

1

Kron wondered if they would shoot at him again tonight. He remembered nothing of his past and his future was uncertain. His life began last night, as if he were turning on a TV set, when three casually dressed guys fired at him along a downtown Camden Bay sidewalk. A plethora of unknown entities popped into his head as he was pursued: the name Leiberman, a place named Jefferson, and something called RX-7. Somehow he got back to his van. He spun the vehicle onto the Lakeland Expressway and continuously whispered the name of the President of the United States. His destination was his apartment on Eisenhower Ave. The long brick building, bordered with thick evergreens, did not look familiar, yet the silver key on his ring fit into apartment sixteen's lock. Once inside he checked the phone book for RX-7 and located a hundred and sixteen Leibermans.

By Friday morning he still could not recall his past, but one image floated occasionally through his thoughts. It was a tunnel, ceiling and walls punctuated within a symmetrical arc of white beveled indentations. Center in this tunnel a rich, glowing aqua field was surrounded by a dark void to walls, and bisected by a line of red blocks extending to a luminescent red dome down the end of the white, waffled tunnel.

More relevant was the employment ID in his wallet, prompting him to report to work at Data Star. His job involved picking orders from long rows of brown metal warehouse stacks. The supervisor and workers knew him, but his recollections were wiped clean. He slowed the electric cart next to one of the towering stacks. In the fluorescent light he swept the red laser against the bar code and dredged up nebulous feelings from a time he could not remember. He folded his arms across his blue-checkered shirt and tried to understand why he had no memory before last night. Records showed he started this warehouse job on Monday morning, exactly five days ago, and moved into his furnished apartment at the same time. The hum of another cart grew louder and he turned.

Dave stopped his cart in the aisle behind the boxes. Kron fought the intense anxiety about running for his life from the armed three men. “Kron, you going to break the quota record again? Three hundred and fifteen boxes.” Kron’s brow creased. He was more concerned about calling New York City again and questioning people at the Graybar Apartments, his last residence according to the rental form from Eisenhower Ave.. “*Hel-lo?* Kron, you over there, pal?”

“The record stands, Dave.”

“I thought you were a competitor.” Dave moved the cart forward and around the corner.

“I retired.” Kron sat on the cart boxes and crossed his elbows on his jeans. His brain functioned, but his past was gone. Maybe a comprehensive scan would determine whether his head was injured. A

head injury could account for him not recalling his childhood nor an adult life, yet, he believed someone had erased his memories and constructed a fictitious past on his employment and housing applications. Why were those guys trying to kill him?

“ Kron, you all right?” asked the supervisor.

Kron quickly stood, ran the red laser pen over the next box’s code, and hoisted up the box. “ I’m okay, Mike.”

The burly, mustached Mike wore a stained maroon hooded sweatshirt. He handed Kron a wrinkled sheet of thermal paper. “ Here’s the fax from the last employer you listed on the ap. Hey, buddy, I ain’t gonna say nothin’ to nobody, but hell, the place ain’t there. Neither is the other place it says you worked at a year ago.”

Kron studied the faxes. “ Great. Just call me nowhere man.”

“ You in trouble?”

“ Who me? Trouble?” he asked, smiling. “ I didn’t list anything about a place called Jefferson on any paperwork, did I?”

“ Nope.”

“ Great... I need a break, Mike.”

“ Sure. Go take a break.”

“ Thanks, and maybe I’ll remember who the hell I am.” His heart briskly beat beneath his checkered shirt. “ The man with no brain. Has a certain ring to it.”

Mike gave him a tap on the shoulder. “ You do what you have to do, Kron.”

Kron loaded the box on the cart stack. He pushed his boot into the floor pedal as Mike headed up front, the cart's electric motor whined, and he drove erratically up the warehouse aisle toward the docking bays. Fresh air leaked in from the bright border around the trucks. He made a wide loop, backed the cart in and dropped the pallet in front of a docked tractor-trailer. The wheels spun as he disengaged from the pallet and pulled across the concrete. He foraged his brain for any inkling of his past as he parked the cart next to the break room door.

He entered the smoke laden room. A few of the pony tailed women holding Styrofoam coffee cups at the lunch room tables giggled when they saw him pass by. He opened the men's room door, faced the mirror and gazed into his intense green eyes. His thick blonde hair outlined a ruddy face.

A radio newscast played through the ceiling speakers. "... of this visit. Mayor Richard Ames, although not of the same party as the president, said he looked with great anticipation to the presidential visit to Camden Bay next Tuesday."

"*Richardson,*" said Kron in a low voice.

Mayor Ames had a smooth clear voice. "Well, Democrats are always welcome in Camden Bay, provided they don't take up permanent residence." The mayor chuckled. "Seriously, this city has a lot to offer and the president has a lot to offer. We look forward to having him."

"The president will address a late afternoon rally from the philharmonic shell in Heritage Park in the financial district.

In other news...”

“ Richardson. President Aaron J. Richardson. And Leiberman, who is Leiberman? And what about you, Kron? What’s the mystery? Who are you?” He pulled his black wallet from his jeans pocket and slid his license from the plastic folder.

Randy M. Kron
1362 Eisenhower Ave.
Eisenhower Apartments # 16
Camden Bay, IL

Distant beeps reverberated in his head. He gripped the sink as every nerve ending in his body pushed outward. His innate strength and mental agility increased with prodigious power from an unknown source. Numbers rolled on a computerized screen, bordered with a thin blue neon line just few feet away. A few seconds ago his eyes were green, but now were inverted almond in shape and strewn with continuous thin blue charges like electricity spinning from a fallen wire during a storm. His biceps, skin now tinted a matted white, tore through his shirtsleeves as the beeps intensified, and his body muscles burst against his clothing. He abruptly turned, ripped the basin from the counter and it crashed against the tiled floor.

The beeps faded and a man's annoying telephone voice penetrated his thoughts. "Hey, Pappy, you there?"

"Who is this?" asked Kron as he stared at the cracked sink.

"Who the *hell* is this?" asked the man.

"Kron." A colorful relief map of Camden Bay flipped into the screen's lower corner. He moved his hand, but nothing was there. "Oh, boy..."

"*Kron?* Where the hell is Pappy?"

A flashing red dot moved west down the green line depicting Interstate 45 along Lake Van Buren near Braden Springs. "How can this be? Who is this?"

"Eddie Conover. I'm a PI and I gut a client almost murdered this afternoon... Don't screw with me, Pappy. I dialed the right friggin' number. It's on the LCD. I knew this phone was bogus."

Kron marveled at his own extraterrestrial appearance in the mirror. His facial bones narrowed into a long smooth white skinned countenance, with a tiny mouth, no nose, and his eyes still vibrated with the blue charges traversing a moist, black medium. His hair had vanished under a white conical skull. He tensed his wide hands. "How did you call me?"

"Screw you." The line went out, but the red dot flashed on Interstate 45.

Kron's dark eyes could scan far away objects outside the bathroom window and he had grown half a foot. His transformed appearance sent chills through his massive frame. He abruptly spun and smashed open the

men's room door, loosening the top chrome hinge when the door hit the wall tiles. With the fury of a hurricane he rushed by the gray punch clock, but slowed, and carefully pushed open the outside glass door.

The computer screen remained bright as he ran across the asphalt to his van. Numbers and readings he did not understand rolled constantly on the bottom. He took out his keys and opened the van door. His thick trunk arms and bulging chest barely fit through the doorframe, and his hands were like two huge white mitts on the wheel. He had no explanation why his metabolism had thundered out of control.

He concentrated on the flashing highway dot as he backed the van around Data Star's parking lot and the phone line inside his head rang a second time. "This is impossible."

"Eddie Conover."

"You?"

"Who the hell is this? Is that you, Pappy, bein' a wise-ass?"

"This is Kron... How did you do this?"

"Do what? Whaddya talkin' about? Look, buddy, I misdialed. What is that a crime now?"

The forward screen in Kron's mind now formed a black bordered, schematic box around the road and provided him with driving information. "Some kind of transformation has taken place..." He smiled broadly in the mirror. His teeth were smaller and whiter. "This is incredible! Who am I?"

“ If you don’t know who you are, I sure as hell don’t know who you are. Good bye, Kokomo.”

“ No, Randy Kron,” he said as the line went dead again. The screen detailed the closing distance to the eighteen-wheeler just ahead. He tapped the brake. Again the diagram of Eddie’s position materialized on his readout screen. “ I wonder how far this guy is from me.”

Kron’s own coordinates blinked blue. The white digits indicated he was only four miles away from Eddie. He and sped up Interstate 45’s ramp. When he thought about Eddie, an actual picture of a dark eyed, thin-faced man with black greasy hair came into focus. Eddie Conover was forty-one years old, was a private investigator for eleven years and had left Chicago after high school. Five other pages listed everything about the guy down to his school grades. “ Wow.”

As he looked into his electric eyes, an image of the fluffy, gray haired President Richardson filtered into his thoughts again. He shook his head.

“ Why am I thinking of the president?”

Red composite buttons formed on the screen, designating the president’s activities for the day, a live feed from Richardson’s speech in New York, and several articles alluding to the president’s trip to Camden Bay next week. Kron chose not to open the files and the screen again scanned the thickening traffic flow on the highway. He again marveled at himself in the mirror. “ Who are you, Randy Kron?”

2

The lime green sports car raced down the fast lane outside Braden Springs, and the image zoomed closer when Kron tightened his eyes. He smiled when he saw Eddie's cigarette hanging from his mouth in the side mirror. Kron pushed the accelerator and watched the green screen digits count down the space between the vehicles. He concentrated and the phone line rang.

Eddie reached under the dash and pulled out a white cell phone.

"Eddie Conover."

"Look in your mirror."

Eddie squinted over his shoulder. Kron pulled within ten feet of the car. "Hey, you turkey!"

"How are you able to call into my thoughts, Eddie?"

"Thoughts? Whaddaya nuts?" Eddie looked at the phone. "Hey, this ain't my phone anyways."

"Who's phone is it?"

"Look, I wuz at the doctor's office. Well, the clinic. See, I gut this hernia. Keeps actin' up." Kron nudged his bumper and Eddie swerved on the highway. "You're gonna get us killed, you dumb bastard!"

"Pull over."

“ I need to get to Alpine Memorial.”

“ What?” asked Kron.

“ The hospital, you dummy. My client was almost killed, I tell ya.”

“ Pull over, Eddie.”

“ Yes, sir.” He saluted and whipped across the lanes without looking, just missing an accelerating pickup as he veered into the breakdown lane. Kron was cautious because of the traffic pattern on his forward screen. He slowed the van once a few cars had passed and gently followed the little car into the side lane. Eddie remained inside as if he were getting a speeding ticket.

Kron squeezed through the van’s doorframe. A warning buzzer sounded in his head and the screen alerted him to a truck approaching from behind at eighty-seven point nine miles per hour. Instinctively, he leaped upward, surprising himself as he rose fifty feet into the air. The rumbling truck and stream of air passed below and continued down the highway. He stared at Lake Van Buren’s blue horizon and floated effortlessly back to the asphalt.

Eddie sprang from the car and pointed with his cigarette in hand.

“ Heeby, heeby, heeby! How did you do that, *Kron-man*?”

“ Good question,” answered Kron. He chuckled, bent his legs and thrust up again. He ascended above the highway embankment grass and hovered near the off ramp. From several dozen feet up he surveyed the van, the sports car, and Eddie gawking.

“ Get down before somebody sees you,” yelled Eddie. “ I ain’t never seen nothin’ like this! How the... how can you fly?”

Kron slowly descended into the breakdown lane. “ I *can* fly. I wonder how high I can go?”

“ You gut buzzing eyes. I’m havin’ a psychotic flashback.”

“ I think you mean psychedelic.”

“ Huh?.” Eddie looked as if he was going to throw up. “ Hey, listen, Kron. I don’t know how you did what you did, but, ah, we can make money: big money...”

“ I don’t care about money.”

“ You’re shittin’ me.” He checked his watch. “ I ain’t neva seen nothin’ like this. You’re from another planet, Kokomo. There’s an invasion, right? We’re all gonna be killed! Man, figures just when I get a case.”

“ My body just changed. I’m not from another planet.”

“ I tell ya, we can make big money.”

“ Let’s have answers, Eddie. How did you get inside my head with that phone?”

Eddie removed the white phone from his pants pocket and looked up. “ I told ya. This ain’t my phone. I musta picked it up in the clinic I go to near the bay. You’re one scary dude.”

On the Kron’s screen, Eddie’s heart rate increased and other readings showed he was sweating. Red letters flashed every few seconds.

FALSEHOOD PROBABILITY 89%

“ You’re lying, Eddie. You stole it.”

“ Whaddaya a mind reader on top of ya other talents?” He handed the phone to Kron.

It looked the no different than a conventional miniaturized, cell phone, but white with a LCD readout screen. “ There has to be some kind of chip in this phone for the signal to come inside my head.”

“ Stop with the head. Nobody gets calls in their head, dummy.”

“ *I did.*”

“ Yeah, right. Hey, keep the phone. I gotta get to my client in the hospital. This broad’s father has a ton of dough and is connected to the mayor. I can smell the money comin’ my way. ” Eddie flipped a bright red card with gold embossed writing and his picture on it. It looked more like an entertainer’s card. He turned toward the sports car, but Kron grabbed his arm and lifted him up.

Eddie’s brown eyes opened wide. “ Okay, maybe I don’t need to go to the hospital.”

“ I want to know who’s chasing me, Eddie.”

“ Hey, put me down, it’s cold up here.”

Kron lowered him back to the asphalt. “ Tell me the truth about the phone.”

“ I stole it, okay?” He pulled out a pack of Camels once Kron set him down. “ You mind if I smoke?”

“ Go ahead, but I’m going to find the truth.”

Eddie lit up and dropped his lighter into his pocket. “ I took the phone. That’s it.”

Kron noted his screen. “ Says you are telling the truth now.”

“ What? Listen,” he said and pointed at his business card. “ There’s all my numbers. Except my cell phone because I don’t know where the hell it is. I wanna know who you are though. Where you got that superhuman strength and how you can fly in the air. Little things like that.”

“ I want answers, too,” said Kron.

“ Right.” Eddie walked back to the sports car and looked over his shoulder. He started the car and spun out, leaving a long stretch of rubber along the tar. “Bye, *sucker*.”

Kron tilted his head. His screen showed Eddie a hundred and ten yards away and nearing sixty miles an hour. He tightened his legs, shot like pinball up to Eddie’s trunk, and his oversized hands enveloped the rear bumper. Eddie smacked the windshield and his cigarette crunched against his face. Kron’s sneakers skidded along the tar, producing the distinct smell of burnt vinyl. He lifted the car and slid it into the breakdown lane as the traffic slowed. “ The phone, Eddie.”

“ Whatever you want.” Kron glanced at the snarled traffic and lowered the car. “ Only a matta of time before the media sends out a chopper and you’re on the national news.”

Kron opened the side door, but struggled to fit inside, and took up most of the seat. Empty soda cans clanged against his sneakers and he removed a bag of cold French fries off the ripped vinyl seat. “ Get me back to my van.”

Eddie looked over his shoulder, shifted and backed up the little car. “ What are you superhuman or somethin’?”

“ That’s what I’m trying to tell you,” he said, looking at the compressed freeway traffic. Then he put the white phone in his hand. “ I don’t know who I am or why people are chasing me or why I changed when you beep me from this phone. What is so special about the president coming to town? Did you ever hear of anyone named Leiberman or Jefferson?”

“ Huh?”

“ Ever heard of RX-7?”

“ RX-7, what the hell is that? *Listen*, I know what you are,” he said as he neared the green striped van. “ You’re some kinda machine.”

“ I don’t think I’m a machine.”

“ Yeah, then how the hell can you do what you can do?”

“ That’s what I need to find out.”

3

Janus reached his limit with John Slocum, the third corporate leader not to contribute to Tuesday's presidential fundraiser, and followed him to the far side of the buffet table. "What do you know about power, Slocum?"

The silver haired Slocum turned at the table. "Excuse me?"

Janus raised his voice. "You nit wit! Richardson represents power and money!"

"You know, your father was a reasonable man. But, you have no class." He removed his gold frame glasses. "I founded Eastern Electronics. I worked nights and weekends like your father did. And by God, I'm proud of what I did. I don't need some upstart, half my age, who inherited his father's wealth, to be telling me where I should place my money. I'll tell you what, and I know I speak for everybody else: you give us the money and we'll give it to the campaign."

"Screw. Get out and take your buddies with you." Slocum shook his head and headed with his aides for the door. Jeanette, wearing a shimmering blue velvet dress with a modicum of cleavage, stood in back of Janus. "What the hell do you want?"

"Taja is on the phone in the back office."

“ Tell him to call back later,” said Janus and he picked up another wine glass.

She trailed him and grabbed his arm. “ Maurice, he says it’s important.”

“ Get your mitts off me!” He kicked one of the banquet room chairs end over end on the carpet. “ Which phone?”

“ Second rear office.”

Janus stormed through the function room and darted into the office. He slammed the door, adjusted his yellow tie and the matching carnation on his pin strip blue suit. Then he clawed the receiver. “ Janus.”

“ Maurice, this is Taja. We have a problem.”

Janus’ face flushed and the veins in his temples pulsed. Saliva spurted across the glossy wood grained desk as he yelled. “ *Problem?* Problem? I don’t care about problems. Problems are for people with no brains and no ambition, Taja. Don’t tell me I have a problem! I haven’t raised enough money!”

“ But Maurice, please.”

He pushed his thick dark hair back along the temples. “ You jackass, I’m five minutes away from begging these people for money and they won’t give money unless I match it. I won’t give up a cent. I’m telling you they’re not going to give me the cash because I’m not my father. I’m just a twenty-nine year old punk...” He lowered his head and closed his eyes.

“ This had better be important. And don't hide things from me like you usually do.”

“ I worked with your father for twenty-six years up to his death. That loyalty extends to his son. I don't need to do things behind your back. But she won't bend.”

“ Who the hell are you talking about?”

“ You know what I'm talking about.”

“ If I knew, Taja, I wouldn't be asking you! Cut to the chase!”

“ Julie Townsend.”

Janus raised his chin and laughed. “ Julie Townsend. Goody Two Shoes Townsend. She can try to help her old man get to the bottom of certain nefarious things.”

“ Don't play coy with me, Maurice. Did you order Weed Pauly to run her down?”

Janus gripped the receiver and sat on the desk. “ Weed... Weed tried to run her down? Why would you think I had anything to do with that?”

“ That's the word out there. I won't be an accessory to murder.”

“ Your so honorable, Taja. So honorable. Is she dead? What's the story?”

“ No... She's only in Alpine for observation.”

“ Pity.” Janus raised his gold Rolex. “ You worry too much.”

“ You're telling me you know nothing about this?” asked Taja.

“ Go back to work, Taja.” He opened his dark eyes wide. “ She’s too close to finding the problems we created in her father’s company and now she has hired a private investigator. “

“ I don’t trust you any more.”

“ You never should have trusted me, but I’m your meal ticket, old friend. Look, I’m hosting the President of the United States for a fundraiser with no money in the kitty. I want Washington connections. I have to get money, Taja!”

“ Yes, this is true.”

“ What I want,” he said, banging on the small desk. “ Is control of this city. ”

“ Ames is too popular.”

“ If I can’t do it by the ballot box I’ll do it behind the scenes.” He gazed down at the afternoon traffic flowing on the Lakeland Expressway between the tall buildings and the shore. “ People like Ernie Townsend and his squeaky clean contracts for city work. I want his company.” Janus looked toward Lake Van Buren’s azure horizon and then panned back to the Camden Bay skyscrapers. “ We’ll use the truck incident. You call Ernie Townsend anonymously and tell him if he doesn’t sell, his daughter will end up as *road kill* next time!”

“ Are you crazy? Drop it. She’s probably already scared off from pursuing this further,” said Taja. “ You think just because you inherited the Janus fortune-”

“ I am the Janus fortune!” he screamed. “ I can do anything I want!”

“Sure... Running her down couldn't be traced. No one could really call it murder. You're a genius at hiding behind other people and then screwing them.”

“ If you know what's good for you, you'll shut up.”

“ Your trouble is you think you're invincible,” said Taja.

“ Maybe I am.” Janus pulled the cord along the window span. “ I'm twenty-nine years old and by the time I'm thirty, I'm going to run this city.”

“ Your father was reasonable and thorough.”

“ My father is dead.” Janus closed his eyes and ground his teeth.

“ You just do what I say if you want to stay in your position. You Taja, think you aren't expendable. Don't make me test your worth.”

4

Eddie whipped the van onto the next street. “ This thing rides like a Mack truck. Pappy always wanted a Mack. We both wanted a Mack. Pappy has a little shit box station wagon.”

“ Tell me about the president’s visit,” said Kron.

“ Do I look like his press secretary?”

“ I want to know where Heritage Park is. The president is supposed to speak there.”

“ Duke da Duke. You like the Prez?”

“ I’m not sure... Where is Heritage Park?”

“ Downtown along Solomon Street. Hey. I’m almost at the hospital,” said Eddie, staring at Kron’s long white face. “ You’re a super hero.”

“ Eddie: shut up.”

“ Hey, I need a butt, *Kron-man*.”

“ Not until you’re out of my van.” Kron tried to stretch, but his massive body filled the passenger side.

“ Superhuman and a cleanliness freak.” Eddie leaned over. “ What’s inside that phone?”

“ Something I don’t understand.”

“ Wonderful. Listen, when we get to the hospital, you gotta change back. But when you do, don’t try and hit on this broad. Julie Townsend. Whadda knock out. Straight rusty hair, long legs and green eyes and a set of-“

“ I need to get back to that clinic near the bay and find out where this phone came from,” said Kron, thinking out loud.

Eddie put on the blinker and turned over a set of railroad tracks. The white brick hospital folded out into three wings under the pines. “ Right. Then I get screwed for takin’ the phone.”

Kron’s head screen filled with biographical information on Julie Townsend. Her driver’s license photo was murky, but additional work photos flipped on the screen. “ She gave up her father’s money and works for a nonprofit company called Potential.”

“ Yeah, that’s the place. Private agency workin’ with all the slime balls and scum.”

“ Your buddies? Says here they try and set new goals for the poor and dispossessed. That sounds commendable.”

“ You can’t trust them people downtown.”

“ Cynical attitude... Julie’s father is a friend of Mayor Ames.”

“ Yeah, I told you that.” Eddie waved his hand in front of Kron’s eyes. “ What are you readin’ from?”

“ My computer,” he said pointing to the screen near the windshield. Eddie waved his hand again. “ I still don’t see nothin’.”

“ It’s coming from inside my head, my vision.” He studied the bio.

“ She’s thirty-four, likes to play tennis and swims. Very athletic. Five foot eight.”

“ See, I told ya. Tall and lean.”

“ How did she link up with you?”

Eddie rubbed his hand over his mouth. “ I wuz workin’ on a case.”

“ You really had a client?” asked Kron, smiling.

“ Yeah, wise-guy. I went to her place on Columbia Street. Two blocks from my old office downtown. I was trackin’ this loser named Harry Ring. Con man. Owes me money. He linked up with her program at Potential. I walks in and I sees her in her jeans. Nice derrière, that Julie.”

“ Just stick to the story.”

“ Right. She’s one of them do gooders. But naïve. Thinkin’ them jokers downtown are really gonna do somethin’ with their lives. Anyways, I asked about Harry Ring and then I get ta talkin’ with her. She says her old man is in trouble.”

“ How so?”

“The old man’s main competitor wanted his company. Just happens to be Maurice Janus, Junior, and he tried to buy out Townsend six months ago, but the old man would have nothin’ of it.”

“ What was the guy’s name?”

“ Janus, you dummy. He’s got money. Inherited the family fortune. Junior Janus controls, shall we say, the dark side of the city.”

“ Your stomping grounds.”

“ Yeah, right. See, I figure they’re tryin’ ta kill her this afternoon. Junior got heavy handed when he couldn’t get control of the company. Julie found out certain things.”

“ *Come on.*” Kron read from the new image on the screen. A short, Latin man, probably in his early thirties, with wavy black hair and dark eyes, stood in a navy suit. His red tie and pocket-handkerchief matched and his shirt was monogrammed at the cuffs. He held scissors in his hand near a wide blue ribbon.

“ I’m watching a video of Janus cutting a ribbon.”

“ I still don’t see nothin’.”

“ They just opened up a new industrial park.”

“ Yeah, that report was on last week. See, Junior ran against Ames and Ames has been clean. He beat Junior bad. Junior sits in his old man’s office tower on Marrakech Island and plots how he’s going to get Ames out... even though Ames won the last election. Everybody knows where the Janus Building is, Kron. He doesn’t overlook the city. The city overlooks Maurice Janus. Least that’s what the old man used to say.”

“ Look, we go into the hospital and then to the clinic,” said Kron.

“ Some people say the kid had the old man murdered so he’d get the money.” Eddie pushed his finger into Kron’s expanded biceps. “ How you gonna explain yourself? You can’t go in lookin’ like a walking redwood.”

“ I don’t know exactly how to reverse... my situation here.”

“ Push the **END** button, Kokomo” said Eddie, pulling into the parking lot.

“ You already did that...”

“ Nah, I shut off the phone and then turned it back on.”

Kron stared at the **END** button and was not quite sure he wanted to return to the status as a normal human being. He pushed the button, fell back in the seat and went out.

* * *

“ Hey, Kron-man, wake up.”

Kron visualized the familiar tunnel, detailed down to the shadows in the ceiling and wall squares. The aqua glow and red cut center line was dampened. He opened his eyes in the sunshine. His baggy shirt covered a normal size frame and he saw the tree leaves flutter in front of the hospital’s white bricks. He touched his cheeks and smaller biceps. “ Where is the tunnel?”

“ Tunnel, what tunnel?” asked Eddie.

An image of the president descending a jetliner steps flashed in front of his eyes and then faded. “ Richardson.”

“ What did you say?”

“ The president. I just saw a picture of the president materialize before my eyes and then dissolve.”

“ Duke da Duke is coming to Camden Bay next week. I told ya that.”

“ Why am I so concerned?.” Kron creased his brow. “ I’m starved. Transforming my body must have taken a ton of energy.”

“ They gutta cafeteria.”

“ I guess pushing the **END** button worked.”

“ What did I tell ya? You push **SEND** and you’ll probably become a muscle-bound beach bum again.”

Kron opened the door and stood in the fresher air near the lake.
“ I need something to eat when we get out of here.”

He jogged away from Eddie toward the main lobby canopy. Eddie slammed the van door and hurried forward. He hacked and breathed heavily as he approached Kron. “ Wait up, Kron-man. I need to start workin’ out again.”

“ When did that last happen when you were back in Chicago?”

“ How do you know about Chicago?”

“ Lucky guess,” he said, motioning Eddie under the canopy.

“ BS, Kron-man. That computer did it. The one inside your head.” A lady crossing the drive stared at him. “ Whaddya lookin’ at, baby?”

“ Crude,” she answered.

“ Everybody’s a critic.”

Kron followed Eddie through the revolving door into the hospital lobby. Eddie asked about the Emergency Room at the information desk and jaunted left down a corridor along the windows. Kron’s biceps were

smaller and he did not see his computer screen when he concentrated. He stopped at a vending machine and quickly deposited quarters.

Eddie turned. “ Come on, Kron-man.”

“ I’m coming.” He pushed the button for a Snickers bar and it fell into the bin. He grabbed it and unwrapped it and followed Eddie into the ER. “ I have to eat.”

“ Yeah, changin’ like that musta made you hungry as hell.” Eddie scanned the lobby and then headed to the front desk. “ Eddie Conover,” he said flashing his red and gold card.

The nurse at the desk looked at him as if he were a stray dog who wandered into the lobby. She wrote something on her desk clipboard pad. “ Yes.”

“ Eddie Conover.”

“ You said that.” She kept writing.

“ Yeah, right. Julie Townsend, where is she?”

“ Are you family?”

“ Listen, sweetheart. I’m a PI and I gut a client in trouble.” Then he pointed at the nurse. “ You get off your little tush.”

“ Buzz off.”

Kron stepped by Eddie. “ Excuse me, mam’, what my friend here is so ineptly trying to say, is that he needs to see Miss Townsend as per her request.”

The nurse smiled at Kron and scowled back at Eddie. “ I can check.”

“ Thank you very much.”

The nurse stood and again gave Eddie a dirty look before she moved through the doors behind the counter. Kron faced Eddie. “ You have no class.”

“ Woman was uncooperative, man. I suppose this place is a no smoke zone.”

“ Eddie, just ask nicely.”

“ Yeah, right.” He sprayed mouth fresher on his tongue. Kron rolled his eyes. Eddie pulled out a pack of gum and tilted it toward Kron.

“ Gum.”

“ No thanks.”

He unwrapped the stick and spun it into his mouth. “ I don’t want Julie to smell that garlic-“

“ Use lemon juice. It helps but nothing will eliminate it.”

“ Huh?”

“ Never mind. Are you sure you never heard of anybody named Leiberman?”

“ Nope,” he said and he leaned around the corner. Then he panned the lobby. “ Oh, shit.”

“ What’s the matter now?” asked Kron.

“ The TV.”

The four screens in the lobby showed a remote live broadcast. A helicopter circled over the freeway. Then two reporters came into view in the breakdown lane. A brunette with deep brown eyes spoke first. “ This

is Veronica Silver reporting from Interstate 45 outside Camden Bay where a number of motorists have reported an unusual sighting this afternoon.”

“ That’s right Veronica,” said the guy, grinning and he raised his brows.

“ About an hour ago a man is reported to have flown up over the highway without any apparent means to do so. I spoke with one of the motorists a few minutes ago.”

The tape blipped and a microphone was stuck in a pudgy woman’s face. “ I was driving my kids from school when this creature.”

“ Creature?”

“ Big... Skin was white-white. Thin face and white skull. His eyes were dark with electricity!”

Kron pinched the bridge of his nose. Eddie rapped his ribs. “ You’re a star, Kron-man.”

“ I don’t want to be a star. And stop the Kron-man stuff.”

The TV switched back to the studio. “ Amazing. In other news Mayor Ames is in hot water for a series of remarks directed at Janus Enterprises made this morning at the Camden Bay Trade Center. The Mayor claimed that Janus plans for a waterfront center fail to take into account lake environmental concerns. The Janus office had no comment.”

“ Sir,” said the nurse. “ Lieutenant McShane requests that Mr. Conover see Miss Townsend at another time.”

“ McShane, oh, that horse’s padunka. Hey, she’s my client,” said Eddie and he walked around the desk into the side corridor.

Kron glanced at the TV and followed Eddie as the counter nurse protested. A tall, graying man in a short sleeve blue shirt and yellow striped tie turned inside the room at the end of the corridor. His eyes opened wide when he saw Eddie and he stepped into the corridor. “ Eddie, why don’t you be a nice little boy and go home to Pappy.”

“ I gut a client here, McShane.”

McShane crossed his long arms and stood between Eddie and the open door. “ She isn’t exactly asking for you.”

“ She called me, Mack.”

“ Why do you keep calling me Mack?”

“ Habit. Habit. Who ran her down? Was it Junior’s guys?” Kron stayed near the wall. “ I know it wuz Junior’s guys. I could be next!”

“ Oh, well. That’s the way it goes...” A slight grin moved up McShane’s chiseled face. “ I don’t mess with Mr. Janus, thank you. ”

“ I want to see her.”

“ Who’s he?” asked McShane as he pointed at Kron.

“ Randy Kron, friend of Eddie’s,” said Kron and he moved closer.

“ I didn’t know Eddie had any friends,” said McShane, smiling at Eddie.

“ You let me see that broad.”

“ She’s still shaken. Her father is on the way over here.”

Eddie tried to look around the rangy McShane. “ Injured?”

“ No, but you’re going to be. Beat it, Eddie.”

“ You gut a description of the car?”

McShane pulled out a narrow pad that looked like a shopping list. “ It wasn’t a car, it was a truck. Red Chevy, beat up and nobody has a plate. The truck spun and fishtailed into a pole right on Columbia. Dented the bed. That’s all we have.

“ It had to be Junior.”

“ Now, don’t bring Janus into this..” McShane pointed at Eddie. “ I told you, I don’t want to be messing with Maurice Janus.”

“ Junior doesn’t scare me.”

“ Well, he should. If I were you I’d just stay out of this.”

“ Mack, let me see her.”

McShane rubbed his chin and shook his head. “ She didn’t say she hired you. So, have a nice day.”

“ Mr. McShane,” said Kron. McShane turned and raised his left brow. “ I think if, indeed, Miss Townsend has called Mr. Conover, it behooves us to honor her request.”

“ What is this guy your press spokesman?” He nodded to Kron and shook his head at Eddie. “ Okay, you and Kron: two minutes.”

“ Two minutes? I can’t take a leak in two minutes.”

“ Then go see a doctor.”

Eddie muttered something and Kron followed him into a tiny room with an examining table and glowing x-ray sheets on the wall. Julie’s red hair was straight, her eyes brilliant green and she had a bandage on her cheek. She wore jeans and a light green

jersey. After studying Kron she focused on Eddie. “ Eddie, they are trying to get me.”

“ You okay, kid?”

“ Yes... I jumped out of the way of that truck. They tried to run me down.”

“ No plate, huh?” She shook her head. “ Listen, I’ll get these bastards.”

“ How? I know you’ve only been on the case a day.”

Eddie’s face froze. “ Well, I start lookin’ at Maurice Janus’ people.”

Kron stepped closer. “ Who else would want to hurt you?”

She looked at his checkered shirt, ripped at the biceps.

“ Kevin is upset because I dumped him, but he wouldn’t try to run me down. We never had that much of a relationship. Who are you?”

“ Kron, he works with me,” said Eddie.

“ Kron?”

“ Randy,” said Kron, shaking her hand. He looked down at her lunch tray next to the table.

She had a long, soft hand and looked at him eyeing the tray.

“ Randy. You look like you’re starved.”

“ He missed breakfast... and lunch. Maybe even dinner last night. The guy is famished, Julie!”

“ Help yourself. I can’t eat after all this.”

“ If you don’t mind,“ said Kron, embarrassed, but too hungry not accept her offer. Again he could not fathom how his body miraculously changed at the push of a phone button and the fact someone had seen him fly might alert his pursuers. He sat in the chair and unwrapped the plastic knife and fork as Eddie continued.

“ So, your boyfriend is pissed.”

“ Ex-boyfriend. We met in a bar called Harpers. He was a financial guy. He even tried to get me to sell Dad’s company. He’s in love with himself.”

Kron dug into the potato salad and swished chocolate milk around his mouth.

“ Where does Kevin boy work?” Julie looked flustered.

“ Solomon and Solomon down town near Harpers as a matter of fact.”

“ How upset was he?” asked Kron as he chewed on the bulky roll.

“ Real upset. Kevin always gets what he wants. He wanted to marry me, but... I’m not ready for marriage and he was real pushy. So, I dumped him. I’ve got too much going on with my father sick.”

“ What’s the matter with your father?” asked Kron.

“ This whole sabotage by Janus’s people aggravated his heart condition. He’s just worn down. Look, we need answers.”

“ How do you know Janus sabotaged your father’s company?” asked Kron as he devoured the potato salad.

“ She’s been snoopin’ into invoices and construction plans,” said Eddie. “ Look, I’ll call Junior myself if I have to.”

Kron finished the pudding and set down the plastic spoon. “ That was good. Thank you, Miss Townsend.”

“ Sure... Don’t let Kevin know I gave you this,” said Julie as she wrote something on a card. “ Here’s his office number.”

“ Okay.”

“ Kevin has a vindictive streak, that’s for sure.”

Eddie stepped closer to the bed. “ Do you want some protection? I gut guys that can shadow you. You won’t even know they’re around.”

“ Dad is on his way over. He’ll bring me home. But I’ll frankly be afraid to leave the house after this. ”

“ I’ll put the fear of God into Junior.” Eddie turned toward McShane now in the doorway. “ I’ll call you tonight.”

“Good, I want answers, Eddie. You *are* a private investigator, aren’t you?”

“ Yeah, I can send you the paperwork.”

“ Not necessary.” She smiled as she turned to Kron. “ Nice to meet you, Mr. Kron.”

“ Randy.”

“ Randy.”

“ And thanks for the food.”

Eddie moved across the room and eyed McShane in the doorway. “ Whaddaya you lookin’ at?”

“ Good-bye, Eddie.”

“ Adios...”

“ Kron.”

“ Sergeant.”

“ Kron, let me give you the same advice I gave Miss Townsend. Stay as far away from Eddie Conover as you can.”

“ He’s not that bad actually.”

“ He’s the only guy I know who can take a bad situation and make it worse.”

Kron smiled. “ Her father is going to bring her home?”

“ He is.”

“ Good. Thanks again.”

“ For you, Kron,” he said, looking at Eddie in the hall, “ anytime.”

Kron grinned again and quickly followed Eddie into the hospital corridor. “ Hey, Eddie, how did you get into this line of work after Chicago?” He snatched some chocolate candies from the nurse’s desk.

“ By mail, Kokomo. Hey, you’re eatin’ like a starving dog, Kron.”

“ How’d you become a private investigator?”

Eddie walked ahead of him and out the revolving door. Once outside he turned in the sunshine. “ I was in intelligence.”

“ What did you say, you used to be intelligent?”

“ Funny, funny, Kron-man. Let’s get downtown and check out Kevin.”

“ No, no. You’re bringing me to the clinic near the bay.”

“ I’m busy. Look, maybe tomorrow I’ll-”

Kron clamped his arm. “ Look, you little grease ball. I don’t know who I am or know nothing before last night. I’m turning into this goon at the touch of a cell phone button. You’re bringing me to the clinic.”

“ Well,” he said, looking at Kron’s hand still enveloping his arm. “ I guess I could make a swing over to the bay.”

“ You do that, Eddie.”