

She had a moment or two to look at the menu before her teenage waitress asked, "Can I get you something to drink?"

"Ice tea, please." The girl nodded and walked back towards the kitchens. Kristen glanced at the menu, remembering her stint at waiting tables in high school. She hadn't lasted a full month before she quit. The work and the hours had worn her out like nothing else she had



ever done. It didn't help that her boss had insisted on only keeping two servers at a time to cover thirty tables.

She focused on the menu. Penne pasta warred with a chicken gyro for her attention, but in the end she went with the pasta. Though the sauce would be full of calories, the pasta was far healthier than the french fries that came with the gyro. She put her menu down so the waitress would know that she was ready to order and looked around. The Full Moon Café was as bright inside as it was outside, with almost luminescent sky-blue paint covering the walls and the ceiling. The staff matched the countertops of the tables and booths in stark white aprons and shirts. The level of conversation was low, each table keeping its words to itself in the cozy dining room that must have once been living room, dining room and a bedroom before they took out some walls.

The waitress brought back Kristen's iced tea and went away with her order. The service was a bit sluggish, but she had nowhere to go. She trusted Nate to keep the P'Ceph safe and thought to give the mechanic more than an hour or two to get to her car. Kristen settled into the soft cushions of her booth, kicked up her feet on the bench across from her and relaxed.

The tea was fresh and quite good. Suzy replaced her glass before she realized how thirsty she was. She hadn't drunk much since leaving Davis yesterday and had no idea how long she'd walked before running into Nate. It surprised her that she hadn't noticed her thirst before now. You couldn't afford to get dehydrated in Davis during the summer when the mercury shot above 100 on most days and still go out running five miles a day. She hadn't done any running recently, but the walk from her car had seemed quite long.

Kristen drained the second glass of iced tea. The waitress arrived to fill her glass back up.

"Would you like some water?" the girl asked.

"No thank you. Tea is just fine." That glass of tea dropped below the halfway point as Kristen realized that nature was calling. She slid out of the booth, walked over to a door marked "restrooms" and headed down the short hallway. No one answered when she knocked on the "Ladies Room," so she pushed open the door and walked inside.

The bathroom was decorated in the same style as the dining room with matching blue paint covering the walls, while the sink and toilet gleamed white. The only difference came from the smell wafting out of a basket of

potpourri above and to the left of the sink. No dill bread in the bathroom, only the scent of cinnamon and apples.

Finished in the bathroom, Kristen opened the door back into the dining room to find a man sitting in her booth. Her first thought was about her purse, sitting on the bench across from the man. She inched slowly towards the booth, alternating her focus on her purse and the man. Tucked against the wall at the far end of the bench, her purse remained where she left it. The straps still folded neatly over the top. What the hell is someone doing in my booth? she thought.

A head full of thick brown hair sat atop broad shoulders covered in red flannel. She might have thought he was a lumberjack, if she hadn't noticed the blue prints and architect's compass lying across the table. Before she could notice anything else about him, he turned around. Her blue eyes met his hazel eyes as he stood up. A smile formed in his immaculately trimmed, full beard.

"Hello," he said, extending his right hand.

Kristen put her own hand in his large callused one and barely felt him squeeze while staring into his face. "I hope you don't mind me joining you. There weren't any other tables available and I had to have a table to work on."

"I guess it's all right."

"Are you sure you don't mind? How about I pay for your lunch to make it up to you? I'll promise to be quiet and chew with my mouth closed."

Kristen smiled.

"I don't mind at all," she said, sliding around the man to get to her side of the booth. "You don't need to pay for my meal. It's no big deal."

"I insist."

"But..."

"No buts, it'll be my pleasure."

"What are you working on?" asked Kristen, curious about the design laid out in front of her. She took a sip from her ice tea.

"A house that I'm building. Just trying to make sure what's really happening matches the blueprint."

"Oh." Not an architect after all.

"Yeah, I'm in charge of this house and three others in a small development off of Elm. I'm the only licensed contractor on the site, so if something goes wrong, it's my ass. Luckily, we're ahead of schedule for once, so if we have to go back and fix something we'll still end on time.

"I'm glad you don't mind me sharing the booth with you."

She considered the difference between an architect's hands and a contractor's and decided she preferred the seating arrangement this way, especially since it meant sitting across from such a handsome man. She sipped from her almost empty third glass of ice tea and thought that the vacation was just getting better and better.

"My name's Jeremy Bracken, by the way."

"Kristen Schouler. Nice to meet you."

"So Kristen, what do you do?"

"I'm finishing up my electrical engineering Ph.D. at U.C. Davis. I was just passing through on the way to Lake Alpine for some much needed peace and quiet when my radiator blew."

"Oww, sorry to hear that."

"It's all right. My car's already waiting down at Phil's Garage to get fixed. I bet my car will be up and running in no time."

"Yep. Wouldn't surprise me at all. Phil's a good mechanic, but watch his prices. He can become the greedy mercenary when tourists are involved. With no other options, they have to pay out the nose."

"Thanks for the warning. How much do you think it should cost me to fix a busted radiator?"

"Well," said Jeremy interrupted by their food arriving at the table. When Suzy walked away after setting down their dishes, he continued. "It depends on your car, but shouldn't cost more than \$300."

"Shouldn't be a problem then." Kristen dove a fork into her pasta and savored the first bite of the delicious food. Jeremy seemed to be enjoying his club sandwich as well.

"I'll be back on the road and up to the cabin in no time," she said.

"Your family own a cabin up at Alpine?"

"My grandfather bought one right after they moved it and a number of others off of Bee Gulch. The family has been going up every year, since then."

"It's nice up there."

"The best," Kristen agreed. "I can't wait to be back at the cabin."

"Hopefully it won't be too soon."

Kristen looked deeply into his hazel eyes and found herself in complete agreement.

## Chapter 5

Nate stared intently at the small computer screen as each new question popped up and he punched in a numerical answer. He took notes, recording the questions on slips of white, crumpled paper that smelled of new leather and tire rubber, until an idea struck him. Why not answer all the questions and see if the thing worked on him? The operating software was just like the computers he'd learned on in high school, so he wasn't worried about messing something up. He could just run the program after fixing the plastic suckers to his head, leaving the folders and databases alone for Kristen when she got back.

With the touch of a few icons on the screen, Nate returned to the beginning and stopped. He had to attach the electrodes first. Borrowing some Vaseline lip care from Bob's office to use on the suction cups, Nate thoroughly messed up his hair trying to place them in the spots Kristen had mentioned earlier. Not knowing whether everything was set up correctly or not, Nate touched the "run" icon on the screen and the first questions came up.

Nate started answering the questions in order. He typed in his age-22, years of school attended-12, number of siblings-3, and a slew of other numerical facts about his life. He pressed the 'enter' icon to move from his

parents' ages to the number of grandparents still alive and shook his head in bemusement. Every question dealt with life, but had very little to do with living. It was as if Kristen believed that the answers to all of life's important questions could be summed up in a number between 0 and 100.

The next question appeared on the screen and Nate burst out laughing. "How many teachers/professors have you had sex with?" blinked back at him. He managed to control himself. He wondered what Kristen's answer to this question might turn out to be. A big nil was his answer and he tapped the 'enter' icon to continue. Looking back on his own teachers, especially Ms. Glass his senior year History teacher, got him rethinking the silliness of the question.

Would it matter who started the messing around? How long did it last? Was it fully consensual or were there extenuating circumstances? In high school, it seemed impossible that a student could want to sleep with a teacher and vice versa, but the Gazette's investigation into Mr. Jameson's econ classes and his subsequent arrest proved that it wasn't out of the question at all. Nate started to realize that all the answers began to create a definite picture of the person typing.



Five or six more questions required numbers, before the first question needing a word appeared. "What is your full name?" blinked on the screen for a good minute before Nate punched in his answer—Nathaniel David Fisher. It made an odd sort of sense to him, considering the other questions. All the small details of one's life, the things almost everyone ignored because they were so obvious made up Kristen's focus.

As more simple questions flashed across the screen, such as the names of the town he lived in and the street where his home was located, Nate began to see how all the small pieces of information might fit together like a jigsaw puzzle—each piece too small to reveal anything about the bigger picture. Kristen's questions were important; they were just too impersonal to complete the image. Parts of the puzzle might be clear like the background edges, while the middle obscured a hidden subject. She needed questions that dug to the heart of what people cared about. These questions might just transform Kristen's dry overview into a complete human being.

The screen went blank except for the 'enter' icon after Nate answered a question asking him how far from work he lived. Kristen had said the P'Ceph was currently not working, but what if it worked for him? Nate tapped the

'enter' icon and heard the P'Ceph start clicking. After a surprisingly short time, a paper slid out into the tray built into the top and the machine quieted down. Nate hesitated to pick the paper up. Nothing was visible on the topside, but the writing could be on the back. A number of emotions warred within him, causing him to clench his fists and sweat. If the machine had worked, the supposed path to happiness lay just under a white piece of computer paper in front of him.

He picked up the paper and turned it around in his hands. Both sides were blank. Nate shrugged, not surprised that the P'Ceph hadn't worked, and started scribbling down questions the P'Ceph needed. He bent over the task, sweating slightly in the cramped heat of the storeroom. The questions occurred to him so quickly that he barely kept up with them on the paper. Both sides were full before he reached out for the first piece of tan toe-filler paper. Soon, he was tearing through boxes for more scraps of paper as each one filled up with more questions.

Time passed quickly as Nate filled up a handful of crumpled paper with his increasingly sloppy cursive before running out of ideas. He sat back and took a couple of deep breaths to calm down. If these questions cleaned up the bugs that kept the P'Ceph from working, Kristen would

be ecstatic. Who knows what she might do to thank him? They could hook up or, better yet, they might become partners in the P'Ceph, and he could earn enough to buy a house or even start his own snowboard shop. He'd finally be independent, not living hand to mouth like he did with his scant pay checks from Bob.

If the P'Ceph worked, they could test it on people who came into the store. Scientists always tested a thing a million times before they actually introduced it to the rest of the world. Vaccines, drugs and even new sodas had to be tested by a lot of people before they ever got to the general public. Nate cocked his head to the left and a faraway look crossed his face. We could charge them to find out about their future sporting activities and which ones they'd enjoy the most. Even if I couldn't sell them the stuff in the store, it'd get around and more people would come to the store just for the spectacle of it all. And the more people that came in, the better chance to increase my commissions. It'd save the store.

The sound of something smacking against the front window of the store caught his attention. Another thud sounded from the main room of the store. Nate turned away from the stack of questions and stuck his head out of the storeroom's door. It sounded like wet cereal being stepped

on-half of the flakes crunchy while the rest mushy. A third wet crunch hit the window across from him and Nate jerked his head in time to see bits of eggshell and yolk slip down the window.

Nate ripped the electrodes off his head and shot through the store as a fourth egg splattered against the front door. Picking up a hand-ax from a display, he pushed open the door as a fifth egg hit the window beside his head and splattered egg and shell on him. The flying debris caused him to jerk his head away from the splatter, distracting him momentarily before turning back to see the taillights of a truck speeding up the hill. There was only one person in the back of the truck, blurry in the distance. The truck disappeared up the hill, leaving Nate with the cleanup.

He stalked back into the store, each step punctuated with another cuss word directed at the punks in the truck. It wasn't even Friday night, he thought heading towards the cleaning supplies stored in the back of the storeroom. Nate stepped through the doorway, around the P'Ceph and grabbed the plastic bucket that held the glass cleaning supplies.

Back outside, he closed the front door and began cleaning. This incident wasn't the first egging the store

had received, but back then Ruby had had to clean it up. She had hated the "goo" and never failed to grouch about it for the next couple of days. Nate didn't blame her. Paper towels in one hand and glass cleaner in the other, Nate started the cleanup.

After the first two eggs disappeared from the windows—no cracks or real damage, thank God—Nate took a break. It was getting dark. The sun had sunk behind the trees, causing the streetlights to come on, even though it wouldn't be really dark for another hour or two. Time slipped by unnoticed until now, standing outside in the deepening gloom, Nate began to think about dinner. He'd skipped lunch, so he still had something to eat in his cooler, but where was Kristen? He glanced up and down the street, half expecting to see his truck coming his way but there were no blue trucks to be seen.

Maybe she was at the motel taking a long nap after a big lunch. Half of Nate's Saturdays disappeared in that exact way. That must be it. The idea of a big lunch got his stomach growling with two more splatters to clean up. Nate finished with a number of streaks still marring the surface of the windows. Tomorrow was Thursday and that meant going through the entire store and polishing up the glass. He'd fix the windows then.

Nate shuffled around the register's counter, sat down in his stool and grabbed his cooler from behind the counter. He levered the blue lid off, letting it fall as he reached inside for an apple. Another one followed it, along with a PB&J sandwich and a plastic bottle of water that had no label and looked to have been sat on one too many times. He devoured one of the apples and tossed the core back into the cooler. Bob didn't like fruit or food rotting in the trash.

The sandwich disappeared next and then the other apple. One long draught finished off the water and Nate shoved the blue lid back on top of the cooler. He stood up to stretch his legs, remembering Kristen's absence. A quick call to the motel would clear everything up.

He picked up the phone and dialed the motel. On the second ring, "Travelodge. How can I help you?" came a bored, female voice.

"Can you connect me with room number 5?" asked Nate. No response came from the receptionist except for the phone starting to ring again. Nate let it ring 10 times before he gave up and put the phone down. Where was Kristen?

The store closed in an hour and he didn't want to walk home. He had to do something to occupy his time. Feeling a little sneaky about working on the P'Ceph more than

Kristen had wanted, Nate slipped back into the storeroom. He smoothed out the papers with his questions on them and got to work. The sooner the thing worked, the sooner Kristen and he could start making money.

The operating system of the P'Ceph allowed easy access to the questions, but held a tighter grip on the underlying programs that did all the work. Nate hunted around the computer, tapping on icons and dismissing them while the databases where the questions were stored remained out of his reach. An entire sweep through the programs behind the icons on the PDA revealed nothing. What if the databases were accessed another way?

Nate abandoned the screen and keyboard to look for ports around the body of the P'Ceph. If he found a USB or Ethernet port, they could be used to access the programs he was after through a laptop and there would be no choice but to wait until Kristen arrived. His hands stretched around the P'Ceph, feeling for the telltale indentations of a port. His right hand brushed against the old command buttons on the front of the printer casing while his left found only the power cord and power switch. Something was missing.

Nate's hands slid back around the P'Ceph, slowly going over every inch until his cheek rested against the device

and both arms hugged it. Still, he couldn't figure it out. He gave up on looking with his hands and scoped out the body of the printer with his eyes. The front, sides and top all looked standard built, but a discoloration on the plastic near the PDA monitor caught his attention. A panel had been placed over something on the back and the PDA hid most of the line where the two different pieces came together. Nate gently tried to lever the PDA screen away from the case, but found it locked in place. Whether the discolored plastic indicated anything or not, Nate was sure there were no available ports he could find.

Satisfied, Nate turned back to the screen and resumed his search. This time as he investigated the PDA, he opened the program behind each icon. Long after searching seemed a waste of time, Nate hit an icon shaped like a CD that disappeared when a pop-up prompt obscured half the screen asking for a password. This had to be the database. What else would be protected on the computer? What type of password would Kristen use?

Nate doubted that he could come up with the right word. He just didn't know her that well. They'd talked a little last night and this morning, but only about the most general of things: the weather, her car, the P'Ceph. A thought struck Nate and he typed in "P'Ceph." The computer



rejected it and flashed "Type Password" at him again. Nate typed in "Prelude," "Aggies," "mace," "encephalograph," and many more words without success. Nate stood up to pace. He passed by the windbreakers near the front glass and turned. Back and forth between those articles and the register, Nate paced, trying to come up with the password.

Free from the P'Ceph mocking his failure, Nate's mind wandered off to where Kristen was. They hadn't set any time to meet, but it was already 5:30 PM. The worse thing that could have happened was that she'd stolen his truck. He shook his head, ridding himself of the ridiculous idea. The truck might be his life, but the P'Ceph was hers. He dismissed the idea that she had gotten into an accident, since she drove more cautiously than he did.

He strode over to the front door and propped it open. The cool evening breeze reminded him of last night. He had had to remind Kristen this morning that her car sat broken down on the side of the road, she was so focused on the P'Ceph. She'd been more concerned about it than her car. It was her life. Focusing his concentration on Kristen's feelings toward the P'Ceph, Nate resumed his pacing and tried to brainstorm some passwords.

The P'Ceph was Kristen's what? Her life, her baby, her lover, her world, her pet project, what? He turned

back into the store to resume his pacing, leaving the front door open. The words that came to mind became more and more silly. Her mommy, her daddy, her granny, her boyfriend, her tomorrow, her future. He stopped a few feet from the register, head tilted over his right shoulder. That might be it.

Nate sat down again in front of the P'Ceph's screen and typed in "future." He shot a meaningful look up towards the ceiling and pressed the 'enter' icon. Nothing happened until the computer rejected the word. If not future, then what? What else could the P'Ceph bring her? He typed 'fame' in and pressed the enter button. Part of him was sure the password prompt would come up again, but the screen changed to reveal the same Microsoft Access database program that he had learned to use in school. He couldn't believe it. He tapped the edit tab in the control bar to find all the familiar options of the program open to him, including edit database.

He began adding his questions to Kristen's list, finding that the program had an unlimited amount of room for the questions. Nate worded each question carefully to keep the answers as short as possible—most could be answered with a single word. The best questions always brought about sharp, clear answers. Give a person a chance

to throw words together and they'd just as likely ramble on as tell the truth.

Nate held the last paper in his hand, when he heard Bob call his name. Startled by his boss's unexpected appearance, and not wanting Bob to see the P'Ceph, Nate hurried out of the storeroom.

"Hey, boss."

"Why are you still here? You should have closed the store ten minutes ago."

"I just got caught up in someth..." Nate trailed off staring at Bob's appearance. Bob stood in the middle of the store, staring vacantly at the clock that hung next to his office door. His slacks and shirt, usually expertly pressed, were wrinkled and there was dirt on his shoes and pants. Bob's hair stuck up on the right side of his head.

"Are you OK?"

Bob's head turned in Nate's direction but the look on his face was glassy.

"Just a little family business," said Bob. "Nothing for you to worry about. Did you sell anything today?"

Nate just shook his head.

"Oh, too bad. Lock up and go home, Nate. I have some work to do in my office."

"I, well, I need to finish some rearranging in the storeroom. I'm almost done and might as well finish tonight. Is that OK?"

"Sure."

The two men stood staring at each other, Nate finding it hard to believe Bob's condition. Nate watched Bob slowly turn his head back to the clock on the wall and nod once. He shambled into the office and shut the door, leaving Nate to wonder if Bob might have been in an accident himself.

Nate stood for a second or two more, looking at the door to Bob's office before, slowly, returning to the storeroom. He carefully listened for any sound that might indicate that Bob was out of his office and typed the last page of questions into the P'Ceph's database. The impersonal facts were now followed by questions that bared one's soul. He saved the changes and exited the database.

Nate risked a quick look out into the main room and found Bob's door still closed. He wanted to see if the new questions helped, but could always wait until tomorrow morning. Bob would probably be back to normal by then and keep Nate busy. He might even want to check out the store's stock himself. No, the best time to test the P'Ceph was now. Who knew if he'd have another chance?

Plus, for all Nate knew, Kristen was finishing with the mechanic and on her way here now to pick up the P'Ceph and leave for good.

Nate quickly stuck the electrodes back in place, tapped the 'start' icon, and the P'Ceph was throwing the old questions at him again. The P'Ceph was more than just the database. What if the changes he'd made caused it to crash? The prospect of facing a furious Kristen frightened him more than a little.

He neared the end of the original set of questions and reached out to enter his last answer to Kristen's prompts. The stylus hung an inch from the "enter" icon as Nate tried to calm his racing heart.

His first question appeared on the screen. They hadn't caused any problems yet, but now he needed to answer them and see if the P'Ceph would work. He remembered to listen for Bob and heard nothing. He started through the questions.

As they flew by, he paid less and less attention to the world outside the storeroom, his thoughts focused on only one thing—the end of the questions. He experienced a moment of panic when the screen went blank, but it slowly brightened back to its original glow.

"Stupid, cheap, dumb, piece of crap," muttered Nate. He reached out to activate the P'Ceph and a couple of suction cups fell off. He got one to stay put, but the other refused to stick. Holding his cheek against his shoulder couldn't keep the electrode from rolling off its designated place. A lick reminded Nate what Vaseline tasted like and he grew frantic trying to figure out how to keep the last suction cup in place until he realized that he could just hold it. Nate reached for the stylus to hit the 'enter' icon.

The stylus tapped the PDA's screen and the P'Ceph came alive. It began to hum like a copier warming up for a day's work, while Nate waited for the clicks to start like last time. It only hummed. The sound didn't get louder or slack off for a full minute with nothing changing. What if it burnt itself out? How long should he let it hum before he pulled the plug? Was it already damaged?

Before his imagination could come up with any answers, two things happened on top of each other. The P'Ceph began to push out a piece of paper with words inked across its surface and the sound of shattering glass echoed from the main room.

## Chapter 6

Kristin entered Mountain Ski and Sports to find Nate hunched over near the office door, squatting while some strange, bedraggled man hovered over him. She'd seen transients with less mud splattered across their pants and clothes. In any other store, Kristen would have left immediately, but this store held her P'Ceph. She glanced around the store to see if any other surprises lurked near the backpacks or sleeping bags and made sure to have her pepper spray ready at a split second's notice. She walked in.

Neither of the two men lifted their heads as she entered the store. Whatever task they were working on absorbed their concentration, letting Kristen sneak up. She didn't expect to see a broken clock with bits of glass scattered on the floor and a rock. Nate continued to carefully pluck small slivers of glass out of the industrial carpet while the disheveled man and Kristen watched.

"Why throw a rock at my clock?" the man said, sounding exhausted. Nate turned to the man, saw Kristen for the first time, nodded and returned his attention to the man.

"Bob. Whoever did this was probably trying to throw a rock through the front door. They had nothing against the

clock." Bob, she realized, was the store's owner. Nate had described him as uptight and immaculate. What caused this change, or was Nate lying?

"Oh," Bob said and walked into the office, shutting the door behind him.

"That's your boss?" she asked Nate looking towards the storeroom.

"Yep," replied Nate, standing up with a rock in one hand and a ruined clock covered in glass shards in the other. "He's been like that all evening. I don't think he's been sleeping well. Where have you been? I think you might have a world record for longest lunch."

"Just enjoying the sights," she lied. No reason to tell Nate about Jeremy, whether or not Nate was justified in asking.

She followed him over to the register where Nate stowed the destroyed clock in the trash. Her attention focused on the P'Ceph sitting in the storage room just as she'd left it.

"Come up with any useful questions for the P'Ceph? Or did you find the games on the PDA?"

"There are games. I wish you'd said something earlier," said Nate grinning. "I'm a whiz at Tetris, you



know. As for questions, I only came up with a big honking stack of them."

Nate jumped off the stool and motioned her to take his place. Feeling more relaxed without Bob around and the P'Ceph in sight, she took the seat and was soon poring over his questions. She flipped from page to page, impressed with the number and scope of the prompts written on the crumpled pages.

The questions were quite good and most of them could be answered with a single, direct response, which was even better. The existing drivers and programs in the P'Ceph might be able to handle the questions without any major changes. She'd have to take her time, add a few new prompts and run a system check on the algorithms that the P'Ceph depended on to come up with predictions. If nothing changed dramatically, she could have the questions she liked in the P'Ceph's database in a week or two. Anything faster would be too dangerous and could cause a fatal crash or freeze up the system.

Nate stood staring over her shoulder, probably waiting for any sign that she liked or disliked questions. It was fun keeping him in suspense, plus it gave her time to go through the questions one more time to see if they were as good as her first impression. A second time through,

Kristen was more excited than ever. She now saw how all of the questions she wanted to use, about half of them, could be worded to guarantee a one-word response that would fit the P'Ceph's software. Nate had accomplished more for the P'Ceph in one evening than she had in four months of tinkering. Why hadn't she realized the need for more questions?

"So?" asked Nate, leaning over Kristen's shoulder.

"Well," she said, drawing out the game. It was harmless, and the wait would only make her words all the more enjoyable. Kristen turned her face to his.

"Some of the questions, they, oh, I can't be this mean, the questions are great," she said. "They're a hundred times better than I hoped they could be."

"Yes."

She stood up, causing Nate to take a step back to make room for her, which soon disappeared as she threw her arms around him in a congratulatory hug. It had been meant as something between friends, a moment to share in the joy of a success, but Kristen surprised herself at how good it felt to be pressed up against Nate with his arms tightly wound around her. She felt his body stir against hers and inhaled as a jolt ran through her body in response.

The sound of the office door opening destroyed the moment.

Nate let go of her and took two quick steps back. She watched as his face turned red and thought how wonderful it was to be that young and easily embarrassed. Just before Kristen turned her head to see what Bob was up to, she caught sight of Nate turning towards the storeroom with a subtle shifting of his hips and a tug at his waist with his right hand. You're not that large, big guy, she thought as Bob came into view.

"Might as well lock up and go home," said Bob, his gaze vacant and lackluster. "Finish with our customer and have a good night. I'll see you tomorrow." He shifted his eyes around the room without stopping on a single display.

Kristen watched, amused, as Bob went back to his office and closed the door. After the click of a dead bolt locking, she turned to Nate. His back was turned to her, giving her a perfect opportunity to size up his physique. Though he was not a big muscular guy, she still made out the muscles across his shoulders and back. There were definite advantages to twenty-two year olds. She walked over towards the storeroom.

Nate cut in front of her and smiled. "I'll shut down the P'Ceph. You've had a busy day tromping around Arnolds. Take a seat."

"Nate you don't have too. I..."

"I insist. Anyway how is your car doing?"

"She's doing OK. Phil, the mechanic, didn't have time to look her over today. He said he'll get to her first thing tomorrow. I'm sure she'll be up and running in no time."

"That's great."

Nate had wound the wires and electrodes into a neat bundle along with the power cord on top of the P'Ceph. It was ready to go. With little effort, they set it gently back in the truck and Nate went back into the store to lock up.

Kristen delighted in the crisp, mountain air sliding down into her lungs. The air was cold enough to sting a bit, but tasted so clean and pure. Nate took only a minute or two back in the store, before he was locking the outside door and landing beside Kristen in the truck. Since it was his car, Kristen sat in the passenger's seat. With the keys already in the ignition, Nate started the truck, put on his seat belt and turned to her.

"So, just back to the motel?"

Kristen watched and then broke into laughter as his face betrayed how bad he thought the words must have sounded to her. This guy was too cute. Kristen was glad to hear a few chuckles come from Nate.

"Let's celebrate your wonderful questions. How about we drop the P'Ceph at the motel and go for a drink? I've been out all day and don't want to go back to that cooped up little room. At least, not yet."

"Guppies?"

"Sounds good. I've got the first round." Nate backed the truck up and got onto the highway with a brief screech from the tires. Smiling sheepishly from peeling out of the store's parking lot, Nate eased off of the accelerator and kept to the speed limit the rest of the way.

They transferred the P'Ceph to her motel room and were stopping in the gravel parking lot in front of Guppies in a matter of minutes. The two were only a half-mile apart.

The lot was only half full, containing a mix of SUV's, trucks and economy cars. Looking at the SUV's already parked, Kristen thought of Jeremy's black Suburban, but didn't see it. She wasn't surprised, but felt a little relieved. Contractors worked early mornings, and it was well after nine already.

Nate parked the truck up against the only light pole in the small parking lot. Kristen got out of the truck and started walking towards the bar. All of the other cars were parked up against the building, some of them so close together that Kristen could hardly imagine anyone small enough to squeeze out of the vehicles.

"Why do these people park this way?" she said.

Nate laughed.

"Same reason, I parked against the pole. Superstition."

"I'm not familiar with parking lot superstitions. You'll have to enlighten me."

"It's simple," said Nate, pausing to open the door and let Kristen walk in before him. "The first person to park away from the bar will get the next DUI. The county sheriff usually has someone watching the bar, even if it's just a snoop from their living room. And it is easier to see a car parked away from the building than next to the sidewalk."

"What about the pole?"

"The first time I parked there, later I got pulled over for speeding. I wasn't drunk, mind you. I was just in a hurry to get home to pick up my softball gear. It was Thursday." Nate nodded towards an open booth against the

far wall and gave a wave to the bartender. "Anyway, long story short, the cop let me off. Ever since, that's where I park."

Kristen wasn't sure she liked the look the woman behind the bar threw at her.

They sat down at the booth, Kristen sliding only halfway in while Nate moved all the way against the wall and propped his feet up so they stuck out into the flow of traffic.

"I know it's silly, but I might as well park there as anywhere else."

"Don't worry about it," said Kristen, watching the female bartender striding over to their table. "I used to only wear blue socks to track meets back in high school."

"That's not strange."

"It is when your high school's colors are yellow and brown. Understand these were bright blue socks, not navy." The bartender came up to the table, tossing a smile at Nate and ignoring Kristen.

"So, you're paying like a regular customer today, Nate?" asked the bartender. The bartender was thin, good looking for her age and didn't seem drunk.

"Kristen, Natalie," Nate said introducing the two women. Neither made any attempt to move their gazes from

him. "Kristen, if you're wondering, I sometimes do odd jobs for Natalie to pay for a beer or two—unloading shipments, scrubbing the toilets, things."

"Yes, things for me," said Natalie. She stared through Kristen.

A confused look appeared on Nate's silent face, but Kristen already understood the writing on this little sordid wall. She turned to Natalie and smiled.

"Don't worry about me, Natalie. I'm engaged." Kristen remembered a second too late to cover her left hand with her right when she saw the bartender look down.

"My David," she Kristen, lying as well as she could. "He bought me a ring that was too small. It's at the jewelers, Guzzetta Fine Jewelry. Hmmm? No, I see. It really is beautiful. No solitaire monstrosity, instead, a princess' cut diamond swimming on a bed of dark blue sapphires. He has such good taste—4.57 carets all told." Kristen smiled her most sickeningly sweet smile. "A rum and coke for me, please." The bartender gave her one last scathing look and walked back behind the bar.

"I do odd jobs," mumbled Nate barely loud enough to be heard. "That's all. I..."

"Don't worry about it, Nate. I need to freshen up. Can you pick up my drink for me?"



"Sure." Kristen walked over to the bathroom and slid inside. Small towns with their small town problems, she thought looking at herself in the mirror. She had to hand it to Natalie though, she had a well-trained slave in Nate and he kept at least this bathroom nice and clean. A bit of combing, touching up her lipstick and readjusting her clothes gave her time to relax. She headed back to the booth.

Nate sat there with a full glass on her side and a half finished beer on his own. As she approached the table, he made as if to stand up to greet her, but stopped and slouched back down.

Kristen slid into place and took a sip of her drink. It was very strong, and she raised it in salute to the bartender who looked away when she saw the gesture. She drained half of the glass and put the drink back on the table. She winked at Nate.

"I saw the PDA screen on," she said, breaking the silence that had settled over the table. "Did you leave the P'Ceph on that long or try to get a prediction of your own?" She knew she'd hit pay-dirt immediately. Nate looked as guilty as could be. He finished his beer, slowly—letting the last few drops collect and fall into his open mouth.

"I tried to get it to work right after you left," he said.

She knew it. This guy couldn't keep a secret to save his life.

"Nothing happened except for a blank page coming out of the top."

"Just like I said."

"Yeah, I know. I just couldn't resist."

Kristen smiled kindly and worked on her drink.

"But, it worked after I entered my questions to your database. I was a little worried while it worked out my prediction because it hummed for such a long time. But it printed out a full page and shut itself off without any problems. I have the print out."

"What? What did you do?"

"I entered my questions on to the P'Ceph and it works now. Isn't that great?"

Kristen stared at him.

"But the password? How did you know the password?"

"It took me a little while, but after trying two or three dozen wrong words I finally came across the right one. It wasn't that hard to figure out. I just thought back to what you'd said about the P'Ceph and what it meant to you and did a little brainstorming."

She would have yanked the table out of the way to get at Nate, but the thing was attached to the wall.

"Don't get mad," said Nate pushing himself back against the wall as she got up and came around the table. "It works, see. Here's a print out."

Kristen wrenched the paper out of his hand. She caught the words "danger," "love," and "hero." She shoved the paper into her purse. Then both hands reached for Nate.

"You are never touching the P'Ceph again. You hear me."

He flinched and put his arms up in front of his face.

"But it works, nothing's wrong anymore. I fixed it, not ruined it."

But Kristen had already turned and stormed straight towards the door. She flung open the door and walked into the night. The last thing she heard was the bartender yell, "Drinks are on me, sweetheart."

## Chapter 7

This day needed another beer, so Nate picked up the empty bottle off the table and walked over to the bar. He tossed a glance towards the door, knowing that Kristen wouldn't be coming back to apologize or anything else. Not knowing what to expect at the bar, but in no mood for more outbursts, Nate dug a five-dollar bill out of his wallet and plunked it down on the bar. Natalie approached him and gave the money an unreadable look.

"Another beer," Nate said and though he didn't want to, he added, "Please." Natalie left the bill on the bar, pulled a Corona from the cooler and set it in front of Nate. The bar had a simple rule, open your own beer. So Nate took out his key chain and the plastic bottle opener that was attached to it, a gift from one of Natalie's distributors, and opened the beer. After a wedge of lime floated at the base of the beer bottle's neck, Nate took a sip.

"Nice friend you've got there, Nate." Not one for sarcasm himself, he still picked up on Natalie's tone. Another pull off the beer gave him a second to think of how to respond.

"How much for the beer?" he asked, pushing the five-dollar bill towards Natalie.

"Four fifty," she replied. Nate started at the inflated price, but didn't want to argue. All he wanted to do was leave.

"Keep the tip."

He chose not to wait for another comment and headed for the door. By the time he stepped out of Guppies Bar, the bottle was empty, and he rested it next to the door. The urge to throw the bottle against the door called to him, but he resisted. There were far more important things to think about tonight. In less than twenty-four hours, the P'Ceph might be gone from his life, and with it any chance to help Mountain Ski and Sports.

Ways to change Kristen's mind floated around his head all the way back to his cottage. Telling her that the device finally worked had no effect, so what could he say? What could he offer her, right now, that no one else she knew could? He had to think of something that she would see as valuable, invaluable actually. The P'Ceph wasn't going help the store become a worldwide franchise or make him rich, but he deserved something for making the thing work. Kristen could have the thing back—after he got something out of it.

Whatever he decided to try had to call to Kristen's nature as well as make her feel the P'Ceph would be safe

again. The solution to the first puzzled him all the way back to his house, but the second problem disappeared as Nate slid his house key into the lock on the front door. If her programs were protected from access through a new password, one not so obvious as the last one, she might feel safe letting him watch over it for a couple more days.

Nate opened the door to his cottage and flicked on a light. The small living room stretched out on both sides of the door, space for a couch, coffee table and TV on one side and a card table surrounded by folding chairs on the other near the entrance to the kitchen. The card table and chairs were new, but everything else had an air of being in its second or third house. No clothes, plates or mail littered the floor. The only somewhat, disorganized aspect of the room was the knee-high stacks of books piled next to the TV, against the wall. Most of the bindings were cracked and dull with age, but there were a few glossy book jackets.

Nate ignored the books he had collected from used book sales, estate sales and library sales. He shut the door and picked up the three pieces of junk mail resting in the basket underneath the mail slot next to the door. He glanced at a flyer from the sporting good store that was putting Mountain Ski and Sports out of business, and walked

all three pieces to his recycling box. He snagged the last beer from his fridge and opened it as he relaxed on the futon.

The new password might work, but how could he convince Kristen to let him watch over the P'Ceph a couple more days? The store was no more or less safe than her motel room and all he could offer was a promise not to dig around in the programs again. He hoped that her desire to run errands and move around Arnolds without lugging the P'Ceph around was all that kept him from despair.

What could he offer that she'd want and couldn't get on her own? The question kept Nate busy throughout the remainder of his beer and followed him through a trip to the bathroom and into bed.

Staring at his dad's old dresser at the foot of his bed, unable to sleep with the problem of the P'Ceph, Nate's focus shifted to his softball gear leaning up against the old dresser, reminding him of the game tomorrow night. He groaned and pulled the covers over his head. Helping his team win a game was so much easier than figuring out how to win Kristen's trust again. If only some of his teammates could help him convince Kristen?

That was it: the one thing that he had that Kristen didn't and would value. Kristen was a scientist, and

scientists always wanted to test their things on as many people as possible as many times as possible. If Nate could convince his teammates to act as subjects for the P'Ceph, he might just get Kristen to let him around the P'Ceph again. Nate immediately eliminated half of his fellow players, either because they had to go to work to early or he knew they couldn't help because of their kids. That left half the team to call and organize before he could go to bed.

If it worked, Nate would have the evidence he needed to prove to Kristen that he could still be useful to her. As an added benefit, the P'Ceph might predict how to win tomorrow's game. Man, he wished he'd gotten a chance to look at his own printout before Kristen grabbed it. If he knew how silly or serious the P'Ceph's predictions were, he could pitch the idea to his teammates appropriately.

A quick glance at his alarm clock told him he would have to hurry to catch his teammates before they went to bed. Most of them stayed awake for the eleven o'clock news. That gave him almost forty-five minutes. A search for the roster information gave Nate enough time to prepare what he would say to them. Maybe coffee and donuts would help, but he knew the close-knit group would stop by if he asked and really needed the help. The money for tomorrow's



treats would have to come out of his savings, but he hoped the old saying, "You have to spend money to make money," would apply to him. It also meant an early morning for him, but Nate didn't mind at all. If things worked out half as well as he hoped, the P'Ceph would still be his for a couple of days and the team would know what to do tomorrow to win.

#

The dozen donuts and ten paper cups of coffee had been passed out to his teammates and it was time to see if Kristen was awake. They had all agreed to stay quiet when Nate tried to convince Kristen to give him another chance. They stood behind him, to the left and to the right blocking the way away from Kristen's door. Nate took a deep breath, thanked God that he had such a good bunch of friends and knocked loudly. His watch read 7:30.

"Just a minute," came Kristen's muffled voice. A second later, the curtains next to the door parted and closed. Nate waited patiently. Nothing else happened.

"I don't think she's happy to see you."

"Quiet, Shawn."

Nate inwardly thanked Jennifer for saying something to Shawn, but he was right. There was no doubt about that. Nate knocked on the door again.

"Kristen. I'm not going anywhere. You might as well open the door and talk to me."

Silence.

"I don't blame you for being mad, but I just want to talk to you. Why not do it face to face?"

"Is that why you came alone?" The words came clearly through the door. Someone snickered behind Nate.

"They're what I want to talk to you about. Come on and open the door."

A minute stretched by and then another. The shuffling footsteps behind Nate, reminded him that his friends all had jobs and places to be this morning. He needed to get Kristen to open the door and talk to him before he started losing his teammates.

"Please, Kristen," he said. "It will only take a moment and if you don't like my idea, you'll never see me again."

The door opened, revealing a scowling Kristen.

"Make it quick."

"All right. First, I'll bet you already changed the password on the P'Ceph to something only you know about, so there is no danger of me accessing the programs again, right?"

Kristen nodded, her gaze stony.

"OK. Second, being a scientist, you will want to test the P'Ceph on a lot of people before you reveal it to the public. You'll want to get every type of person you can to see how the P'Ceph will respond to their brain waves, yes?"

"What's your point? I'm getting cold."

"Ouch," said Shawn. Nate agreed. It wasn't that cold out.

"I'll take that as a yes. Third, you need money to help pay for your car repairs, since radiators don't grow on trees."

Kristen waited.

"You can trust me again because I won't try to do anything with the P'Ceph's programs. I've brought a group of my friends, as different a group of individuals as you can find here in Arnolds, to be subjects of the P'Ceph. Each is willing to pay money for their predictions, if there is any truth to them."

"How much?"

Nate swung around to look at his teammates, but the looks and shrugs he saw didn't help. He turned back to Kristen and gambled.

"Ten dollars a piece."

"Make it twenty."

"I don't know, Nate," said Rick. Nate swung around to meet his gaze and shook his head once to get him to be quiet. Turning back to Kristen, Nate caught each of his teammates eyes hoping they would stay quiet.

"Done. We can move the P'Ceph over to Mountain Ski and Sports without wasting..."

"No," said Kristen, stepping out of the motel room for the first time. "It happens here, while I watch over the P'Ceph. If anything looks or sounds like it is going wrong, I'll shut it down."

"Only one person in here at a time, paying up front to use my P'Ceph. And Nate, don't come a step closer or the whole thing is off."

Nate nodded and motioned Becky on his left to step over to the door. She handed Kristen a twenty and walked over to the room's little table where the P'Ceph rested. Kristen watched Becky sit down, grabbed the door and stared Nate straight in the face. She held her glare for a moment and then let go of the door to step over to Becky. Nate barely heard her voice begin instructing Becky on how to use the P'Ceph's PDA.

Nate turned to his teammates with a relieved look on his face until Shawn moved up to him.

"I'm not paying twenty bucks for some dumb fortune telling. I can get a tarot reading at the county fair cheaper than that."

A few other teammates murmured agreement.

"I, I will owe you the money if you don't think the prediction is worth it," said Nate, his stomach screwing itself in knots. He could afford the two hundred dollars if everyone hated their predictions, but it would set him back two months in saving for his dream home.

"Well, no problem then," said Shawn, taking a sip of his coffee. "I'm next."

Nate bit back a response and turned to look through the motel's door. He saw nothing but the two women's backs. Nate started to pace. A few strides later, Jennifer stepped in front of him to block his route forcing him to stop.

"Does that really help?" asked the only member of the team younger than Nate. Her bright red hair stuck close to her head, looking to have been clipped just recently.

"No, not really. But I don't have anything else to do."

"Tell me what's really going on. Why are you going to some much effort? I heard Rick say that you promised to

mow his yard for the next month if he came out this morning. Is that true?"

"Yeah."

"Not that I'd ask for a favor to be here, but why did you agree to that?"

"If Rick came, he'd bring Mike and Denise. I desperately needed them here."

"Why?"

"It's complicated."

"Use simple words."

Nate smiled and sighed.

"Mountain Ski and Sports isn't doing so well. Bob had to fire Ruby yesterday because we've done so little business in the last few weeks...months. He won't make any changes to the store, especially the ones I suggest, so I thought the P'Ceph might help raise some money or something."

"You don't think that woman will share any of the money, do you? The Psychic Network charges less than that and offer a lot more reassurance than she did."

"If not money, maybe it can help bring people into the store again. The Sportzone is killing us."

Becky's enthusiastic laughter pulled Nate's attention back to the motel's door, but he couldn't see anything from

his angle. He moved quickly towards the door until he could see Becky and Kristen standing face-to-face next to the P'Ceph. The mirrored smiles plastered across their faces brought hope to Nate's flagging spirits.

Becky appeared to look over the prediction one more time before handing it to Kristen. His teammate turned away from the P'Ceph and walked out the door. Nate pounced on her the moment both her feet passed over the threshold.

"What did it say? What did it say?"

His teammates crowded around, listening intently.

Becky laughed again.

"Nothing too surprising," she said causing Nate to groan. "But it was right on the money. I'll tell you guys this, it was a little eerie how well that prediction fits my life."

A spark of hope flared in Nate, until Shawn shouldered past and confidently strode through the door.

"Hook me up, baby. I'm ready to rock and roll."

Another groan slipped through Nate's lips as he began to pace again. His teammates huddled around Becky asking her details about the P'Ceph he knew oh so well. More than a few disappointed "Ahs" floated over to him as Becky described her prediction. If Shawn came out with the same nonchalant attitude, his whole plan would crumble.

Time ticked by slowly for Nate, waiting for Shawn to emerge from the room. Becky left to go to work and his teammates were getting restless. It all rested on Shawn. Nate shuddered. Shawn's voice reached Nate's ears and caused his teammates to fall silent a minute, that felt like a year, later.

"Wow.

Everyone inched toward the room, waiting for his next comment. Nate couldn't bear to watch and stayed toward the back of the crowd. The only sound came from shoes shuffling across the motel's carpet. When Shawn appeared in the doorway, the expression across his face clearly revealed concern. Nate held his breath as he watched Shawn walk into the circle his teammates had formed. Shawn turned to Nate.

"I'll say this, it wasn't what I wanted to hear, but it is what I needed to hear." No one said a thing; they just kept looking at Shawn. Nate prayed the next words out of his mouth would be a little more inspiring to the rest of the team. "That prediction is worth ten times the twenty bucks I gave that woman."

Nate breathed a sigh of relief. The rest should go easier now.



"Like Becky, that thing nailed me good. I'm not proud of what it printed out, but I'm definitely going to take its advice. I should have realized this a long time ago.

Shawn shook his head slowly and moved forward into the crowd. His teammates stepped aside, leaving room for him walk away. Without another word, he picked his way to his Camaro, slid in and pulled away down the road. By the time he was out of sight and Nate had turned back to the motel room, Janey sat next to the P'Ceph while Kristen leaned against the doorjamb.

"Well?" Nate asked, moving near enough to talk to her politely.

"Well what?"

"Do I get another chance?"

"I want to say no, but..." She looked down into the pieces of paper and brought her gaze up beaming. "It's working. It's finally working."

"I promise I'll do whatever you want done with the P'Ceph," said Nate stepping closer. "Tell me where to go, when to do it and I'll keep you up to your neck in eager volunteers. There is one thing though."

Kristen's expression turned stony again, but she nodded.

"I'm not sure you can keep demanding that people pay twenty dollars to use the P'Ceph. At least, ask for the money after they see the prediction."

Kristen smiled.

"Consider it done."

The stood comfortably side-by-side until the sound of another prediction printing out came through the door. Kristen ducked back inside and a moment later Janey emerged.

"It's not what I expected," she said. "It'll definitely give me something to think about."

"Like what?" asked Ruth. Her hands rested easily on her impressive hips and the smile on her face reminding Nate of kid witnessing their first carnival.

"I should spend more time on my painting."

"You paint?" said Ruth.

"For years, now. Only I do it every now and then. It said I need to spend more time painting and I'll have all the success that I ever dreamed of."

An impressed intake of breath sounded from the remaining teammates. They stood around staring at Janey until Kristen reached out of the door and pulled Rick into the motel room.

"Bet that hasn't happened before," joked Ruth breaking the spell.

One by one, the rest of the group walked into Kristen's room and emerged with a laugh, a nod or silently deep in thought. The one consistent thing was their desire to get copies of their predictions and their wish that only Kristen and them ever see the results.

It was quarter til ten by the time the last person left. Ten people had come, sat, received their futures in a neatly printed out page and left. Not everyone had thought the prediction worth twenty bucks, but many did and only Stuart thought it deserved less than ten dollars. All told, Nate figured he was down less than a hundred dollars if everyone who had complained about the price asked for a reimbursement. Things had gone as well as he could have hoped for.

Kristen motioned him into the room and Nate meekly entered.

"What now?" he asked.

"First, we get the P'Ceph into the truck and get it over to the store. Then, I need to get some breakfast."

"Can I ask you something?"

Kristen seemed to think the question over, then nodded.

"What made you change your mind? My promise, the subjects or the money?"

"None of them."

"Huh?"

"Let's just say that your teammates, all of them, have more nice things to say about you than one person should deserve. If half the stories are true, the P'Ceph will be fine under your care."

## Chapter 8

Kristen returned to the motel after dropping Nate and the P'Ceph off at Mountain Ski and Sports. A mixture of excitement, exhaustion and annoyance raged within her and drove her back to the motel to get away from Nate. She had forced him to promise repeatedly to not to touch the P'Ceph again unless she was present. Even with the numerous promises, Kristen stripped the power cord from the P'Ceph and considered removing the PDA until the stricken expression on Nate's face convinced her that she could leave for now. A squeal of tires from his truck propelled her back on Highway 4, headed towards the motel in the close distance. Now back in her room, she sat down on the edge of the bed and stared at one of the walls.

All through the night Kristen had tossed and turned, unable to put aside her fear that Nate had done something horrible to the P'Ceph. The stack of papers on the little table seemed to prove that her baby was all right, but in her confused state she continued to worry about the system. Without the P'Ceph's unique power cord, her baby would sit dormant until she went back to the store. Fiddling with a database after getting lucky with a password was a far cry from ripping open the plastic casing to rig up a new power

supply. Kristen doubted Nate had the ability or desire to try.

She itched to get back to the P'Ceph and run a full diagnostic on its systems, though she felt on the verge of falling asleep sitting on the bed. It irked her that she hadn't been able to pick and choose what was best for the P'Ceph before Nate ran a bunch of subjects through her motel room, but the money followed by the overwhelming praise of Nate given by his teammates had blunted her desire to rip the machine from him. The numerous stories about Nate being trustworthy, dependable and honest wore down her anger better than any essential bribe could. His teammates had made him look like Mother Teresa's long lost child.

Eventually, Kristen stood up, shot a kick at the blankets lying at the foot of the bed and stretched. A couple deep breaths and the stretching helped calm her nerves. The sight of the predictions reminded her that the P'Ceph worked and had surprised and delighted most of Nate's teammates. It was a significant consolation to her worries about the P'Ceph's programming. With any luck, the programs would be fine. Her excitement grew as she realized how close she was to having the P'Ceph finished.

She knew what she really needed after a morning like this one. A quick shimmy caused her pants and panties to fall to the floor as she headed towards a nice long, hot shower. Her shirt and bra followed them in a stretched out line of clothes pointing directly to the bathroom. Few things were better for tight muscles and an over-worked mind than a shower. Best of all, she had no roommates complain that she had used all the hot water because she planned to do just that. She stepped into the shower and pulled the curtain shut.

When she emerged from the long soaking, she felt immensely better. She now felt a little guilty about charging Nate's teammates so much money to help her collect data for the P'Ceph. Nate hadn't endangered any of the important executive files that could only be accessed by taking the casing off the P'Ceph and hooking up directly to the motherboard inside. The core of the P'Ceph remained unchanged, only a little graffiti had been added to mar its surface.

"Time for breakfast," she mumbled digging through her suitcase. She chose a pair of blue jeans and a red top with matching underwear, before searching for her sandals. She slipped them on just when a loud knock came from the front door. "Not again."

Kristen looked at herself in the mirror and shrugged. Nate could wait a few seconds this time. A little make-up cleaned up some of the blotchiness on her cheeks, and she finished with a quick swipe of lipstick. Kristen knew that her hair would rebel upon drying and go in every direction if she didn't do something immediately. A second later, Kristen was across the room digging in her purse for a scrunchie to restrain her hair while it dried. She pulled her hair tightly against her head, wrapping the scrunchie three or four times around the small pony-tail she had created. With her hair immobilized, she glanced in the mirror and made a slight adjustment to her bra.

Kristen grabbed her purse and headed for the door, trying to fix a stern look on her face. She found it difficult when already she was feeling more relaxed and less concerned with the minor damage, if you could even call it that, Nate had done to the P'Ceph. She stepped up to the door and, without looking through the peephole, swung the door open. She'd been so set on greeting Nate that, for a moment, she was unable to recognize the man that stood before her.

"Good morning," said Jeremy. "It's nice to see you too."



"Hi," replied Kristen with a sheepish smile across her face. She accepted the hug that he wrapped around her body and filled her lungs with the sharp smell of his cologne. The scent stayed with her, even after he pulled back to take another look at her. She was suddenly glad that she had spent the time to make herself presentable.

"A beautiful sight on a beautiful morning."

"I bet you say that to all the girls you pick up at motel rooms," said Kristen regaining some of her mental balance.

"Breakfast?"

"I'd love to."

Jeremy offered her a hand and she immediately took it, letting him pull her gently out across the threshold into the cool, mid-morning air. The refreshing chill helped clear her mind. A glance into her purse to make sure her room key – an actual key instead of some imitation charge card – was still there, and she reached behind her to close the door.

"I didn't expect to see you this morning," said Kristen. "I thought you were busy with a big project all day."

"Been working since 6 on the building and now it's time for lunch."

He tried to lead her to his Jeep, but Kristen stopped next to Nate's Ranger.

"I'll follow you."

"You haven't turned into a car thief have you?" asked Jeremy eyeing the truck suspiciously.

Kristen laughed.

"Oh, nothing like that. I borrowed it from a friend."

"Really? Who's your friend?"

"Just some kid who gave me a ride into town the night my car broke down. He's sweet. Reminds me of my little brother, Mark. You're not jealous are you?" Kristen moved up against Jeremy and planted a kiss on his cheek.

"No." He pulled Kristen against him, causing a shiver to run up her spine. She pressed her body against his.

"Good," she said stepping away reluctantly. "Because I'm really hungry."

"I know the perfect place." Jeremy walked slowly over to his car as Kristen watched his retreating backside. A quick shake of her head to clear her thoughts again and she jumped happily into the truck.

Jeremy's Jeep shot into the morning traffic, leaving only a tight space for Kristen to slide Nate's truck into if she wanted to keep up. A horn blared behind her and Kristen tried to wave apologetically as she sped up to keep

close to Jeremy who already was 10 MPH over the speed limit.

"That was fun," said Kristen. She looked in the rearview mirror to see the driver behind her yelling and gesturing rudely through his windshield. The man kept up the barrage with Kristen keeping a close eye on him. As fast as she sped through town to keep up with Jeremy, the man kept up. She was relieved when Jeremy signaled a right turn and slowed down.

She followed him into the shopping center with the irate driver, now honking his horn. She looked over in time to see him roll down his window, shout his opinion of her driving and flip her off before shooting down the road. Kristen sighed, glad the man hadn't followed her into the shopping center. People seemed to be the same up here in the mountains as down in the valley. She spotted Jeremy pulling up in front of a Café called Pinenuts that was squished between The Big Trees Market and a Blockbuster Video.

She parked next to Jeremy and got out of the truck. Jeremy already had entered Pinenuts, leaving Kristen to get the door for herself. She shrugged. It was hard to believe he could be jealous of Nate. She'd learn soon

enough what other annoying traits, penis peculiarities her mom called them, Jeremy had besides acting jealous.

"Rock star parking," said Kristen checking to see if the truck's doors were locked. She opened the restaurant's door and caught up with Jeremy already sitting at a table.

"Thank you for getting the door for me. It was very gentlemanly."

"I figured an independent, modern woman like yourself didn't need me hovering at the door."

"If this is about Nate, he's just a friend. He works during the morning, and since Arnolds doesn't have any car rental places, he offered to let me borrow his truck. That's it.

"Without it, I wouldn't have met you yesterday at the Blue Moon Café."

"All right," he said leaning over the table to give her a peck. He picked up one of the menus on the table and Kristen took a look around.

Pinenuts was virtually empty. Only the cashier who doubled as a server, a man bent over in concentration exhibiting his hair net to the world as he swept the deli counter clean with a rag and a pair of retirees enjoying a mid-morning latte occupied the café. Through an open door in the back of the restaurant, Kristen could see a pile of

green plastic tables yet to be put in front of the café for the lunch rush. She brought her attention back to their table.

It had a glass top on what appeared to be a wrought iron pedestal that sprouted legs. Besides forks, spoons, and napkins, each table sported a glass bowl with a large pinecone pointing straight up towards the ceiling. Kristen glanced up and saw other cones hung from the ceiling below stretches of pine and fir branches that had been imbedded in the ceiling to give customers the impression of standing or sitting beneath a rich canopy. Kristen barely made out the actual ceiling tiles painted green to blend in with the branches. Surprisingly, only a slight scent of pine permeated the room. Aromas from the kitchen and deli counter mixed pleasantly with the old tree branches, making Kristen think more of picnics than of lunches indoors.

"Neat place," she said. He nodded; looked up from the menu.

"I've always like this place. It reminds me of some job sites I've worked. It isn't claustrophobic like so many little restaurants tend to be."

Kristen nodded and looked down at her own menu. The café offered some interesting breakfast burritos and she had a hard time deciding which one to order.

"Can I take your order," asked the hostess/server.

"Ladies first," said Jeremy smiling.

"I'll have large mocha and the Pinenut's specialty breakfast burrito."

The server nodded and turned to Jeremy.

"Coke. Roast beef on wheat with potato salad."

"I'll have your drinks out in just a minute." The server walked back to the deli counter.

Jeremy reached over to a neighboring table where a newspaper sat on a chair. He grabbed it, opened it to the business section and offered Kristen the remaining sections.

She grabbed the community section, curious to see what kinds of events and people excited Arnolds and found their way in to the local newspaper. They read in companionable silence.

Kristen smiled behind her paper to see a full color shot of a coed softball team gracing the second page of the Community Section. The team, The Happy Campers, was the favorite in the upcoming league's playoffs. They looked like a motley bunch, from short to tall and thin to fat, but their undefeated record spoke louder than their picture. Whether huddled against the Sierra Mountains or in the valley, some things never changed—softball ruled the

adult recreation leagues. Kristen skimmed over a few more articles about upcoming crafts fairs and music festivals until the waitress returned with their drinks.

Jeremy switched to reading the front section of the newspaper, but Kristen had tired of reading and focused on her coffee. She sipped the drink, delighting in the mixture of chocolate and regular coffee. As the steam took on new shapes and patterns with every exhaled breath, she let her mind wander to Nate and her car. Hardly any steam rose by the time she reached out to take another sip, when Jeremy slammed his paper down and pointed animatedly at a series of pictures across the top of the page.

"What complete amateurs!" he said, repeatedly stabbing at the picture with his index finger. Kristen struggled to make sense of the upside-down picture until she realized that it was blurry and mostly obscured by fire and smoke caught in a black and white photo limbo.

"You mean the firemen. Did the building burn to the ground or did the fire spread to other houses?" she asked tilting her head to read the title of the story upside down. "Thriving Business Torched by Foothills Arsonist?"

"No. Not the firemen. The arsonist."

"What?"

"The arsonist, you know the person who torched the place," said Jeremy. Though he squared his shoulders and crossed his arms, his voice stayed as level and smooth as the first words he'd said to Kristen yesterday. "A complete and utter amateur. The firemen on the scene already know where the fire started and how it started. Obviously arson, and by someone who had less brains than a squirrel."

"So? What's to get upset about?" Though Kristen couldn't tell if Jeremy really was upset. "It'll just mean the cops will catch the crook more easily, right?"

"Who cares if he's caught? That's not my point." Jeremy leaned across the table and reached for her arm. Surprised, Kristen leaned away from him and pulled her hands away from her coffee mug to the safety of her lap.

"My point," continued Jeremy, "is how poorly planned the arson was. Any monkey can break windows and throw open cans of gasoline into a store to ignite with a thrown flare. I just can't believe how obvious they were. It would be so easy to burn a building to the ground and not get caught. I could do it in a heartbeat. It would only take a little planning and some discretion. I can't believe how dumb some people are."



"Warn me before you go after my motel for not giving me enough clean towels," said Kristen. "I want a chance to save my luggage." The waitress placed an enormous burrito in front of her and she thankfully dug in.

"But of course."

The breakfast burrito contained eggs, onions, pinenuts sautéed with garlic and jack cheese. It was the best breakfast she had had in months and it disappeared quickly. She leaned back against her bench with her mocha in hand and stared at Jeremy, though he pointedly ignored her as he finished off the potato salad. Neither one had talked much during the meal. Kristen almost wondered whether her comment had offended Jeremy, but brushed off the insecurity. How could a thirty-two year old man be that offended by a little sarcasm?

She forgot her worries as he paid the waitress, tipped her handsomely, and escorted Kristen out of Pinenuts on his arm.

"I've got to check on my car," said Kristen stopping in front of Jeremy's Jeep. "With any luck, they'll finish it today."

"Good luck. If they finish, what are your plans?"

"I'll head up to Lake Alpine."

"No goodbye?"

"Don't worry, schnookums. I'll give you a call. I've got you cell phone, pager and home phone after all."

"You better." Jeremy stepped close to Kristen and kissed her full on the lips.

Kristen returned the kiss eagerly, regretting when Jeremy pulled away and hopped into his Jeep. She watched him drive away until he merged back into traffic, disappearing down the road. A short drive to Phil's Garage and she stood looking at her car propped eight feet off the ground. Kristen strode into the garage, looking for Phil.

She found him at the back of the garage, talking animatedly to someone on the phone. He waved and motioned her over to a clean chair a few feet away where the counter ended.

"I don't care who you are or what you do for a living, I charge what I charge. If you don't like it, go somewhere else." He slammed the phone down and turned to Kristen. The look he gave Kristen told her all that she needed to know—she was going nowhere today. She slumped.

"Sorry, Miss," said Phil. "Radiator's cracked and I can't find a replacement in town. I ordered one from Stockton this morning, but it won't be here until tomorrow morning at the earliest. There's nothing I can do until then."

With that hanging between them, Phil walked a few feet down the counter and pushed a button. Kristen watched her car descend dejectedly.

"There's nothing you can do?"

"Sorry. You need a new radiator. The crack in your old one is too large to patch and the inside is so corroded that you would have had to replace it within a month or two anyway."

"How much is it going to cost?"

"The radiator will cost about \$200 and the labor will run another \$100. All your hoses are in great shape, so I won't need to replace any of them."

Kristen nodded.

"I'll call you as soon as the part gets in. Are you still staying at the Travelodge?"

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry I can't do anything sooner. Are you sure you don't want to borrow my loner vehicle?"

Kristen shook her head.

"Well, I've got to get back to work." Phil turned to the other car in the service bay, a brand new Lexus, and walked away.

Kristen stepped outside into the late morning air and sighed.

## Chapter 9

Nate stood at the door of Mountain Ski and Sports, scanning the highway and sidewalks for any sign of Kristen. After this morning, he had expected to see her back at the store with only enough time to grab a bite to eat in between. It had been nearly three hours. He was starting to get worried. It would soon be time for lunch, though Nate could hardly think about food with Kristen to worry over. He walked back into the store, stopping himself at the register before he turned and began pacing.

A car pulled up outside of the shop, causing him to stop pacing and get ready to help a customer. Helping someone pick the right pair of hiking boots or skis was the last thing on his mind this morning, but he shook off any worries and waited. Determined to do his job, Nate forced a smile across his mouth. When he saw a uniformed sheriff's deputy walk in ahead of another man in a sports coat, the welcoming smile melted to a quizzical frown. Was this about yesterday's vandalism?

"Nathaniel Fisher?" asked the man in the sports coat as the deputy walked around behind him. Nate turned to see what the uniformed cop was doing, only to find him taking a peek into the storage room and head over to try Bob's office door which was unlocked.

"Yes, that's me. Can I help you?"

The deputy stuck his head into Bob's office, seemed satisfied and walked back over to the man in the sports coat and shook his head. The man in the sports coat nodded and hiked a thumb towards the door. The deputy obediently walked over and stood against the doorframe, watching Nate.

"Yes. You could start by explaining where you were last night between midnight and one AM."

"I was at home. Why?"

"Alone?"

"Yes. You still haven't answered my question."

"In good time, I promise you. I'm Inspector Baker with the County Sheriff's Department and I have some questions for you. I'll explain everything when I'm done."

Nate nodded.

"Tell me about the damage to the sports store last night," said the Inspector. He had a pen poised over a notepad. Relaxing for the first time since the officers entered the store, Nate took a deep breath.

"It all started yesterday about four o'clock. I was just finishing up some restocking when I heard something hit the front windows of the store. I came rushing out to find someone had thrown five or six eggs against the windows." Nate stopped to see if the Inspector was getting

it all and found the man scribbling away. Nate continued. "I saw their truck drive away, a small or mid-sized truck at best, but didn't recognize any of them. So, I cleaned up the mess. But that wasn't the end of it.

"Just before we closed last night, the same bunch of people threw a rock meant to shatter the glass in our door, but took out a clock instead. The door was open, you see, and the rock flew right in and hit the clock. They were gone before I even reached the door this time. I don't know who's responsible, but I'm worried that it'll only get worse."

"Yes, I see."

Nate walked over to the wastebasket next to the register and lifted the trash can so the Inspector could see the broken clock and rock at the bottom of the basket. Baker took a quick look at the clock, nodded and wrote in his notebook. Nate set the trash can down and waited to see what the policemen might want to know.

"So," said Inspector Baker. "Angry at the petty vandalism, you went to Guppies and got liquored up. In a drunken haze around midnight, you decided the vandalism was the work of the employees of your biggest competitor, so you headed down the hill and set fire to the San Andreas Sportzone."

"What?"

"Where were you last night after you left the bar?"

The Inspector stepped closer to Nate with each word, causing Nate to scurry backwards until he was pressed up against the counter. "Who were you with and where did you go?"

"How do you know I went to Guppies?"

"You're not the first person we've talked to today. Answer the question. Where did you go?"

"I went home after Guppies and didn't leave until around six this morning. I called a bunch of my softball teammates last night from home. You can check."

"We will. When did you finish the last phone call?"

"I don't know. Midnight or a little bit after."

"You still had plenty of time to make it to San Andreas, throw the canisters of gas through the windows along with a lit flare and hurry back home."

"But I didn't," Nate squirmed under the hard gaze of the Inspector, but didn't turn away from him. "I didn't leave until this morning around six. I went to bed."

"There were people there that recognized you."

"Where? Guppies?"

"Yes."

"Yes, someone knew me there, probably more than one person. The bartender and owner, Natalie, can vouch for me and tell you who else was around who would have known me. Got that?" Nate wanted to proclaim his innocence but was sure the policeman wouldn't listen.

The last comment pulled the Inspector's face from his notebook, allowing Nate to lock stares with him before the policeman returned to scribbling down notes.

"What has been your schedule since leaving Guppies?"

"I told you. I called some friends, went to sleep and left my house around six. I hit Big Trees Market for coffee and donuts and was at the Travelodge by seven. I met all the people I called last night there." Nate dug in his pocket, pulled out the receipt for the food and thrust it at the officer. "Afterwards, I came directly to the store and have been here ever since. I can't believe you think I would do something like burn down a store. Ask my friends about me, they'll tell you. God!"

"No reason to get angry, son," said the deputy at the door. Nate glared at him.

"No reason? You come in here accusing me of arson and say I have no reason to be angry? Screw you!" Nate turned his back on both of the men and stalked back over to the



register. He sat on his stool, daring either one of the two cops to say or ask him anything more.

"I don't suppose you'd mind us checking your residence?" asked the Inspector.

"I don't suppose you have a search warrant."

"This will go a lot easier if you cooperate."

"This will go a lot more legally if you abide by the law you're supposed to be protecting." This last comment broke through the Inspector's calm mask. He took one menacing step forward, but restrained himself from taking another. The two men stared at each other, neither one backing off until the Inspector turned without a word and walked towards the front door.

"Best not go anywhere," suggested the uniformed deputy still at the door, after the Inspector passed him and headed for the car. "We'll be watching, so don't get any ideas."

"Where the hell am I going to go? What do you think I'm going to do—fly to Brazil and live like some king? What are you thinking?"

"Just remember, we'll be watching." The deputy slid out the door with one eye focused continually on Nate and headed for the car.

Nate walked to the door and watched them drive off, still wondering what was going on. How could they think he burned down the Sportzone? One thing was for sure, Nate needed to find out what had happened down in San Andreas, and the easiest way was to run down to the corner and buy a paper. He dug through his wallet, but he only had one quarter. At the register, a couple taps on the computer screen and the cash drawer popped open, allowing him to put a dollar in and grab four quarters. He pushed the drawer closed.

At the door, Nate looked right and left, saw no potential customers or robbers, and took off for the newspaper box. The quarters rattled down into the vending box, and Nate waited a second to make sure they had triggered the lock to open. He used the moment to check back on the store—nobody around. He pulled open the door, to reveal a short stack of papers and grabbed the one on top.

Back in the store, he made some room on the counter to open the paper up. The information he wanted was smack dab on the front-page and continued on to A 3. Nate pulled up the stool and sat down. In the picture, two firemen pointed a stream of water up on to the roof of the burning building, but it was obvious to him they were only trying

to keep the fire from spreading. Already, the fire appeared to have covered every wall of the store. It was a complete loss.

Nate turned to the article and began to read:

"Thriving Business Torched by Foothills Arsonist."

At eleven thirty last night, fire fighters from Murphys and San Andreas responded to an out of control fire at the Broad Oak Shopping Center in San Andreas. The fire had already engulfed the San Andreas Sportzone Sporting Goods Store and threatened to spread to surrounding buildings and near by dry brush. Captain Greg Jacobs reported, "After we contained the blaze, three steel fuel canisters were found among the wreckage." In his opinion, the fire had to be arson. Local law enforcement declined to make a statement about any investigation into the fire.

The remainder of the article contained interviews with witnesses and firemen. Nothing in the article hinted at why the sheriff's department would come knocking on Mountain Ski and Sports' door. Nate flipped through to the editorial page and stopped. Right at the top was the day's piece from the editor, "Where there's skis there's fire."

Nate began to read.

Jealousy turned to flames last night as our shining hills lost one of the best sporting goods stores in all of Northern California. It is not my intention to fan these flames, but it seems obvious to this humble, purveyor of truth that a certain down on its luck ski store here in our midst warrants a closer look. Local declining interest in high end merchandise has brought on hard times and forced layoffs for this once thriving store. The changing demographic of mountain thrill seekers over the past ten years cut dearly into the business, but the introduction of a little competition has forced the store to literally shut down. Does this coincidence establish just cause for our stalwart sheriffs? It is not for me to say, but...

Nate stopped reading the piece and skimmed to the bottom.

The editor appealed to the police to check every sporting

good store in the surrounding area and pay special attention to those experiencing financial hardship. Nate smashed the page into a ball and threw it into the trashcan. The editor never mentioned Mountain Ski and Sports, but clearly pointed a finger at the store. Nate wondered if the store could sue, but the disclaimer at the bottom—Editorials do not express the feelings of the newspaper—and the innuendo instead of names sufficiently allowed the editor to say whatever he wanted to and get away with it.

Nate got up and began to pace.

He hadn't set the fire, so who did? The Sportzone store had had lots of employees that could have done it. Some eco-terrorist might have torched the place because of the land that now lay under asphalt. But besides who would do it, why would someone do it? Nate couldn't imagine anyone hating anything bad enough to set it on fire. It didn't make sense to him.

The image of Bob, disheveled, came to him suddenly. He hadn't known why his prim boss was so untidy, but now maybe he had a reason. Had setting that fire caused Bob's strange behavior? It seemed impossible. Bob wouldn't hurt a fly and definitely wouldn't risk setting fire to the foothills after the close call that Arnolds had with a

forest fire back in '88. On the other hand, the store was Bob's whole world. The situation was far too puzzling.

Nate stopped in mid-stride and caught his balance on a coat rack. No one working now at Mountain Ski and Sports would do such a thing, but what about someone who had been fired? He remembered how angry Ruby had been when Nate told her she was fired. She was the perfect candidate for the eggs and rock episode. But would she torch another building just to get back at them? It didn't make sense; it was far too irrational even for Ruby, who could get worked up because of an annoying insect. No, thought Nate. It couldn't be her. He moved back to his stool, sat down and propped his head up with his hands on the counter.

One moment he was trying to put one and two together to make some sense of things alone and the next Bob stood in front of him on the other side of the counter. Startled, Nate jerked his head back and sat up in his chair. The bell over the door hadn't rung, so Bob must have snuck in through the back door. Nate tried to smile welcomingly as he raised his head, but what he saw stopped him in his tracks. Bob still had the same clothes on that he did yesterday and his pants were covered in dirt and grime.

Smudges of dirt lined Bob's face, making him look like a fierce football player. His hair lay thick across his forehead and side of his head, except for a tuft that stuck straight up in the back. Deep hollows lay under each eye and the whites glowed red from lack of sleep. Nate wasn't sure whether he should rush around the counter and offer help or run away. He'd never seen his boss look so disturbed, even considering the day he found out his father had died.

"Good morning, Nathaniel," rasped Bob, standing erect and wooden.

"Bob are you all right? What's happened?"

"Nothing for you to worry about Nate."

"But Bob, your clothes."

"These," said Bob looking down at himself and gesturing with his hands. "They're nothing. If you can't wear what you want when you're the boss, what's the point?"

"But..."

"Two things. First, I've noticed that laser printer you're keeping in the storeroom. It doesn't belong there and you should be focusing on your work instead of fiddling around with some piece of hardware. I know, I know. You're good at that sort of thing, but it has to go."

"Of course, I..."

"You can take it away when you leave for the day. That brings me to the second thing I've been thinking about. You work too long and too many days. You should cut back. What do you think?" Nate's look of amazement turned to horror.

"Do I have a choice?"

Bob appeared to think it over for a moment then turned to walk over to his office door.

"No."

"But..."

"Sorry, no buts," said Bob. The voice might be gravely, but it still held all the power. "You can still open Monday through Friday. You'll work until two and head home. Saturdays I won't need any help, and we won't be open on Sundays. It's almost noon, why don't you take your lunch?"

The sentence was all demand and no question; Nate had nothing to say. He picked up his cooler, pausing only once to look back at Bob, who had sat down behind the register, something the boss only did during the busiest times of the year.

Nate stopped outside on the sidewalk in front of the empty store next door to Mountain Sports and looked around without seeing a thing. His entire life had been turned

upside down. He could no longer trust Bob to keep him working the measly 20 hours a week he'd been dropped to. The future looked as bleak as it ever had; yet the P'Ceph offered some hope, but how he could use it to help the store was beyond him. But even the P'Ceph would disappear in a matter of days if not hours.

Head hung low, Nate headed down the street where a group of redwoods clustered right next to the highway. It was a quiet spot he had sat at many times before when he needed to get away from the store. Nate crossed the parking lot to the sidewalk running along the street and headed downhill.

As he went, all the problems he faced swirled around in his head. The cops thought he'd torched some stupid sporting good store last night and pegged him for the primary suspect. His boss would probably be firing him in the next few weeks. Kristen was bound to demand the P'Ceph never leave her hands.

Losing his job at Mountain Sports and returning to his stepmom's house was nothing compared to prison. His life would be over. Nate shook his head slowly back and forth as he walked down the highway towards the cluster of redwoods.



## Chapter 10

The closer Kristen got to Mountain Ski and Sports, the better she felt. Nate's proof that the P'Ceph worked bolstered her spirits. A quick stop at the motel to round up all the predictions, and her laptop to help her check the P'Ceph's programs delayed her another couple of minutes. She stuffed the predictions in an empty pouch of the laptop's carrying case and was back in the truck, waiting for a gap in the traffic in no time. Mountain Ski and Sports was visible in the distance.

That breakfast had been fantastic, Kristen thought while waiting patiently to pull into traffic. A good meal or exercise always put her in a better mood. The world around appeared more hospitable; the wind coming through the truck's open window felt less harsh against her skin. Warm sunshine poured through the windshield, adding to the day's pleasures. There was nothing she could do about her car, so she refused to let it dampen her mood.

She kept her head held high, scanning the soft shadows clustered around the pines packed up against the road as she waited. She focused on the calm depths of the forest. Last night, the combination of that awful old bartender and Nate's intrusion had blinded her to this morning's

possibilities. She nearly regretted that she would soon be secluded in the storeroom.

A space opened up in the traffic and she pulled behind a slow moving Volkswagen Bug. She could easily see over the ancient, rusted vehicle at the pile up of cars on the road going ten MPH below the speed limit. Kristen ignored the cars, humming along with a Shania Twain song as Mountain Ski and Sports approached. Getting ready to pull into the suicide lane, Kristen saw Nate walk out into the universal turn lane and cause the cars in front of Kristen to stop.

He plodded along across her lane of traffic, head down and shuffling his feet with his cooler clutched in one dangling arm. He ignored the honks from the cars and finally cleared the lane. Confusion warred with optimism in Kristen. Why was Nate, who worked such long hours and refused to leave the store empty, taking his lunch break now at eleven o'clock? She inched the truck forward slowly, keeping her eyes on Nate.

Nate continued down the side of the road away from Kristen as traffic approached and she bore down on him. Completely at a loss, Kristen watched Nate suddenly step off the road and disappear into a stand of Redwoods. She pulled the truck off the road and parked against an antique

shop, near the trees. She didn't know what to make of his behavior, but she did know one thing—she wasn't going to lose Nate and have to explain to his weirdo boss why she wanted to get into the storeroom.

Kristen jumped out of the truck and raced over to the trees. She stopped, turned back to the truck and retreated to its side. She checked the doors to make sure they were locked and went back to the trees. Nate was nowhere to be seen. If she hesitated, Nate might vanish among the trees, leaving her screwed. With a few long strides, she stood surrounded by trees amazed that the cars passing by could barely be heard. She stepped deeper into the shade and almost tripped over Nate's feet.

Kristen let out a startled gasp. She stumbled and caught herself by hugging one of the large tree trunks. She glanced over her shoulder at Nate and saw his surprised look. Looking at Nate, his knees up against his chest, Kristen was reminded how young he really was.

"Kristen," said Nate, burrowing his eyebrows and staring at her. She began to respond, but something missing from his usual bright expression made her stop. Nate turned away before she could put a finger on exactly what was different.

"Nate. Has anything happened to the P'Ceph?" All the worst possibilities flooded into her mind as she struggled not to jump over next to Nate, grab him by his shoulders and shake the truth out of him.

"Bob cut my hours in half," he said. "The cops think I burnt down the San Andreas Sportszone and I don't know how I'm going to be able to save up enough money now to get a house of my own."

Kristen sighed in relief.

"What about the P'Ceph?" she asked.

"It's fine, but Bob wants it out of the storeroom by the time I'm off today at two."

"Damn. Where can we move it? My car won't be fixed until tomorrow."

"I don't know. Maybe Guppies?"

"No way. I'm not going back to that dive again, and I sure as hell won't trust that woman with my P'Ceph. We'll have to think of somewhere else."

"Why don't you just stay with it at the Travelodge? If your car's going to be fixed by tomorrow, you would only have to stay cooped up for a day."

Kristen thought about Jeremy and what might be in store for them and shook her head.

"We'll think of something." She sat down across from Nate. "Anyway, tell me what your friends said about the P'Ceph. They seemed excited to me, but I might be projecting my own feelings on them. What did they really think? You know them better."

"Some were surprised, but most were very happy," said Nate, drumming the top of his small cooler. "What did their predictions say?"

"Now, Nate. I can't tell you that. I promised each one of them not to say anything about their predictions. It's part of the deal."

"I just wanted to know about the game tonight."

"Sorry Nate."

"It's OK. This day has just sucked so much that I thought maybe you would remember one of the predictions talking about tonight's game and could tell me about it. I just need one good thing to happen and I'd feel a lot better. Hey, what about my prediction? Do you still have it?"

"Yeah, I haven't thrown it away or anything. It's probably in my purse back in the truck."

"It might say something about the game."

"Maybe, I'll get it to you first thing."

"My teammates are going to want a copy of their predictions too. They've already seen theirs, but I know they'll want a copy."

"Hmmm. Is there anywhere in town to make copies?"

"Sure, but can't the P'Ceph just make another copy?"

"It's not designed the way. We can take care of extra copies of the predictions later. Right now," said Kristen standing up. "I need to check the P'Ceph and I think about where we're going to move it. I might just have the good news you were hoping for."

"What kind of news?"

Nate popped up next to her, cooler in hand.

"You'll see."

Kristen led the way out of the trees back to the truck. Nate's prediction wasn't there.

"It must be back at the motel, but don't worry. In the amount of time it takes me to run the diagnostics on the P'Ceph, I'll have the best news you've heard all day."

"Why not just tell me now?"

"Where's the fun in that?"

"You might as well leave the Ranger here," said Nate. "It'll take longer to move it than to just cross the street."

"OK."

Kristen stepped beside Nate on the parking lot's edge and watched the traffic flow by. The years of hard work, the late nights spent adjusting and cussing at the P'Ceph had finally borne fruit. She wanted to sprint to the store, throw open the storeroom's doors and wrap her arms around her P'Ceph. She forced herself to wait patiently for a safe gap between the cars. She rocked back and forth, shuffling her feet anxiously trying to will a space to open in the never-ending stream of cars.

Finally, seeing a gap in the traffic, Kristen dashed across the road and reached the far sidewalk in front of the sports store. Nate rushed past her a heartbeat later and stopped a few steps ahead of her and turned to meet her gaze.

Nate led the way to the shop's front door. Kristen followed him, ignoring the ring from the bell the door had jostled, and headed to the storeroom. Nate stuck his head into the boss's office, nodded once to whatever Bob must have said. Nate rounded the corner of the glass counter and opened the storeroom door for Kristen. Kristen hurried over to the P'Ceph without closing the door behind her.

The device needed to be plugged in. Kristen had it hooked up in a second and flipped the power switch on. The characteristic hum resounded as she bent over to stretch

out the keyboard and pull the PDA screen to the top of the casing for easier access. It would take a while to run all the diagnostics, giving her time to look over the predictions again.

The papers turned in her hands and she started to read the first prediction, for a Shawn Lynch. There wasn't that much on the page, except a few requests for cutting down on the drinking and spending more time with some woman named Casey. Besides these two focal points for Mr. Lynch's life, there were no other suggestions. Kristen read through the sheet one more time and came up with the exact same impression; there just wasn't much predicted for Lynch. With the thought that this might be all the P'Ceph could do, Kristen shuffled the papers and scanned their contents. Every single print-out resembled Lynch's brief collection of simple suggestions. It all seemed so trivial, she felt let down.

Kristen briefly scanned the papers but found nothing new. How could little suggestions like these impress anyone? A look up at Nate got her thinking that something wasn't right here. Either Nate was lying about how the people responded or the printouts were fakes.

"Are you sure your friends were satisfied with the P'Ceph's predictions?"



"Absolutely."

She still had her doubts, but maybe people did like the simple solutions.

The time ticked by as each diagnostic confirmed that all programs were running without errors and all data within the P'Ceph remained uncontaminated and whole. Kristen double-checked the password-protected databases to see if the questions had stayed the same and found everything there to be fine, including all of Nate's questions. She had to give him credit for coming up with questions that each could be answered with one word. Her number-crunching statistic programs had little problem processing such data. There was only one more thing to check, and Shawn Lynch's record would do as well as any others.

She popped off the top of the plastic casing to access the motherboard directly and set up her laptop. It took a moment to boot the computer, before directly accessing the stored answers to Shawn's turn on the P'Ceph. She was curious what he'd typed in during his time hooked up to the P'Ceph. Kristen had stood back from each subject as soon as they understood the procedure.

The answers scrolled down the PDA screen with Kristen paying close attention. The first time through failed to

produce any illuminating answers, but something did nag her—something about the prediction and the questions not matching up. Another look at Shawn's paper and Kristen delved into his answers on the P'Ceph one more time. By the end of the list, she knew what she was looking for. She raced through his answers one last time looking for any mention of Casey. When she finished poring over the answers, a cold shiver ran up and down her spine. Nowhere among his answers had Shawn typed the woman's name.

"I'm out of here in five minutes," said Nate, sticking his head through the door. "Bob just left to go get some coffee and will expect me out of here the moment he returns. So what's your plan?"

"We're moving the P'Ceph, of course," said Kristen, disconnecting her laptop from the P'Ceph and putting the panel back in place. She unplugged both devices and packed the laptop into its traveling case along with the printouts. She folded up the PDA's keyboard and began to prepare the P'Ceph for travel. Nate moved into the storeroom's doorway as if to help, but she waved him off. "I've got it. I'll need your help in just a moment."

"OK. So, where are you going to stash it?"

"The best place in town, the absolute best place. You'll see."

06-25-03

19:34

Subject Reference Number 3852676531

Psychological Encephalograph

Beta Version 3.5

Subject Recommendations:

1. Set selfish desires aside and work to help your friends who are in need.
2. All things come in time, so be patient.
3. A fire will play prominently in your life.
4. Though danger lurks among the flames, your reward will be more significant than any injuries you endure.
5. Change careers to help more people in danger of being burnt.
6. The teachings of your parents will show you the way to happiness.
7. Temptations of undeserved wealth will lead to your downfall.
8. Keep focused on the people around you.
9. Take an active role to help strangers.
10. A move will make your life complete. It will put you closer to the water.
11. You can accomplish your goals by tying your life with someone else's
12. All paths lead to hard work and large rewards.
13. A chain will bring considerable travel, but always pull you home to Arnolds.
14. Follow these tenets and you will be happier than ever before in your life.

Patent Pending  
Property of Kristen Schouler

## Chapter 11

Nate carried the P'Ceph through his front door and angled to the right. The kitchen table wobbled a little when Nate carefully lowered the P'Ceph on to its center. A gentle nudge with his foot to each leg convinced Nate that the table would remain standing. It was old, but still worked fine. He was still surprised that she wanted to use his place to test the P'Ceph, but since she didn't know anyone in town he guessed it made sense. The suggested 65-35 split of any donated money for the P'Ceph's predictions had sealed the deal.

He'd lived on his own in this house for six long and happy years. The one bedroom and one bath cottage fitted his needs perfectly. He watched Kristen walk up the narrow concrete path to his front door, carrying her laptop, purse and the two envelopes full of predictions and shrugged. His prediction was still missing in action, probably at her motel. Kristen angled over to the P'Ceph, put the envelopes down and picked up the machine's power cord and started looking for an outlet.

Nate grabbed one of the envelopes and left Kristen in the front room to go change into more comfortable clothes in the cottage's single bedroom. He tucked the envelope into his softball bag and started to strip. No dirty

laundry cluttered the floor. Scattered mementos and toys clogged the dresser and nightstand. Star Wars action figures stood in a cracked champagne flute from Senior Prom guarding a few piles of change, family pictures taken at KMart and pieces of old mail. Nate changed his clothes, putting the dirty ones in the hamper next to his dresser. It was completely full.

He had nothing to do, but sit around the house with Kristen fiddling with the P'Ceph so he decided to hit the Laundromat before it got busy with people done with the regular nine to fives. Nate lifted the lid on the hamper, pushed down the pile of clothes and grabbed the drawstring of the bag lining the hamper. He jerked on the drawstring and pulled out a full laundry bag from the hamper. He headed for the door. Kristen caught his eye as he crossed the living room.

"I'm going to go do some laundry," said Nate.

"OK. Mind if I use the phone?"

"Not at all."

Nate dropped the laundry bag onto the passenger seat through the Ranger's open window and walked around to climb in on the driver's side. As he backed the truck out of the driveway, an idea came to him. He could stop by the store on the way home and pick up some fresh veggies and pasta to

cook his favorite meal for the two of them—Pasta Primavera. Happy with the idea, Nate drove back down towards town and the Laundromat.

Suds Proof was further away from his cottage than the other coin-op Laundromat, but it was always cleaner and charged a quarter less for washing a load of laundry. Nate was surprised to see the place empty. He got out of his truck and went around to the passenger side to grab the laundry bag. A quick check of the ashtray for quarters supplied enough money to wash and dry two loads. Pocketing the quarters, he lifted up the dirty clothes and sheets to head into the Laundromat.

All the laundry fit into the end machines and was washing away by the time Nate sat down in one of the chairs arranged against the front wall of the Laundromat. A quick glance around at the sea of clean white tiles lining the floors, the two rows of back-to-back washing machines and the wall of dryers—no crusty dispenser of soap here, you either had it or you didn't—and Nate grabbed an old copy of Sports Illustrated lying nearby. He opened it randomly and read. The magazine kept him busy until the buzzers from the washing machines told him it was time to switch his laundry to the dryers.

Picking two middle dryers for their easy access, no bending down or reaching up necessary, Nate piled the laundry into the machines and got them running. He leaned up against the washing machines to watch the clothes and think. The cops had bothered Nate, but he had to believe that they were done with him and already had turned their attention to someone else. Nate had never done anything really illegal and felt positive that the police mess would solve itself. Those troubles slipped away to be replaced by his boss's odd behavior.

Was Bob going to fire him completely? The store continued to lose money, which must be a stressful for him, but Nate could've sworn it was something else. Bob remained business-like, but distant like he was trying to keep Nate and anyone else away. Nate's problems appeared less threatening compared to the drastic change in Bob.

Money remained tight, but that would probably never change. His thoughts shifted towards Kristen and, by association, Natalie when something occurred to him. Thinking about the cops, how they had treated him and the fire, Nate realized that they might not have been interested in him. The uniformed deputy had, after all, looked into Bob's office while the Inspector threw

questions around. Could they have been really trying to find out if Bob did it?

The buzzer for the dryer went off, reminding Nate where he was. He stepped forward to open the dryer door and pull out the laundry but realized he needed one of Suds Proof's rolling laundry carts. One of them rested against a dryer three machines away. He brought it back and began to pull the laundry out into the plastic basket. A metallic rattle sounded from behind him, but Nate paid no attention to it. Probably someone arriving to do laundry. He had everything out of the dryer and had started folding a shirt when something hard slammed into the back of his knees.

Nate struggled to keep his balance. His hand brushed the side of his laundry cart and gripped the basket's plastic edge instinctually. It began to tip, even as he fell towards the floor. At the last second, Nate let go of the cart and landed heavily on his butt. The shirt landed wrinkled in his lap. He turned to see what had hit him and found another laundry cart, careening away. Through the metal grates of the cart, Nate saw Ruby pushing a pile of her clothing into a washing machine right behind the one Nate had used. The innocent smile that she shot him helped to propel Nate to his feet.



"What do you think you're doing?"

"Putting my clothes in the washer, what does it look like?"

"You know what I mean," said Nate pushing his cart down the wall of dryers away from Ruby. "Why did you push that cart at me?"

"Oh that?" she asked. "It was in my way. I hardly touched it." Her expression dared him to dispute the claim.

"Hardly, right. Why did you do it? What have I done to you?"

"If you can't handle the heat," she said. "Get out of the mountains."

"What the hell do you mean by that?" Nate wondered if she still blamed him for her termination at the store.

"Nothing."

"Shouldn't you be at school? Last time I checked, Arnolds High doesn't get out until three o'clock."

"It's none of your business."

"What about your mom?"

"I didn't feel like going, OK? Are you going to tattle on me?"

Nate decided to try to mend things with Ruby. He hated the idea that she was so mad at him for something that wasn't his fault.

"You know, Bob cut my hours in half today. He'll probably have to fire me if business doesn't pick up."

"I won't lose any sleep," said Ruby, lowering her washing machine's lid.

"I don't get it. I've never done anything to make you so pissed. I was always nice to you and even took a bunch of your shifts to help you out."

"Whatever. Aren't you done? I'd prefer to be alone."

Nate ground his teeth and gathered his laundry. By the time he reached the door, Nate could hear Ruby whistling merrily as her washing machines filled with water.

Nate walked as calmly as he could to his truck. Holding the laundry in one arm, he opened the door and slid in behind the wheel without once looking to see what Ruby was doing. He set the laundry down next to him on the seat and started up the truck. He wondered what could have possibly brought on so much resentment in one person. He backed up and threw the truck into first.

Stopping at Big Trees Market only took a few minutes, though the errand gave Nate a chance to cool down before

arriving home. He pulled up to his house a little after five. He was surprised to see a Jeep parked in the driveway. Nate kicked the Ranger into four-wheel drive and hopped the curb to park next to the Jeep. He grabbed everything in one load, holding the laundry between his arms with the plastic grocery bag hanging underneath off his right arm. Kristen opened the door for him, but didn't offer to take the laundry or food. Instead, she turned back towards the table where some guy was hooked up to the P'Ceph, tapping away at the keyboard.

Nate awkwardly hooked the door with his foot and pulled it shut as he stumbled backward into the house. No help came from Kristen or the stranger, leaving Nate to carry the laundry into the bedroom and deposit it on the bed before he put the food in the fridge. Before he could surprise Kristen with his dinner plans, she stepped up beside him and leaned in close.

"When Jeremy's done," she whispered, "we'll jump in his Jeep and head out for dinner. He says there's a good Mexican place down in Murphys." Nate's disappointment must have shown because Kristen frowned. "What is it?"

"I picked up some food at the market and thought we'd eat here."

"We can do that tomorrow. Doesn't having someone else cook sound better? Plus, it'll give you a chance to get to know Jeremy," said Kristen.

"Who is this guy anyway?"

"A friend."

"A friend, like a boyfriend? Did he come all the way up from Davis? You're going to take off aren't you."

"No, nothing like that. Jeremy lives here in Arnolds. I met him at the Blue Moon Café a couple days ago."

"So that's why you were so late getting back to the store. Why didn't you tell me?"

Kristen shook his head.

"No," said Nate. "I know it's none of my business. Just forget it. Look. I'll guarantee that anything out of my kitchen is better than food from anywhere in Murphys. Why don't we just stay here and eat? I've bought enough for the three of us."

Kristen glanced back towards Jeremy and turned back to Nate smiling.

"Nate, I don't want you to go to all the fuss. You've done so much for me, can't I pay you back by taking you to dinner?"

Well..."

"Jeremy has even offered to pick up the bill."

Nate squared his shoulders and frowned. He wanted to take Kristen up on the offer, but didn't really want to spend any time with this stranger. It had been a long day and all he wanted to do was stay at home and relax before the softball game.

"Still, we..." Nate began, but trailed off when he caught the glare Jeremy threw at him from across the room. There was nothing warm in the look. "I, well I can't make it because of my softball game. Murphys is just too far."

"Oh. That's OK. Maybe we can all go out tomorrow?"

"Sure," said Nate. The sound of the P'Ceph printing out its prediction saved him from having to say more or commit to any definite plans. Kristen rushed over to the P'Ceph. It took Jeremy a solid minute to read through the paper and fold it up. Jeremy clapped his hands together, beaming.

"This is fantastic. Just fantastic," said Jeremy sweeping his arms around Kristen.

"Can I take a look at that?" said Kristen, pulling back from Jeremy's embrace.

"Nope. Otherwise, it won't come true."

"Nate won't be able to join us for dinner," said Kristen, sounding disappointed. Nate doubted his absence

at dinner was the problem. She turned to include Nate in the conversation. "He's got a softball game tonight."

"That's too bad, sport," said Jeremy.

"I'll catch you next time," said Nate. Jackass, he kept to himself.

"We'll be back after dinner to hang out, OK?" asked Kristen. She and Jeremy had already turned towards the door.

"Sure. Fine."

The two drove away and Nate turned towards the kitchen. Kristen had his only backup key, so there wouldn't be any problem with them getting in if he happened to be gone when they returned.

He filled a pot with water and slammed it onto the stove, splashing the nearby burners. He flicked on the gas and turned to hack through the fresh vegetables he'd bought. As zucchini and squash fell to the violent chops of his knife, some of the tension clawing at his neck began to subside. But that Jeremy guy. There was something wrong with him.

Ten minutes passed and he leaned against the counter eating dinner out of the pot the pasta had cooked in. Nate hardly tasted the food as he shoved mouthful after mouthful down his throat.

He knocked back half of the pasta and shoved the rest into the fridge for tomorrow. Seven o'clock would be arriving soon and he might as well grab his gear and head to the sports complex. Somehow one of his cleats went AWOL and had Nate looking under the bed, digging through the closet and cussing every step of the way until he found the delinquent shoe hiding in the bathroom. With all his gear firmly trapped in his old high school baseball duffel, Nate slung the bag over his shoulder and headed out the door.

The Ranger was in gear and ready to go when Nate remembered his teammate's predictions. He threw the truck into neutral, yanked back the parking-brake and pulled the keys from the ignition. Cursing, he searched the house again for the manila envelope containing the copies of the predictions. Finally, he remembered slipping the envelope into one of his dresser drawers. A moment later, Nate pulled out of the driveway and headed towards town. He'd be about an hour early for tonight's game, but at least he wouldn't have to think about his houseguest and her unwelcome friend.

## Chapter 12

Kristen sat down in the chair across from Jeremy, taking in the sights of Torero's Mexican Restaurant. Dark wood tables and booths contrasted with the bright red, green and white banners strung across the ceiling, reminding Kristen of the decorations at a car dealership at a grand opening. The smell of steak and refried beans caused her stomach to growl, which turned her attention to the Hispanic servers industriously moving back and forth through the room. She watched as a plump pre-teenage girl carrying a tray with chips and salsa neared her table. The server gently placed the chips in the middle of the table with two different colored salsas on each side.

"Hot," said the girl in heavily accented English pointing towards the salsa verde. "Mild." She pointed at the pico de gallo and smiled.

"Thanks," said Kristen reaching for a chip. Jeremy had one in his hand, dipping it into the salsa verde. The girl was only a few steps from the table when he spoke.

"Like I need help figuring out which one of these is hot? They probably don't let any jalapeños come close to these salsas."

Kristen shot a glance after the girl, but thankfully she had slipped out of sight.



"So you're a big manly man who likes it hot?" she asked, taking a bite of the pico de gallo.

"Fiery."

Kristen raised an eyebrow and dug into the chips. A moment later, their waiter walked away with their drink orders and left a pair of menus for them. Kristen opened hers and scanned the traditional Mexican fare—enchiladas, chimichangas, burritos, Chile relleno, carne asada. Jeremy continued to munch chips without a glance at his menu.

"Already know what you want?" she asked.

"Yep."

"Care to share?"

He shrugged. "Combo plate. Taco, tostada and enchilada. All shredded beef."

"I don't see the shredded beef on the menu. It says ground beef."

"You just have to know how to ask for it."

Kristen went back to her men with a small shake of her head. She was torn between the chicken tamale and empanadas frijoles. Both dishes were low in fat and had lots of protein; the only difference was she had never had empanadas frijoles before. It could be good, bland or horrible. She looked back at Jeremy and decided to take a chance with something new. She put the menu down.

Their waiter came back with their drinks. "Ready to order?"

"Yes, I'll have combo number 7. Everything with shredded beef," said Jeremy before Kristen could open her mouth.

"Sir? Those come only with ground beef."

"Now, we both know that you can fix them the way I want them."

"But..."

"You have a big kitchen back there with lots of monkeys slaving over the stoves. Surely, one of them can fix my order. Even Taco Bell could do it. And remember, the customer is always right."

"Of course," said the waiter turning his back on Jeremy. And you?"

"The empanadas frijoles, please?"

Kristen saw the waiter relax a little. He smiled.

"Very good." He left.

"You'd better examine your food really closely when it gets here," warned Kristen.

"Don't worry, I will."

Kristen took a sip from her ice tea and refocused on the chips. Two delicious mouthfuls later, Jeremy spoke.

"So tell me about your P'Ceph?"

"What do you want to know? You've already seen how it works and what it can do. Speaking of which, I'd really like to see the prediction it gave you. I'm keeping track of all the early predictions to help me see any patterns or limitations in the P'Ceph."

"Oh, you don't have to worry about any limitations," said Jeremy. "I'll let you see it later. For now, tell me what gave you the idea to make it? Big fan of fortune telling?"

"Hardly. Tarot, astrology, psychic hotlines are just entertaining ways for people to spend their money in my opinion. All those horoscopes are so vague; they could fit to anybody. I wanted to take a more scientific approach and come up with something that gave specific, individual advice."

"Why?" said Jeremy finishing his Coke and snapping his fingers for a server.

Kristen cringed.

"Why? Well, you'll probably think I'm crazy. God knows that Dr. Zho does. But I have a theory about people. You see, I think habits shape our lives more than any other thing. Genes, environment, parents, and friends all affect us less than the things we do every single day. People are

successful because of the habits they have, the things that they do every single day that make the happy, or sad.

"I wanted to combine my understanding of human psychology, I had a psyche minor at Cal Poly, and my engineering skills to help people. With today's computers and some help from code-heads I graduated with, I hoped to show people the way to a happier life. There are a lot of people out there that are terribly depressed and looking for answers. Just look at the suicide rates. By revealing who they are and what they do, I have to thank Nate for that..."

"Nate again? I thought he was just some kid."

"He is. He just happened to help me with some of the questions you answered to get your prediction."

"How else has he helped you?"

"Really, Jeremy. I thought you were too old for this sort of thing. For the last time, he's just a friend. Now what would his majesty like to know about my P'Ceph?"

Jeremy stared at her for a moment, saying nothing. Kristen wondered for a moment if she would have to call Nate to come pick her up, but the waiter delivered their dinner breaking the growing stillness between them. She carefully scooped up one of the bean filled empanadas that reminded her of raviolis and popped it into her mouth. The

gooey consistency took a little getting used to, but the combination of cilantro, lime and cumin was divine. She swallowed in time to slide another bite-sized empanada into her mouth.

"So now that the P'Ceph works, what do you plan to do with it?" asked Jeremy.

He must have been a waiter in his past life, thought Kristen. She chewed her mouthful of food and twirled a finger to say she was hurrying. With a draw from her ice tea's straw, Kristen swallowed ready to answer Jeremy's question.

"Test a few more people, send in a patent and do follow ups on the people who followed their predictions. If everything looks good, maybe in a year I'll be ready to introduce the world to the P'Ceph."

"Isn't that a little overly cautious?"

"I don't think so. Why should I be in a hurry?" said Kristen.

"My prediction, for example, makes perfect sense to me and is definitely specific. The P'Ceph works great right now. Why not let the world know it exists today? These people in here," said Jeremy with a sweep of his hand to include the entire restaurant, "sure could use some advice like mine."

"But that's exactly the problem I'm facing. If the P'Ceph just prints out the same advice in different ways, it'll be no better than a carnival gypsy. It'll take some time, but I'm in no hurry."

"You're sitting on a gold mine."

"I didn't build the P'Ceph to make money."

"Hummph."

Kristen went back to work on her meal while Jeremy ate sparingly, never touching the taco. The empanadas disappeared rapidly along with the rice and beans accompanying them on the large orange plate. She drained her ice tea and let her head loll back contentedly. Kristen closed her eyes, rolled her head from one shoulder to the other and listened to the soft, piped-in mariachi music in the restaurant. Jeremy had been right, Terero's served the best Mexican food she had ever had.

"Waiter!" Jeremy's shout cut through her serene lounging. She snapped her head forward and her eyes open to see Jeremy standing with his right hand shaking at his plate.

"What is it?" she asked, nervous that everyone in the restaurant was now staring at their table. The waiter hurried over.

"Sir? What is the problem."

"This!" Jeremy picked up the taco, cracked it in half along the base and pointed with the broken shell fragment at a glob of clear liquid sitting on top of the taco's lettuce. Kristen gulped, starting to feel a little ill.

"Sir, I don't understand. What..."

"All I ask for is some shredded beef," hissed Jeremy, "and one of your cooks spits in my food. This is outrageous. I demand to speak with the owner of this place."

The waiter looked stricken. He reached down, grabbed Jeremy's plate and motioned for him to place the taco on it. With a scowl twisting his face, Jeremy let the offending taco fall to the plate. The waiter quickly covered it up with Jeremy's napkin and disappeared into the kitchen. A moment later, a strikingly handsome man in a suit emerged from the kitchen. He walked up to Jeremy and bowed his head.

"My dearest apologies for this reprehensible incident. Of course, you won't have to pay for your meal, senor."

"My meal. I'm not paying for any meal from this restaurant. How dare you? Come on Kristen."

Kristen looked back and forth between the two men. The owner nodded and waved over the young girl who delivered their chips and busboy. Kristen took Jeremy's

hand, letting him pull her out of the restaurant and into the parking lot. She coughed uneasily. To her utter surprise, Jeremy laughed. She got into the Jeep and turned to him.

"Why are you so happy? That was horrible."

"You look a little green."

Kristen swallowed hard.

"Why shouldn't I? Who knows what they put in my meal? The empanadas, the rice, the beans." Kristen wrapped her hands around her stomach.

"Don't worry about it," said Jeremy pulling out of the shopping center where the restaurant stood next to an Albertson's Grocery Store.

"Don't worry about it? How can you say that?"

"Easy, because I spit in the taco."

"What?"

"Come on. You've never pulled a fast one like that before.

"Never."

"Never ever? I find that hard to believe."

Kristen remained silent. She had never spit in her own food to get a free meal, but she'd gotten out of a few speeding tickets by playing nice and popping loose a couple of buttons.



"I'll take that for a yes. I've given that restaurant plenty of money over the years. Going alone, with a friend or taking an entire crew there for lunch, I've paid my share to them. Plus, I always tip more than I should for the service just to be nice. It's about time they gave something back to me."

"I don't know."

"Forget about it. Did you enjoy the food?"

"Yes."

"Then no harm, no foul. Tell you what, how about I give you a massage."

"It has been a long day."

"Great. Your place or mine."

"Yours."

## Chapter 13

Nate sat on the bench, cheering his team out in the field as loud as he could yell. They were ahead by two runs in the bottom of the eighth inning with men on first and second, and two outs. The entire game had been close. Each team had led the game two or three times during their turn at the plate. When his team took the lead, the team captain, Ken, decided to change things around, which meant replacing Nate on first with Deborah. She'd pitched the first seven innings. Though she wasn't tired, Ken thought it best to put in their reliever and put Deborah on the field in case of an emergency. She was an excellent infielder, so Nate was out and she stood crouched off first base ready to end the inning.

Nate wanted to be out on the field, willing the batter to strike or fly out with the rest of his team, but he understood Ken's decision. Until now, his team had concentrated on offense, trying to build up the largest lead they could and now found themselves struggling to hold on. Ken had steered the team to their best record in the last four years, and Nate was too good a team player to feel resentful for being on the bench. Still, he wanted to be out there.

The crack of a bat connecting with the softball dragged Nate's attention out into deep center field following the flight of the ball. Nate held his breath as the center fielder sprinted back towards the fence. She plucked the ball out of the air and began the long jog back towards the bench. Only one more inning and they were headed to the playoffs.

Nate greeted each player as they filed into the fenced-in dugout with either a high five or a word of encouragement. He saved a hug for Cathy their center fielder when she stepped in, last of all the players. The opposing team took the field and the first two batters for Nate's team stepped outside the dugout to loosen up by swinging two or three bats at a time. Their first batter popped up and out on the first pitch.

"Make them throw good pitches," yelled Ken from the bench to Deborah who stood one foot in the batter's box and one foot out. "Take your time." Nate watched her walk on five pitches. When Nate opened his mouth to cheer on Cathy as she stepped up to the plate, something poked him in the back. Surprised, he turned around to see one of his high school buddies standing right behind him on the other side of the chain-link fence.

"Brandon, what's up, man?" said Nate. He hadn't seen Brandon for a couple of months. Rumor had it that he spent that time in the county jail for possession of weed.

"Dude. Those cops, over there, are asking about you. What'd'ya do?"

Nate followed Brandon's gaze over to one of the three other softball diamonds in the complex and saw two men, one in a deputy's uniform and the other in a familiar sports coat, talking with some fans. Instantly, Nate felt sick.

"Nothing," he said. "I haven't done anything."

"Right, whatever you say. Just thought you'd want to know."

Brandon nodded good-bye and headed away, walking in the opposite direction of the two officers. Nate didn't know what to do. At the crack of a bat, Nate swung back around to see Cathy reach first and Deborah slide into second, safe. His teammates yelled encouragement to the players, but he couldn't manage more than a bare whisper. A glance over his shoulder towards the cops showed him they were on their way. He had to get out of the dugout.

Nate said as calmly as he could, "I've got to hit the head," and left before Ken could respond. He slid through the gap in the dugout's fence and was halfway to the bathrooms, walking stiffly, before he turned to see the

cops following him. Nate jerked his head forward, but still felt the weight of their gazes on him. He walked around to the women's restroom, where the building cut off his view of his teammates, and waited.

The two cops walked around the corner of the building and had to stop abruptly or run into Nate. It was the same Inspector, but the deputy was different. He wore a kinder expression on his face than the last one.

"We searched your house," said the inspector.

"Did you have a warrant?"

"Of course." The deputy stood off to the side letting the Inspector do all the talking.

"Let me see it," Nate blurted out.

The Inspector pulled the warrant from the inside pocket of his jacket and handed it to him. The form contained his address, a date, the specific places outside and inside his cottage they could search, the items the officer in charge should be looking for and a few signatures. He was enough of a suspect for the police to search his house.

He handed the paper back to the Inspector, who folded it neatly and returned it to the inner pocket of his blazer. The sight of his handgun resting in a holster below his left arm somehow made the situation more real

than the legalese of the search warrant. Nate stiffened and waited for the next question. The Inspector just looked at him.

"Did Kristen stop by during the search?"

"Who's Kristen?" asked the Inspector scribbling a new note down.

Nate mentally cursed.

"Just a friend who was supposed to pick up some old...books."

"No one named Kristen stopped by."

At least, I'm saved from that embarrassing scene, thought Nate. Another ringing crack of a bat came from the field. Nate took a good look at the bathroom's cinder block wall.

"Want to guess what we found?" asked the Inspector.

"A lot of clean laundry?"

"Two brand new, five gallon, metal gasoline canisters."

"So," said Nate. "My landlord must have left them in the shed behind my house. He's always storing different things in there."

"I see."

"Because they're not mine," said Nate quietly. "You can check my credit card receipts. I buy everything with a

credit card. Or check them for fingerprints because I had no idea they were around."

"No one is saying anything, sir," said the deputy.

Nate ignored him.

"Don't I have to be present for you to come into my house?"

"Actually," said the Inspector. "With a warrant, we can enter any building with or without the occupant being present. Nothing was taken from your premises except for the cans, but we'll undoubtedly be back for another look around."

A cheer went up from the field, causing another inadvertent studying of the bathroom's walls. Time was up. Nate decided it was time to get back with his team.

"So? What now?"

"Nothing," replied the Inspector as calmly as ever. "Just... don't leave town and this time it's not a request. Follow me?"

"Clearly."

Nate shuffled past him and headed back towards the field. As he turned the corner of the bathroom, the Inspector asked, "Do you want to know where we found the gasoline canisters?"

"I know they weren't in the house."

"True. They were behind the house in the mulberry bushes."

"OK." There were hundreds of better places to stash something around his house, thought Nate. What idiot would throw new gas cans into those sickly plants? He thought about saying this to the Inspector, but decided that he didn't want to see him writing anything else in that notebook.

Nate left the Inspector and deputy and returned to his teammates. He felt relieved to see the happy faces and hear the exuberant voices of his teammates. Nate slipped back into the dugout just when his teammates went back out into the field. Cathy the last one in and last one out turned to him.

"You all right?"

"Sure. What happened while I was gone?"

"Scored two more runs." With that, she sprinted out towards center field, leaving Nate alone on the bench. All the team had to do was get three outs and the game would be over. Nate settled back to watch, trying hard to focus on the game instead of the comments made by the Inspector.

#

When Nate went up to the bar to order the second round of celebratory drinks for the team, he decided to ask



Natalie about a paying job. He'd perked up after his first beer and was ready to take a chance. He didn't know anything about bartending, except for popping the tops off beers, but he'd already proved to Natalie that he worked hard and got things done quickly. Plus, if he was even half right about the blow up between Kristen and her, a job might already be waiting for him. The bar was pretty empty for a Thursday, but it was still early. Natalie waited on the other side to take the empty beer pitchers he held.

"Another two pitchers of Red Tail," said Nate, handing the pitchers across the bar. She tilted back the tap and started filling the first. She seemed content to watch the beer fill the pitcher and say nothing. The first pitcher was full and sitting on the bar before Nate pulled together his nerve.

"Um. Natalie. I was thinking, maybe, you could use some more help around the bar."

"Always need more help." She didn't look up, just kept staring at the filling pitcher. Nate feared that if he didn't hurry up and ask her, she'd walk away when the pitcher was full.

"Yeah. Well, you see. I was thinking that maybe I could, um, work for you part time."

Natalie acted like she didn't hear and kept watching the pitcher fill. Nate fidgeted. The beer rose to the top of the pitcher and sloshed out onto the bar as Natalie set it down. She stared directly into Nate's face for a moment and then nodded.

"Does that mean yes?"

"Maybe. First, we'll have to see how you do. A trial run, so to speak. The place will fill up pretty soon and I need to see how you handle working the bar and moving around the tables. If you do all right, then maybe."

"OK, that's fair."

When he grabbed the pitchers and started to turn away from the bar, Natalie asked another question.

"What's going on between you and that woman from a couple days ago?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing. She's just a tourist who needed help because her car broke down. Nothing more."

"Hmmm." Her scrutiny caused Nate to squirm. She let him off the hook after a moment or two. "You start right now."

"But, I'm all sweaty and dirty from softball and..."

"Well," said Natalie, walking away down the bar. "You have a choice then, either get to work sweaty or go home without a job."

Nate yearned for a long shower and his bed. The last thing he wanted to do was work until 2 or 3 in the morning after the early morning he'd had. But what choice did he have? He tried to stall.

"Can't I start tomorrow? I'm really..."

"Unemployed," said Natalie, turning her back on him as she walked to the other end of the bar. Nate rubbed his eyes and forehead before following her.

"What about wages?" he asked.

"I'll pay you better than minimum. Maybe more if business picks up."

Oh joy, thought Nate but said, "Great."

"Start in the storeroom. It's a mess."

"I've got to take these pitchers to my teammates...our customers."

She waved him away.

He returned to his teammates and told them about his new job. They promised to stay around long enough to give him a good tip, assuming he wasn't as slow at cleaning as he was at going around the bases. Nate smiled at the running joke and headed for the storeroom.

It was a mess and took a while to rearrange. He was glad he hadn't gone home to clean up since moving boxes caused him to sweat more than the game. He finished

restacking in time to fill his teammates' next order.

Natalie sent Nate to wiping down the tables in anticipation of more customers after he returned from delivering the fresh pitchers to his teammates.

When he'd gotten about half the tables wiped down, Ken came over and tapped him on the shoulder. "The guys want their fortune papers," he said. "When can we get them back?"

"Right now. I've got copies in the car."

"Copies?"

"Kristen needed the originals for her data to prove the P'Ceph works or something. She made copies when we moved the P'Ceph to my place this afternoon."

Ken nodded. Nate glanced towards Natalie to be sure she wasn't too busy before rushing out to his Ranger to retrieve the envelope containing the predictions. He brought it directly over to his team's table. After Nate handed out the papers, the team got up and headed for the door. Nate waved goodbye and spread out the tables they had pushed together.

A leather jacket hung forgotten from the back of a chair. Nate wasn't surprised when Shawn walked up and grabbed it. Before Shawn could leave, Nate got his attention with a nod.

"Shawn, I haven't read any of the predictions, but I heard the owner of the device marveling over yours. Can I ask you what's so special about it?" They were teammates, but not very close friends, so Nate figured he had an equal chance of success or failure.

"There isn't that much to say really," said Shawn. "You know that I'm happy working for the Parks Service. It's what I always wanted to do growing up."

"Uh-huh."

"I just want to do my thirty years and retire in some nice town like this one and spend all my time hiking and fishing. As long as I'm outside, I'm happy. Anyway, you might have heard that I date a little."

"Yeah, a little."

"OK, a lot and I haven't thought much about settling down. I've always viewed women like hiking trails—why tromp up and down the same one when the next trail is just as beautiful. I like to have a good time, but I never stay in one place too long. Well, the paper said I should settle down."

"Sounds reasonable."

"With a girl named Casey."

"I don't think I've met that one."

"No," said Shawn, getting more serious than before. "I don't think you have. You see Casey and I went to school together up in Redding. We were really good friends, but never dated. I, well, I just didn't think about her that way."

"OK." Nate tossed a nervous glance over his shoulder towards the bar, but Natalie was busy talking with a couple customers.

"We had the best time together, but I was always doing out-door stuff and she, well, she's blind."

"So? She's blind."

"Well, I get that now but back in high school I was really hung up on it. But here's the really weird part," said Shawn, leaning closer to Nate. "I haven't thought about her in years, but after that thing, printed out her name I couldn't think of anything else. You know what I did?"

"What?"

"I called her on my lunch break and guess what? She's coming to visit me, just like that. It's been a long time since I saw her, but if things go well—who knows what could happen? I can't wait until she gets here."

"That device, the P'Ceph is something else. It's a walking miracle." His voice had drawn the attention of Natalie and the people at the bar.

"Those tables aren't going to clean themselves," she shouted across the room, breaking up the meeting.

Nate began working on the next table.

"Thanks for telling me, Shawn. I appreciate it. Good luck with Casey."

Shawn nodded, walked over to the door and disappeared into the night.

Nate thought of his own prediction that Kristen still held.

What did it say?

## Chapter 14

Kristen rolled over on the motel's bed and sighed. Having Jeremy take her home after the massage last night may not have been the best decision. All she could think of where his strong steady hands, rubbing oil deeper into her tired muscles. Those thoughts plagued her through an unsatisfactory shower, though the water was still hot and she could still take her time. Her mind didn't clear until she called Nate to come pick her up, so she could get to work on the P'Ceph. It had been late last night when Jeremy finished the massage and she'd had a hard enough time just asking him to bring her back to the motel. The P'Ceph was safe enough with Nate.

He hardly said a word to her on the drive back to his house. Kristen shot a couple sideways glances to see if he was upset or sick, but couldn't tell. Nate refused to pull his eyes off the road. Back at his house, Kristen finally got a good look at Nate. His bloodshot eyes and the heavy bags under them told her everything she needed to know. She walked over to the kitchen and prepared a pot of coffee for them.

She found out that Nate had to open the store in less than a half an hour, leaving little time to talk about the P'Ceph. She drilled him about possible subjects for her



device, feeling a little guilty for pressing him so hard. Nate kept yawning. They had enough time to talk about drumming up subjects for the P'Ceph before he left. He promised to make a number of calls from the store to people he thought would be interested. It gave Kristen time to open up the P'Ceph and recheck the programs. She got through the diagnostics, which again found no errors, just before the first person arrived to be the P'Ceph's subject. All in all, fifteen people kept Kristen busy all morning with four more appointments scheduled for the afternoon. Nate had outdone himself, again.

Her growing collection of data and the generous donations left by the subjects, she continued feeling guilty about the twenty dollar charge to Nate's teammates, made her smile but the jubilant expressions lighting up the subjects' faces elated her.

Nate wouldn't be back from Mountain Sports for another half hour or so, and without someone to hook up to the P'Ceph there wasn't much to do. When he arrived, Kristen would borrow his car and zip down to Big Trees Market where a copy machine waited to duplicate all the predictions. The morning's group of subjects expected them to be ready by three. Kristen dumped out the cash from the battered

donation pitcher and started counting the money to kill time.

A car pulled up into the driveway, interrupting her count at \$142. Only a handful of change remained uncounted. Kristen tossed the money back into the pitcher and made sure the P'Ceph hadn't run out of paper. One of the subjects had received a two and a half page prediction, the first multi-page printout the P'Ceph had produced. A car door slammed outside and Kristen prepared herself to greet Nate. He was earlier than she expected, but with that crazy boss anything could happen. He might have been fired straight out. Wanting to cheer him up, Kristen grabbed the pitcher and held it out towards the door, so it'd be the first thing Nate saw.

Jeremy walked in. Kristen froze as he walked over to her, wrenched the pitcher from her grasp and headed to the table. He reached into the pitcher with his right hand and pulled out a large clump of bills.

"Hey! What are you doing here? That's not yours!"

"It's a loan," said Jeremy. "I stopped by your motel and couldn't find you so I came over here. Don't worry about the money, you know I'm good for it." He let go of the pitcher above the table, causing Kristen to stop and desperately grab it before the remaining money spilled

across the table. Loose change was all that was left.

Jeremy was already in the kitchen, the money out of sight, and digging in the refrigerator.

"But the money's not all mine. Nate gets some of it."

"Well, he shouldn't," said Jeremy, turning back towards her with a soda in his hand. "You made the P'Ceph. I don't know why you let him have any of it."

"He's earned it, especially with all the people who've come by today."

"Humph."

Kristen watched as Jeremy gave a hard kick to the refrigerator door and walked back towards her.

"What's wrong? Did something happen at work?" she asked, deciding to drop the issue of money for the time being. She came over to stand next to him at the breakfast bar.

"Well," said Jeremy, looking into her upturned face. "It's just the same old shit."

"Do you want to talk about it?" asked Kristen, nodding her head over to the table and the chairs scattered around it. Jeremy shrugged.

"I guess I'm just frustrated with the crew," he said. "We've been working for a long time together, and I just can't stand their shit anymore. The goofing off, the lame

excuses about leaving early or arriving late and the whining about working long shifts just pisses me off. I'm not sure I can handle much more of this crap, before I just throw it all away. You know what I mean?"

She relaxed.

"I know exactly what you mean," said Kristen. "It's one of the reasons I'm here, besides the vacation. This guy at work, Paul, and I don't get along. I was just about to kick him right in the ass the last time I saw him. We both were working on the new encephalograph that I'm getting my Ph.D. for and he almost drove me away from the project two or three times. Of course, I think he was doing it on purpose. Your crew sounds lazy but not vindictive."

"You don't know them like I do. They know what they're doing."

"Well, maybe you should take some days off. Go on vacation. My interrupted trip couldn't have happened at a better time, because if I had to work one more day in the same lab with that butthead, I'd have gone postal. I'm just glad my part of the project is done."

"Postal, huh? Ak-47 and everything?"

"Would have blown him back to the stone age," she said.

"I bet. Well, at least, you know what I mean."

A knock on the screen door interrupted them and Kristen turned to see who it was. A stranger dressed in a U.S. Parks uniform stood outside on the doorstep. Kristen smiled.

"Shawn send you?" she asked.

"Yep. He said you had a device better than the best tarot card psychic in the world." Kristen motioned him in.

"I wouldn't say that, but people have been pretty happy with what it's told them. Did Shawn tell you how this works?"

The man nodded.

"Stick suckers on your the head, type a bit, read the printout and pick up a copy for good the next day. Sound about right?"

"You got it," said Kristen. She began to stick the electrodes to the man's forehead. As she stuck the second electrode in place, Jeremy slid over to the futon and sat down. Practice took over and soon she was manipulating the man's thick hair and sticking the electrodes to his scalp without thinking about it. She took another electrode in her hand as she noticed Jeremy toss a book back towards the wall where the rest of the books were stacked. It hit a pile towards the middle, causing the

stack to teeter and then fall across the carpet. Another book already held Jeremy's attention.

With the last electrode in place, Kristen said, "All right. Time to start typing." A minute later, Kristen left the man to the questions, moved the pitcher of cash to the breakfast bar and joined Jeremy. She had to move a small pile of books out of the way to make room next to him. The sound of typing from the table assured her that the new subject was doing all right, so she closed her eyes and rested her head on Jeremy's shoulder. It seemed like only seconds, before Shawn's friend spoke.

"Excuse me. What do I do next?"

"That's easy," said Kristen, opening her eyes and getting up. "Press the little 'enter' icon and we'll see what the P'Ceph has for you. As soon as the P'Ceph stops printing, you can begin to take off the electrodes." The man nodded and Kristen stepped to the side to wait and see how much would be printed. The silence from the P'Ceph caused her to hold her breath, hoping it'd print. The P'Ceph, finally, began to hum and the rollers pushed the prediction out.

A feeling of elation overwhelmed Kristen. The part of her that always expected the P'Ceph to fail was always surprised when it didn't. There was something awesome

about what the P'Ceph could do, something bigger than Kristen.

She helped the man remove the electrodes and happily passed him his prediction. She turned away and busied herself with arranging the wires for the next subject in order not to stare at the man's face as he read. The first thing out of his mouth was a long breath.

"Wow," he said.

Kristen waited to see if he'd add anything, but he remained quiet.

"Everything OK?" she asked.

"No."

He sounded winded. Kristen turned to face him and, from the corner of her eye, saw Jeremy's head swivel in the man's direction.

"Is there anything I can do?" asked Kristen. The man's face was very pale.

"Not unless you're a doctor."

The man stood up, leaving the paper on the table, and walked over to the pitcher on the breakfast bar while shaking his head. He dug in one pocket for some money, found nothing and switched to the other one. A couple bills came out with his hand and he let them drift down into the pitcher. He turned and walked out the door.

Kristen watched him through the screen door until he disappeared, then turned to the paper.

A quick scan told her more than she wanted to know. She let out a quiet whistle and put the paper with the others in a manila envelope next to the P'Ceph.

"What did it say?" asked Jeremy. Kristen shook her head, and turned to face him.

"Are you going to let me see your prediction?"

"Not yet."

"Well then." Kristen scanned the man's prediction again and looked up to see Jeremy still staring at her.

"Come on. I can tell you want to tell me."

Part of her did, this prediction made the Shawn-Casey mystery seem normal in comparison. Especially considering how fit and thin the man was. Kristen nodded and read from the page.

"85% blockage of three arteries in his heart." Goose bumps spread across her bare arms and legs causing her to shiver. The next time she looked over at Jeremy, he had his nose in another book as if nothing had happened. She walked slowly across the room, forcing herself not to look back at Jeremy. Her frustration only grew. The book held his attention over everything else. Why is he not awed by the P'Ceph like me? she thought. Kristen reached the



pitcher and took a look inside from the top, a five and a one.

A truck pulled up in front of the house and Nate stepped out of his Ranger, glaring at Jeremy's Jeep in the driveway. Nate walked over to the jeep and pulled back his fist as if he planned to punch the vehicle. As if sensing that she was watching him from inside, Nate turned, locked stares with Kristen, and stomped up the walkway.

She stayed next to the breakfast bar as Nate flung open the screen and homed in on Jeremy. He ignored Nate, flipped the book he had been reading towards the growing pile on the floor and picked up another one. Nate stood trembling over Jeremy, staring down at the man with his hands opening and closing into fists.

"Get your Jeep out of my driveway," said Nate.

Kristen shot across the room to get between the two men. Somehow, Jeremy stood up without Nate giving him an inch. By the time she turned the corner of the futon, they were staring at each other face-to-face.

"What if I don't?"

"I'll..."

"Let's go to lunch," she said quickly squeezing between them. "I know you must be hungry."

"I'm not hungry," growled Nate.

"She's not talking to you, sport. Where do you want to go?" His voice remained level and calm, though he kept his gaze riveted on Nate.

"Anywhere is fine." Kristen put an arm around Jeremy and turned to walk out, but bumped into Nate, who stood rock solid. Not needing to see where Nate's attention rested, Kristen pulled Jeremy around Nate, keeping herself between the two men. She stayed between them as she guided Jeremy to the door while Nate remained standing next to the futon. Kristen leaned into Jeremy to get him moving outside. For the first time since Nate rushed in, he turned to stare at her.

"Never again," he hissed. "He is never to come into my house again."

Kristen nodded.

"No problem." She backed out of the house. "The appointments for the rest of the evening are next to the P'Ceph. There shouldn't be too many more people stopping by."

He slammed the door in her face. Kristen heard the dead bolt slide into place before turning to see Jeremy behind the wheel of his Jeep.

Kristen pulled open the passenger side door and levered herself up into place in the bucket seat.

"How about the Blue Moon Café again? It hasn't been too soon for you has it?" he asked blandly.

Kristen shrugged, which seemed good enough for Jeremy. He slipped the Jeep in gear and backed up onto the road. Kristen wondered what kind of man could brush off a scene like that and act like nothing had happened.

## Chapter 15

Nate carried the last case of beer into the storeroom, dodging the boxes of hard alcohol scattered around on the floor, and set the case next to the door leading into the bar. A single mercury light nailed above the door enabled him to distinguish the cardboard boxes from the gloom. He'd been arranging boxes of booze in the storeroom long enough to have everything memorized.

He walked back outside, took the clipboard from the deliveryman and signed off on the shipment he'd loaded into the storeroom. He knew his timing was perfect as he waited for the driver to squash his cigarette butt under his heel before taking the clipboard back.

Nate waved at the retreating truck from the doorway of the storeroom and took one last breath of fresh air. Guppies held a peculiar smell of fish and spilled beer that he hardly noticed, except after extended trips outside the taproom. He stopped in the middle of the storeroom, surrounded by darkness and reached out to his left to find a stack of boxes about waist high. He propped himself on top of a case of the Fetzer wine and took a moment to relax.

The cops hadn't bothered him all day, which was a blessing, but didn't make up for Jeremy. It had taken Nate

twenty minutes to clean up the pile of books Jeremy knocked over. The books might appear to be randomly piled against the wall, but Nate had a system of organization by content and quality, best on top. By the time he'd set everything right again, someone knocked at his door ready to be plugged into the P'Ceph. Four appointments and a rushed dinner later, the time had come to hurry over to Guppies.

Nate spent a couple more minutes enjoying the peace and quiet of the storeroom before standing up and heading back into the bar. He stopped at the stack of beer next to the door, slipped one under his arm and walked back into the bar. Already, there was a line of people at the bar waiting to be served and most of the tables were full. The jukebox blared Randy Travis. With his free hand, Nate lifted the hinged section of the bar out of the way and took his place next to Natalie. He slid the beer from the storeroom behind a few six packs already sitting in the long, multi-doored refrigerator under the bar and stood up to see what Natalie needed.

"Two Long Island Ice Teas," said a woman stepping up to the bar right in front of Nate. He had no idea how to make one, not to mention two. Today was his second day behind the bar, and yesterday all he did was fill pitchers and mugs full of beer. Judging by the number of guys

waiting to give their orders, he'd be busy doing that tonight as well. That gave him an idea.

He cleared his throat, ignoring the woman in front of him, and then tried to shout loud enough to be heard by everyone crowded in front of the bar.

"Beer only, over here!" He tried to give the woman who wanted Long Island Ice Teas an apologetic look, but she had already turned towards Natalie. A line quickly formed in front of him and he started filling orders. When his line dwindled and disappeared after a few minutes, he turned to Natalie to see how many people still needed to be served.

"Are you a one trick pony or do you think you can handle a martini?" she asked him, head bent in concentration over another drink forming in her hands.

"Sure. I can handle it."

"Really. Let's see you work, stud."

Nate smiled.

"Who wanted the martini?" An older man slid in front of him and nodded.

"Sapphire, straight up, wet with a twist." Nate looked blankly at the man's burgundy tie, his confidence dwindling away rapidly, until a reassuring hand landed on

Nate's shoulder, accompanied with a smile. "Let's take it a little slower, eh?"

"Yeah," said Nate relieved. He shot a look at Natalie, but she was already busy with another customer.

The man slowly explained what he wanted and Nate fixed him a generous martini filled to the brim. Nate counted out the man's change and was surprised when he shook his head and walked away leaving a two-dollar tip in Nate's hand.

"Another martini," said Natalie. "Need someone to hold your hand?"

"You've got some tricks you want to show me?"

"Maybe later."

Nate motioned for the owner of the order to slide on down to him. The orders eventually slacked off, giving Nate an opportunity to collect and clean glasses before running back to the storeroom for another bottle of Bacardi.

After retrieving the rum, one of the tables waved him over, so he grabbed a tray and began a long night filling orders, washing dishes, fetching alcohol from the storeroom and wiping down tables over and over again. He'd never seen Guppies as busy as it was tonight. Midnight came and went. A bunch of phone calls before coming in to work, a

suggestion jar that acted as a one dollar off coupon if you dropped off an idea or two and a quick discussion with Natalie ending in a tropical theme for tonight's drink specials added up to a full house. It didn't hurt being Friday.

Half an hour before closing, three large groups of Nate's high school friends left to go home. He made sure to stop washing dishes and wish them all a good night as they left.

"If I'd known you could bring so many, more people in on a Friday, I'd have recruited you months ago," said Natalie. Nate turned his head and smiled maniacally at Natalie. She laughed.

"I'm not out of ideas yet. Plus, the suggestions from the pitcher should keep both of us busy for a long time," said Nate motioning with his head towards the overflowing jar filled with scribbled-on napkins, "and I think I'll deserve a nice little raise."

"Little? I'll have to pay you more than I make. I'm going to have to expand your job profile." She squeezed his shoulder and headed down the bar to fill an order.

Nate finished with the glasses and left them to dry as he took another trip around the bar, piling more dirty glasses on a tray and wiping down tables. Only about a



quarter of the tables still held any people, so there were a lot of dirty tables to wipe down.

Nate leaned over to catch the far corner of a table with his rag and groaned when a jab of pain shot up his back. It'd been a long day.

Working at Mountain Ski and Sports was a lot easier than tending the bar. Still, he wanted more and Guppies had room for a partner, while Mountain Ski and Sports didn't. Nate yearned to be more than a clerk. Anyway, Natalie needed him more than Bob.

Nate carried his tray over to another table near one of the last groups working on their drinks and set to cleaning. The jukebox sat silent, allowing him to catch pieces of their conversation.

"Who cares about that," said a high-pitched female voice. "It doesn't matter at all."

"Yeah," agreed another woman who sounded like she had a cold. "Stuff that happens in the valley doesn't affect us."

"OK," said a man. "If that's too far away, what about the fire in San Andreas? Is that close enough for you?"

Nate listened more intently.

"Yeah, that's close enough, but how does it affect us?" responded the woman with the cold.

"Not the same county, but our boys went down to help with the blaze. Who do you think will pay them?"

"We already pay for them, if all they do is sit on their butts. What difference does it make if they're earning their living?"

"Well, there's gas and equipment." Nate smiled. They were just talking politics. He set down his rag and picked up the tray, now full of glasses. On his way back to the bar, Nate stopped cold at the next words.

"I heard that the sheriff knows who did it," said a man who hadn't been talking earlier. "I've got a friend in the department, a dispatcher, and she says that it's only a matter of time before they arrest the guy. Lots of evidence against him." Nate held his breath and pretended to clean the table closest to him.

"Really?" asked the woman without the cold. "Who is it?"

"He lives here in town."

The woman gave a startled gasp and leaned toward the speaker.

"Spit it out, Jim," said the woman with a cold.

"Oh, you're no fun, Jenny. The guy who torched the Sportszone was Robert Jones."

"Robert who?" asked the woman who'd leaned forward.

Nate stumbled away, heading slowly toward the bar.

Could it be true? The police hadn't hassled him all day, but that didn't mean anything. It couldn't be Bob, Nate thought. There was absolutely no way it was Bob. The guy was dead wrong. Bob would never hurt a fly. Sure, the store needed business, but Bob would never turn to arson. Nate knew that Bob's retirement paid most of his bills, and he ran the store because it was a dream of his to own a sporting goods store. The money he made only helped pay salaries and utilities. Nate was pretty sure that Bob owned the entire complex where Mountain Ski and Sports was located.

Nate joined Natalie behind the bar to put things away and wash any stray glasses. Time ticked by slowly until at three AM Nate walked through his front door and headed to the bedroom, exhausted. He lay down on his bed and closed his eyes. Fighting against sleep, Nate turned over and set his alarm for eight o'clock. He had to talk to Bob.

#

Nate arrived at Mountain Ski and Sports a little after ten, having slept through the alarm. He found the door locked. The store should be open. The parking lot of the strip mall already was three quarters full, and Nate had been lucky to find a spot.

Nate unlocked the door and headed directly to Bob's office. Having to take care of his mother, Bob tended to be late on weekends. Nate opened the door into Bob's office, realizing at the last second that Bob might be finishing some last bit of paperwork before opening the store. Nate stood transfixed by his fears until he could see that Bob wasn't in.

Nate hustled in and looked around the room for any clue that his boss might be responsible for the arson. Nothing out of the ordinary lay against the walls or under the desk, so Nate stepped around the desk and began to pull open the drawers. They slid open with just a touch, surprising Nate. The two drawers on the right side of the desk revealed nothing except receipts and Northface brochures.

Nate switched to the drawers on the left and found a Vasque catalogue. He closed the doors to both sets of drawers and leaned back in his boss's chair, wondering what he was doing.

He felt sick. He rubbed his face with his hands. The pictures of Bob's son and mother sitting on the desk seemed to mock him. Nate stood up, pushing the chair hard enough to roll back up against the wall. He'd never felt more ashamed of himself in his life.

A rogue thought demanded that he check the last drawer in the middle. He'd already looked through the other drawers, so why not take a peek at the only one he hadn't opened? It would only take a second. Hating himself for doing it but unable to resist, Nate pulled the drawer open.

A single page lay face up with three or four sentences typed on it. Nate leaned over to see what it said.

August 5

To whom it may concern:

It is true. It shames me to admit it, but I am responsible for the fire that destroyed the San Andreas Sportzone. There is nothing I can do to change what has happened, the best I can do is make peace with the situation and the world before the end comes.

Robert Bledsloe Jones

## Chapter 16

Kristen woke up and rolled away from Jeremy, throwing her legs out from beneath the covers and over the side of the bed. Realizing that a shower was an absolute necessity this morning, Kristen levered herself off Jeremy's king-sized bed and tiptoed across the room to the bathroom. She flinched as the door latch snapped into place behind her, sending a sharp crack echoing around the bathroom's walls. Having him wake and join her in the shower began to sound better and better, but she didn't hear him stir. She jumped into the shower alone.

Refreshed, Kristen stepped out of the shower and stopped. Jeremy stood inside the bathroom's door staring at her. She covered herself with the first towel she could reach and slid past him into the bedroom. He didn't move an inch, causing her squeeze through the gap left between his body and the doorframe. She emerged on the bedroom side of the door and swung around to give Jeremy a piece of her mind, only to see his naked backside step into the shower and close the door. She stood transfixed, watching him adjust the water and begin sudsing up before being able to pull herself away.

She stole one last glance at Jeremy through the door before picking up her clothes and slipping them on as she

made her way out of the bedroom and down the hall to the front room where her blouse still hung over the back of the recliner. She started a pot of coffee for the two of them and called Phil. The car was ready.

She sat down to wait for Jeremy. He emerged from the bedroom wearing khakis and a green polo shirt. He stepped outside to fetch the newspaper and when he got back, grabbed a cup for himself, before tearing into the paper. Kristen focused on her own coffee and finished it.

"Let's get my car."

"When?"

"Right now," she said.

Jeremy hesitated then asked, "Can I finish reading my paper?"

"The whole thing or just the front section?"

"How about the front and business sections?"

"Sounds fine."

Kristen stood up to fill her mug of coffee and brought the pot along with a trivet to leave on the end table between Jeremy and her. He held out his mug and before she set the pot down, she obligingly filled it up. A minute later, Jeremy put down the paper neatly on the floor and stood up.

"Shall we?" he asked, holding out his hand for her to take. She reached up and was soon walking out the door in front of Jeremy, purse in hand, ready to go pick up her car and make her way to the cabin for the day. The P'Ceph would be safe in Nate's house and she could spend the entire day on the lake enjoying the bright sunshine and cool waters without a care in the world. With a spring in her step, Kristen headed for Jeremy's Jeep.

They arrived at the mechanic's shop a few minutes later and parked around back. Kristen got out of her side of the Jeep, ready to tell Jeremy she'd take care of it, but Jeremy took off towards an open service bay. Kristen watched him disappear into the bay and shrugged. She headed around to the office, stepping into the air-conditioned room, and looked for someone to help her. There was no one in the office.

Kristen pressed her face up against the glass square embedded in the door to the bays, but could only see a few cars hoisted up in the air and two men talking on the far side of the bay-Jeremy and Phil.

The men spoke for a minute or two, the mechanic up against an iron support with Jeremy hovering over him. When they turned towards the office the mechanic's face was pale, except for bright red blotches across his cheeks.



Jeremy followed him to the office. Kristen cleared her throat.

"How much?"

"Two hundred, I mean one hundred and, um, fifty."

"Are you sure? Only a hundred and fifty dollars? I expected to be twice that much?"

"Well," said the mechanic focused on Jeremy. "Yeah, that's it. Got a special on parts and easy access and all."

She glanced back and forth between the two men as she counted out the money on the countertop. She took her keys, spotted her Prelude parked outside and left. She had her door open and was just about to slide in when Jeremy walked out of the building's shade into the sun. He leaned on the open door, staring down at her.

"What now?" asked Jeremy.

"Over to Nate's to pick up my stuff and then off to Lake Alpine. With any luck, I'll be at the cabin before noon."

"I've thought about what you said yesterday about vacations and I think I should get away. Would you mind the company?"

Kristen thought about last night and smiled.

"Not at all."

Jeremy nodded and turned to go to his Jeep. Kristen slid behind the wheel of her car and shut the door. By now, she knew her way around town and was confident she would lead the way to Nate's house. She drove over to Jeremy's Jeep, waved and then jumped on the highway. She pulled into Nate's driveway, yanked on the parking brake and got out of the car. Jeremy parked directly behind her. A stranger waited on Nate's porch.

"Can I help you?" she asked, walking up the concrete path that led to the door.

"I don't know how," said the man. "Nate was going to read my future or something, but he's nowhere to be seen."

"I'm sure you can call Nate and reschedule. He shouldn't be gone for long." The man took a step towards her and stopped as Jeremy came up beside her. He opened his mouth to say something, but clamped his jaw shut and headed across the grass without another word. Kristen looked up into Jeremy's face, but saw nothing in his placid features. Kristen lowered her gaze in time to catch a scared look thrown at her by the stranger before he climbed into a beat up Citation and sped away.

It took the two of them only a few minutes to get her suitcases out of the house and into her car. After the last trip, Jeremy led the way up to the door and stepped

inside before Kristen reached the front porch. She followed him inside, wondering what he was doing and half expecting him to raid the refrigerator again. He stood next to the P'Ceph.

"Does it matter if you just unplug it or do you have to shut it down first?"

"I usually shut it down first, but it's already off. It doesn't matter though. I'm leaving it here. It's time for a vacation from my vacation."

"Are you sure? Is that the best way to go?"

"What do you mean?"

"It'd be better for us to take it, safer."

"Why?" asked Kristen.

"Because Nate's too busy with his new job to baby sit the thing any longer and apparently has better things to do than helping more people find their way in life. You don't know that much about the kid and, even if you take it, you don't have to work on it. I say take the P'Ceph so you'll have nothing to worry about and can relax. It's yours after all. Right?"

"Of course."

"Then what's the problem? Let's pack it up."

"OK," said Kristen. "But first you owe Nate some money."

"I don't see why you insist on giving the munchkin anything. It was your device the made the predictions."

"I made a promise which I intend to keep. I may never see Nate again, so I'm going to take care of business now. Fork it over."

Jeremy stared at her unmoving.

"Don't you still have the cash?"

"Sure, but..."

"Then give me, say, \$75." Kristen stared patiently at Jeremy until he dug into his wallet and pulled out a stack of bills. He counted out the money and offered it to her. Kristen took the stack, added three more twenties to the pile and placed it on the table.

"What's the extra cash for?"

"Let's just say that I feel bad about fleecing his teammates. Now, we can go."

"We can toss the P'Ceph in the Jeep," said Jeremy.

"No. It fits in my back seat."

"Sure. It's your choice." Jeremy picked up the P'Ceph without a glance to the pile of bills next to it. Kristen led the way to her car, holding open Nate's front door and then the Prelude's back door. He tucked the P'Ceph into the back seat and Kristen headed back to lock

the door. She slipped Nate's house key off her key ring and into the mailbox next to the door.

She hastily scribbled a note that said, "Dear Nate, I'm off to Lake Alpine and I've taken all my stuff. Thanks for all your help the last couple of days. I left your portion of the donations on the table with a little bit extra. Take your teammates out for pizza after your next victory on me. Good luck with Guppies and the bartender." Kristen tucked it between the screen door and the molding.

She walked back down the concrete path and called out to Jeremy as she approached her car. He stuck his head out of the driver's window of the Jeep.

"Do you need anything from your house before we head up?"

"Nope. I've got some extra clothes in the Jeep and whatever else I don't have I'll just borrow from you."

Jeremy disappeared back into the Jeep, moved it out of the way, allowing Kristen to back up. She couldn't wait to be at the cabin, up in the high Sierras walking along the shores of Lake Alpine, all alone with Jeremy.

## Chapter 17

Nate sped through town. Stop signs and traffic lights grew distant in his rearview mirror as he kept a constant lookout for cops, wanting nothing to impede his progress to Bob's house. The note weighed heavily on him. He conjured up a multitude of suicide scenes that became more and more gruesome the closer he got to Bob's house. He felt sick.

Screeching the truck's tires, he angled across the highway, cutting between a couple campers. The sharp left turn sent his back tires spinning for purchase and the Ranger started to slide as he breached the mouth of the side road. A correction to the steering wheel and a tap on the brakes steadied the truck and allowed him to accelerate again. He shot down the lane, staying in the middle of the road long after the yellow hash marks had disappeared.

A few startled faces appeared out of the shadowed gloom blanketing the small stretches of lawn and summer gardens. Saying a quick prayer was all the caution Nate could afford as the last turn to Bob's house appeared over a rise in the road.

Nate hit the brakes causing the Ranger to fishtail across the road. He resisted the urge to jerk the wheel back and forth to control the weaving bed and held it steady. Breathing a sigh of relief, he turned on to

Saddleback Drive and sped up. There were no more turns, but Saddleback stretched along the hill's ridge for a couple miles before Bob's driveway. Nate checked his watch, 10:27 AM, and pressed harder on the accelerator.

Fewer houses and driveways dotted this stretch of road, allowing Nate to push the speedometer over 60. In six years working at Mountain Ski and Sports, Nate had only been up to his boss's house a handful of times—a couple backyard barbecues, a Super Bowl party, a blown water pump on Bob's car and the graduation party for Bob's only son Rob.

Feelings of guilt assaulted Nate when Bob's mailbox came into view. The old pair of wooden skis, propped up and nailed against his mailbox, stuck out toward the road and sported bright A's and 49'er banners off the tips. Without someone to change them, it wouldn't take long for them to fade and fall apart. Even though every ounce of his being screamed at him to speed up, Nate slowed. The turn into the driveway was sharp and angled back towards the way he'd come.

Nate came to nearly a complete stop as he turned on to Bob's driveway and ground his teeth as he crawled up the one lane gravel driveway. He navigated around each switchback, cursing each twist and turn. He slipped around

the last turn, revealing a section of Bob's two-story house at the end of a miraculously straight patch of driveway. A second later, a spray of gravel heralded his arrival as bits of chewed up granite clicked against the walls of the garage. He jumped out of his truck, leaving the motor running and the door open, and shot towards the back door.

Nate flung the door open, ready to sprint towards the stairs that led to the second floor and master bedroom, but stopped dead in his tracks at the sight in the kitchen. Wearing a dark green bathrobe and holding a cup of coffee in one hand while reading the local newspaper, Bob sat at the kitchen table. He stared at Nate, but his gaze remained unfocused. Overcoming the shock of finding Bob healthy and eating breakfast, Nate took a seat opposite Bob.

Three-day-old stubble lined Bob's jaw, accenting his tousled hair and dazed expression. The two men stared at each other across the table; the only sound between them an egg timer counting down the minutes.

"Bob, are you OK?"

"Yes." The normality of the response sent a shiver along Nate's spine.

"Good," said Nate. "So, how about those A's?"

Bob stared back as blankly as ever.



"Taking a day off from the store?" asked Nate.

Nothing.

"Bob, what's going on?" Nate stood up and began to walk back and forth across the hardwood floor. Bob kept silent.

"Damn it, Bob. What's going on? There is no way, no way at all, that you had anything to do with the fire in San Andreas. It's just too far away from here and you're always busy with your mom on Wednesday nights. Plus, it's not who you are. You'd never do such a thing. So why, why did you leave that note on your desk? Why?" Nate slammed his palms on to the kitchen table, staring intently into Bob's face while willing him to snap out of the trance. He rammmed his fists against the table again.

"This doesn't concern you, Nate. Leave it alone."

"But it does."

"Nate."

"Why are you doing this? Why are you throwing your life away? It doesn't make any sense."

"I have my reasons," said Bob, taking a sip from his coffee and steadily returning Nate's gaze. "It'd be best if you just left, Nate."

"First Jeremy and now you? What did I do to deserve the two of you?"

"Jeremy who?" Bob's gaze focused more intently on Nate.

"Jeremy Jones, for all I know. You're both stubborn enough to be related. I can't remember his last name. He's dating a friend of mine and is a royal pain in the butt."

"Sounds familiar. What does he look like?"

"Who cares? I want to talk about you, not Jeremy. Why won't you answer me?"

"Tell me about Jeremy, Nate," persisted Bob.

Nate wanted to scream in his face, but succumbed to Bob's steady gaze and calm voice. Maybe he could turn the conversation back to Bob and get some answers if he played along.

"Oh, I don't know. He's older. I mean older than me, but not older than you—late thirties or so. Dark hair, built and I think he works construction. Does this have anything to do with you and the fire?"

"No. He wouldn't be Jeremy Bracken, would he?" asked Bob.

"Maybe, I don't know. Bob..."

"Well if it is him, I'd be careful dealing with that guy. His company built the store and I saw what he was capable of."

"Like what?" Nate couldn't help being curious.

"I saw him pick up one the construction crew and throw the man a good six or seven feet. The funny thing was he didn't appear mad, at all. If I hadn't seen him toss the guy like an empty bag of Readymix, he would have fooled me completely. You see, he helped the guy up like nothing..."

"Who cares, who cares, who flipping cares? You still haven't told me what's going on. What reasons could you possibly have to admit to a crime you didn't commit?"

"Again, it is none of your business. It's time for you to go."

What the hell was he doing? Why won't he tell me? They were like family and Bob always bent over backward for family.

The thought struck a chord deep inside Nate, causing him to leave the kitchen and step into the middle of the family room. Everything looked the way he remembered it—the rustic fireplace, the leather sofa, a floor-to-ceiling cabinet hiding the TV and Bob's favorite recliner. Still, something was missing. Nate scanned the room again, but couldn't put his finger on it.

He glanced towards the kitchen and found Bob watching him. Nate looked along the mantel and froze. He bent his neck to lay his head along the mantel's surface for a

closer look at the wood and saw a mark. A few feet away toward the other end of the mantle, two marks in the dust formed a flattened out V that opened out to the room.

"Nate, you've been a good employee and a friend, but I won't say this again—leave."

Nate ignored Bob, darting over to the end table next to the sofa and took only a second or two to find another five or six-inch long strip free of dust. His gaze swept the room again, paying more attention to the walls. There, a rectangular spot on the wall where a picture used to hang. Nate found the nail that used to support the picture still imbedded in the wall. He hastened back to the kitchen.

"Bob. Is Rob in trouble? Did he do anything wrong?"

"Nate..."

"Bob! What did Rob do?"

Nate shot around the table, grabbed Bob by the shoulders.

"I want to help, but I can't do anything if I don't know what's going on. Is Rob in trouble?"

"I've told you," said Bob. "This doesn't concern you. Now if you refuse to leave, you will never work in my store again and I'll call the police to have you removed."

"You wouldn't!"

Bob stood up.

"OK, OK. I'll go."

Nate had no idea where Rob lived, but couldn't risk Bob calling the cops. Even if he went back to the store and got rid of the confession, it wouldn't be long before the sheriff came up here and Bob could lie to them in person. If only he knew what to do, he might be able to help Bob out. He needed insight or guidance to help him find a way to save his boss from spending the next 5-10 years in prison.

Nate made his way back to the Ranger. It wasn't until he was back on the paved road heading towards town, his bumper rattling in the background, that Nate was struck with an idea. The P'Ceph. That's what it was supposed to do, help people find a way to be happy. Damn! He'd have to race home, pick up the P'Ceph and bring it back to Bob's place. The questions might be tricky and who knows if he could convince Bob to use the device, but Nate could see no other choice. He only hoped that he could convince Bob to give it a try.

The trip back to his house felt like hours, but only took a few minutes before Nate rushed up the walkway. He flung open the front door and peered inside. A scrap of paper fell to his feet. Angrily, Nate snatched up the

note, nearly tearing it as he pulled it taut between his clenched fists. His eyes scanned the note.

Dear Nate,

I'm off to Lake Alpine and I've taken all my stuff. Thanks for all your help the last couple of days. I left your portion of the donations on the table with a little bit extra. Take your teammates out for pizza after your next victory on me. Good luck with Guppies and the bartender.

Sincerely,

Kristen

Finished, Nate tore it a part.

He cursed his luck and began stomping around his dining-living room, circling the futon and the table. Stacks of books tumbled across the floor from repeated kicks. The table received a stout blow from one of his fists. He scattered the pile of bills onto the floor.

"What am I going to do? Where is she? If she left, her car must be fixed," he told the walls. "Maybe the mechanic knows where she went."

Nate ran out the door and jumped back in the Ranger. Minutes later, he screamed to a halt in front of the

mechanic's and jumped out. He ducked inside and found the head mechanic standing behind a counter drinking coffee. The man wore a spotless pair of navy coveralls and a bright green Interstate Battery baseball-cap. His mouth twitched into a grin from within a thick, well groomed goatee.

"Have you finished with Kristen, uh, Kristen Schouler's car?"

"You don't look like a Kristen," said the man behind the counter.

"She's a friend. I'm trying to find her. It's an emergency."

"Kristen Schouler? How do you spell that?" The man turned to a stack of papers behind him. "Never mind. Here's the receipt for the work we did. She picked up her Honda an hour or so ago."

"Damn! Did she say anything about where she was going?" "Nope. Not that I recall." A strange expression crossed the man's face.

"Are you sure? I really need to find her."

"Why?"

"Because, because her mother...she owes me money."

"Well, I don't know about that, but I'll tell you this," said the man leaning forward. "That fellow she was with is bad news. He threatened me, pushed me up against a

girder and promised to make life difficult if I didn't give that woman a discount on the work we'd done."

"Yeah, sure. But did you hear her say? Anything?"

"I've got a friend in the sheriff's department who is already on his way here. Nobody treats me like that, especially in my shop. Are you a friend of his?"

"Hardly."

"Good, because if I have my way he'll be behind bars before sundown."

"Yeah, fine. Wouldn't bother me a bit. But did they say anything about where they were headed? Anything at all? Your cop friend's going to want to know too."

The mechanic stroked his goatee, but shook his head.

"Did you see which way they went?"

"That's easy." He hooked his thumb up the road.

"They headed up the road as merry as you please." Nate shot out the door. He looked up the road, scanning the cars and slapped his forehead. They probably left here to go pick up the P'Ceph. He had no idea where they would be now. He looked up and down the road, unsure of what to do or where to go. Cars streamed by in both directions, not a Prelude or red Jeep in sight. Nate had to trust to luck.

Nate jumped into his Ranger and headed uphill, hoping to see Kristen's Prelude parked at some restaurant or gas



station. He slipped in behind a couple of cars, eyes sweeping back and forth. The small shops and buildings that lined the other side of the road began to dwindle, and Nate found himself outside of town. Without a safe place to turn around on the narrow two-lane road, Nate continued to drive up the hill, waiting for the first opportunity to make a U-turn.

At a wide spot in front of a mileage sign, Nate pulled off to allow a car behind him to pass before he headed back to town. Just as that car passed, a full 18-wheeler crawled around an uphill corner with a long string of vehicles behind it. Nate smashed his hands into the steering wheel and cursed.

There was nothing to do but wait for the entire procession to pass by, so Nate stared up the road waiting for the last one. Car after car after car appeared, until Nate gave up and rested his head against the wheel. Where could she have gone? he wondered. He peeked out through one of the gaps in his steering wheel at the mileage sign. The top locations were blocked by the steering wheel, but he could clearly see the final destination—Lake Alpine 25 miles.

## Chapter 18

Kristen breathed in the familiar pine scent and shivered in delight as a tiny wave washed up around her ankles. She waded deeper into Lake Alpine. Snow melt fed the lake throughout the summer from patches of snow tucked away between rocky crags higher in the Sierras. For thirty years, Kristen returned for the ever-present chill and deep clarity of the waters. She came back to reconnect with the place. With only the small one lane road skirting the north side of the lake and the rustic cabins scattered about the hills, the lake-filled valley continued to offer a placid escape for her.

She turned her back on the lake and spied Jeremy reclining in the shade of a fir tree. He held a small branch in his hands, sharpening one end with a Leatherman. Flake after flake of wood jumped from his blade to bounce off of his jeans or fall directly to the pine needle covered ground. She shivered and stepped out of the water into the dense shadows along the shore. A light breeze rushed across the lake and brought goose bumps to her arms and legs.

"I'm going to head back to the cabin," said Kristen.  
"I need to check some things on the P'Ceph."

"I thought you wanted to enjoy your vacation, not bother with it?"

"Well...OK, I admit it. I'm addicted to the thing. I'd probably go crazy if we had left it in Arnolds. I'm glad you talked me into bringing the P'Ceph."

Jeremy continued sharpening the branch. She hesitated next to him as she walked by, bending down to peck his cheek but he whittled away paying no attention to her. Kristen shrugged. This was his vacation too, she thought. If he wants to whittle, more power to him. She started back to the cabin, walking leisurely through the patches of brilliant sunlight and dark shadows.

Few people were around in the campgrounds, already having left to go fishing or swimming. Kristen cut through the camp, keeping a respectful distance away from the camper's tents and picnic tables strewn with supplies. She crossed Highway 4 to begin the ascent up the gentle slope to the cabin. In the distance, the green metal roof blended into the surrounding pine needles, unlike the yellow monstrosity that was their neighbor's roof.

Mounting the river rock stairs up onto the deck, her breath came in short gasps. She pushed open the front door and walked in, suddenly blinded by the gloom, but safely

navigated around the kitchen counter and stools to reach the refrigerator for a soda.

Her eyes adjusted quickly as she sat down at the kitchen counter ready to get to work. With the flip of a switch, the P'Ceph hummed to life in front of her. A few minutes slipped by before she lost herself among the different databases and programs. Every so often, she stopped to spend a few minutes taking down notes on statistical data pulled out of the P'Ceph's buffer.

The sun marked off the time as shadows lengthened over the rustic cabin and the darkness inside deepened. A faint glow showed under the door to the bathroom, brightened by rays of sunlight pushing past the curtains to its single western facing window. Kristen shivered in the quickening cool of the mountain evening, grabbed a blanket off the back of a rocking chair nearby and returned her focus to the lightly glowing screen of the P'Ceph. The small rectangle cast her face in a pale, unhealthy glow.

A creak from the porch outside heralding someone's approach was followed by the front door's cast iron latch rattling loudly in the cabin's silence. Kristen remained fixed on the screen. The door popped open and Jeremy stepped inside. He shut the door, turned to face her, flashing a large grin. The sharpened branch dangled

loosely in his left hand, until he placed it next to the P'Ceph when he walked past.

"Little dark in here?" Jeremy headed to the fireplace. A couple steps across the brown linoleum floor brought him to a light switch that he flicked on. The naked bulb hanging from the bare rafters flashed to life. Kristen looked over to Jeremy crouched in front of the fireplace and shook her head. She got back to work for a while without any more interruptions, unconcerned by his behavior.

"Come over to the fire," said Jeremy. "That can wait." "I'll be there in a minute or two as soon as I'm done."

A moment later, the P'Ceph's screen went dark.

"That can wait," said Jeremy standing on the other side of the counter with the power cord dangling in his hand, a pleasant yet firm expression stretched across his face. He picked up the sharpened branch, pointing it directly at her.

Kristen reached for the cord, but Jeremy let it drop pressing the branch's point against her palm. She instinctively tried to grab the stick, but he pulled it away before her fingers closed around the point. Jeremy reached out with his empty hand and grabbed her wrist.

"Hey!"

Silently, Jeremy pulled her around the countertop. He poked her in the stomach with the branch and smiled.

Kristen rolled her eyes and let herself be pulled over to the fireplace then down next to Jeremy. She stared at the flames dancing in the fireplace.

"What now?"

Jeremy stayed quiet. With a flick, the branch disappeared into the flames. The fireplace crackled, sending up a pillar of sparks only to have them settle down into the flames a moment later.

"Did you hear me? Well? Did you?"

"Yeah, I heard you," said Jeremy. "I was just thinking." "Anything you'd like to share?"

"Sure. I was thinking about your favorite conversation topic, the P'Ceph."

"Really?"

"Yep."

"What were you thinking about?" Kristen asked.

"Well, it seems to me that we should mass produce it."

"What do you mean 'we'?"

"Well, it can't really do that many people any good if they can't get access to it. What use would the telephone or TV be if everyone couldn't have one in their home?"

"The P'Ceph is not a telephone or a TV. But just for argument's sake, what makes you think mass production is the right way to go?"

"It's the most logical thing to do. It would be a snap. Take it apart, make a list of the components, order them and start throwing them together. An easy swap of operating systems through a USB port and there you go. We'd make millions."

"Whatever. You still haven't answered my question. Why is mass production the right way to go?"

"In construction and anything else, for that matter, if you can't make tens or hundreds of units, you don't make any money. Think of Georgia Pacific. They wouldn't make any money if they didn't produce millions and millions of boards. Dewalt couldn't keep a roof over their head if they didn't make enough routers, orbital sanders or circular saws to fill every Home Depot from here to the East Coast. Mass production has been the way of the world, at least the US, since Ford."

"You have a point, but you forget one thing. You don't have a say in the P'Ceph. What in the world made you think you did?"

"Well. A certain scrap of paper showed me the way."

"Oh really. Why don't you prove it and show me this certain scrap of paper."

"It's out in the Jeep. I can..."

"Wait. That's right. It doesn't matter. The P'Ceph is not going to be mass-produced and turned into the next prize for some jumbo happy meal. It is mine and only mine. I can't believe you. Where do you get off thinking that you can dictate what I do with my P'Ceph?"

"Darling. You're not thinking clearly. You should really listen to me. I know what the people want. I've lived side by side them my entire life. And you, well, let's be honest. You've been sheltered and living in the college world. This is the real world. I know what's best, for me and you."

"How dare you? I haven't been living in the real world? What cave do you consider the real world to be hiding in these days?"

"Please," said Jeremy. "What do you know about the real world? Have you ever been one bounced check from being homeless? Have you ever had to fight for what you wanted? Struggle for each small step you made in a business, so cutthroat that crews from other companies will steal anything left at a site that isn't nailed down. What in your life hasn't just been handed to someone like you?"



I'll bet you've never worked a single honest day of your life, got you nails dirty or sweated away in the sun. You don't deserve the P'Ceph."

"Get out." Kristen jumped to her feet.

"Excuse me."

"You heard me. Get...out!"

"But..."

"How dare you tell me what to do? We've had a little fun, but we sure as hell aren't married. Even then, I wouldn't take this crap. I'm heading back to Davis on Monday and after some more work I will decide what happens to my P'Ceph. You hear me! I will decide!"

He stared blankly at her. A calm expression settled across his face as Kristen glared at him.

"Get out!"

"I think you need some time to think about this," he said rising slowly. "I'm sure if you really think about it, you'll come around."

Kristen fell back a pace and shot a glance at her purse. Jeremy placed his hand on her shoulder, tightening it mercilessly until tears fell from Kristen's eyes. With a quick jerk, he dragged her over to the narrow stairs to the second floor.

"Don't make this harder on me than it already is. I'm doing this for both of us. You need a steadying force in your life and that's me. You need someone to push you and challenge you to use the P'Ceph so it will help the most people. That's what I'm around for."

Jeremy pushed her up the stairs, reached past her, opened the door to the west bedroom and flourished his free hand to invite her into the room. She walked in and planted herself on the double bed, keeping her eyes locked onto his limpid gaze. Seething, Kristen waited.

"You'll see that my way is the best way in no time. Oh, and don't try anything silly. I'd hate to have to get forceful." He wagged a finger at her and left, closing the door behind him. As his footsteps creaked down the stairway, Kristen scanned the room for anything she could use as a weapon. Nothing.

"Remember I can hear you as well as you hear me."

She was stuck.

## Chapter 19

Nate walked through the deepening gloom, searching each cabin for signs of Kristen. He had been walking around Lake Alpine all day, trying to catch a glimpse of Kristen or her car. He never realized how many cabins were up here. A few naked bulbs shined at him from the left and the right, but mostly the dirt lane was deserted. None of the cabins could be reached directly from Highway 4; they depended on dirt roads that snaked up the hillside between stands of douglas fir and pine trees. A few cars butted up against the scattered cabins with lights brightening up their interiors. No Preludes or Jeeps in sight. Nate trudged on.

Car lights shone a hundred yards ahead of him on the dirt road, bringing trees and boulders into sharp existence in the distance. The headlights moved back and forth along the curving road. Nate hoped those lights belonged to Kristen, but the front grill of a big Ford truck appeared instead. He stepped to the side of the road to let the truck pass, shielding his eyes from the bright headlights.

Nate flicked on his flashlight after the truck passed as the darkness enveloped him. He slapped the light against his thigh. At first, a weak light spilled forth, but another harder collision brought out a bright beam.

The light dimmed a little when he raised it to point in front of him, causing the road fifteen feet ahead to blur. It didn't lose anymore power as he swept it from side to side, beginning to despair that he would ever see the P'Ceph again.

More cabins passed by in the gathering night. The gurgle of water cascading over an unseen log or rock to his left caused him to stop and glance at his watch. He moaned and tilted his head skyward. The bar would be really busy by now, and Natalie thoroughly pissed. Saturdays were her busiest days. Nate rubbed his temples as he shuffled forward, hardly looking for Kristen's car. The flashlight beam fell on his dusty shoes, creating a puddle of light for him to walk in.

Nate faltered in the middle of the road, torn between heading back to his car and continuing the search. He glanced pleadingly up to the stars but received no helpful inspiration. A minute passed as Nate thought over his options. With a nod, Nate turned back to the surrounding cabins and stumbled forward. He had only one choice.

"Bob needs me more than Natalie." He strode forward more confidently with each step, swinging his flashlight from side to side. Two, then three cabins passed by in the concealing darkness. On his right, a Jeep and a Prelude

materialized. The soft hues of a fire leaked out the cabin windows the cars were parked against.

Nate hesitated, then walked forward, stopped, moved towards the revealing windows again and turned back to the road. He wrestled with the desire to rush in, but didn't want to walk in on something romantic; there'd be no chance to get the P'Ceph if he did that. He paused back on the dirt road, thinking. He suddenly realized he needed the Ranger to transport the P'Ceph. It'd do no good to barge in with it still parked over near the lake. With a definite course to follow, Nate headed down the hill to Highway 4 and his car less than a mile away.

He made quick time back to the truck and retraced his route. Shining his high beams into the cabin, Nate took his time turning off the engine and getting out of the car. He stumbled along the irregular rock path around to the front door. He peered through the glass panel set into the wood, saw no one and knocked—no response. He hoped they hadn't gone to bed. The P'Ceph stood out on a nearby counter, bolstering his spirits.

Another glance revealed the same roaring fire, couch and rocking chairs. He knocked again loudly, wondering whether to try the latch or knock again. The fluorescent lights in the kitchen burst into radiance, causing Nate to

look away. A second or two later with his sight back, Nate turned to see Jeremy open the door.

Jeremy took a step towards Nate across the door's threshold, blocking the entrance. He crossed his arms, staring intently off into the distance. Nate tried to speak, but found his throat rather scratchy and coughed to the side. Nate smiled the best he could.

"Jeremy. Where's Kristen? I need to talk to her."

"She's asleep."

"Then, wake her up. I really need to talk to her."

Jeremy said nothing.

"It's not that late. Come on. I'll take the blame if she gets upset. It's important."

"Hmmm. No. Shouldn't you be tucked in bed by this time of night, sport?"

"Now look, Jeremy. We may not see eye to eye, but I have to see Kristen. The sooner you let me in, the sooner I'll be gone. So stand aside."

"I believe that I said no. Kristen is asleep and if you had any manners, you would leave. Come back in the morning."

"Look, this is really important. It sounds corny, but a man's life is actually at stake. All I need is a couple

of minutes to talk to Kristen. She won't be mad, or at least she won't get that mad. Only then, will I leave."

"And I don't care. I'm not going to bother her. Take your really important problem back to Arnolds and bug someone else." Jeremy took a step back into the cabin and swung the door forward.

"Hey!"

Nate stepped forward blocking the door with a foot and caught its frame in his hand. He pushed violently against the door with his shoulder. Unprepared for the shove, Jeremy fell back another step before he could stop the door. Nate braced his left foot against the wooden runner at the base of the doorframe and pushed with all his might.

"Get out of my way," he said, giving one last push that opened enough room for him to slip into the cabin.

"What's wrong with you? Where's Kristen?"

"I said she's asleep."

Nate ignored Jeremy, already across the room. He pushed open a door to find a bathroom and the next one revealed an empty bedroom just before Jeremy pulled him back into the main room. Nate flung his arms around, slapping Jeremy's arm away.

"Where is she? Kristen!"

"I told you," Jeremy said. "She's asleep. She retired upstairs about two hours ago."

"You're telling me she went to bed at 7:30? Hrmph."

"We had a long, strenuous day. Quite invigorating and tiring, something I'm afraid you'll never experience."

"Shut up."

Nate shot a look above and saw a catwalk extended across the length of the room but nothing else. He stepped to the side to get a better look and caught sight of Jeremy coming at him low and fast.

Jeremy slammed into his ribs and sent Nate flying. Bright sparks burst in Nate's vision as his head and shoulders rammed into a wall. He dimly saw Jeremy straighten up, smiling down at him. One fleeting thought about Bob going to prison slid through his head before darkness closed in around him.



## Chapter 20

Kristen sat Indian style on the full sized bed and stared out through the windows, wondering how she could get out of this mess. An hour, or more, had passed since her banishment upstairs. She cursed herself for not carrying her cell phone, even though the cell coverage was worse here than Arnolds. There was no clock in the room. She had lots of time to think about Jeremy, how he had changed and what he meant by saying his prediction had told him what to do. Could the P'Ceph advise to assault and imprison someone? Her curiosity towards his prediction and what it might say had helped to pass most of the time.

She wondered whether Jeremy had fallen asleep or still remained alert. Kristen stayed in place the last part of her plan crystallizing in her mind. When not thinking about Jeremy, she had wondered how to get free. Rushing him was out of the question, seducing him made her skin crawl and waiting for the cavalry to come might take forever. Soon, she would enact the only plan that had a chance: open the window, toss off the screen and hope the ground below provided a soft landing. The problem was opening the window. Kristen had already inched both sliding panes up, but the right squeaked and the left pane jammed in the sill. Kristen waited.

Time slipped by slowly, the only sounds emanating from downstairs were the sizzle and crackle of wood. Disgusted with looking outside, Kristen pulled her attention back to the bedroom and looked around. Twin beds on iron frames, a wooden chair and an old throw rug were the only things at hand—nothing that could help her. Kristen jerked her attention back to the outside world, crinkled her nose at the scenery and knew she had to act soon.

She leaned close to the other window, placed her elbows together on the windowsill and her hands on either side of the frame. She took a deep breath and began to push. The window didn't budge. Her hands tightened on the window while shoving hard with her right. The pane shifted with a loud clunk and moved up a couple inches. It stopped four inches higher, jammed again in the frame. Kristen pulled air in over her clenched teeth and waited for any indication that Jeremy had heard. As calmly as she could, she counted to twenty before returning to the window for another shove.

This time, Kristen meant to stop the window before it hit the opposite side and stuck again. A quick glance and a moment's held breath to listen before she gripped the window's wooden edge and gave it a push. This time when the window jerked upward, she kept it from rattling in the

frame as she tried to guide it smoothly to the top. It slid up without incident until it came to the top and stopped. Kristen wanted to shout for joy, but she still had to deal with the screen.

She popped the two hook latches from their eyebolts at the bottom of the screen and let it swing a couple of inches out away from the frame. She turned away from the window, reached with her arms over her head to grab the screen as she let her torso fall back on the bed and windowsill. She wormed her way backwards across the bed until her head and shoulders stuck out of the window. Her right foot threaded between the bed's iron headboard for support.

Kristen angled her hands down to the base of the screen and pushed out as far as she could, trying to make enough room between the screen and the cabin to free the screen from the brackets above. The right one came free, causing Kristen to grunt when the ungainly screen tried to swing out of control. She hefted it back, pushing it up and out to get the other side loose. The sound of a car coming to a stop near the cabin reached her ears, distracting her enough that she hooked the right side back onto its bracket.

She let out a curse and focused on the screen. Growing more and more frustrated, Kristen pushed out to her arm's limit and tried to maneuver the hooks away from the brackets. A slight scraping sound came to her ears, but Kristen didn't stop; she was so close. The screen might be free or it might not. It definitely had tired out her arms so Kristen bent her wrists to pull the screen away from the building and almost cried out in joy when it swayed free.

A moment later with trembling hands, Kristen put the screen gently on the end of the bed and breathed out a sigh of relief. She flipped her sandals off, and before she could change her mind, let them drop out the window to the ground below. One landed next to the wall and the other lay right under the window.

A loud, wooden crack echoed up from the main room and Kristen froze. It sounded like one of the stairs creaking or might be something else. She couldn't take the chance of having Jeremy walk in on her now. Silence greeted her ears as she strained to hear any more sounds from below. Taking a last look at the door, Kristen slipped her feet out the window and started to inch her body out.

As her hips bumped across the windowsill, Kristen prayed that the ground below would be kind. Another inch and she felt her legs and hips start to pull her out of the

window. She fought off the immediate panic of falling to the ground and allowed her weight to drag her further out the window. She stopped. Balancing on the sill with her breasts uncomfortably pressed against the wood, Kristen let go of the bedframe. One hand at a time, she transferred them to the sill readying herself for the hang and plunge. Slowly, Kristen slid entirely out the window to hang from the sill.

She heard another loud rap from below-someone was knocking on the front door. She thought about yelling for help, but realized she would look like a lunatic hanging from the windowsill. Better to drop to the ground and then call out.

She heard a muffled noise from inside an instant before letting go. She hit the ground, tried to roll and fell. Her left ankle rolled under her. She bit down hard on her lip. Rolling onto her back, Kristen forced her breathing to steady while willing herself to stand up. She tried to call for help, but couldn't manage anything above a whimper. It took a few moments before she felt ready to call out or move. She levered herself up, using the cabin for support, until she stood on one leg with the deck an arm's length away. The person at the door might be one of Jeremy's cronies, she thought. I'll need to check. She

lightly set her throbbing left foot down in front of her and stepped forward.

The pain was sharp, causing her leg to buckle but not before she got her right foot under her and caught herself on the waist high deck. Breathing shallowly, she forced herself to remain standing until the pain ebbed. She caught a glimpse of a man entering the cabin, but the darkness and ache from her leg kept her from seeing clearly. It hurt more than a sprain, but a lot better than a broken ankle. She'd probably only tore a bunch of tendons and ligaments. The cruel irony of needing to move fast, being in shape to do so but screwing up an ankle, forced a thin smile to spread across her face. No one said life would be easy.

Kristen took another step, holding on to the porch and felt less pain. A third, fourth and fifth step convinced her that she could walk to the lodge if Jeremy had called a friend. She hated to leave the cabin occupied by Jeremy, fearing what he might do if he found her missing but decided she didn't have a choice. She stumbled to the corner of the deck and stole a quick glance back into the cabin through the front windows, preparing to make her way down to the road. She froze.

Jeremy stood looking right at her, moving away from the kitchen counters toward the bathroom.

The need to run overwhelmed her, but she couldn't take her eyes off Jeremy as he stepped away from the kitchen and continued across the room, focused on something else. She saw his lips move.

She remembered the knock and the man going through the front door. Her ankle hurt more than she wanted to admit, making her head spin and thinking hard. Kristen hunched over to hide behind the deck and shuffled her way towards the front door to get a better look. His guest might not be a friend and could still help Kristen if she caught his attention when he left. She was curious who the stranger was. Five steps from the corner with only her head peaking over the deck's floor, Kristen recognized Nate standing under the catwalk. She gawked in amazement.

She watched Jeremy lower a shoulder and rush Nate. She wanted to yell out and warn Nate, but didn't dare open her mouth. The collision propelled Nate out of sight. Jeremy walked past where Nate had stood and disappeared behind the window curtains. This was her chance. She could stumble down the hill to the lodge and get free of Jeremy, but she would have to abandon Nate. Kristen shivered in the cold night, shooting another glance through

the cabin's front windows. There was only one thing she could do.

Kristen fell to her knees and began crawling across the front of the cabin, the deck blocking her view of the cabin. She got to the stone steps leading onto the deck, held her breath and peaked back where Nate and Jeremy had disappeared. If she could reach her purse, there was a chance. The door stood open, inviting her to try.

She saw Jeremy bend over, realized there would be no better time and feared what he would do to Nate. Clutching the stone steps, Kristen pulled herself to the top and hobbled towards the door. Her purse still sat on the far counter of the kitchen a long way away, but also far away from Jeremy. She got through the door, only limping a little in the rush of adrenaline, slipped past the kitchen counter and reached her purse before looking over at Jeremy and Nate. Her eyes locked on to Jeremy's as he let a boneless Nate slide back to the floor.

"You know what I said. And your lipstick isn't going to help you."

Ignoring him, she dove into her purse, tearing open the top to dump out its contents on the kitchen counter.

Kristen popped the top of her can of mace and pointed it at Jeremy. She held onto the canister and prayed that



the five- year-old device would still work. He stepped into range, either unaware of the mace or unconcerned.

She pressed the firing button, spraying across Jeremy's chest. Jeremy brought his arms up, just before Kristen angled the stream into his face. He stumbled back a few steps. Kristen pressed forward, aiming the spray to coat his arms and chest until Jeremy jumped back out of range.

"Bitch. Why couldn't you just behave?" Tears streamed down his face. He rubbed them with his palms and backed further away. Kristen, leaning on the counter for support, moved out of the kitchen to stand in front of the P'Ceph with the can of mace trained on him. She wished she caught him full in the face, sending him to the floor. She waited, keeping an eye on his slowly retreating form. Kristen looked for Nate in the corner, only to see toppled card tables and strewn magazines where his body had lain.

"The P'Ceph will only collect dust in your hands," croaked Jeremy. "We could have been rich. My contacts and your device would have made us millions. But you had to have it your way. Be stubborn and keep your precious little jewel close, so no one else could benefit from it and be happy. No you're too selfish. And now, I'll have to..."

A metallic gong rumbled through the cabin, followed by Jeremy lurching forward. Kristen didn't question what she saw; she acted. A few stumbling steps brought her near the reeling Jeremy and she sprayed mace directly into his face. He howled and fell to the floor, clutching his eyes. A weak shove sent Kristen over against the back of the couch before he fell to the ground.

Nate came out of the downstairs bedroom with a metal stool hung from his hand. He stepped next to Jeremy and swung the stool down into the back of his head. Another gong echoed through the cabin. Jeremy lay unmoving.

"Are you all right?" he asked. His words were slightly slurred.

"Yes."

Nate nodded and lurched over beside her to lean heavily on the couch.

"Why are you here?" asked Kristen.

"I need the P'Ceph. Bob's in trouble and I need some advice I can count on."

She looked down at her feet, covered in dirt and slipped to the floor. Nate reached out to help her, but whipped his arm back to clutch the couch.

"What's wrong?" he asked, breathing fast with his head hung.

"My ankle. I badly sprained it. But that's not it."

"What?"

"I'm not sure I can let you borrow the P'Ceph." She looked up into his eyes and saw confusion and betrayal written clearly across his pain filled face.

"Why?"

"I'm not sure you can trust what the P'Ceph says."

## Chapter 21

Nate sat in one of the rockers watching two sheriff deputies haul Jeremy out of the cabin. Their squad car sent blue and white flashes through the windows from the back of the cabin. There had been little to do or say after tying Jeremy up. Kristen had stepped out on the deck to use her cell phone, leaving Nate to watch over Jeremy. Nate had grabbed a rocker and pulled it next to Jeremy before sitting down. Her worries about the P'Ceph still echoed in his mind. After it printed out Shawn's prediction, Nate had assumed the kind of advice was always positive. The chance the P'Ceph gave destructive advice never crossed his mind. He felt lost.

He wanted to rush back to Arnolds to help Bob, but would not leave Kristen alone with Jeremy. Plus, one of the sheriffs had told him to stay put until they had a chance to question him. Images of Bob in jail kept flashing through Nate's mind. After awhile, Nate saw himself sitting next to Bob looking out through bars—the Inspector's demand that he stay in town weighing heavily on his mind.

"What happened here?" said one of the sheriffs, causing Nate to glance up.

"Well," said Kristen.

Nate turned towards the almost completely dead fire and hoped that was all that the sheriff wanted to know. Telling the deputy why he was here would be dangerous. Nate focused on the fireplace, though the remaining embers barely glowed among the ashes under the iron fireplace grate. He stared transfixed at those ashes while Kristen's voice droned on behind him. After a while, Kristen fell silent.

"What is your account of the incident, Sir?"

"Well, I knocked. Jeremy opened the door and I asked to come in. He tried to keep me out, but I forced my way in. After demanding to see Kristen and looking in the bathroom and bedroom, he tackled me and threw me against the wall." Nate vaguely pointed in the direction of the collision. "I was dazed but came around, grabbed a stool, and slammed it into the back of his head. Kristen hit him with mace and Jeremy fell to the floor. I hit him one more time and he was out. Kristen and I tied him up with the twine you found around his ankles and wrists."

"Anything else?"

"Not that I can think of."

"Your full name is?"

Nate hesitated for a second, but sighed when he realized he had no choice.

"Nathaniel Fischer."

The sheriff wrote down his name on a notepad and stopped. Nate watched as the sheriff flipped through some pages, double-checked and looked again at Nate.

"You weren't supposed to leave town."

Nate considered lying, begging or running, but just nodded weakly.

"Why?" asked Kristen.

"They think I torched the San Andreas Sportzone. They've been on my case for the last three days, but didn't bother me at all yesterday. I hoped I was no longer a suspect."

"Oh."

"Actually, Nathaniel," said the sheriff. "You are no longer a suspect for that crime. It broke late last night and is all over. I heard about it when I came on shift this afternoon."

"What? What happened?"

"A Robert Bledsoe Jones, Junior turned himself in for participating in the vandalism that occurred two days ago against Mountain Ski and Sports."

"What? Robert Bledsoe Jones Junior? Rob?" asked Nate. "I don't understand."

"While making his statement, Mr. Jones admitted to helping out a Miss Ruby Ann Wood buy and place gasoline canisters around your cottage in an attempt to point blame at you for the fire in San Andreas."

"Ruby? But why?"

"It seems that Mr. Jones Junior has fallen head over heels for Miss Wood. He confessed to driving her to Mountain Ski and Sports for her to throw eggs against the windows and later that evening a rock. His part in the fire seems to be mostly tangential. He apparently bought the flares and gas canisters, but lacked a solid alibi for the night of the fire, which his girlfriend used against him. He'll only have to spend a few months in jail instead of years for his part in the arson. And even that depends on the judge."

"So Bob had nothing to do with it?" said Nate to himself. "Nothing at all. Robert Senior, or Bob, was never a suspect. He had a watertight alibi guaranteed by one of our retired officers at Shady Glen Retirement Villa. We only talked to him once, trying to figure out where Rob was the night of the fire. From what I hear, he seemed to figure it out and got real tight lipped-kind of spacey."

Nate shook his head in disbelief.

"I've got your information and we will be in touch if anything else is needed. Otherwise, you shouldn't be hearing from me again. When the trial comes around, the local D.A. will give you a call," said the sheriff to Kristen. "As for you, I've got your information as well and will need you to come down to Angel's Camp tomorrow to make a formal statement about the vandalism and Miss Wood."

"OK. When tomorrow?"

"Anytime. There is an officer on duty 24 hours a day. Thanks for your cooperation." The sheriff shook Kristen's and then Nate's hand and left. Nate leaned against the door, dazed.

"I guess you don't need the P'Ceph after all," said Kristen.

"No. I don't," said Nate.

"I want to thank you for helping me with Jeremy. You've been my mountain guardian angel ever since we met."

"Well, I, your welcome," Nate stammered. "What are your plans now?"

"I'm heading back to Davis as soon as I pack up."

"So soon?"

"I love this place, but I don't really want to be alone here, right now."

Nate nodded.



"Need any help packing?"

Kristen smiled and shook her head.

"I guess I'll say goodbye then." He hesitated, holding his hand out to her but then gently put his arms around her. Kristen warmly returned the hug. He let go a moment later, and head for the door without looking back.

The night felt cool when Nate stepped out of the cabin. He hadn't realized how stuffy the cabin had been. He looked at the stars hanging overhead, bright pin-points of light and followed the deck around past the kitchen. When he stepped even with the kitchen door, the top of it swung back into the cabin and Kristen stuck her head out. She held a piece of paper.

"Here's your prediction," she said, extending her hand out to him.

He looked at it, rubbed the back of his neck for a second and took the paper from her. With a nod, he walked away.

#

Nate walked into Guppies a minute after midnight, holding his head in his right hand. Customers surrounded the bar with Natalie struggling to keep up with the orders. Only a few tables stood empty, most of them crowded with customers. The jukebox screamed out a Motley Crue song,

adding to the intensity of the spike of pain centered above Nate's right eyebrow. He staggered over to the bar.

"Excuse me. I work here. Let me through please. Come on." Nate hefted up the hinged section of the bar after two customers cleared their drinks from the panel and slid over next to Natalie.

She glared at him, turned away and did a double take. She gingerly reached out to touch his face and stopped.

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah. Sorry I'm late."

"Are you sure you're all right?"

Nate nodded and turned to fill an order. A large bruise was forming over his right temple where he hit the wall. His head throbbed, he felt nauseous, but he kept working the bar until only a few patrons remained huddled around it. A trip around to all the tables brought him back to the bar with a tray heavily laden with dirty glasses. He took a short break, filling a glass with soda and drinking it down in one long gulp. The sugar and caffeine helped a little. By the time he finished cleaning the dirty glasses, dried and put them away, another trip through the bar was necessary. The night wore on slowly.

After last call was announced and all the customers left for the night, Nate sat down on a barstool and laid

his head on its polished wood. Natalie set a bag full of ice next to his head and leaned back against the wall behind the bar. He rolled his head to the left and pressed the bag against the growing bruise on his face.

"What happened?"

"It's a long story and I really don't want to go into it."

"Well get into it or start paying the cover the next time you come back here."

Nate tried to shake his head, but winced.

"It's been a long day."

"I've got time."

Nate lifted his head and repositioned the ice pack.

"Well," said Nate. "I thought Bob had torched that store in San Andreas, so I went over to his place and found him unresponsive. I realized he was taking the fall for his son, after seeing all the missing pictures in his house. He also had left a confession in his desk at work. Whether he expected the police to find it or he planned to send it in, I don't know."

"What'd you do?"

"Well, that woman had a device that predicted futures for people." Nate pulled out his prediction from his back pocket and flattened it against the bar. Natalie stepped

closer and bent over the paper. She turned the paper around to read. "She kept the thing at my house, so I zipped home to find the device and all her stuff gone. A couple misadventures later, and I'm up at Lake Alpine looking at all the cabins trying to find her."

"That must have been fun. Do you really want to be a fireman?" said Natalie, pointing at the paper.

Nate laughed and then grabbed his head.

"I guess that device wasn't too good, hmmm?"

"Yeah. Well, I finally found her but ran into her boyfriend who had gone a little psycho and locked her upstairs. He knocked me out and when I came to, I hit him over the head with a stool."

"I didn't know you had skills useful in a bar besides lugging cases. I'll have to give you a raise now."

Nate smiled.

"I thought you wanted to hear all the gruesome details?"

She shrugged and indicated for him to continue.

"Kristen, the woman, sprayed the psycho down with mace, I knocked him out with a second blow and we tied him up. An hour and half later, the cops had dragged him away, taken down statements and let me leave. I came right here."

"You know, I wouldn't have fired you for trying to help a friend and being knocked around like that, but a phone call would have been appreciated. It only takes a second."

"Sorry, mom."

"That's not what I meant or what I want." She gazed steadily at Nate, before he had to turn away.

"I'll remember next time. Do you need help cleaning up?"

"No. I'll take care of it." She grabbed a couple rags and heading around the bar.

Nate headed for the door.

"You forgot something. You might want to frame it to keep the memories alive." Natalie held the prediction in her hands.

"Throw it away for me?" he asked.

"Sure."

Nate stopped halfway out the door and turned back to Natalie.

"I don't need some machine to tell me how to be happy. I already know where I want to be and who I want to spend my time with."

Natalie smiled. Nate let the door close behind him as he left the bar for the night.

06-30-03

00:29

Subject Reference Number 5739312964

Psychological Encephalograph

Beta Version 3.5

Subject Recommendations:

1. A problem faces you whose answer will direct the rest of your life.
2. Place your trust in past successes.
3. The answer will come from the confidence existing deep inside you that has pushed you along in life.
4. Learn from your mistakes in the mountains, but don't let them stymie your drive and openness.
5. Success lies down a long difficult road with many failures and few successes.
6. Your strengths lie in measurement and precision.
7. Follow your strengths to a rich and fulfilling career and emotionally complete life.
8. Zho will present you with the right choice to take.
9. Work only on the things you can control in the laboratory.
10. The academic life offers the most rewarding path for you to choose.
11. Follow these tenets and you will be happier than ever before in your life.

Patent Pending  
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