

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Karen, Fuzzy, James, Brigitte, Lianne, and Elaine.

*A very special thanks to my family.
John for his ongoing support,
and Brenda for her ongoing inspiration.*



The Pretender

**A Marcie Noel Novel
By J. A. Burke**

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Chapter 1

Friday, April 16, 2083

Dr. Roper picked up the telephone and tried to relax. He dialed the number. This patient was a lovely young woman. He couldn't help but wonder to what fate he was sending her. The telephone rang once. Roper settled back into his office chair, starting to feel a bit more confident now that he had made the decision to make the call. *She's a homebody. She'll be there.* He read, from the conclusion of the legal document on his desk, General Directive to Canadian Physicians from the Government of Canada: "Physicians, therefore, are required to report any and all patients conforming to the criteria above. Patients who have suffered any of the following diseases are exempt from this directive...."

"Hello?"

"Hi there. Dr. Roper here."

"Oh doctor. So good to hear from you."

"I don't have anything definitive to tell you; so let me apologize for that right off. We need you to come in for more tests."

"Sure, when do you want to do them?"

"That's up to you. These tests are extensive; so you have to go into the hospital."

"That's a little scary. I've never been in the hospital."

I'm sure you haven't. "This kind of procedure usually has a waiting list months long, but I've had a cancellation for this weekend. Would you like to take her place?"

"Yes, I would really appreciate that. I hate waiting."

"All right. Go to the McMaster University Medical Centre tomorrow morning at ten a.m."

"But that's in Hamilton."

"Yes, it's a bit of a hike, but it means no waiting. Report to Admitting on the main floor. You'll have to stay over night."

"Over night?"

"Don't worry. You'll be done by Sunday afternoon, okay?"

Roper held his breath. *Is she turning me down?* He was surprised. She was dedicated to having a child.

"Okay." The voice was uncertain, a bit tentative. *Like she knows something.*

"Fine, then. We'll see you tomorrow."

"Fine. Oh, and doctor?"

"Yes?"

"Thanks so much. You don't know how much this means to me."

"No problem. Good-bye."

"Bye."

Roper hung up the telephone and looked at the two men sitting across the table from him. They were shady types. Roper was surprised they were working for the government. The older man with the salt and pepper slicked-back hair actually gave Roper the creeps. He looked capable of anything.

Roper raised his eyebrows. "Okay?"

"There's just one more thing, Doctor."

Saturday, June 19, 2083 10:00 a.m.

Marcie Noel couldn't help but feel a little full of herself. This move would definitely be a move up. Looking out the floor-to-ceiling bedroom windows, she could see the city laid out in front of her. It reminded her of just how small she was. *Wow. What's the view from the office?*

She walked into the bare room that would be her home office and stared out another floor-to-ceiling window that displayed a magnificent view of the lake and the city at the same time. She could

put her desk right in the centre of the room, run the cable through the floor, and have this beautiful vista to stare at while she was working. Darn sight better than what she had now.

This condo was fantastic: a large two-bedroom with solarium, huge bathroom, squash courts, gym, swimming pool, PA landing pad and parking on the roof. And it had a nice roof lobby. So few buildings had that yet. Marcie looked around. It seemed a little stark, a little antiseptic. Perhaps a coat of paint? She frowned. What's bugging me about this place? Marcie couldn't put her finger on it. She didn't feel completely comfortable.

Kerri Belson, the realtor, coughed politely, signalling her entrance into the room. She was a short, beautiful woman, with blond hair, blue eyes, and an earnest face. She looked barely thirty, but was ten years older, and she was tops in her field; Marcie settled for nothing but the best these days.

"Did I tell ya or did I tell ya?"

Marcie smiled and turned to her. "Oh yeah. It's perfect. Far from the madding crowd."

"But...?" Kerri let the question hang in the air.

"But, what?"

"There's something you're not sure of?"

"Maybe it's the newness of the building. I'm used to a place with a bit more, well, character."

"Don't tell me you're really going to miss the bums on Queen Street?"

Marcie laughed and shook her head. "No, I won't miss the bums, Kerri."

"Right. So, you want to place an offer."

"Absolutely."

Marcie was a private investigator whose clientele drew from Toronto's rich and trendy. She was also a reformed hacker. In her teens, she won the annual Hacker Deface Contest three years in a row. She was famous in some circles. At twenty-five, part of her was embarrassed by these achievements and part of her was so proud, she wanted to put it on her resume. Of course she couldn't. She was

lucky she'd smartened up before she'd turned eighteen. She had no criminal record. Criminal records don't help your creditability in this business.

"When do you want to take possession?"

"Now, of course." Her 'phone beeped quietly in her ear, signalling a caller. "Excuse me." She turned back to that spectacular view and pressed her neck lightly under her right ear lobe. "Marcie Noel." She wasn't sure she liked being so plugged in, but it was either in or out in her world. She'd rather be in.

"Marce, hey, it's me."

She hated that. She worked hard to try and place the voice, but she couldn't figure it out. She never understood why people assumed she would know who was calling.

"Me who?"

"Dave Welsh."

"Sorry?"

"From the Oxygen Bar on Thursday night."

Heck, this was Saturday. Did he expect her to remember that far back? And jeeze, she talked to, oh, hundreds of people each day. *Dopey me.* But she still didn't remember him.

"Sorry?"

"You are some piece of work." He sounded irritated.

"Sorry?" Sometimes, she disliked being Canadian. It seemed to limit her vocabulary, especially when she was supposed to be saying f-you.

"I bought you the drink. The fuzzy navel."

"Mr. Welsh. I don't drink fuzzy navels, and I think you're confused." She had been at the Oxygen Bar on Thursday night, but she had had nothing to drink. She was working, meeting a client. Dave Welsh? No bells. She'd never met this jerk. She sighed. *Just some reporter trying to get info on a client.*

"Well, then how did I get your number? Answer that."

She hung up. She simply couldn't figure out a polite way to say f-you; so she opted for a lesser insult. Her 'phone code was in every book in the great city of Toronto, on three billboards, in various

in-print newspaper adverts, and splashed all over four websites. She had just started an advertising campaign that she hoped would bring in a lot more business. That's how a fledgling business turned into a real going concern. Besides, she wanted a bit of a challenge. The daily grind had gotten a bit boring. *Hmmm. I wonder where he got my number.* These kinds of calls were coming in more frequently: hangers-on, gold-diggers, wanna-knows, reporters wanting information.

When she started this business, she prided herself in being on the frontline when dealing with clients. When you called Noel and Associates, you got Marcie Noel right off, no waiting. Customer service is how you build a service business. But it was getting too irritating and counter-productive to answer the 'phone. She was going to have to start routing all calls through the office. Perhaps it was time for a new personal code as well?

Kerri caught her look. "Who was that?"

"I don't know. He said his name was Dave Welsh."

"That's funny."

"What?"

"I know a Dave Welsh."

"Great, who the heck is he?" Kerri laughed.

The 'phone beeped again. Marcie decided to ignore it. She tapped her neck under her right earlobe twice. The beeping stopped. The system would take a message.

"The David Welsh I know I went to high school with. I haven't a clue what he'd be up to now."

Marcie just smiled and shook her head. "Oh! I have some questions about security."

"Shoot."

"How many views can I have of the roof?"

"Only the one."

"And the ground lobby?"

"Only the one. A complete list of security features is here if you want to study it." Kerri handed over a four colour glossy brochure on the building.

Hmmmm, I'll have to install a few cameras of my own.

"Thanks." She hugged the brochure and looked around one more time. *Maybe it's just cold feet.* "All right. Put the offer in."

"I'll have to warn you: This purchase will be competitive."

"Kerri, I don't care about the price, really. Just get it for me."

"Okay."

"Oh, I'm definitely going to change my 'phone code over the next few days. Call the office if you're looking for me."

"Sure."

"Okay, that's it then?"

"That's it. I'll fax you the papers. You just need to sign them and fax them back."

"Fine. See ya."

Marcie lightly tapped under her ear twice again and walked out of the room. She surveyed the main room one more time. A small dining area, but a lovely large living room. *Perhaps I'll spend a little more time relaxing. Maybe it's time to enjoy the spoils.* She turned to leave. As she stepped out the door, the 'phone beeped again. Marcie answered.

"Marcie Noel." She walked down the hallway toward the elevators.

"Ms. Noel. My name is Steve Turner. I need some help."

"What's the problem, Mr. Turner?" Marcie punched the button to call the elevator.

"It's my wife. She's missing."

"Missing persons isn't my specialty, Mr. Turner. I have a friend I could refer you to."

"Well, I'm not being clear. I actually think I know where she is. I...I need your help." The elevator came and Marcie stepped in and punched UL for Upper Lobby. She really liked that. She would never have to touch the ground.

"Sounds like you need a divorce court."

"No. I need your help, Valhalla."

Well, a computer friend, then. Valhalla wasn't her hacker name; it was the nick she used currently and only in one chat room – protected and monitored, a place where former hackers met and swapped stories. Currently, it was called safeinmyarms.com, but the domain changed frequently, sometimes weekly. Marcie waited to see what he had to say before she decided what to do. He invoked the name, but that just made her listen; it committed her to nothing.

“What kind of help?”

“Will you meet with me, please?”

She considered it. She hated face-to-face meetings, but she felt an obligation due to their shared connection. “Well, as my mother would say: How can I turn down such a polite request? Where?”

“How about the Oxygen Bar?”

“The Oxygen Bar?” She was nonplussed.

“Is there a problem?”

Marcie didn't know what to say. She didn't like coincidences; they made her feel out of control. “Yes I think there is. Meet me at the Eight Ball.”

“Okay. Thirty minutes.”

“Sure.”

Marcie stepped out of the elevator into a very nice, if a little small, Upper Lobby. She retrieved her keys from behind the desk, making a mental note never to leave them behind again – no doorman in sight. She went out onto the roof PA pad and got into her little ‘plane. She powered up and waited a minute or two while the vehicle ran through a lengthy, pre-flight check, then she backed to the centre of the PA pad. She put the PA on auto and said clearly: “Eight Ball Lounge” into a microphone on the dash. Then, she sat back while the vehicle connected with Flight Control. She could have made this jump without Flight Control if she liked – it was very short, but Marcie wanted to relax. It was Saturday after all and besides, it was prudent to keep a record of client meetings. Control confirmed her destination and the PA received a flight plan in about ten seconds. Then, the PA took off on its own, moved into the lower and slower

intra-city stream of traffic without a hitch and headed north to its destination.

The skyline had risen steadily over the last hundred years, but Toronto was still a beautiful city. The newly opened Don Valley Cycling Park (it used to be a highway) cut a swath of green all the way to Newmarket. Toronto maintained its reputation for cleanliness and friendliness and, amongst the world's great cities, Toronto was consistently ranked as one of the top five. Marcie loved living here.

She enjoyed the view while she considered buying a new PA; so she could get the Remote Start-up feature. Then, she could initiate the warm up sequence with a device she could carry on her person and the vehicle would be ready for her as soon as she got to it. *I hate waiting.*

Saturday, June 19, 2083 10:30 a.m.

Very few places were interesting at ten thirty on a Saturday morning, but the Eight Ball was one of those places. Hugh Pale, the owner, ran one of the city's best billiard tournaments every Saturday starting at eight. Most of the players hadn't gone to bed from the night before. By ten thirty, a few rounds were generally done and three quarters of the players had been knocked out. It was starting to get interesting.

Marcie came down the stairs from the roof and found a good stool in the observation lounge. She had a view of the top seed table and could also clearly see the bank of television vidscreens on the wall. Fun. She ordered a cappuccino and watched. Her ‘phone beeped again.

“Marcie Noel.”

“Steve Turner again, Ms. Noel. I'm here, but I don't know what you look like.”

Marcie turned to look at the front door. There was a man there, tall, dark hair, coffee and cream skin, plain khaki pants and off-white t-shirt.

“I'm over here by the observation window.” She waved. He looked her way and waved back.

She tapped her neck to disconnect the ‘phone and her coffee came. She looked back at the billiard game in progress. The top seeds were a couple of players she didn’t know. They were both young and lanky and very serious, but one was clearly out of his league. He was about to be knocked out.

Turner joined her as the waiter left. Marcie tore her eyes from the game, turned around and smiled at him. She pegged him at mid to late twenties. He looked very much like a suburban husband, bland and nondescript, which he probably was. She held out her hand.

“Marcie Noel.”

He shook. “Steve Turner.”

“Sit down, Mr. Turner.”

He sat, but looked uncomfortable. Marcie smiled again, trying to set him at ease. “Do you want some coffee, Mr. Turner?”

“No. No thank you.”

Marcie waited. “Well, what can I do for you, Mr. Turner?”

He sat for a moment, considering. “I need to get into a computer.”

Marcie looked at him levelly. “I don’t do that anymore, Mr. Turner.” Her ‘phone beeped. She was annoyed with him – everyone in safeinmyarms knew that she was no longer hacking. *Why is he wasting my time?* She decided to take the call. “Excuse me.” She turned away and tapped her neck. “Marcie Noel.”

“Ms. Noel, my name is Steven Turner.” *What?* Marcie schooled her expression and took a moment to breath. “Are you there?”

“Absolutely. No, I’ll go higher than that.”

“What?”

“I heard you. What else?”

“I wanted to warn you that someone is running around pretending to be me and he’s asking a lot of questions about you.”

“I understand completely.”

“No! You don’t.”

“Yes I do. Okay? Let me know if there are any more offers.”

“He’s with you now, isn’t he?”

“Oh, yes.”

“All right. There’s no reason to believe me, right? We’ve never talked on the phone. Just get him to confirm this week’s password to safeinmyarms. He couldn’t’ve stolen it from me. It’s only in my head.”

“Right. Okay, call me later.”

“Talk atcha.”

“Thanks. Bye.”

Marcie looked back at the man on the stool beside her. Suddenly, he looked a little more threatening than he had before. How does some schmuck from the suburbs crack ‘safeinmyarms’, find out about Turner, and get to me? What could a guy like that really want? She was intrigued. She savoured the feeling. *Who is this guy?*

“Look, I don’t mean to be rude, but I’m a businesswoman and I want to stay in business. I can’t screw up. There are thousands of good hackers out there with no reputation and nothing to lose. Go find one.” She dropped a few dollars on the counter in front of her and slid smoothly off her stool.

“I have a lot of money.”

“You couldn’t pay me enough. Besides, I’m still not sure you are who you say you are.”

“Ask me anything.”

“How do I know you?”

“Through a hacker chat room currently called safeinmyarms.”

“Fine. Tell me the password to ‘safe’.”

“8Xcr1502mlK5.”

Very old password. Almost three days. She had to fake it. She smiled as if a little relieved. “I hate face-to-faces, don’t you.”

“Yeah.”

“Look. You know me. I don’t do this anymore. You have to know that I wouldn’t risk everything. And besides, it’s likely if you can’t hack it, I won’t be able to get in either. Find someone else.” She knew she sounded sincere. She was proud of that little performance. She almost believed it herself.

“I’m sorry. You have to come with me. You have to help me.”

Marcie looked down at the gun he was suddenly pointing at her. She ran everything through her head as quickly as she could. This man is not Steve Turner. If this man were a policeman of some sort, what he had just attempted was called entrapment, which is plain stupid. If this man were a criminal of some sort, he just introduced a weapon in plain sight in a bar that’s completely wired, which is extremely risky and plain stupid. Therefore, this guy is stupid or desperate or an amateur or all three, which means he’s a most unpredictable and dangerous animal. She didn’t want to call for the cops, they tended to be no help and then charge the PI with public mischief. The Toronto cops were not supportive of the city’s burgeoning PI force. They thought PIs were a nuisance; the less there were the better.

Besides, Marcie was intrigued. She wanted to know what was going on. Why was this obviously average guy so desperate? There was a good way to find out without anybody getting hurt: call in the cavalry. She dropped her right arm casually and tapped her outer thigh at arm’s length three times. Tap, tap, tap. Her emergency call procedure. There was a small device installed in her outer thigh that instructed her phone to speed dial one number. Most people who had this feature installed usually called 911.

This guy was so stupid. He didn’t pick up on it. ‘Steve’ gestured toward the front door. “Please. I’m serious.” Actually, he looked a little insane. Marcie complied.

She wasn’t calling 911. She was calling Robbie McLean, a good, long-time friend, and an occasional employee. Robbie didn’t ask questions, accepted any reasonable payment, and was a pro. He was also a very large man who could subdue anyone. He was so good, she considered him her insurance policy. The call went through.

“Yeah,” answered Robbie. *Good.*

“Where are you taking me?” Marcie spoke in a clear voice.

“Can’t tell you that.” *Because you probably don’t know, you idiot.*

“Hello, sugar. In trouble again, are we?” said Robbie. “Don’t you worry your pretty, little head. I’m tracing.”

Great. He was home, only a few blocks away. She could hear him tapping away in the background.

“What mess have you got yourself into now, sugar?”

“Well, who are you then? You should at least tell me that. I know you’re not Steve Turner.”

“Can’t tell you that.”

“He can’t tell you anything.” Robbie sounded calm, almost relaxed. “Oh, I gotcha. On my way. I’ll only be a few minutes. I want to transfer the homing signal to my palm.” Robbie had a small computer installed in his right hand that worked for limited tasks like homing signals. It cost him a lot of money. It was flexible, didn’t affect the function of the hand and looked like real skin, until the display came on. Then, it was a bit creepy looking. “O-o-o-kay. Got it. See you soon, sugar.”

She heard the connection die and suddenly felt very alone. ‘Steve’ was practically shoving her across the room in his haste to get to his PA. She moved as slowly as she thought she could get away with. She hated hand-to-hand combat despite almost fifteen years of karate. Her mother had been very clear that a woman should be able to defend herself, while all the while telling her daughter that the best fight was the one you ran away from. Marcie could almost certainly take him, but he was so agitated he might fire that weapon by mistake and hurt someone; like her, which wouldn’t do at all.

They got to the stairs and Marcie started walking up slowly.

“Hurry up! Goddammit!”

He grabbed her arm and pushed her forward. *Great. Control freak.* They got to the roof and he practically carried her over to a PA that reminded her of its owner: bourgeois, suburban, and nondescript. He opened the pilot’s door and shoved her in ahead of him, never letting go of her. She had to admire his single-mindedness.

She bruised her knee and scraped the other ankle as she tried to climb into the front passenger seat. PAs weren't built for acrobatics. He sat down and shut his door. Normal start-ups took a few minutes. She toyed with a single well placed punch to the head, but decided to wait. Robbie would be along.

'Steve' inserted his keycard and punched the engine into life. He pressed a series of keys that started the pre-check sequence. He looked agitated, hurried. He was making mistakes, swearing. Finally, he successfully initiated the start-up. Then, he remembered to point the gun at Marcie. She almost laughed. The vehicle ran through its safety checks and beeped. 'Steve' programmed his destination and waited for the vehicle to beep clearance from Flight Control. Marcie shook her head. This whole thing could be traced. He didn't even have the sense to do an uncontrolled jump.

Suddenly, the pilot's door opened without warning. A big hand reached in and yanked him out of the vehicle and down to the ground. 'Steve's' gun clattered harmlessly on the tarmac. Marcie leaned over and hit the "KILL" switch. The PA powered down and was silent. She grabbed the keycard, jumped down out of the passenger side, and walked around the vehicle. Robbie had 'Steve' up against the side of the PA, arm locked behind his back, face pressed hard against the driver's side window. *Serves him right.*

"What do you want to do with him?"

Marcie looked at 'Steve'. She was definitely annoyed, but something about his desperation intrigued her. She honestly couldn't remember being this interested about anything in a long time.

"I think I deserve to know what's going on here. Can I offer you a cup of coffee, Robbie?"

"Oh yeah. That would be nice."

"Uh huh. And how about you?"

She turned before "Steve" answered and ignored him when he called after her. She got into her own vehicle, sat down, sighed, and said: "Home." She looked at the keycard. She checked her bumps and scratches. Nothing really bad. She sat back and waited for Control to give the okay.

Home was currently a loft on Queen West right in the middle of Toronto's new boutique district. The area had just recently turned around and Marcie's life had turned around with it. Sometimes, life was all about luck. Marcie had rented her office space just before the district became popular and when the new crowd came in, Marcie's business became popular too. She started to attract a completely different type of clientele, the type with a lot of money to spend. She had become something of a darling to Toronto's 'in crowd' and, within a couple of years, was following errant husbands and libidinous wives, confirming backgrounds of nannies and chauffeurs, and chasing down minor con men. She had enough work to have two assistants on staff, as well as Robbie from time to time, and she was interviewing for a third full-time researcher on Monday. Where would she put everybody?

The loft was two stories tall with the office located on the lower floor. There was a small reception area, complete with impressive desk – that usually stood empty. Tracy and Jeff, her two current researchers, played 'receptionist' from time to time when a particularly important client came in for a rare visit. Business was done primarily over the telephone or at the client's location. The main office space had four large desks floated and facing centre; so that the staff could all converse easily if necessary. There was nothing to separate Marcie's desk from anyone else's. There was a storeroom, a small conference room (which was used for eating pizza and client conferences), and a bathroom. Up a metallic spiral staircase, and taking up only half the area of the office floor, was the loft space. Here were the Stacks, and Marcie's personal space. The Stacks were four shelving units of reference materials, old-fashioned fiche records, old-fashioned CDs, and the latest in MCs (memory cards) with gigabytes of reference material (addresses from all over the world, telephone directories, etc.). Marcie loved memory cards. You could walk around with a whole library full of information and not break a sweat. There was only one computer up in the Stacks, and that was Jeff's baby. No one else was allowed to go near it, not even Marcie.

Marcie's personal space was a galley kitchen, with a small table and two chairs; a living room with one loveseat, a coffee table, and a television – not even a holovision – a bathroom and her bedroom. She'd had a designer come in a do it all for her and, though it was striking; in the end, the effect was a little cold. Another great reason to move.

Now, if she hired one more person, all the desks on the main floor were taken. What happened if the advertising actually worked and she needed to hire two or three people? She'd have to boot Jeff up to the Stacks, which might seem like a loss in status for him (even though he loved it up there). She didn't want to lose Jeff over something like that. He was a crack researcher. She certainly didn't want to move office locations. So it was time to split home and office. Well, mostly. She lived her work; so she knew that at home, the most used room in the house would be her office.

She landed on the roof of the six-story building she called home. In the early twentieth century, this building was a factory, but over recent decades many of the old sweatshops in the area had been renovated for lofts and most of the inhabitants used to be artsie-types seeking natural light – the windows were floor-to-ceiling, wall-to-wall. Marcie liked living with artsies because they generally couldn't afford PAs; so there were always a lot of parking spots on the roof. As a bonus, artsies were generally quiet, and they were nice to you in the elevator. But now that the rents had gone up beyond belief, most residents were artsie-wannabes with tons of money that they spent putting up expensive window treatments, throwing loud parties, and buying PAs. And now there was always a fight for parking spots on the roof. To make matters worse, none of these trendy-types said hello in the elevator. This always worried Marcie. If you were capable of ignoring a living breathing person standing right next to you in a box that was about as interesting as white bread, what else were you capable of ignoring? A lot, Marcie was sure.

Eventually, Marcie found a parking spot. She was going to have to insist that the building management allot the spaces on the roof evenly to the leaseholders. She needed to be able to put her PA

down somewhere and she hated leaving it on the street. She parked the PA and got out of the vehicle. Robbie and 'Steve' were already waiting at the roof door. Marcie walked over to meet them and they all went down the stairs to the top floor. Robbie had 'Steve's' arm firmly behind his back, and he did it so effortlessly that three people they met coming up noticed nothing out of the ordinary. Or perhaps they were just being ignored.

Marcie's Loft was on the second floor. They took the elevator down and, luckily, no one got on with them. They exited into a deserted hallway and walked down to Marcie's door at the end of the corridor. It wasn't locked.

"Hi," she called as she went inside. Two responses came back. Both Tracy and Jeff were working this Saturday morning. Marcie gave bonuses for volume and her assistants were often at work on the weekend, but they'd been getting behind lately, even with all the extra hours being worked.

"Where would you like the package, ma'am?" Robbie enjoyed his job a little too much.

"Please sit him over by my desk, Robbie, and make sure he doesn't run off. Can you stick around for a while?"

"Sure, sugar."

'Steve' had lapsed into a docile funk – he must have realized Robbie's strength. He hadn't said a word since they arrived, and he hadn't attempted to escape either. Marcie was very curious about who this man was and why he had decided to pick on her. Robbie walked him over and sat him down at one of the visitor's chairs at Marcie's desk.

"Stay there," he said. 'Steve' looked very much like he would be happy to comply.

"Hi Marce; hi Robbie. Who's that, then?" asked Tracy. Tracy was an expat Brit who really sounded it when she was surprised.

Marcie was walking upstairs to pour herself and Robbie a cup of coffee. "Meet 'Steve'." Her tone of voice verged on the scornful but, dammit, her knee hurt.

“Steve?”

“Yes, he says his name is ‘Steve Turner’, but I happen to know he’s not. Jeff, I’ve got an A-priority job for you.”

Jeff popped his head over the rail from the upstairs. He was in the Stacks.

“How is that different from all the other A-priority jobs I’ve got?”

“It’s not for a client; it’s for me.”

“Gotcha.”

Marcie went on to assign him the task of checking out the chat room to determine who visited it, their backgrounds, etc. She took her coffee back downstairs.

“This could take months!”

“It’s a seriously restricted chat room, Jeff. There are only five of us with unlimited access and there can’t be many more than that who shadow. See what you can do. If it becomes too huge a task, let me know.”

“What is the objective?”

“I want to know who ‘Steve’ really is. I’m not sure how forthcoming he’ll be.”

“Gotcha.”

“Oh yeah, and Jeff? I have another little job. I want to know who a David Welsh is. I got a rude call from him this morning. He may or may not be from Toronto, but my guess is he’s a reporter or PI. Not priority.”

“Sure.”

All this was said in front of ‘Steve’ while she stared directly at him. She wanted to let him know that she wasn’t without resources. He couldn’t hold her gaze for long. *Hmmm, feeling a bit ashamed of yourself? Great.*

Marcie decided to let him stew for a moment, while she sent encrypted emails to the other four registered members of safenimyarms. She knew that they’d be able to crack the message in minutes; so she didn’t reference any key for the encryption. The email detailed that the chat room had been somehow compromised,

that she’d been attacked, and appealed for help in determining who ‘Steve’ was and what his motives might be. The security measures were strong, but no one was safe from a hacker who was motivated enough. She knew that first-hand.

“Well. ‘Steve’. Perhaps you’d tell me what your real name is?”

“Greg Pearce.”

That was easy.

From above, she heard Jeff’s voice: “I’ve got it! I think his name is Greg Pearce.”

“Very funny.”

She looked at Greg, trying not to laugh. Jeff’s humour was well placed. She didn’t feel like playing the shady, underworld figure today. She just wanted answers. The joke took the edge off. “All right, Greg Pearce: How did you get my name? Why me?”

“I hired a kid to do a job for me. He couldn’t complete it; so he told me about you and the chat room. He gave me the password and I shadowed for a few days. Then, I just looked you up on the telephone book. I’m sorry about what I did.”

“About what you attempted to do. Do you know that the Eight Ball has you marching me out of there at gun point in full colour and from at least three angles?” She had never known Hugh to call the police, but he always had a great record of any incident in his bar. The police were always given the one cam standard security record. But his own three-colour, three-angle version? He’d been known to sell the memory cards to both the prosecution and the defence. It was a good sideline for him.

“They’re monitored?”

Marcie suppressed the impulse to say: Duh! “They’re totally wired, every table and most of the gallery. Which reminds me. Tracy, call Hugh Pale at the Eight Ball and get a copy of his security memory cards from this morning, from ten to eleven, please. Oh, and don’t let him overcharge you.”

“Sure.” Marcie knew Robbie would sit down, drink his coffee, and wait until she told him she was done. Then, he’d do

whatever she wanted with Pearce. Now that was power. Marcie was secretly enjoying this. She didn't get into the business so she could do background checks on au pairs. She really craved a bit more adventure in her life.

"Why don't you try telling me what you really want, Mr. Pearce?"

"I really am looking for my wife."

"Okay."

"She disappeared about a month ago. I took her to McMaster University Medical Centre in Hamilton for some tests. I took her through Admitting and sat with her until the doctors came, and I had to leave. But the next day, when I went to pick her up, she wasn't there. No one knew anything. They said she'd been released the night before. And then I couldn't get in touch with her gynaecologist either."

"Wait a minute. Helen Pearce? From the news?" Tracy was still hanging over the balcony listening.

"Yeah. The police think my wife ran off with the doctor, but then he turned up, a few days ago, back in his own office, dead on an examination table. He'd been shot in the head. And he'd been dead for some time, the coroner says about four weeks."

"Yeah, that's right," Tracy loved this sort of thing. She looked at Marcie. "They were just about to drop the case – no body, right?"

"Right. But, because they found him dead, they checked the doctor's records and his bank accounts have been cleaned out. So, now my wife is a suspect. They think she's on the run with all his money."

"I heard it on the news too. They're looking for her all over the country. What, they think she took about twenty million dollars?"

"Yeah."

Marcie looked at Pearce: "And you're going to try and tell me that she'd never do such a thing, that you were in love and that you want to prove her innocence."

"Yes."

"Right. Okay. But what computer did you want me to crack?"

"I wanted to get into the records at the hospital to see if she was even admitted. They won't tell me anything. No one will tell me anything!" He paused and studied Marcie for a moment. "You have that look on your face, Ms. Noel. You think she killed him. Everybody does. No one will help me!" He tried to calm himself. "She wouldn't hurt anyone for money. Look, we've been together for ten years, Ms. Noel. Why, all of a sudden, would she change so completely?"

"Because the opportunity presented itself, I expect."

"Okay, okay. Just, let's say. Let's pretend. Let's just say she isn't involved in killing her gynaecologist for his money. What if she's still my Helen?"

"Okay." Marcie was willing to see where he was going.

"Well, where is she? If she's still my Helen, why hasn't she called, why hasn't she come home?"

"That's a good question. The easy answer to that question is that she's not 'your Helen'. That she is, in fact, guilty."

Pearce became more agitated: "I don't believe it. Something else is going on here. Someone's abducted her! For God's-sake, she wouldn't use a gun. She hates guns." He tried to steady himself again. "Look, I think someone might be able to pull the wool over your eyes for a period of time, maybe as long as a few years. But I don't think you can live with someone for ten years and not know something about who they really are, the good and the bad. And I don't believe that she's anything other than an integrally good person."

Marcie let that sit for a while. He was probably right. She'd have to be a brilliant actor, and purely evil, to be able to fake it for that long; especially with a spouse that saw her day in and day out for ten years. In Marcie's experience with married couples, she had found that when one is bad, the other is too.

"Greg, why didn't you hire some kid to crack the hospital system?"

“I did. I hired three of them. None of them could do it and they all said the same thing. The last guy got the closest, but he said that the level of encryption was much higher than he’d ever seen. He got into the system easily, but when he tried to look at my wife’s records, he was stumped. Her file, and about twenty others, were so well encrypted, he didn’t think they would ever be cracked. I asked him who he thought could crack it. That’s when he told me about you. He gave me the impression that you liked a challenge. I thought you’d take the job.”

“You thought wrong. Why the phoney name?”

“I thought that you’d help someone from that chat room. It’s nuts, I know. I guess I am a bit nuts right now. No one will help me. Not the police. Not reporters. Not the four private detectives I’ve already seen. No one. I’m sorry about trying to coerce you.

“You’ve been watching too many movies. You say that most of the patient records were relatively easy to get into, but there were a small group, including your wife’s, that couldn’t be cracked. Could you see the names of all of these patients?”

“Yes.”

“Well, that’s a place to start. Let’s see if any of those people have disappeared as well. That would give the police a different perspective. They might start taking you seriously.”

“Can you do that for me?”

“Bring me the names. I’ll do what I can. Oh, and Greg, this’ll be at standard rates, including today – uh with a nice fat bonus for my bruised knee.”

“Charge me whatever you like. I’m glad someone is willing to help me.”

“Fine, we’ll start in on it Monday. Tracy!”

“Right here.” She was standing at Marcie’s right shoulder. *Spooky how she knows when I need her.*

“Get Mr. Pearce a standard investigative contract and go over it with him.”

“Mr. Pearce, I’ll need you to authorize the contract and give us a deposit.” Tracy smiled at Pearce and gestured toward her desk.

“Fine.” Pearce followed Tracy. He looked like he couldn’t believe his luck; someone was actually taking the case. *Maybe I’m the one who’s nuts.*

“When he’s done, Robbie, take him back to his car, please. Here’s his keycard. Oh and Robbie, what are you up to for the next few weeks?”

“I am, as always, ready to help you, sugar.”

Marcie nodded. She was glad. She had a feeling she was going to need him.

Sunday, June 20, 2083 7:30 p.m.

A baby started to wail somewhere in the building and Norman Li almost jumped out of his skin. It was true what they said about a guilty conscience. Norman had always thought that that psycho-bullshit wasn’t worth the expenditure of hot air, but not now. Now, he understood it all much better.

Norman always used to sleep well, because he had never had anything on his mind. He’d always done the right thing, played the game straight, paid his taxes. He did not expect to have to make the kind of decisions he was making now, this late in the game. Norman was fifty-two. He was the Security Executive at a government run research facility called The Eastdown Institute. He had been with the Institute for the ten years it had been open and he’d always been proud of his work. He knew what he was doing for humankind.

But, just lately, they’d started testing little children. He had lain awake all Saturday night and Sunday morning and finally rose, determined to do what he could. He hadn’t been able to get away for most of the day, but just after dinner, he had leaped on his wife’s complaint that she had a book she wanted to return to the library.

He read the email on the computer screen in front of him. It would be very difficult to trace. He’d even paid for the computer time in cash. About seven thousand words: dates, diagrams, details. They would know and maybe they would get the government to stop what was happening. If this didn’t work, he was going to go to the papers himself. His little girl was almost finished college now and her

education was all paid for. His family didn't need him to avoid risks the way he used to.

He pressed 'send'.

He deleted the free email account he had used. He logged off the internet connection and then edited the connect logs of the public library computer to clear the record of the connection with the free email website. He powered down the machine, removed the memory card and slipped it into his pocket. He walked out of the library as nonchalantly as possible.

Once out on the street, the fresh air and the bright day did not impinge on his consciousness. He turned away from the street at the first alleyway he came to and walked down to the end away from prying eyes. He pulled out the memory card and a cigarette lighter. He lit the memory card on fire. The plastic twisted and melted immediately, sending off an acrid odour. It quickly became too hot to hold and he dropped it on the pavement. He stepped on the destroyed card and ground it into the asphalt below. He waited a moment for it to cool. Then, he picked up the ruined thing and slipped it back into his pocket. He was sure that no one had seen what he did.

He walked back out to the sidewalk and strolled down the street as if he hadn't a care in the world. About three blocks down, he walked into a convenience store and bought himself a chocolate bar. He pulled off the outer wrapper and slipped it into his pocket as he continued on down the street. Another block later, the chocolate bar was finished. He stopped at a garbage can and threw the wrapper away. With it went the remains of the memory card.

Evidence thus destroyed, Norman Li went home and telephoned his insurance broker, who happened also to be a good friend. He scheduled a game of golf for Thursday afternoon, his afternoon off. He wanted to make sure that his insurance was up-to-date. It was the least he could do for Marion.

End of Chapter 1.

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