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Mars Girl



a novel
by Jeff Garrity

Prologue

The MarsDestiny lander roars through the Martian atmosphere, generating intense heat that blossoms off its shield in a bright, miles-long trail. Under dim emergency lights Mirellen Garasovic staggers to the bridge and pushes the useless console buttons, at first with her finger, then slams them with her palm until it hurts.

The ship's shudders turn to violent quakes and Mirellen is thrown to the grated metal floor. She uses a rail to pull herself to her feet then hangs on as she works her way to the window. Looking out, she sees the rusty soil and deep blue shadows of Mars floating below her. The planet's immensity startles her.

The ship spins and Mirellen sprawls into the galley and onto the floor between a row of padded chairs. She pulls herself into one of the chairs and draws the straps across her body just as she had in countless training sessions, but now her trembling hands fumble with the latches.

Mirellen looks around at the empty seats and hears the hiss of the retro rockets. Instead of steadying the ship, they send it twisting one way and then the other.

Mirellen throws off the straps and struggles toward the sleeping quarters. The ship jerks violently and she's thrown again to the floor. She crawls to the eighteen sleeping pods, stacked like coffins three-high. Holding onto one of the pods, she gets to her feet and checks the display panels on each sleeper. Except for her own, all panels are dark and each hatch is sealed tight.

The ship bucks and Mirellen lands in her open pod. She raises her hand to touch the bottom of her mother's sleeper, then looks at the next stack and silently says goodbye to her father and brother.

She pulls down on the hatch and waits for impact.

Day I

1. Just Quit

Standing against the back wall of the overcrowded funeral parlor, Ray Barker watched a holo of his brother's well-dressed body rise from the casket and rotate upright. With eyes open, the holo paused to raise a hand in a solemn goodbye, then closed its eyes and continued its ascent toward the rustic pine planks of the parlor's cathedral ceiling. Barker saw his mother sitting in the front row sobbing into a handkerchief. Next to her, Barker's young niece, sitting on her mother's lap, stared at the floor and fidgeted with her braids.

As the holo's shoes disappeared into the cathedral ceiling, Barker's head hummed the familiar tone of the New York office. When the priest stood, adjusted her robes and stepped to the podium to deliver the benediction, Barker slipped out the rear door and into the dim hallway. His head was humming again.

"Piper, what's up?" Barker said.

"Something's wrong with MarsDestiny," Piper said in Barker's head. "The lander's not responding and NASA thinks only one colonist is awake. This could be big. We're going live with the story after 'Prelude to Destiny.' Rindell wants you in Houston to do some weepy-relative stuff."

"I'm at my brother's funeral," Barker said.

"We signed off on you leaving Chicago, not taking a vacation," Piper said. "You know the rules. Something comes up, you go to work."

Barker saw a doorless room down the hall and walked toward it. “There must be something in my contract about family funerals.”

“Let me know when you find it. In the meantime, get to Houston.”

“There aren’t any real airports in northern Michigan. The closest one is a couple hours south.” In the small room, scattered folding chairs faced a wall screen that showed short clips of his brother’s abbreviated life. On the screen he and his brother built a snow fort behind their home in Oak Park when they were kids.

“Then get moving,” Piper said. “The lander’s going to hit soon. If we’re lucky we’ll get live vid of the crash but it looks like it’s far enough off course that we’ll have to search. We need you ready when we see bodies.”

“Last I heard Gainsbro had Houston.”

“Rindell fired her and a couple other casters middle of the week. I suggested you and he agreed.”

“Commission?”

“Ray, be realistic. This is a house show. Straight time basis. Hang on a second, Rindell’s buzzing my assistant.”

Barker dropped into one of the folding chairs. “MASSnews-Now,” he said, and the wall screen changed to a live view from Mars, shot by a TractorPix, a bot the size of a golf cart with a camera mounted on top of a flexible wand. On the screen five glowing GreatWall MotorWorks luxury sedans in vee formation sped across Moskey Basin, the landing site for the first-ever colonial mission to Mars. Coki Peps, wearing a red vinyl mini dress with a hundred holes punched in it, stood like a ship’s figurehead on the hood of the lead car. Her bandmates, pawing at their instruments, rode the hoods of the trailing cars. Coki’s golden hair fluttered against the

rusty hills west of the basin as she broke into “AutoErotica,” her latest hit. For the occasion the refrain was changed from “Ain’t nothin’ like gettin’ down in GreatWall cars,” to “America’s stars are goin’ down on Mars.”

The formation skidded through a turn and slid to a halt in front of three conjoined plastic and metal tubes that formed the Gemini Cricket Family Restaurants Mars Station. A holo of a giant two-headed cartoon cricket rose from behind the station, waving an American flag in each of its six hands and nodding its heads to the beat of Coki’s song. Pipped into the lower right of the screen was a live view of the MarsDestiny lander streaking through the Martian atmosphere, its long, bright tail like a tear in the pale blue sky.

“I’m back,” Piper said in Barker’s head. “Rindell just talked to NASA. They’re pretty sure the lander will overshoot the basin, so that should give you time to get to Houston.”

“Who’s doing production for the ‘Prelude’ show?” Barker said. “I’d swear Coki was really there.”

“Zimmel,” Piper said. “We’re lucky we still have him. DisneyNews made him an offer earlier this morning.”

“So they’re raiding our sinking ship,” Barker said.

“We’re not sunk yet.”

“Your optimism is impressive, but the rest of the world thinks it’s just a matter of time,” Barker said. “Anyone else get an offer?”

“They talked to me, too. I told them we’re going to make it, and I’m not leaving New York for California anyway. I doubt they’ll call you. Thirty-four is getting a bit old for a caster. Hang on a second. Rindell’s buzzing me again.”

Down the hall the funeral parlor doors opened and Barker heard muffled voices as people wandered into the hallway. He considered stepping into the hall but he heard Piper's voice again.

"Good news," Piper said. "Rindell said the board delayed their emergency meeting until Monday because of what's happening on Mars. That gives us four days to turn things around."

"I heard Jaspers paid fifty billion for the exclusive."

"Fifty-five billion plus twenty-five points on all advertising and spin-offs."

"There's never been a show worth that much," Barker said.

"So we'll make history while we save our jobs. Everyone needs to pitch in on this, so get moving."

Barker looked up at the wall screen. As "AutoErotica" rushed to its climax, Coki leapt off the lead car and landed in a puff of sparkling Martian dust. She turned away from the camera and raised her skirt to slide down one side of her panties. The TractorPix zoomed in and the screen filled with a MicroSoft logo tattooed on her right cheek.

"I don't know, Piper. I really should go to the cemetery, and then there's a reception. I've got family to think about."

"Barker, I'm tired of having this discussion with you again and again. If you want to quit, just quit. If there's another job that'll give you a chance to get rich everyday, go ahead and walk. Otherwise, this is one hell of an opportunity to get face time on what could be our biggest show ever. I need to know right now."

Barker stood and stepped outside the room. Down the hall he saw his uncle put his arm around his mother. His sister-in-law hugged a woman he didn't recognize.

“All right, all right. I’ll head back to the airport in Bay City. Have someone arrange the flight and a car in Houston. And tell them to send some flowers to my mom’s house. I’ll send the address.”

“We’ll take care of the transportation. You deal with the flowers.”

2. Don’t do this

MASScorp CEO John J. Jaspers sat at his desk, alone in his corner office atop the MASSworld building, a magnificent glass and steel structure that spiraled sixty-four stories above Times Square and revolved around its spindle once every hour. Jaspers wore a pinstriped suit and his thin gray hair was pulled back into a ponytail that lay on his collar. His hands were folded over his slight paunch as he stared at the silent wall screen opposite his desk. He hadn’t found the courage to turn up the sound.

On the screen, Coki pulled up her panties and danced toward the lead car to the beat of “Skanky Panky,” another of her chart-toppers. When she jumped onto the hood, the formation drove off toward a narrow pass that led into the rugged hills west of Moskey Basin.

Ivan Smith, NASA’s media relations chief in Houston, filled the right side of the screen, and Sally Timmens, MASSnews morning anchor, filled the left. From what Jaspers remembered of the script, after Coki showed her tattoo there was supposed to be live vid from the lander’s interior as the crew braced for touchdown. The unexpected change made Jaspers’ heart beat faster.

Smith, a bearded man in his forties and sporting a backward NASA baseball cap, looked anxious and kept glancing behind him at the rows of techs who all seemed to wear the same worried expression. Smith exchanged a few words with a flight engineer who shook her head as

they talked. A man standing next to the engineer looked like he might cry as he examined data on his screen.

The MarsDestiny lander, pipped into the bottom center, was close enough that the TractorPix's zoom could see the MASSnews logo in large block letters that ran from top to bottom of the fuselage.

Jaspers couldn't stand it any longer. "Volume-Five-Now," he said.

"Ivan, we understand that only one of the crew is awake," Sally said. She wore a shimmering blue top and there were matching blue streaks throughout her dark hair.

"Yes, that's right," he said. "It's Vlady's kid, Mirellen. Mirellen Garasovic."

"The youngest of the seventeen colonists," Sally said.

Smith nodded. "Right. She's fifteen. We think the other crew members are still in their pods." Smith turned to say something to the flight engineer. She shook her head and Smith turned back toward the camera. "The lander ... isn't responding. The comm links are dead."

"No," Jaspers whispered to himself. "Don't do this."

3. Welcome to Okinisee

Barker headed south on M-23 in his rented GreatWall microvan. The two-lane highway hugged the Lake Huron shore all the way to Bay City, then straight south through Flint and Ann Arbor to the Ohio border.

The road traveled up a small hill giving Barker a view of the vast lake to his left. Dark clouds hung like slabs of slate above its steely gray water. Ragged lines of whitecaps marched toward shore ahead of a storm blowing in from Canada.

As he crested the hill his car began to sputter. He pushed the accelerator but the microvan barely responded. He hit the diagnostics button on the steering column and a translucent message appeared on his windshield:

Condenser Fault

Failure Estimate: 4 miles

Barker pulled off the road next to a cheery sign decorated with sailboats, beach umbrellas, smiling gulls and the words, “Welcome to Okinisee, It’s a Shore Thing!”

Ahead, on the edge of town, Barker saw an LED display over a small brick building that showed a tow truck hauling a car in a never-ending loop. He checked for traffic, then crept back onto the road with the pedal to the floor as the storm’s first raindrops hit his windshield. A moment later he pulled into the parking lot of Fred’s Fixit. His car sputtered to a stop on the cracked asphalt next to an ancient gas pump island.

4. Everything’s good

President Shari Flanagan stood alone like a statue with her arms folded and feet apart as she stared at the Oval Office wall screen. She wore a yellow blazer over a navy blue blouse and her handsome, care-worn face was fixed in a scowl as she watched the lander, its retrorockets flaring randomly and spinning the ship in either direction. The crawl at the bottom of the screen read, “MarsDestiny lander not responding ... Only one colonist awake ... Others feared dead.”

There was a quick tap on the door and Bob Briter, the president’s chief political advisor, stepped inside the room. Briter reminded the president of the drawing of a Norman peasant in

one of her old college textbooks – sharp nose, curly light hair and proud ears. Briter, wearing a deep violet four-button suit, walked to where the president stood in front of the wall screen.

“Did you talk to Black Goat?” the president said, her eyes still on the screen.

“Not really,” Briter said.

“Either you did or you didn’t.”

“He’s worried about security,” Briter said, standing with his arms folded like the president. “He didn’t want to talk.”

“He didn’t say *anything*?” The president said.

“All he said was, ‘Everything’s good.’”

“That’s it?”

“Then he said, ‘Don’t call me again,’” Briter said. “That’s the entire conversation. ‘Everything’s good. Don’t call me again.’”

On the screen the TractorPix tracked the lander as it sailed high above the basin. Pipped into the screen’s lower right, a three-dimensional map used red and blue lines to show the ship’s actual trajectory in relation to its planned flight path. The lander was hundreds of meters too high.

“How’d he get a codename like Black Goat?” the president said.

“I gave it to him,” Briter said. “It’s a good name for a terrorist.”

The president looked at Briter.

“Just in case,” he said.

“Do we know if the girl’s still alive?” the president said, turning back toward the screen.

“She has to be.”

“But the others are dead?”

“I wouldn’t say they’re *dead* dead,” Briter said.

“Then what kind of dead are they?”

Briter shrugged. “I guess you’d call it brain dead.”

The TractorPix camera followed the lander until it disappeared beyond the western hills where a glowing banner was stretched between the enormous twin peaks of Olympus Mons. On the banner an animated wooly mammoth, its trunk wrapped around a toothbrush handle, stepped on a tube of Tusk Toothpaste to load the brush, then scrubbed his tusks until they sparkled.

“I’m so glad my grandkid got to see Coki’s ass,” the president said. “Whatever happened to decency?”

“That was pure Rindell,” Briter said. “Everybody’s been talking about whose logo it would be all week. I bet MicroSoft paid forty million for that tattoo and you know what that means.”

“Tell me.”

“That means our take of those ten seconds alone is ten million,” Briter said. “This is going to be a good day.”

“Keep telling me that. We’ve got sixteen dead ... ”

“Martyrs for Mankind,” Briter said. “Remember that when you’re onscreen. Martyrs for Mankind tested very well.”

“I’m sure those reassuring words will make all the tender-hearted grandmas leap with joy,” the president said. “I’m getting a bad feeling about this.”

The image on the screen jumped and jerked as the TractorPix bounded over a series of shallow craters on its way across the basin toward the western hills.

“Listen,” Briter said, “after a few days, when the girl finally dies, we’ll have enough money to launch six or seven more missions. By midterms there’ll be more than a hundred colonists living up there and by the time you’re campaigning for re-election people will see Martian babies on their screens – all of it financed by your SponsorAmerica program. Just try to name somebody who saved the human race without raising taxes.”

5. Martyrs for mankind

“It’s just such a shame,” said Amber Drake, leaning back in her creaky chair in the office of Fred’s Fixit and watching the large screen hanging from two hooks in a corner of the semi-tidy office. Amber touched the flame of her pistol lighter to a cigarette and took a deep drag. “But if only one’s gonna make it, I hope they’re right and it’s the girl,” she said through drifting smoke. “She was always my favorite.”

Barker, still wearing his rain-splattered jacket, stood looking through the streaked Plexiglas window of a swinging door that led into the repair shop’s garage where Fred had Barker’s car on the lift. There were two coiled wires running from under the car’s cell compartment to a keyboard and screen on a wheeled cart. Fred, Amber’s husband, wore baggy blue coveralls over his thin frame and studied the screen with his back to Barker.

Amber handled the phone and the administrative details from behind a wooden counter that, except for the overflowing ashtray and the deck of cards arrayed in a half-finished game of solitaire, seemed more appropriate for a corporate gatekeeper than an office at a mom and pop repair shop in northern Michigan.

“They said the president’s gonna talk soon,” Amber said. “So maybe they know something. Volume-Seven-Now.”

Barker turned and saw the network's chief anchor fill the screen.

"This is Peter Cloud for MASSnews, the USA's best choice for contemporary news hits."

Peter smiled and winked at the camera.

Peter had dark, gray-flecked hair and the manly, confident look of a former athlete who might still throw a football around at the beach if there was someone to impress. His dark suit and white shirt were tasteful and well tailored. His eyes matched the blue of his tie.

Peter shifted his gaze to another camera.

"In a moment we'll be joined by our commander-in-chief, President Shari Flanagan. In the meantime we have some breaking news."

The anchor turned back to the first camera.

"Of course, here at MASSnews we avoid speculation so we won't repeat the rumors already spreading about terrorist plots to sabotage the mission. Or as one source close to NASA and the White House said, 'If anyone wanted this mission to fail, it's the Chinese.' The source went on to say that the humiliation of losing the race to colonize Mars, and its continuing efforts to aid our enemies in the Middle East, give China ample motivation to sabotage the MarsDestiny program. Predictably, the Chinese ambassador denied that Beijing-controlled terrorist cells were involved."

An electric guitar soared through the opening line of "Hail to the Chief" and the president, standing in front of her desk, filled the screen.

"Welcome, Madame President," Peter said from the lower left pip as the music faded, "I'm sure, like everyone, this is a difficult moment for you."

"Yes, of course," the president said with a somber smile. "I trust that all Americans are keeping the colonists in their prayers."

“Of course,” Peter said. “Madame President, if our worst fears are confirmed, what will that do to your commitment to the MarsDestiny program?”

“Excellent question,” the president said. “In moments of crisis I look to history for guidance. If terrorists had attacked the first ships that brought colonists to these shores more than four hundred years ago, would no ships have followed? Would the New World have remained the Unknown World? Of course not. When we say that our destiny is to take human civilization to Mars, no one should doubt that we will succeed. The USA is the only nation capable of accomplishing this vital mission, and we take our responsibilities seriously. We are one deadly asteroid, one catastrophic terrorist attack, one rampaging virus or one ecological disaster from the end of human existence on this planet. Whatever the fate of the first MarsDestiny mission, we will – *we must* – persevere. I promised this great nation that we will create a sustainable Martian colony and that there will be a baby born on Mars before my term expires. And most important, I promised that my SponsorAmerica program will make all this happen without spending one dime of taxpayer money.” The president stiffened her spine. “Peter, I intend to keep my word.”

“Beautifully spoken, Madame President,” Peter said. “Thank you.”

The president smiled and nodded. “Peter, if I may, I’d like to lead the nation in prayer.”

“Of course.” Peter said. “That would be wonderful.”

The president clasped her hands and bowed her head.

“Dear Lord,” she said. “Like Jesus before them, the men, women and children of MarsDestiny left their world to create a new one for us all. Like Jesus, their mortal lives may have come to an end and they may have become Martyrs for Mankind. But, if it is your will, the mission they so proudly accepted in our name will live on.” The president kept her head bowed

but raised a palm toward the camera. “No matter what has happened, this is not the end of a journey, but the first step toward ensuring our future without nailing ourselves to the cross of burdensome taxes.”

“Amen,” Peter said.

“Amen,” Amber said, crossing herself.

Barker turned back toward the doorway window and saw Fred unhooking the coiled wires from underneath his car.

“You know what I think?” Amber said, lowering the screen’s volume with her assistant.

Barker half-turned toward her.

“This kind of thing,” Amber gestured at the screen, “maybe it’s good for us. Sorta brings us together, you know? It’s about the only time we’re all thinking the same thing. Sometimes good comes from bad. I wouldn’t stand there if I was you.”

Barker wasn’t sure if the last bit was directed at him, but just as he turned his head to take another look through the window, the swinging door flew open and hit him hard above his right eye. The force knocked him stumbling backward onto a vinyl loveseat that toppled over when he landed and left him on his back with his legs dangling over the seat cushions.

“Told ya,” Amber said.

6. The best shows are mysteries

Jaspers stared out his office window, absently watching the white vees cut by tourist boats in distant New York Harbor. His assistant hummed the first few notes of “God Bless America” and he hurriedly pulled it from his suit coat pocket and thumbed its green button.

“Briter, what the hell’s going on?” Jaspers said.

“Quite a show, huh?” Briter said. “I told you we’d come through for you.”

“Come through? This is *murder*.”

“Don’t confuse facts with reality. We’re saving the human race. Be happy.”

Jaspers put his hand to his forehead. “You killed seventeen astronauts.”

“How do you know?” Briter said. “Are they dead? Are they alive? No one knows for sure. The best shows are mysteries.”

Jaspers took a few unsteady steps to an overstuffed chair and leaned against it. “You people are monsters. I’m voiding the contract.”

“Jaspers, if you even dream about blowing the whistle we’ll have a thousand fingers pointing at you.”

“I had nothing to do with this and you know it.”

“Nothing? You’re the one making all the money.”

“What? We paid you a fortune for the exclusive and you’re getting a piece off the top of everything – placements, commercials, spins.”

“We’re putting our share into MarsDestiny so we can save the human race,” Briter said. “You’re a greedy corporation who’s going to squeeze every last dollar out of this. Who are people going to believe?”

7. How’s your head?

Amber rolled her chair away from the counter, stood up, straightened her short knit skirt and walked to where Barker lay on his back in the toppled loveseat. Amber had nearly doubled her weight since graduating from Okinisee High a couple decades before, but she still had the

pleasant smile and unflappable attitude that Fred fell in love with when his family moved to Okinisee from Detroit before his junior year of high school.

“You okay?” Amber said, standing over Barker.

Barker closed his eyes against the pain and raised a hand to his wound. He felt blood on his fingers.

“You did it good this time,” Amber said to Fred. His hand was still on the swinging door and he held Barker’s coiled condenser under his other arm. “Toss me one of them rags, willya, Fred?” Amber said.

Fred picked a stained but clean rag from a canvas bag hanging by the door and walked it across the room to Amber. She dropped the rag on Barker’s chest and he held it to his forehead.

“Didn’t see you there,” Fred said. “Sorry.”

Fred offered his hand to help Barker up, then righted the loveseat and Barker sat down, keeping the rag to his head.

Fred looked out the window at the row of red pines bowing in the wind across the street at Okinisee Township Memorial Park. Thunderheads sent guttural rumbles rolling across the lake.

“This is one hell of a storm,” Fred said, walking toward the window for a better view. “Liable to blow us all away.”

Amber rolled her eyes. “Hun, The David says just some wind and rain. Don’t get all worked up about it.” She looked at Barker, his face hidden behind the rag. “Honestly, he gets like a scared puppy every time we get a little weather. How’s your head?”

“Sore,” Barker said.

“They got an emergency room up in Alpena,” Amber said. “You just say the word and I’ll take you.”

“I’ll be all right.”

Amber lifted the loose part of the rag from Barker’s face to see if she could get a glimpse of the gash but Barker held it tight to his wound. “You look familiar,” Amber said. “You come up here summers?”

Barker shook his head. “How long until my car’s fixed?”

Amber looked at Fred, still at the window watching the storm. “Fred?” she said. “The gentleman would like to know when his car will be ready.”

“Part’ll be here in an hour,” Fred said from the window.

“I need to get to Bay City as soon as possible. Any ideas?”

“Driving’s the only way anymore,” Fred said. “Buses stopped running years ago. I put a hurry-up on the order. Usually doesn’t do any good, though.”

“If you’re hungry there’s a nice little restaurant down the street,” Amber said to Barker. “Cozy Corner Café. Ceci’ll fix you up. When you get back we’ll have your car all ready. Right, Fred?”

Fred turned toward the screen and said, “The-David-Now.” The screen changed from Mars to the local weather report.

“I was watching the crash show, hun,” Amber said. “I already told you The David says it’s just a little rain storm.”

Barker used his little finger to pull the rag away from one eye so he could see the screen. The David, appearing in front of a satellite display of Alpena County, wore a bright blue suit and

a permanent grin. Barker had seen better, but he was surprised that a place so far from anywhere had a high quality weather bot with such smooth motions and speech.

“Hi folks,” The David said from the screen. “Thanks for checking in with WUPM, where we do weather before it does you. This Mars thing is getting crazy isn’t it? Did you hear NASA is changing its name? It’s still NASA but the letters mean something new: ‘Need Another Seventeen Astronauts.’”

The David rapped his head with a knuckle and sounded a perfect rim shot. As he floated toward the lower left of the screen, his left hand swung down along the Lake Huron shoreline. The camera zoomed in far enough to show individual houses and cars, and then zoomed in farther.

“We’re getting some big winds and we’ve got some trees down along the shoreline. Here’s Lorelei and Wynton Harsen’s place out near Big Rock Point. There’s Wynton cussin’ up a storm. That big maple missed his house but didn’t miss his boat.”

Lorelei Harsen came out the front door hugging herself in the strong winds. She shouted something to her husband and pointed toward the sky. Wynton looked up into the clouds and gave a weak wave.

“Hi, Wynton,” The David said. “Good thing you’re not wired. This is a family show.”

“Kind of a strange weather bot, huh?” Fred said to Barker. “They got him from a comedy club that crashed over in Traverse City. They put a weather proggie in him but left the comedy code. Cracks me up sometimes.”

“Those dark clouds you see rumbling through the county are the result of two fronts colliding like sumo wrestlers just back from a Mexican buffet,” The David said with his permanent grin. “The heavy rain’s on its way and we can already hear the thunder boomers.”

“See? Just a thunderstorm,” Amber said. “MASSnews-Now.”

The screen changed back to a live view from Mars. Fred walked back to the window to watch the lurching trees in the lakefront park across the street. “I don’t like the looks of this,” he said.

8. Move those mountains

“Answer your damn head, Marquelson,” Piper said to herself as she sat at her desk in the center of the MASSnews sales floor, holding her assistant to her ear and waiting for the production chief to answer. Piper could barely hear the ring coming from her assistant over the noise of thirty-two sales reps taking orders as fast as they could from marketers who knew a good thing when they saw it. Sitting in open-fronted cubicles surrounding Piper, the reps would occasionally check the whirring digits of the ScreenTrend monitors facing in four directions above her desk.

Piper gave up waiting for Marquelson. She considered putting on the double-heeled pumps she’d kicked under her desk but instead walked to the elevator in her stocking feet.

“Good morning, Ms. Lane,” the elevator said as she stepped inside.

“Sixty-one,” Piper said, closing her eyes and leaning back against the carpeted wall so that her body arced from her feet to her blonde hair, which just reached the collar of her gray business suit.

“Are you sure you’d like sixty-one?” the elevator asked. “You usually choose one, fifty-nine or sixty-two.”

“Sixty-one, sixty-one, sixty-one, sixty-one,” Piper said, and the elevator launched itself skyward.

Piper was younger than half the people she managed, but no one doubted that she deserved the job, and few would have survived a week working under Rindell.

“Sixty-one, MASSnews Production,” the elevator said. “Have a pleasant day, Ms. Lane.”

Piper walked across the hall to the eyescan and looked into its bright light until she heard the door pop. The production floor was filled with rows of workstations that stretched the entire length of the building. The room always seemed too dark to Piper.

She walked to Marquelson’s office but it was empty. She wandered past several stations where faces glowed in screenlight, and found Marquelson, with rolled up sleeves and no tie, in the conference room talking to a dozen designers seated around an oval table. When Marquelson saw Piper, he excused himself and walked to the door where she stood waiting.

“We need those mountains moved right now,” Piper said. “I’ve been trying to call you.”

“I haven’t been answering my head,” Marquelson said, rubbing his bleary eyes. “Things are too crazy. We’re getting a flood of orders and I’ve got almost a hundred placements and banner ads in queue. We’re struggling to keep up.”

“Get used to it,” Piper said. “We hit a vein and I’ve got thirty-two reps digging with everything they’ve got. I’m not telling them to slow down just because you’re feeling a little stress.”

“It’s just a matter of what’s possible and what’s not,” Marquelson said.

“Before long the sun will be right behind the banner,” Piper said. “We’ve sold a boatload of banner spots that no one will be able to see. We need it done *now*!”

“It’s not as easy as you think,” Marquelson said, scratching the top of his head, his fingers disappearing into his thick black hair. “We need to synch the shadow angles with the

planet's rotation and we need to match the colors. The hills west of the basin are more of a burnt orange. We planned for something closer to russet, like at the basin."

"Marquelson!" Piper took a deep breath to calm herself. "This isn't about geography, it's about making money. I want the banner fifty degrees farther north and if it's not done in the next ten minutes I'm going to put you on a rocket to Mars so you can push the damn things over yourself. And Rindell's going to hear about it the next time you don't answer your head. Clear?"

Marquelson shrugged. "All right. But it's not going to look right."

"Make things pretty when you have time. If advertisers complain, send them to me."

Piper spun around and walked toward the door. On her way she stopped at Barton Zimmer's station outside Marquelson's office.

Zimmer slouched in his chair watching a glowing bottle of ForceCola rotate against a palette of colors found in the hills west of Moskey Basin. His heavy fingers flitted across a piece of black fabric draped on his thigh and a bag of CornDoggers rested in his lap. Zimmer, a large man with a shaved head, looked more like a prison guard than the MASSnews production closer, but no one knew more about making product placements pop. Everything crossed Zimmer's desk before going live.

"Things all right, Zim?" Piper said.

Zimmer turned his head far enough to catch Piper in the corner of his eye. "No one would want to work with these colors on purpose," he said. "Mars is a rotten pumpkin."

A banner ad for GrassFast Implants appeared on Zimmer's screen. The ad featured three children playing on a perfect lawn while dad napped in a hammock.

"There's no shade of green that looks good with rotten pumpkin," Zimmer said.

“Do your best and it’ll look great,” Piper said, and headed for the door.

9. Nerves of steel

The sweet smell of the Cozy Corner Cafe reminded Barker of the pastry shop near his apartment on Chicago’s north side. The walls of the bright and clean café were painted a motley mix of pastel colors and the tables and chairs randomly repeated the scheme. Barker assumed that a local artist had painted the black and white abstracts hanging on the café’s walls. The only other patrons were two retired farmers at a big round table in the back. Barker’s table was at the center of the café and he sat facing the wall screen.

Barker had eaten his BLT and occasionally stabbed at the few remaining home fries on his plate while he watched the TractorPix bounce across the rugged Martian terrain on its desperate search for the lander. The bot had made its way across Moskey Basin and as it approached the western hills a small squad of glowing dune riders skied down a sandy hill on their thin boards and brandished bottles of ForceCola for the camera as they zoomed past.

“Refill?” The waitress smiled and held up a coffee pot.

“Sure,” Barker said, sliding his mug toward the edge of the table.

“I hope you don’t want anything else. I just sent the cook home. Her daughter broke her arm at school.” She leaned toward Barker. “What happened to your head?”

Barker started to reach for his wound but stopped. “It shows, huh?”

“Hard to miss. You should get that stitched up.”

She leaned closer and Barker felt a satisfying wave of body heat. Her nametag was inches from Barker’s nose but all it said was “Your Name Here.”

“You could go to emergency in Alpena if you’ve got a few hours, or I could try closing it up with a butterfly.”

“Sure,” Barker said.

“All right, give me a minute,” the waitress said, and walked toward the two retired farmers in the back.

Barker pulled his assistant out of the pocket of his damp jacket lying over the back of the chair next to him. He thumbed a few buttons to find the latest ScreenTrend numbers and saw that nearly ninety percent of the nation’s population had already spent at least an hour watching the landing show, now called “MarsDestiny: Dead or Alive?” The domestic numbers were huge across all demographics and the international numbers were only slightly lower. He’d never seen anything like it. No one had.

“Piper-Now,” Barker said to himself and he heard Piper’s voice in his head.

“Barker, where are you?”

“My car broke down. I’m going to lose some time.”

“Barker! You’re should be halfway to Houston by now,” Piper said.

“Things happen. They put a hurry-up on the repair so I should ...”

“Never mind. I’ll call Brandle in Phoenix. He’s been hot lately. We wanted you but we can’t wait on this. Over-Now.”

The waitress returned with a tackle box and put it on a small table by the large windows at the front of the café. Each table by the windows had an individual light hanging from the ceiling. “Why don’t you move up here so I can see a little better,” she said as she fished through the tackle box.

Barker slipped his assistant back into his pocket and walked toward the big windows. A lightning bolt like a crooked skeleton flashed over the lake and changed its color for an instant from deep gray to milky blue.

“This is one hell of a storm,” Barker said.

“We get some good ones,” the waitress said, picking a butterfly bandage out of the tackle box. “You should sit down while I do this. I’ll need to pull pretty hard to close it up and you seem like the squeamish type.”

“Nerves of steel,” Barker said, smiling. “Do your worst.”

“Maybe you should tell me your name,” the waitress said, peeling the backing off the bandage. “Just in case this goes horribly wrong and I have to notify your family.”

“Barker. Ray Barker. Have you done this before?”

“No, but my mom was a nurse.”

“Is your mom here?”

“Just relax.” She stood over Barker and leaned his head back.

10. Two-ring circus

“While the MarsDestiny search continues,” Peter said, “let’s turn our attention to the political implications of the crash and the difficult decisions that will have to be made in the coming hours. Joining us is Senate Minority Leader Harv Straley. Welcome Senator.”

“Thank you,” the senator said as he snapped a tiny microphone into place on his lapel. “Glad to be here.” The Senator, a large, balding man with a double chin, wore a pale green suit and behind him the studio background slowly adjusted to the same shade of green. The lighting on his side of the anchor desk changed from warm to bright, making his face appear pallid.

“Senator, your party has kept a low profile since the crash,” Peter said. “Most of us expected to see some pretty strong words from your side of the aisle, especially since you and your comrades have done everything you could in a vain effort to derail the president’s popular and successful SponsorAmerica program, which will bring taxes to their lowest point in more than one hundred years.”

“It’s clearly way too early to claim success for the president’s sponsorship program,” Senator Straley said. “The fact that she somehow extorted a huge fee from MASSnews for the MarsDestiny exclusive doesn’t make the program a success.”

“Perhaps you haven’t heard that FlyRight Airlines has agreed to sponsor passport printing and Starbucks is sponsoring sign maintenance on the entire length of I-80.”

“I am aware of both of those,” the senator said. “I added up the cost savings from those programs and it’s less than one-hundredth of a cent per family. And the Starbucks agreement takes revenue from businesses that rely on advertising dollars.”

“A hundredth of a cent saved is a hundredth of a cent earned,” Peter said. “But let’s talk about MarsDestiny. It’s still looking a lot like a foreign terrorist attack, and the Chinese seem to be the leading candidates.”

“It’s extremely reckless to assign blame for the crash,” Straley said. “We simply don’t know what happened.”

“I guess we could say that once again your party doesn’t seem to know what’s going on.”

“That’s unfair and you know it,” Senator Straley said. “Until we have all the facts, no one knows what or who caused the crash.”

“Still, your party, which is known for its stridency, has been largely silent. That reinforces the idea that there is a lack of leadership and therefore a lack of credibility.”

“What you call stridency is merely a response to feeling shut out of the national debate,” Senator Straley said. “Especially by news channels like this one. When’s the last time MASSnews sent anyone to a press conference on the Hill? The American people are being left in the dark. We need to ... (Scrolling text appeared across the bottom of the screen: *Senator Straley was one of 48 from his party who voted in favor of reducing NASA’s budget by \$62 billion. Did these cuts undermine MarsDestiny safety?* A large ‘Y’ appeared in the lower left, a large ‘N’ in the lower right) ... reengage the public so that we can at least *have* a debate about important national issues. You and the others who call themselves journalists are becoming increasingly marginalized because you’ve turned news into a three-ring circus. Or I should say two-ring, since this network and DisneyNews completely dominate the others.”

“Yes, we’re at the margins with nearly three billion screens worldwide right now.”

“They’re watching a train wreck,” Senator Straley said. “They’re gawking. If it’s not sensational, you ignore it. You run from everything ... (the votes were in and the tally at the bottom of the screen showed that more than thirty-seven million people thought that Straley’s party had undermined MarsDestiny’s safety, fourteen million disagreed) ... of any substance and you ignore issues that profoundly affect ...”

“Our polling data says that the American people think you and your party are responsible for the crash on Mars,” Peter said. “If there are survivors, would you support a rescue mission?”

“A minute ago you blamed the Chinese,” Straley said. “And I’ve seen your polls. You and the rest of the staff at MASSnews would flunk basic statistics at any university in the nation.”

“Again you won’t answer the question.”

“I answered your question,” Straley said. “I said that it’s too early to make a decision. That’s a responsible position on a complex and emotional ...”

“Sorry to interrupt senator, but, as we reported earlier, Mirellen Garasovic is the only colonist confirmed to have been revived before NASA lost contact with the lander. We’ve managed to track down someone who knows her well. With us now is Mr. Albert Crandall, Mirellen’s long time piano teacher. Albert, thanks for joining us.”

An elderly man standing in front of Ronald Reagan Elementary School in Cherry Hill, New Jersey replaced Peter and Senator Straley.

“Hi, Peter,” the smiling man said.

11. You’re sure about this?

Barker reached up to touch his newly bandaged wound but decided against it and let his arm drop back to the table.

“What’s your name?” he said. “Your nametag doesn’t help.”

“Cecilia,” she said. “Cecilia Westraek.” She sat down opposite Barker at the small table by the big windows and looked past him toward the café’s wall screen. The TractorPix traveled toward a rock wall that wore a glowing image of the new all-terrain Toyota two-seater. “Do it Tonite in a Toyota Sprite” was written above the car in red letters that seemed embossed on the wall.

“I usually can’t stomach all the garbage on the live news networks,” Cecilia said. “But it’s pretty hard not to watch a show like this.”

Barker turned to look at the screen. The bot steered away from the wall and toward several boulders. Sitting on top of one of the boulders was an over-sized box of AgPro

CornDoggers. The crunchy little snacks flowed out the top of the box and popped in the air. As the TractorPix passed, the smoke created by the bursting CornDoggers spelled out “Taste Explosion!”

“That’s what I do for a living,” Barker said when he turned back. “I’m a caster for MASSnews.”

Cecilia laughed. “No offense.”

Barker shot her a quick smile. “I think my career will be over soon anyway. MASS has been threatening to pull the plug on the news division for months. I’m supposed to be on my way to Houston right now to interview the colonists’ relatives. Somehow they think I’m the best choice for exploiting human misery. New York wasn’t too happy when I told them my rental car broke down. They’ve fired people for less.”

“You don’t seem too concerned.”

Barker looked out at the trees swaying in the strong winds. “I left my brother’s funeral up in Alpena because I thought getting some face time on a hit show would help my chances with another network when MASSnews shuts down.” Barker looked at Cecilia. “He died diving some wrecks in the bay up there.”

“You just ... stood up and left?”

“Pretty bad, huh? While I walked here from Fred’s I remembered that the guy who’s going to Houston in my place was planning to go onscreen with some kids to get their reactions to the crash. I started looking around for kids – a school or something – so I could fill in for him while he filled in for me. Then down the road I saw a vulture picking at a dead rabbit. That’s what I am. I’m a vulture looking for roadkill.” Barker laughed at the notion. “This is a lousy

way to make a living. I've always thought I'd hit it big and then quit. Hasn't happened so it's time to move on."

"There's an elementary school just up the hill," Cecilia said. "The principal stops here for coffee every morning and she said all the kids were going to gather in the cafeteria to watch the landing. I think it would be good for kids to hear other kids talking about what's happening."

Barker smiled, then shook his head. "I'm done with it. It's all or nothing in this job. I haven't got it anymore."

"I could help," Cecilia said. "I don't have a cook right now anyway. I could go to the school with you and point out some kids who would be good in front of the camera. I know everybody in town."

Barker considered the suggestion. "You really want to do this?"

"Sure," Cecilia said. "You wouldn't be a vulture. I'm sure kids are having trouble processing all this so you'd be doing something good. And this town could use a little attention."

Their eyes locked. Barker studied Cecilia's face. It was between pleasant and pretty. Possibly beautiful.

She looked away at the wall screen. The TractorPix slowed to a stop on the crest of a rocky ridge and just over a hillock caught a glint of bright metal in the distance. The camera zoomed in on the silver and black MarsDestiny lander, lying on its side with its nose stuck into a hillside.

"There it is!" Cecilia said, pointing at the screen.

Barker turned to look. Dusty gravel had spilled onto the ship obscuring the "M" in the MASSnews logo.

“Perfect timing,” he said, and turned back toward Cecilia. “You’re sure about this?”

“I’m sure,” she said. “Just give me a minute to shut down the kitchen.”

“I’ll call New York,” Barker said. “I guess it’s worth a shot.”

12. M.G.

Piper hadn’t eaten since she dug an energy bar out of her desk drawer when she arrived at the office just after four o’clock that morning. She decided she should treat herself better than that, so she took the elevator to the ground floor and slipped across Times Square traffic to the BlueOrbit Deli.

On any other day the deli’s customers would be edgy and rushed, and the staff would bark commands at each other. But on that day patrons waited patiently as they stared at the double-sided screens hanging from the ceiling, watching for the first glimpse of survivors. The deli’s staff went quietly about their business and stole glances at the hanging screens between orders.

Piper took her cinnamon scone and mint ChockaChino to a small table by a window with a good view of one of the screens. The café came to a silent standstill when Mirellen Garasovic appeared in the lander’s window and peered outside. Someone dropped a ceramic mug, shattering the silence, but no one looked away from the screens. All were transfixed by the girl staring back at them through the lander’s window. Mirellen wiped a tear from her eye and tucked her long brown hair behind one ear and then the other. The sun bounced a nasty glare off the ship just above the window so the TractorPix moved a few feet laterally until the glare was gone. When Mirellen saw the bot move, she raised her hand and gave a tentative wave.

She turned away from the window and unfurled a flexible ReadWrite screen onto a shelf that doubled as a door and used her finger to write a message. When she turned back toward the window she held up the message. It read, "I'm Alive, Are You?" She signed it "M.G."

Barker appeared in the lower right pip next to two young girls wearing spring dresses. On the cafeteria wall behind him were a few dozen colorful drawings of the MarsDestiny lander. Barker asked the girls what they thought Mirellen's message meant.

The girls looked at each other, and one finally said, "I think it means she wants to know if we can see her."

"And M.G. stands for Mars Girl," the other one said.

"Bull's eye," Piper said. She gulped half of her ChockaChino, picked up her scone and raced back to the office.

13. She's gotta eat

Barker stepped inside Fred's Fixit and leaned the dripping umbrella he borrowed from Cecilia against a wall.

Amber was at the counter, leaning back in her creaky chair and dabbing her eyes with a tissue. "The Mars Girl Show" was on the screen.

"Isn't it just awful?" she said. "All alone up there, a billion miles from everything." Amber blew her nose into a fresh tissue. "I saw you onscreen. You looked good. Couldn't even tell Fred busted your noggin. You didn't tell us you were a celebrity."

"Sorry." Barker saw through the swinging door's window that his car was still on the hoist. "He's still working on it?"

“Part’s not here yet,” Amber said. She leaned toward her desk screen, tapped it a few times and leaned back again. “The delivery guy’s a couple miles south so he should be here real quick. Had to come all the way from Oscoda. Won’t take five minutes for Fred to slap it in.”

Fred entered through the swinging door carrying a large piece of plywood and a hammer. He held a half dozen nails in his teeth and nodded at Barker as he walked past. He put the plywood on the floor by the front window, dropped the nails into his hand and looked up at the screen. The lander’s window was empty. “Anything new?”

“Seems like it’s just her,” Amber said. “Nobody else has come to the window so everybody’s saying the others must be dead. Poor girl. Can you imagine how lonely she is, with her dead family right there?” Amber shuddered.

“I’ve been thinking about this,” Fred said, holding the plywood up to the window and leaning his shoulder into it to keep it in place. “She needs H_2O , right? I mean, you can go for a couple months without eating, but you gotta have H_2O .” He gave a nail a few whacks, driving it into the top center of the plywood. “She’s got what she needs to make it right there. They couldn’t have used up all the H they’re carrying for fuel and there’s definitely some O in the emergency tanks or she wouldn’t be breathing.” Fred pounded in another nail and looked at Barker. “Hydrolysis. She makes some water and she can stay alive for a good long time. Too bad the comm links are down or somebody could teach her how to do it. And for food, there’s those sixteen dead people. Wouldn’t be the first time someone had to ...”

“Oh, you’re awful!” Amber would have none of it. “She’s not gonna eat ... oh, that’s awful!”

“She’s gotta survive five or six months,” Fred said. “They’ll stay fresh in those pods. They’re saying maybe they’d get there faster in one of those new space sails, but she’s still gotta eat.”

Amber glared at Fred, who started on another nail. “Mars Girl will find a way to get to the station and she’ll be just fine,” Amber said, raising her voice above the pounding. “End of discussion.”

“They’re saying she’ll never make it to the station,” Fred said, turning toward Barker. “Not with the comm links dead. Plus she’d have to figure out all the station’s systems. She’s got no training for that. But she’s got what she needs right there if she can figure out how to make some water, and if she gets hungry enough ...”

A delivery van’s brakes squealed outside the front door.

“She’s gonna be just fine and come home a big hero,” Amber said. “End of story. Now the least you can do is fix this gentleman’s car.”

“People might look at her kinda funny when she got back to Earth,” Fred said to Barker. “Especially if she’d been eating kin.”

“That’s e-nough,” Amber said.

14. That’s criminal

“I guess we owe you an apology, JJ,” said Mary Belle Mivers, MASScorp director of special operations. “Who would’ve thought this would happen?” Leaning against an overstuffed leather chair in front of Jaspers’ desk, she gestured at his wall screen where Mirellen was at the

window, wearing a T-shirt with the message “Kiss Me I’m Dying” written on it in sloppy red letters.

Mary Belle was dressed in a dark power suit, sans tie, and wore her short-back-and-sides hair parted in the middle. Her high heels matched her bright red lipstick.

“You’ve got the guts of a thief, JJ,” said Brandon Khul, MASS VP for marketing, sitting in a chair he had turned to face the wall screen. He thumbed a few buttons on his assistant and shook his head. “We hit the jackpot.”

Brandon favored colorful suits and on that day wore a turquoise double-breasted number with pleated pants and jacket. His blond hair had the tight curls of a Michelangelo statue and his elongated face, dished out cheeks and round tortoise shell glasses gave him the look of a Venetian dandy.

Mirellen turned her back to the window and wrote something on her ReadWrite. Next to her on the shelf was a glowing box of Zap ‘n’ Zerve Chicken Littles. A dozen miniature chickens wearing lacy cabaret dresses marched out from behind the box and performed a few can-can steps to a barroom honky-tonk. After the rousing, big-kick finale, the chickens flew up and disappeared into the box and the TractorPix zoomed out to show the entire ship.

“I thought we were gonna put the ‘M’ back in our logo.” Jaspers said.

“Rindell’s call,” Mary Belle said.

“He says it’s comic relief,” Brandon said. “And he wanted the buzz. The talk shows have been all over the ASS. So to speak. There’ve been proctology jokes, donkey’s flying through space ...”

“Did you hear what CoolMan Luke said on ‘WhatNow’?” Mary Belle said, grinning at Brandon. “He said Peter Cloud’s finally working for the right network.”

Mary Belle and Brandon turned to share the joke with Jaspers but he didn't smile.

"I'll tell Marquelson to fix it," Brandon said.

"Any pirating so far?" Jaspers said.

"DisneyNews knows they'll be invaded by an army of lawyers if they even dream of putting Mars Girl onscreen," Brandon said, thumbing buttons on his assistant. "Spins are a different story. A district judge agreed with Disney's claim that the name 'Mars Girl' was created spontaneously by the public so no one can own it."

"The caster didn't script the little girl's comment?" Mary Belle said.

"Apparently Barker never scripts his shows."

"We paid fifty-five billion and we're giving up twenty-five points but we don't own her name?" Mary Belle said. "That's criminal."

"Maybe we were too quick going with the name 'Mars Girl,'" Brandon said. "Rindell warned us but it tested great."

"What spins do we have so far?" Mary Belle said.

Brandon thumbed his assistant again. "We've got six plants pumping out Mars Girl dolls. We're taking screen orders now and we'll deliver at least four hundred thousand dolls to major market MASSmarts in the next five hours. All stores will have them before midnight. Another half million units arrive tomorrow by air from Kenya. Mini dolls will be in all BurgerLands before breakfast. We've got a dozen music and vid projects available or in the works. 'I'm Alive, Are You?' should chart by mid-afternoon and we made a deal with CosmoGirl Network to call the band Randi Rescue and the CosmoGirls. They'll do a feature on the band as soon as we cast it. We've licensed a clothing line and the first item is a T-shirt with 'Kiss Me I'm Dying' in the same script as the one she's wearing now. We've got a quarter

million screen orders for the shirts already and they'll be in all MASSmarts in the lower forty-eight and most of Canada within six hours. The first draft of a screenplay will be done today and there are three thousand Mars Girl wannabes waiting in line to audition at an auditorium we rented in Midtown. By tomorrow we'll have little pink coffins for the dolls coming off lines in Kenya and Cuba. Intelligence says we'll need those within three days."

"Coffins?" Jaspers said.

"Isn't that a little ... too?" Mary Belle said. "And what if she survives?"

"Survive?" Brandon said. "Doubtful. The coffins tested well, especially in Texas. When Mars Girl's dead we'll get some psychobabblers to convince everyone that we're providing a public service. Something about how the little pink coffins will provide closure for America's emotionally distressed children. We'll start shipping the coffins when her eyes get glassy."

15. Better than perfect

Barker was disappointed when he saw the "Closed" sign in the Cozy Corner's window but he parked his car on a side street anyway and trotted through the rain to the front door with Cecilia's folded umbrella in his hand. The strong wind blowing off the lake held the door shut until he pulled hard, jangling the bells attached to the door.

Cecilia came out of the kitchen when she heard the bells. She had taken down her ponytail and her hair hung on her shoulders. "I'm glad you're back," she said.

"Had to return your umbrella," Barker said, holding it up and smiling.

"It's not really mine. Someone left it here. You might need it so keep it if you want. Thirsty? Coffee? Lemonade? It's on the house."

"Lemonade sounds great."

“Splash of vodka?”

“Perfect.”

“Two splashes?”

“Even better.”

Cecilia had turned toward the kitchen but looked back. “Better than perfect?”

“Perfecter.”

Cecilia disappeared into the kitchen. Barker hung the umbrella and his wet jacket on hooks by the door and the lights went out. He walked toward the kitchen but bumped into the salad cart. “You all right in there?” he said, rubbing his knee.

“Let there be light,” Cecilia said, backing through the swinging kitchen doors with a lit candle in each hand. “Grab a plate for the candles and I’ll get the drinks.”

Barker picked up a pie plate from a stack on the salad cart and took the candles from her. Back at the table, he tipped one of the candles and made two small pools of melted wax, then stood the candles upright on the plate.

Cecilia arrived with a pitcher in one hand and two wine glasses in the other. “I bet you didn’t expect drinks by candlelight,” she said as she poured.

Barker held up his glass for a toast. “To power failures.”

“Cheers.”

They touched glasses and took long drinks.

“It wasn’t really a power failure,” Cecilia said. “I turned off the emergency cell. Why waste it?”

“To the perfectly timed flip of a switch.”

They toasted again.

They both looked out at the street. It was raining harder and large drops splattered on the pavement. The streetlights were on, even though it was late afternoon.

“You really helped me out this afternoon at the school.”

“I enjoyed it. I’ve never been in front of millions of people before. It was kind of a thrill.”

“If you count international screens, it was a few billion. I thought they were going to pull the plug in New York when I let you interview the principal, but you did a great job. You’re a natural. I owe you one.”

“You want to pay me back? I need to check on my boat to make sure she’s tied down good and tight. Wanna help?”

“Love to,” Barker said.

“Wait here a minute. I need to make a call and then we’ll go.”

After she went into the kitchen the lights came on and so did the wall screen.

Mirellen, wearing her spacesuit, climbed the hill that the nose of the ship had penetrated. Her feet occasionally slipped in the loose soil. When she reached the top of the hill she scanned the landscape in all directions while the TractorPix, following behind, positioned itself on a small knoll a few yards away.

Mirellen walked toward the TractorPix and put her visor against its camera so that her face filled the screen. With slow, exaggerated pronunciation, she mouthed the words: “The station. Where is the station? Take me to the station.”

16. Not while my numbers are down

The president sat at her desk staring at an untouched croissant on the plate in front of her. Briter sat in a chair facing the president's desk and drummed his fingers on the briefcase lying across his lap.

The president closed her eyes and laid her palms on either side of the plate. Briter could see veins and tendons on her neck he had never noticed before. She clenched her fists, opened her eyes and then relaxed her hands. She reached out to straighten a picture of her and her husband, taken on their first trip to the moon when she was a junior senator. In the background of the photo was a billboard proclaiming the future site of the Lucky Luna Casino and Resort. As chair of the NearSpace Subcommittee she had championed the SpaceVator to get people and freight to the moon at affordable prices. Its completion during her second term in the senate spurred a lunar economic boom and her foresight won national attention that led to her selection as a vice presidential candidate two years later. When her running mate died of a massive heart attack, she was suddenly at the top of her party's ticket.

"All I know is that we've got to do something or you're going to be in the mid-twenties by dinnertime," Briter said. "People are wondering why a teenage girl came up with a plan to save her life and you didn't." Briter looked at his assistant and shook his head. "Your compassion numbers suck."

"I prayed for the little shit and people don't think I care?" the president said. She pushed the croissant away and looked at the wall screen across the room, showing a three-dimensional MASSnews map of Moskey Basin and the surrounding hills with possible routes Mirellen could take from the crash site to the Gemini Cricket Family Restaurants Mars Station.

"Actions," Briter said. "We need actions not words. I say we take her to the station."

“Let’s not panic,” the president said. “We need to stick with the plan.” She twisted the top off a bottle of MochaMint Iced Latte Frappé and took a drink.

“Black Goat wants to kill her right now,” Briter said.

“No,” the president said. “Not while my numbers are down. He can do it when my numbers are back up.”

“Then we have to let her go on the trek,” Briter said. “People want her to have a chance.”

“You’ve been telling me all along that if she gets to the station, they can get to her head and find the crash code,” the president said.

“Yes, but only if the comm links are working when she gets there,” Briter said. He put his briefcase on the floor and scooted up to the edge of his chair. “Listen, the Goat’s in this just as deep as we are. If it looks like they might get to her head, I think he’ll take care of her. He’s done everything we’ve asked so far. The guy’s a wizard. Once she’s dead, they can’t get to her head. She’s wired, but she’s not hard wired.”

The president took another drink from the bottle. “What do you mean, ‘I think’? I want some kind of guarantee that the Goat will take care of her.”

“He’s never failed us. And just imagine the numbers MASSnews will get during the trek. We’ll get twenty-five percent of everything they sell. We’ll be able to send so many breeders to Mars that NASA will have to build a nursery before the next election. I say we let her go.”

The president recapped the bottle and looked across the room at the screen. Mirellen was in the window wearing her “Kiss Me I’m Dying” T-shirt. She had crossed out the word “Dying” and replaced it with “Dead.”

“All right, all right,” the president said. “She goes.”

17. Just the mast

Arm in arm, Cecilia and Barker leaned into the wind and rain as they walked along M-23 to the marina.

When they arrived at the boat, a white, twenty-eight foot sloop with “The Somewhen” written in script across its transom, Cecilia hopped onto the deck and disappeared down the companionway steps into the cabin. She reappeared wearing an orange slicker and handed a blue one to Barker. He put on the jacket over his soaked clothes and watched Cecilia’s sure-footed maneuvers across the wet deck. The wind pressed her jacket against her body and fluttered her hood.

Barker looked across the harbor and noticed that the lake, the dock, the clouds, the boats, the marina buildings – everything – was bathed in pale green light.

Cecilia shouted to Barker to get a couple tires from the shed on shore. He returned with the tires and held them in place while Cecilia lashed them to the dock’s wooden posts. When the tires were secure she danced along the boat’s edge, retightening the ropes to snug it against the tires.

After Cecilia had double-checked everything, she motioned toward the cabin door and Barker followed her down the companionway steps. The sound of the wind and rain was muffled only slightly when he closed the door.

“Green’s not good,” Cecilia said, rubbing her wet hair with a towel. “This isn’t the best place to be right now but this is where we are. We’re all right unless there’s a tornado, and I don’t even want to think about a water spout.”

“What’s a water spout?”

“Trouble.” She tossed the towel to Barker. He caught it in his teeth because his arms were busy behind him trying to pull the slicker sleeves off his wet clothes. Cecilia grabbed the towel and gave his hair a quick rub down. She tossed the towel toward the sink and nudged Barker onto one of two padded benches that met in a V, with a table between. Barker watched Cecilia’s dress rise higher as she reached into a cabinet above the sink.

“Scotch? Gin? Cognac?” Still reaching up, she turned to face Barker.

“We’re at sea,” Barker said. “No rum?”

“It’s a lake and we’re tied to a dock.” Cecilia looked over her shoulder. “Scotch all right?”

“Sure.”

She put the bottle and two tumblers on the table and sat next to Barker.

The rain sounded like a stampede of tiny horses on the boat’s deck. Heavy gusts of wind whistled through the rigging and strained the mooring lines. The hull squealed against the tires.

“The good thing about a boat is that it doubles as a coffin if you sink,” Cecilia said, after they’d both taken a drink.

“I think we need to get our minds off death,” Barker said.

He knocked back the rest of his Scotch and she took the empty glass from him. Cecilia put both glasses and the bottle on the shelf behind her and slid closer to Barker. He put his hand on her knee and slowly worked it up her thigh as they kissed.

“This would be easier if we stand up for a minute.” Cecilia dropped the table so it was at the same level as the two benches and pulled a few pads from a storage bin above their heads to complete the bed. They took turns taking off each other’s clothes, kissing when there weren’t arms or clothes in the way. Outside the boat, the wind strengthened and the whistling grew into

a low moan that turned into a deep growl and built to a roar that shook the boat. One of the ropes snapped and the boat jerked violently.

Barker looked up from between Cecilia's legs.

"Tornado," she said between heavy breaths. "Terrifying. Isn't it? God, don't stop."

A metallic screech pierced Barker's eardrums and he paused again.

"It's just the mast," Cecilia said. "Keep going for God's sake."

18. You okay?

Amber and Fred huddled next to each other under the counter. Fred had taped a flashlight to the counter's underside so Amber could continue her game of solitaire on the floor as he worked his way through a bag of peanuts. There was a pile of shells next to him on the worn linoleum.

"The David missed this one," Fred shouted. The storm sounded like a jet landing outside their door. "This is bad. Real bad."

Amber gathered up her cards and looked around for her cigarettes. She didn't see them so she got up on her knees to peek over the counter just as the front windows shattered and the plywood Fred nailed there broke free and flew into the room. The board hit the front of the counter hard enough to shove it back half a foot. Amber ducked under the counter and covered her head with her hands.

"You okay?" Fred shouted.

Amber pulled one hand free and reached out for Fred. "I'm okay."

19. Seemed like a good idea

Barker lay on his side with his elbow stuck into a pillow and his palm supporting his head. His other hand traced the contours of Cecilia's back and shoulders. The boat lay still against the dock and through one of the narrow windows he could see that the sky had brightened. A distant siren stopped abruptly, then another one started.

"Damn it," Barker sighed.

"What's wrong?" Cecilia said, rolling onto her back and looking at Barker.

"My head's humming," Barker said.

"Wired, huh?"

"Professional mandate."

"Same thing happened to me," Cecilia said.

"You have to be wired to run a café?"

"I worked for Penn-Wright in Detroit for 11 years, right out of college. Remember the 'Just Add Water' campaign for the Ford Helix?"

"I never liked that one," Barker said.

"Those three words made me a partner. When everything went to instant media buys they wanted me wired so I'd be available twenty-four/seven. I wish I hadn't agreed but I was pretty ambitious back then."

"Why don't you get the wires cut?" Barker said.

"I've thought about it. But I don't like the idea of someone noodling with my noodle again. I change my connects every time I get my period. Seems to keep the traffic down."

"Why'd you leave Penn-Wright?"

"They offered me a lot of money to quit after the big advertising panic."

“The Heffernan Report?”

Cecilia nodded. “We were making commercials nobody was watching. I got out at the right time, but things never got as bad as everyone thought they would. The live news boom saved a lot of my friends’ jobs.”

“How’d you end up here?”

“I sold my share in the business and with that, plus the parachute, I bought the café and the boat. My husband visits most weekends. He’s not really my husband anymore. We have a limited partnership now. He’s a lawyer in Detroit.”

“So you escaped,” Barker said.

“I wouldn’t necessarily call it escape. We used to come up here summers when I was a kid. Childhood friends still live here. Seemed like a good idea.”

“Was it?”

Cecilia turned her head and looked past Barker through the porthole at drifting white clouds. “Yes, it was. I have to put in my time at the café but I live on my boat four days a week in the summer. I travel and ski a lot in the winter. I have good friends. Suits me fine. There’s more to it but those are the headlines.”

“No kids?”

Cecilia hesitated. “Almost. Didn’t make it past three months.”

“Sorry.”

“Jim said it was the stress of working too hard for a dying company.” She looked up at the ceiling. “I really don’t like thinking about it, but of course I do.”

Two wailing sirens headed north toward Alpena.

“Things don’t sound good in town,” Barker said.

“I wonder if anyone’s dead,” Cecilia said. “I wonder if my café’s still there. I wonder if Jim’s coming up today.”

Barker brushed the hair out of her eyes and wondered if she was serious about the last one.

The boat dipped toward the dock and a man yelled, “Cecilia?”

20. Double?

“The data are consistent in every market,” Brandon said, sitting in front of Jaspers’ desk and teasing apart a Mars Girl doll’s hair to check its density. “Their doll is selling double ours.”

Jaspers, across the room staring out his big window, didn’t say anything.

“I could understand if theirs had extra features,” Brandon said. “Their dolls have satellite downloads but so do ours and you’ve gotta buy expansions for theirs.” He took off the doll’s sneakers and ran a finger along the bottoms of its feet. “Big, heavy seams. Our quality is better too.” He turned it upright. “Must be the breasts.”

“What?” Jaspers said from the window.

Brandon lifted the doll’s shirt so Jaspers could see.

Mary Belle, out of breath, slipped through Jaspers’ office door. “I just heard about the doll.”

“It’s Disney,” Brandon said.

“Any numbers yet?” Mary Belle asked.

“Projections say theirs will sell double ours and early figures support the estimates,” Brandon said. “We’ve stopped production until we figure it out.”

“Double?” Mary Belle said. “How’d that happen?”

“Big tits,” Brandon said, lifting the doll’s shirt again.

21. This yours?

Barker and Jim, Cecilia’s limited partner, sat on the dock just past The Somewhen’s bow. The sailboat’s mast, bent horizontal but still attached, despite the twisted and torn metal at its base, lay on top of a cabin cruiser moored across the dock. Barker’s clothes floated on the other side of the sailboat where Jim had thrown them. He wore Cecilia’s terry cloth robe that used to be red but had faded over time. Cecilia had gone to see what damage the tornado had done and told Barker she’d bring his car back if it wasn’t crushed under a tree.

“You’d think I’d get used to this.” Jim said, looking off toward town through the pale young oak leaves that would grow to block the view in another week. He could see ambulances and police cars surrounding the half-destroyed First United Methodist Church on the far side of M-23.

Jim leaned back, propping his barrel-chested torso with his thick arms. Above his mildly pockmarked but squarely handsome face, the breeze tousled his dark, well-manicured hair. He had driven north directly from work but left his tie and suit coat in his car, parked at the end of the dock.

“Get used to what?” Barker said, finally.

“Guys like you.”

Barker looked out at the lake. He could just see the outline of a distant freighter but he couldn’t tell which way it was heading.

“I guess I should just let her go,” Jim said. “We’re not even married anymore. And it’s not like I can’t find someone else. I’ve been nailing this secretary at work, but it’s not the same.”

Jim looked at Barker. “There’s something about Cecilia, you know?”

Barker’s shirt and pants drifted into view past The Somewhen’s bow. “Sure,” he said, looking around for a pole or stick he might use to retrieve his clothes.

“I think she still feels something for me,” Jim said. “We still have a good time when we’re together. It’s not the same as it used to be, but it’s not the same as it used to be for anyone.” Jim pulled a splinter loose from the wooden dock and tossed it into the water. “But this shit drives me crazy. When I saw you two in bed all I could think about was how much I wanted to tear off your fucking head. That idea’s still hanging around.”

Barker could feel Jim’s eyes on him as he watched firemen climbing over the piles of bricks that used to form the south wall of the church. The storm had torn a large hole in the roof and Barker wondered how the rest of the building was still standing.

“You know what’s funny?” Jim said. “Cecilia called me earlier today from the café to tell me I shouldn’t come up because of the storm. I didn’t say I wasn’t coming. You two could’ve planned this better.”

“We didn’t plan anything,” Barker said. “My car broke down here.”

“Great,” Jim said, shaking his head. He looked at Barker. “So now you’re leaving.”

“Fred fixed my car before the storm,” Barker said. “No telling what shape it’s in now.”

Another ambulance left the church and headed north, its siren blaring.

Jim stood and took a few steps down the dock toward the parking lot, his arms swinging slow and wide like a gunslinger. He picked up Barker’s jacket that hung on a post and looked back over his shoulder. “This yours?”

Barker didn't respond.

Jim tied the jacket's sleeves into a knot and threw it as far as he could into the harbor, then continued walking down the dock toward his car.

Cecilia drove Barker's microvan down the marina's gravel drive and parked next to Jim's car. She and Jim spoke when she stepped out. Neither one looked away. When they finished, Jim reached inside Barker's car and popped open the back hatch. He pulled out Barker's suitcase, walked to the dock and heaved it into the harbor, sending a pair of gulls up into the light breeze. The leather case bobbed on top of the surface, then slowly sank.

22. Somebody's lucky night

Piper stuck her head inside Rindell's Spartan office. "You wanted me?"

Still wearing the clothes he had on when he arrived at work the previous morning, Rindell seemed deep in thought. He held his broad chin high and his bloodshot eyes were locked on the ceiling. His tie was loose and his sleeves were carelessly rolled above his hairy forearms. He lowered his eyes to Piper, then shifted them toward a chair near his desk.

Piper shut the door behind her and sat down in the armless, padded chair. "What's up?"

"We're going mobile sometime tomorrow," Rindell said, looking at the wall screen opposite Piper. Mirellen stared out of her window wearing her "Kiss Me I'm Dead" T-shirt. "She's going to try for the station like some cute little kitty trying to cross the highway."

"NASA is dead set against a trek."

"NASA can't stop her," Rindell said. He took a drink from a ForceCola bottle on his desk and shuddered. "God, this stuff is awful."

"Don't drink it."

“It keeps me going.”

“When’s the last time you slept?”

“Sleep is for the weak,” Rindell said. He took another drink and grimaced.

“If you’re right about her trying for the station, we’re in for another huge spike,” Piper said.

“That’s tomorrow. We’ll never get anywhere thinking about tomorrow.”

Rindell walked around his desk and stood uncomfortably close to Piper. She noticed a spot of tomato sauce on his white shirt that made a pink halo near his navel.

“It’s tonight that’s on my mind,” Rindell said. He leaned against the edge of his desk and pressed his knee against Piper’s thigh. His powerful legs strained the seams of his pants.

“People will get tired of watching her stare out her window, and she’s got to sleep sometime. We need something strong tonight to take advantage of all the eyeballs she’s brought us.”

“We can preview the trek and fill a lot of time with replays,” Piper said, crossing her legs.

“We lose numbers when people can’t see her,” Rindell said. “We need something new we can tease the hell out of while we’ve got the numbers.”

“You mean you want to leave Mars Girl?” Piper said. She shifted her weight away from Rindell, but his knee followed her and remained pressed against her leg. “We’ve never had a show like this. Seems crazy to walk away from it.”

Rindell took off his tie and tossed it onto his desk. “We can always go back to Mars if something happens or if the new show bombs.”

“Why risk what we’ve got?” Piper said, angling her legs farther away from Rindell and tugging on the hem of her skirt.

“Put out the word that we’re doubling casters’ commissions until midnight,” Rindell said. His knee followed Piper’s thigh again. He leaned toward Piper and stroked her cheek. “This will be somebody’s lucky night.” He put a couple fingers under her chin, tilted her face upward and gave her a kiss on the lips, then walked behind his desk and sat down.

“What the hell was that for?” Piper said.

“Sometimes I feel affection. Don’t worry. It never lasts.”

23. Number one source of evil

Peter Cloud, seated inside the arc of a crescent-shaped marble desk, pretended to read from a handful of pages as vid highlights of Mirellen’s day played behind him. The highlights were accompanied by “I’m Alive, Are You?” The song had already reached No. 13 on the Billboard D/L chart.

As the music and montage faded, Peter smiled into the camera and winked.

“Welcome back to MASSnews, where the hits just keep coming. We’re witnessing one of the most dramatic moments in all of human history and I’ll be here to guide you through the story and help you understand what this tragedy means to you and your family.”

In the lower right were order buttons for T-shirts with the messages “I’m Alive, Are You?” “Kiss Me, I’m Dying,” “Kiss Me, I’m Dead” and, the latest in the Mars Girl line, “Station = Life.” A free shipping special was set to expire in three minutes.

The camera pulled back to reveal a middle-aged woman with flowing blonde hair and shining green eyes sitting on the outside of the anchor desk’s arc. Her dress matched the hue of her eyes.

“We’re joined now by the lovely Dr. Marion Ciarbin, a leading expert in what Mars Girl is going through. As everyone knows, Dr. Ciarbin is the creator of the best-selling interactives on the MASSfun label, ‘You Can: Twelve Easy Steps to Bring Your Lover to His Knees,’ and ‘You Will: Twelve Easy Steps to Get Your Husband Off the Couch.’ Welcome Dr. Ciarbin.”

“Thank you very much, Peter,” Dr. Ciarbin said. “And I’d like to say you’re looking particularly spry today.”

“Well, thank *you*, Dr. Ciarbin,” Peter chuckled. “Let’s turn our attention to what we, as a nation, are experiencing as we watch events unfold on Mars.”

“Peter, I think this is very important,” Dr. Ciarbin said. “Tragedies have a tendency to either strengthen or weaken a nation and its people. The way we, as Americans, approach our everyday lives – our natural optimism and drive – is what sets us apart from the rest of the world. If we’re feeling down about ourselves and our great nation, there may be dire consequences for all of us in these difficult and dangerous times.”

“So, our individual reactions to the crisis could affect the very survival of the nation?” Peter asked.

“That’s right, Peter. The biggest danger we face is repressing our true emotions. Clinical trials have proven again and again that repressed feelings are the number one source of evil in this world. So we must let our feelings rise to the surface as we try to come to grips with this heartbreaking story.” The camera tightened on Dr. Ciarbin’s face. “Allow your emotions free reign while you follow every minute of this saga. Indeed, revel in your emotions.”

“Excellent point, Dr. Ciarbin,” Peter said. “Is there something that can help bring those repressed feelings to the surface?”

“Peter, our research has shown that some kind of icon can be quite useful in dealing with blocked emotions, especially for children, but also for adults. I’ve found things like the Mars Girl doll are a tremendous help.”

A revolving image of the new, bustier version of MASS’s Mars Girl doll appeared in the lower right with an “InstaOrder Now!” button below it.

“Another excellent point,” Peter said, looking into the camera. “I understand that Mars Girl dolls are already available at nearly all MASSmart megastores, or you can use the screen order button right now. Eight-hour shipping is available.”

“Do yourself and your family a favor,” Dr. Ciarbin said. “Get a Mars Girl doll and see what it can do for *you*.”

24. Buddha Boy

Jim’s hands were stuffed in the pockets of his unbuttoned overcoat as he stood just inside the front door in Cecilia’s house, two blocks from the café.

Cecilia’s cat, Bud, short for Buddha Boy, sat on the back of the couch in the pose that earned him his name. He was always on edge when Jim was around, and the glass-littered carpet and billowing drapes added to Bud’s anxiety.

Jim walked to the kitchen in search of beer but found none in the fridge. A look through the liquor cabinet turned up only a bottle of rum with barely two fingers left.

“I need a drink,” Jim said to the bottle. He screwed off the top and drained it in two gulps. He left the bottle on the counter and walked to the front door, crunching fragments of window glass into the carpet. Before he closed the door he picked up an umbrella leaning

against the wall and threw it like a javelin at Bud. The cat leapt to the floor and disappeared under the couch.

25. Oops

Barker, still wearing Cecilia's almost-pink robe, reached into his microvan and pulled a small metal case from the back seat. He had Piper in his head.

"I got the message about double commissions," Barker said, placing the case on the hood of his car. "I might have something for you. I can start beaming up some B stuff in twenty minutes. A tornado busted things up pretty good in this little town. The weather bot completely blew it. No warning."

"Anybody hurt?" Piper said.

"Six kids are dead and one's still missing," Barker said. "The storm tore through a church during after-school bible study. I can give you a strong half hour, more if we get lucky. Cecilia's still with me so she can help set up the heads. All I need is someone to fly the FloatPix."

"All right, I'll get Bocelli on the floater and I'll tell Rindell when the B stuff is here. No promises."

"Good enough. Over-Now."

Cecilia walked down the dock to where Barker stood by his car. "Not a stitch on the boat," she said. "I guess you're stuck with the robe. Sorry."

"I'll manage." Barker pushed a few test buttons on his FloatPix, a black device the size of an oblong softball with sixteen tiny jets around its perimeter and moveable vid lenses on its

front, back, sides, top and bottom. He double-checked the lenses, the deployable microphone wire, the lights, the jets and the power supply. He looked at Cecilia. “You ready?”

“Sure,” she said. She tightened the tie on Barker’s robe. “You’re at least wearing underwear, right?”

“Oops.”

26. Don’t we have standards?

Piper sat on the corner of Rindell’s desk as they watched Barker’s B vid on the wall screen.

The busy scene was filled with flashing ambulance and police car lights. The FloatPix rose into the air for a view of emergency workers wearing orange and yellow vests digging by hand through piles of brick and splintered wood. Two men in civilian clothes wearing red bandanas tied around their biceps walked past Barker and Cecilia carrying a blank-eyed young boy on a stretcher. The boy was sitting up, holding his bandaged arm. His mother walking next to him looked sick.

“What’s with the pink bathrobe?” Rindell said. “Don’t we have standards?”

“None that I know of,” Piper said. “And I wouldn’t say it’s pink. More like faded red.”

“I don’t care if it’s dusty fucking rose, he’s still wearing a bathrobe. Did he just get out of bed or what?”

Piper smiled. “No idea.”

“All right, so what’s he got?”

“A tornado blasted this little town’s church and killed some kids,” Piper said.

Bocelli flew the floater above the church to show the hole that had been ripped through the roof.

“Dead kids, huh?” Rindell said. “That’s cheery.”

“I assume he thinks it’s news,” Piper said.

“Disasters happen. They’re random. What’s the hook?”

Piper looked at Rindell. “The six dead kids?”

“Piper, the story has no good versus evil. No suspense. We show some vid of the dead and wounded and people say ‘ain’t that a shame,’ and after five minutes they move on. No villains, no heroes, no action and no chance for spins.”

“The weather bot completely blew the call,” Piper offered. “No warning. His forecast just called for thunderstorms.”

“That helps,” Rindell said, nodding his head. “How much vid do we have so far?”

“Just what you’re watching and some earlier stuff from inside the church,” Piper said.

She pressed a couple buttons on her assistant and the screen showed Barker and Cecilia stepping over the sanctuary’s wrecked pews. Cecilia pointed to a large crucifix that had fallen from its place high on the wall above the altar. The camera zoomed in to show a thick crack across Jesus’s belly. Barker placed the crucifix across two tipped-over pews and stomped on it until it broke at the crack. He laid the two parts, separated only slightly as if they had fallen that way, onto a pool of blood and broken stained glass. The FloatPix slowly circled above the crucifix.

“Nice touch,” Rindell said. “Unless something better comes along in the next ten minutes, edit Barker’s B stuff into a teaser and run it every break until he’s ready to go live. Tell marketing to come up with a name for the show and see if the parents will give us some happy

vid of the dead kids. Offer to pay for the funerals if they cooperate. We need to personalize the tragedy for this to work.”

27. Better days

The only problem at the Okinisee Inn was that the cash registers weren't working. The tornado hit the church next door, then hopped over the bar and kept hopping until it fizzled out north of town. The bar's rusted screen door had been blown off its hinges and a few roof tiles were missing, but it had otherwise escaped the storm's wrath and business was booming.

Jim pulled into the crowded parking lot and left his car in front of a dumpster, ignoring its hand painted message: “Don't Even Think About Parking Here.” The owner's teenage son was crouched in the entryway trying to screw the screen door hinges into the chewed-up doorjamb. Jim slipped by the kid and walked into the dark bar. When his eyes adjusted, he saw the owner, Stu, a heavy-set man with large tattooed arms and an unruly gray mustache, standing at the center of the horseshoe-shaped bar trying to get everyone's attention. His salt and pepper hair clung to his scalp in heavy clumps.

“Everybody listen up,” Stu said. The crowd didn't quiet down so he rapped a fork several times against an empty beer glass. “Every drink is twenty dollars. Drink up because a quarter of what we bring in today will go to the families of those kids who died.”

There was some polite applause.

“There's also a jar by the register for anyone who wants to give a little extra to the families,” Stu said. “Let's all do something to help our neighbors. Now I'd like everyone to keep still so we can share a moment of silence for them kids.”

The wail of an ambulance grew louder and louder as it approached, then went silent as it pulled onto the church lawn next door.

“All right, let’s drink up,” Stu said and the bar came back to life.

Jim settled onto a bar stool next to Ben Lambton. Ben got rich by pumping natural gas out of land leased from the state. When the wells ran dry he retired to alcohol and boats, spending the warm months in Michigan and the cold ones on Florida’s Gulf Coast. His silver hair was parted in the middle and he had a gold tooth for no reason other than he liked the idea of having a gold tooth. His deeply lined face already had a ruddy tan from early season fishing trips.

“Jimbo, what’s happening?” Ben was all smiles. “Man, did you pick a bad day to come up or what?”

“I’ve had better ones,” Jim said. He made eye contact with the bartender, a large-framed, heavily made-up young woman. When he had her attention, he pointed at the beer taps.

A fireman came in the front door and Stu handed him a tray of Styrofoam cups filled with hot coffee.

“Is Cecilia all right?” Ben said.

“Better than me,” Jim said. He pulled a wad of twenties from his pocket and laid them on the bar.

“Her boat’s all right?”

“Her mast fell onto your boat.”

Ben was about to take a drink from his gin and tonic but stopped short. “No shit?”

“Caved your roof some,” Jim said. The bartender brought Jim’s beer and picked up one of the twenties. Jim raised his glass and didn’t put it down until it was half empty.

Ben shook his head. “You gotta love insurance at a time like this. How’s the café?”

“Haven’t been there.”

“Where’s Cecilia?”

“Not at home,” Jim said.

“But she’s all right?”

Jim shrugged. “Sure.”

The fireman came back into the bar with the empty tray and asked for five more coffees.

“Hey, you know some MASSnews caster out of Chicago just happened to be in town when all this happened,” Ben said. “His car broke down or something. He did a show from the school earlier and now he’s doing one on the tornado. Okinisee’s gonna be famous.”

“From Chicago?” Jim said. “His car broke down?”

“That’s what I heard. Fred fixed it this afternoon. Just happened to break down here on the day all this happened. Some luck, huh?”

“And he’s hanging around to do another show?”

“That’s the word.”

28. First the tension

“Barker’s working with the same partner?” Rindell said, watching live preshow vid of Barker and Cecilia talking to emergency workers outside the church.

“Yes,” Piper said. “She’s local. She did great earlier. She’s wired and I’ve got her connects.”

“She’s wired? Why is she wired?”

“Used to be at Penn-Wright. She got a golden handshake and bought a café and a sailboat up there in Hicksville. Some kind of childhood dream or something. She’ll help set up the interviews and go onscreen when Ray needs her. He’s giving her twenty-five percent of his commission.”

“Everything signed?”

“Sealed and delivered,” Piper said.

“Tell her to seduce Barker after the tornado show and we’ll kick in an extra five percent if we get vid of them in bed.”

“You want a sex show after one about six dead kids?”

“First the tension, then the release.”

“Tell her yourself,” Piper said. “I’m not doing it.”

“All right, forget it. What’ve you sold?”

“A couple insurance companies bought spots and we’ve got a handful of placements. Some Mars Girl clients are interested but only if we get numbers.”

“Who’s handling the floater?”

“Bocelli.”

Rindell watched Barker, his robe flapping in the breeze, shuffle to his right at Bocelli’s direction to line up the proper background.

“And tell Barker to get some clothes on,” Rindell said.

Barker looked into the FloatPix, hovering six feet in front of him. “Ready when you are,” he said. He reached up to dishevel his hair, then pulled off the butterfly and scraped his wound with a fingernail until blood began to trickle down the side of his face.

Barker heard Bocelli’s countdown in his head. As it approached zero he took a deep breath.

“So I’m up here in Northern Michigan for a funeral and my car breaks down fifteen minutes from the chapel,” Barker said. “The only mechanic in town tells me I’m lucky I broke down here.”

The camera zoomed out to show the missing wall of the church and the gaping hole in the roof, then zoomed in on a distraught woman on her knees crying over her son’s body. The boy was covered with a trench coat and his father stood next to his wife with his hands to his face.

“Yeah, right,” Barker said. “Lucky. I thought I’d spend a couple dull hours here killing time until my car was fixed. I walked through town and found a little café that I’m sure gets its meat from whatever road kill the cook finds on his way to work every morning. That’s why I took a couple of these ten minutes ago and now I feel fine.”

Barker raised his left hand as if he was holding something. A glowing plastic bottle filled with large blue tablets appeared in his palm. “Quellicious combines ground eucalyptus root, the best known natural stomach cure, with Blo-Teez, developed by NASA after that incident with the bad meat on Popov Station. If you think puking down here is bad, do it in zero gravity. These things *work*.”

Barker took a few steps and stood next to a tall, thin man wearing a dirt-brown uniform that was a size too small. The deputy stood grinning into the camera with his hands clasped behind his back.

“This is Captain Cook from the Sheriff’s office,” Barker said.

“That would be Deputy Cook,” the man said, bobbing his head forward like he was stooping to a microphone. “With the Alpena County Sheriff’s Department. Hi Mom.” He brought a hand forward and gave a tentative wave.

“Cute. All right, Cap’n ...”

“Deputy.”

“I like Cap’n better,” Barker said. “Where’s the Sheriff?”

“Florida. He goes down there every May and brings his mom back up here.”

“So you’re in charge?”

“Yes sir, I’m the boss.”

“What’s the body count?”

The deputy fumbled with his breast pocket button and pulled out his assistant. He punched some numbers, shook his head and tried again.

“Sometime this week, Cap’n,” Barker said.

“We’re looking at six kids dead and we’ve got at least 13 injured. One child is still missing. Some of the injured include adults. We don’t have exact numbers, especially on the injured. The number of dead isn’t confirmed either.”

“You don’t know much, do you?”

“More than you,” the deputy said with a grin.

“We’re all proud of you,” Barker said. He stepped away from the deputy and motioned for a young boy to join him. The boy walked toward Barker and stood facing the floater with his arms hanging straight down.

“The twister struck the First United Methodist Church in this sleepy little town a half hour before moms and dads planned to show up for a puppet show the kids had been practicing,” Barker said. The camera pulled back to include the young boy. “Here’s one of the lucky ones.” Barker crouched down to the boy’s level and stuck a tiny microphone to his jacket collar.

“You all right, kid?”

The boy shrugged. “I guess so.”

“What’s your name?”

The boy looked at someone off screen. “Tim.”

“How old are you Timmy?”

“Seven.”

“So, Tim. Did God do this?”

The young boy’s eyes darted back and forth as he searched for an answer.

“All right, Tim. Forget that one. That’s a tough one. So what happened in there? What do you remember?”

“We were practicing our puppet show and there was this huge noise. Like explosions and stuff. Everybody got scared and started running down to the basement but then the roof started falling in.” The boy turned to face the church but quickly looked back at the camera.

“So there was no warning that a tornado was coming?”

The boy looked at Barker. “Warning?”

“No one told you a tornado was coming?”

“Nobody said anything about a tornado. We were practicing our show and then everything, like, blew up.” The boy looked at the ground.

Barker stood up and faced the camera. “There you have it. No warning. Six kids dead and one still missing. What went wrong? We’ll tell you after this.”

30. A charmed life

Brandon Khul paced back and forth across his office, occasionally shooting glances at Man Boy Floyd, who was slouched in a high-backed velvet chair with his assistant to his ear.

“I gave you a big pile of my money so you could make it bigger,” Man Boy said into his assistant as Brandon paced. Man Boy swept his white hair back by dragging his thumb and middle finger across the top of this head but his hair fell across his face again. “Conservative ain’t a word I know,” he said. “Listen, I’m gonna be eighteen in a month and I got plans. My plans don’t come cheap, so get off your ass and make me some damn money or I’ll find somebody who can. Man Boy-Out.” He stuffed his assistant into a pocket on his shirtsleeve. “Asshole,” he muttered.

“Frankly,” Brandon said, sitting down on the coffee table in front of Man Boy, “I think your broker has a point.”

“That’s why you wanted me here?” Man Boy sneered, revealing his red teeth. “You two gangin’ me?” Body heat turned his plastic shirt from black to bright red wherever it touched his skin.

“We just want what’s best for you,” Brandon said.

“Bullshit,” Man Boy said, leaning forward in his chair like he was going to stand up to leave.

“Just give me one minute,” Brandon said, holding up a hand toward Man Boy. “If you don’t like what I say, fine, I’ll find someone else.”

Man Boy slouched back into the chair.

“So far, you’ve lived a charmed life,” Brandon said. “Some A&R scout picked you out of a crowd and put you in Trinary Sky and the band killed with its first shot. But all those people who fell in love with Trinary Sky are looking for new love. It’s human nature. There’s nothing you can do about it. Six weeks ago you were on top, now you’re 30 or 40 on the D/L charts.”

“Twenty-seven,” Man Boy said.

Brandon pulled his assistant from his pocket and thumbed a few buttons. “Twenty-nine and you’re not trending well.”

“I came all the way from Long Island so you could tell me I’m shit?”

“Man Boy, if I thought you were shit I wouldn’t waste my time talking to you. I’ve got something that’s gonna put you back on top. You stay with Trinary Sky and it’s a fast ride to the bottom. What’ll you do then? Sell a couple houses? Sell a few cars? No more parties for five hundred of your closest friends. The girls will start looking for guys with real money. It’s gonna be a hard crash. You think you can take it?”

“I don’t have to listen to this,” Man Boy said, leaning forward again.

“I know what I’m talking about. I’ve seen it a thousand times. You’ll be a faded memory to all your fans by fall unless you make some changes.”

Man Boy leaned back but didn’t look at Brandon.

“We want you to go solo,” Brandon said. “*Your* name on everything. *Your* face on everything. Not Trinary Sky. Man Boy Floyd. No more five-way split. It’s going to take some hard work. But you pull this off and you’ll have the most famous face in the world. You remember the Sex Tigers?”

“Hell yeah. Dig Biggers used to be my hero.” Man Boy settled back into his chair and landed one of his boots on the coffee table with a thud.

“They’ve still got the record with nine number ones in a row on the D/L charts. You can beat that.”

Man Boy tossed the hair out of his eyes and looked at Brandon. “Details.”

Brandon leaned forward and smiled. “Mars Girl.”

“Mars Girl?” Man Boy said. “No way. I only do news shows when they’re about me.”

“She needs a boyfriend to sing love songs to her and take her mind off living all alone in a tin can. She falls in love with you and the whole world goes crazy for the beautiful story.”

“She’s on fucking *Mars*, asshole,” Man Boy said, sneering again.

“You’re going to Mars.”

Man Boy pulled his boot off the table. “What the *hell* are you talking about? I gotta dope me out like a fiend just to get on a plane.”

“You and Mars Girl get on the vidphone twice a day, three times a day, whatever you want. You charm her, get to know each other. Millions of people watch you sing love songs to her on your way to Mars. You’re her rescuer, her knight in shining armor. There’ll be interactives, songs, action figures, vids ... you’ll get a piece of everything.”

Man Boy sat up and looked around the room. “You got a camera on me or something. This some kind of set up? I’m supposed to get all pissed off about this stupid shit you’re saying and the jokes on me, right?”

“I’m serious.”

“Even if I went along with all this, how the hell am I gonna get some girl in some other solar system?”

“If things don’t click, we get her in on the deal. She’ll pretend to be in love with you for the right price. But I wouldn’t worry about it. What girl can say no to you?”

31. Things aren’t going to be the same

Ben and Jim sat at the bar watching on the wall screen as Cecilia talked with two kids who were in the church when the tornado hit. One had a bandage wrapped around her head.

“Cecilia’s got a knack for this,” Ben said to Jim. “How’d she meet up with that caster?”

Jim guzzled the last of his beer. “Bad luck.” He raised his empty glass for the bartender to see and set it on the stack of twenties in front of him.

On the screen Cecilia left the two kids and knelt next to a blank-eyed girl with straight blond hair parted in the middle. The girl’s mother stood next to her daughter and fidgeted with her purse strap.

A new beer arrived for Jim and the bartender peeled a moist twenty off the bottom of his empty glass.

“Hard to believe there are millions of people all over the world looking at our little town right now,” Ben said. “Things aren’t going to be the same around here after all this.”

Jim, already halfway through his new beer, watched Cecilia talk with the little girl on the screen. The girl nodded and almost smiled.

Jim raised his glass and didn’t put it down until it was empty.

32. The whole town's behind us

“Bocelli, are we getting anybody?” Barker said. He stood out of the camera’s view as Cecilia gave the little girl a hug and motioned for another child to join her onscreen.

“So far you’re keeping Mars Girl’s numbers,” Bocelli said. “And you’re getting triple commissions.”

“Triple? I thought it was double.”

“Rindell was getting impatient so he made it triple just before you called Piper.”

“My lucky day,” Barker said. “I’m going to need a little time to get something going here. Cecilia can keep doing the heads while I work the crowd.”

“Has Cecilia ever done this before?” Bocelli said.

“She’s a natural. She’ll be fine.”

“We want to tell Mars Girl that she’s heading to the station,” Bocelli said. “We budgeted twenty minutes for that and NASA’s ready anytime.”

“That should be about right,” Barker said. “Let Cecilia work the heads through another break, then go to Mars Girl. If I don’t have anything by then, I guess we’re done. Hey, what are we calling the show?”

“‘Death on the Plains,’” Bocelli said.

“Plains?” Barker looked across M-23 at Lake Huron, stretching to the horizon.

“What’ve you got in mind?” Bocelli said.

“Not sure yet,” Barker said, walking toward a group of three middle-aged men standing near the road in front of the church. “I’ll let you know when it happens.”

The three men stood next to a large Norway spruce, pulled up by its roots and twisted apart so that bright wood showed along its length. One of the men sobbed with his chin in his chest and a man wearing an embroidered Detroit Tigers jacket had his arm around the crying man's shoulder. The third man held a pint bottle of whiskey to his chest.

"Gentlemen, I'm real sorry about this whole thing," Barker said as he approached.

"What a tragedy."

"You the news guy?" said the man wearing the Tigers jacket, zipped over his potbelly and up to his double chin.

"How'd you know?" Barker said.

"The bathrobe," the man said. "I want you to tell everyone about the good kids who died today. Marv here lost his grandson."

Marv raised his head just enough to show the tears streaming down his round, reddened face. He tried to speak but couldn't get past his grief.

"Little Al would've grown up into a fine young man," said the Tigers' fan.

The third man held out the bottle for Barker. "You wanna hit this?"

Barker took the bottle but didn't drink from it. "I'm trying to find out why the kids didn't go to the basement," he said. "They'd all be alive if they had."

"No one knows," the Tigers fan said. "The David's been right as rain since we got him. He didn't say anything about a tornado, even when it was happening."

"That son of a bitch," Barker said, shaking his head. "I heard some things. But ... you don't always want to believe what you hear."

Marv looked up and found the power to speak. "You heard *what*?"

“Just some chatter,” Barker said. “You know, industry stuff. I heard that The David’s real fond of chess and he was playing some girl weather bot. They said her name’s The Donna. She’s over on the other side of the state.”

“Traverse City,” the third man said. He had the same round face as Marv but his eyes were set lower.

“That’s right,” Barker said. “Traverse City. From what I heard they’ve been doing this a lot and the station managers let it go thinking it doesn’t hurt anything. So today they’re in this heated chess battle. It’s kinda like having sex for bots. You know, real intense. I guess it’s as close as they come to doing it. The David wrote some kind of pleasure proggie for them both so The David and The Donna were locked in this passionate chess tango and the David stops paying attention to the weather. He never gives a warning because he’s doing this hot weather bot. He’s probably up there right now at WUPM smoking a cigarette. Bots have no concept of death. No feeling for the terrible loss you’re all suffering.”

Marv looked at Barker with big eyes and wiped away a tear. “My grandson didn’t live to see his ninth birthday because some horny bot was playing around with some girl bot?”

Barker sighed. “That’s what it looks like. And when he heard about the tornado, he said ...” Barker hesitated, shook his head and looked toward the church.

“What?” Marv said. “What’d he say?”

“The David said, ‘There are six billion humans on the earth and they’re worried about a few kids dying? Get over it.’”

Marv grabbed the whiskey bottle from Barker and took a long drink. He wiped his mouth with his corduroy jacket sleeve and turned to the Tigers fan. “Henry, we’re going to Alpena for a little payback.” He looked at the other man. “Bill, you’re coming too.”

“Now hold on,” Henry said. “You can’t just walk into WUPM.”

“Yeah?” Marv said. “Watch me.” He marched off toward his truck parked next door at the Okinisee Inn but Henry and Bill didn’t follow. When he noticed he was alone, Marv turned back toward the men.

They stared at him with their hands in their jacket pockets.

“What the hell’s wrong with you guys?” Marv shouted. “Let’s go!”

“Marv,” Henry said, “I don’t see any good comin’ from this.”

Marv took a couple steps toward the men. “This is a sorry way to find out I got no friends in this world. I’ll do this myself if I have to.” He spun around and pushed his way through a line of bushes bordering the bar’s parking lot.

The two men looked at each other. “C’mon Bill,” Henry said. “If he won’t listen to me, maybe he’ll listen to his brother.”

“Never has before,” Bill said, following Henry through the bushes.

Barker trotted toward where people had gathered in front of the church to watch the rescue workers laboring in the bright lights set on tall stands. People stood in small groups near the yellow police tape strung along the sidewalk.

Barker stepped up onto a cement bench near the sidewalk.

“Hey, everybody!” he shouted. “The grandfather of one of the dead kids is going to Alpena to get The David. He’s bringing him back here. The grandpa’s name is Marv and his grandson’s name was Al. Some of you must know the family. Marv found out why The David didn’t give any warning about the tornado. Those kids would’ve survived if The David had done his job.”

“Found out what?” a man shouted from behind Barker.

“Marv can tell you,” Barker said. “It has something to do with the weather bot over in Traverse City.”

“The Donna?” said a young man with dreadlocks spilling off the top of his head.

“Yes, that’s the name,” Barker said. “The Donna.”

“She’s hot,” the young man said

“You’re sick,” his girlfriend said.

“Why’s Marv bringing The David back here?” a man shouted from the back of the gathering crowd.

“Payback,” Barker said. “Somebody should call Marv and find out what he’s got in mind.”

Barker jumped down from the bench and ran toward Marv’s truck. When he broke through the bushes he saw Henry and Bill outside the truck talking to Marv through the driver’s side window.

“Just get in the goddamn truck and let’s go,” Marv shouted at the two men.

“Even if you get him, what’re you gonna *do* with him?” Henry said.

Marv’s assistant buzzed and he pulled it from his jacket pocket. “Marv here.” He looked at Henry, then Bill. “Yeah, me and Henry and Bill are gonna go get the son of a bitch,” Marv said into his assistant. “Yeah, it was The Donna over in Traverse. You should give The David a big welcome when we get back.” Marv nodded as he listened. “I like it. We’ll be back in a half hour.” Marv put his assistant back in his jacket pocket and looked at the two men. “The whole town’s behind us. C’mon boys. We got a job to do.”

When he approached the truck, Barker put his hand on Henry’s shoulder, attaching a tiny barbed microphone to his jacket collar. “Room for one more, gentleman?” Barker said.

“Yeah,” Henry said to Barker. “You go and I’ll stay here.”

“Henry, get your ass in the truck,” Marv snapped.

Bill climbed into the cab and pulled Henry in behind him.

“Why you wanna go, news guy?” Marv said, leaning forward to see past Bill and Henry.

“We got this covered.”

“Heroes make great stories, Marv,” Barker said. “You guys are out to get justice. People all over the country are proud of what you’re doing. I just want to be there when it happens.”

“All over the country?” Henry said. He turned to Marv. “We don’t want the world watching this. That’s just not smart.”

“Henry, you ever been a hero?” Marv said. “I wanna be a hero one day before I die. I owe it to my grandkid.” Marv leaned forward to look past Henry and Bill again. “Climb in the back, news guy,” he said to Barker. “Make it quick. We gotta roll.”

Barker trotted to the back of the truck and opened the topper’s lid. He stepped onto the bumper to climb in and struggled to hold on as Marv hit the accelerator. The truck’s tires spit gravel as it bounced through the Okinisee Inn’s parking lot. Barker threw a leg over the gate and tumbled into the truck’s bed.

“Bocelli, you there?” Barker said, crawling toward the front of the bed.

“You got me,” Bocelli said.

“I should have something soon,” Barker said. “Three guys are going to steal the weather bot from his studio. How’s Cecilia doing?”

“She’s doing great,” Bocelli said. “She’s got one more head on deck and then we’re going to Mars Girl so NASA can tell her she’s getting her wish.”

“Sounds good,” Barker said. “Tell Cecilia I’m following a lead and I’ll be back soon.”

“What do they have planned for the bot?”

“I don’t know yet,” Barker said.

“You’ve got your Upix in?”

“Of course,” Barker said.

“Let’s check it,” Bocelli said. “I’m just seeing shadows.”

“There’s no light back here. Barker raised his head to look through the cab window.

“What’ve you got now?”

“I’m seeing the back of somebody’s head,” Bocelli said.

“Good,” Barker said.

“You got a lens in both eyes?”

“Yes. And I put a sticky mike on the shoulder of one of the guys.”

“Give me a minute,” Bocelli said. “Okay, I can hear them. Sounds like they’re rehearsing their story.”

“Let’s hope it’s a good one,” Barker said.

33. Back on Mars

Amber sat at her counter fishing through a box of Mars Girl Adventure Chockies she bought at the MASSmart north of town during her lunch break. Through the swinging doors she could hear Fred hammering on the garage door rails bent by the storm. Until he could straighten the rails and raise the door, a late model Daimler Diablo with a newly repaired transmission was trapped inside the garage.

The car’s owner had refused Amber’s offer of a seat so she stood in the center of the office watching “Death on the Plains.” The woman wore a long suede coat with fox collar and

cuffs. Her alabaster skin seemed nearly translucent and her short hair was colored like a flame: bright red up to her ears, fading from orange into yellow along her temples, and finally white like her complexion at the top of her head. She could have been twenty-five, she could have been forty-five.

Amber found what she was looking for, a large chocky with gooey caramel inside, made in the shape of the twin peaks banner. Along with the banner, there were candies shaped like the TractorPix, the station, the lander and Mars Girl. There were also boulder-shaped chockies with corporate logos.

“I wish they put more of these in there,” Amber said, holding up the banner chocky to the woman’s back. Amber flipped the candy into her mouth and searched for another.

On the screen Cecilia talked with the church’s pastor, a young woman wearing an orange rescue vest. The pastor was dirty and sweaty and seemed anxious to be done with the interview so she could return to the rubble piles where a child was still missing.

“Shame about them kids,” Amber said. “We haven’t had this much excitement since I was a kid and two guys stabbed each other down by the river at the old Sucker SpearFest. Remember that?” Amber paused a couple beats. “You’re probably not from around here. They found them both the next day face down in the big lake all bloated with spears stuck in ‘em. Hasn’t been a SpearFest since. Kind of a shame, really. That was the last time the whole town turned out for anything.” She held out the box of chockies to the woman’s back. “Have a chocky while you’re waiting. Go ahead. MASS said they’d use the money they make to rescue Mars Girl.”

The fire hair woman ignored her offer so Amber shrugged and picked another banner chocky from the box.

“Hey, they’re back on Mars Girl,” Amber said, looking up at the screen. “Must be something happening. Volume-Seven-Now.”

“... rejoin ‘Death on the Plains’ in a moment,” Peter said, “but right now NASA techs will attempt to tell Mars Girl that tomorrow at 5 p.m. Eastern the TractorPix will lead her to the Gemini Cricket Family Restaurants Mars Station.”

Mirellen filled the screen. She’d been holding the same ReadWrite message in the window for more than a half hour: “Station = Life.”

The image on the screen panned up and down as the TractorPix nodded its camera.

Mirellen looked surprised and made a new sign. “I’m going?”

The TractorPix nodded its camera again.

She smiled and made another sign: “When?”

The TractorPix didn’t respond. Mirellen rolled her eyes and made a new sign: “Now?”

The image on the screen panned from side to side as the TractorPix shook its head “No.”

Mirellen’s new sign read “Tomorrow?”

The TractorPix nodded.

“Morning?”

The Tractor Pix shook its head.

“PM?”

The TractorPix nodded.

Mirellen took a moment to write the next message: “Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you.”

Marv steered his pickup into the parking lot at WUPM, a low brick building with a huge parabolic dish on top. The night receptionist, the only human still at the office, stood outside the front door smoking a cigarette under a yellow light shining down from the entryway's roof.

"Bocelli, we're here," Barker said, crawling to the rear of the truck's bed. "I need the audio feed."

"We're at a break right now but that's over in thirty," Bocelli said. "Rindell wants to go back to you if you're ready."

Barker lifted the topper's lid and crawled out. Marv, Henry and Bill were still in the cab and Barker heard them talking in his head. Barker stepped off the truck's bumper and kept his eyes and his Upix lenses on the woman blowing smoke rings into the yellow light. "Go to me when the break's over. Maybe these guys can pull it off."

All right Ray, you're on in five, four, three, two ..."

35. Go time, live

"I told you," Henry said. "That's LaTricia. Shelli's sister."

"That's why you're the right man for the job," Marv said. "She's our ticket inside."

"I'm the last person LaTricia's gonna help," Henry said.

"Bullshit," Marv said. "She's almost blood so she has to let us in."

"I'm telling you, I got no sway with her," Henry said. "Every time I see her she tells me how bad her sister fucked up by marrying me."

"Yeah, and she's right," Marv said. "But landing Shelli proves you got initiative. So, c'mon, do it for my grandkid and those other kids."

Henry looked at Bill. "I thought you were gonna help me talk him out of this."

Bill grinned. "I'm kinda warmin' to the idea."

"Henry," Marv said, glaring at his friend. "Either you do it the nice way or I do it with the softball bat I got under my seat."

36. TLC

Jaspers nodded at the doorman and walked through the security arch in the lobby of his Upper West Side apartment building. The elevator wished Jaspers a good evening as he stepped through its doors. When the doors closed his assistant began humming "God Bless America."

"What do you want, Briter?" Jaspers said, holding his assistant to his ear.

"You've got the biggest story of the century and you drop it?"

"I thought we weren't going to talk anymore," Jaspers said.

"I'm concerned about our agreement," Briter said. "I'm concerned about our *relationship*."

"Our agreement didn't include sabotage." Jaspers nearly spit out the words.

"Hey, slow down," Briter said. "I don't even like hearing that word."

The elevator stopped at Jaspers' floor and he stepped out. "You bought the suit, Briter," Jaspers said.

"You bought the show, so keep your end of the deal. Mars Girl is a blockbuster. Make the most of it."

Jaspers looked into the eyescan outside his door and the lock popped.

“Rindell’s running the show,” Jaspers said. “It’s his job, not mine. I want nothing to do with it.”

When Jaspers opened the door to his apartment his wife, Ania, wearing flannel pajamas, stuck her head out of the bathroom door and pulled a toothbrush out of her mouth long enough to say, “Hi, John.”

“And if you call me again I’m going to the FBI,” Jaspers said. He snapped his assistant closed and stuffed it into his shirt pocket.

Ania, a small woman with blonde hair hanging in short bangs above her eyes and squared off at her shoulders, gave Jaspers a puzzled look and ducked back into the bathroom.

Jaspers dropped his briefcase by the door, hung up his coat and walked into the living room. The wall screen was already on and he saw the live view from Barker’s Upix. Henry walked toward LaTricia with his hands in his pockets. LaTricia, a tall, thin woman with a large nose, held her cigarette between thumb and forefinger.

Ania came out of the bathroom. “Who was *that*?” she said.

Jaspers was focused on the screen. Bill and Marv followed Henry to the front door of the WUPM building and stood behind him as he talked with LaTricia. The sound was turned low so the voices were only murmurs.

Jaspers sat down in his easy chair and Ania walked up behind him. She knocked softly on his skull with her knuckle. “Anyone home?” She stood behind the easy chair and tried to massage Jaspers’ shoulders but he was slouched down too far in the chair. “You want some tea? The water’s hot.”

Jaspers shook his head as he watched LaTricia jab her cigarette at Henry while she scolded him about something.

“So who was on the phone?” Ania said.

“Work.”

Ania gave him a disappointed half-smile that Jaspers couldn’t see. “Was it about Mars Girl? What a shame.”

On the screen, LaTricia opened the door just far enough for herself to slide through, but Marv grabbed the handle and Bill shoved LaTricia inside.

“I’m going to bed early tonight,” Ania said. I’ve got a 7 a.m. interview at a café over by the UN. There’s at least one editor in New York who remembers I’m still alive. I’m doing a feature on the head of a Moldovan separatist group. Get this: the group’s name is ‘TLC.’ Isn’t that funny?”

“Tender loving care,” Jaspers mumbled.

“It’s the Transdniester Liberation Congress. The guy’s really quite attractive, in a bearded-revolutionary-egomaniac sort of way,” Ania said. “Jealous?”

On the screen Bill and Henry each held an arm of the legless weather bot as they carried him toward the door. LaTricia, lying on the floor with her wrists and ankles duct taped together, raised her legs to trip Henry as he passed but she only caused him to stumble. Marv held the door open for his comrades and they trotted out the door toward the truck with The David.

“Don’t forget about lunch with Jack and Sara tomorrow,” Ania said, walking toward the kitchen. “They’re bringing their pictures.”

“Pictures.”

“Pictures of their trip to Tranquility,” Ania said, taking a few steps back toward the living room. She yawned and used the back of her hand to cover her mouth. “They want us to go with

them next year to ForeverNights, that new dark side resort. It might do you good to take some time off.”

“Busy year, dear,” Jaspers said. “Maybe next year.”

37. Crazy means numbers

Cecilia waited in the park, near a row of picnic tables where she and Barker agreed to meet after she finished her interviews. She called Barker’s head with no response so she set her wristscreen to MASSnews and saw Marv and Bill toss The David into the back of Marv’s pickup.

“Bocelli?” she said. “What’s Ray doing?”

“He’s following a lead,” Bocelli said. “He’ll be back soon.”

“What are they doing with The David?”

“Citizen’s arrest, I guess,” Bocelli said. “The eyeballs are into it. You two are doing great.”

“The FloatPix is here, how’s he doing it?”

“He’s got a Upix,” Bocelli said. “Little eye lenses.”

Cecilia stepped up onto a picnic table to see into the crowd gathering around a large oak near the parking lot. There were a couple dozen people carrying splintered wood from the church’s ruins across M-23 to the park. Two young men wearing orange hunting vests stopped traffic as people filed like giant ants back and forth across the road. They piled their finds under the tree’s heavy horizontal limb and went back for more.

“This town’s gone crazy,” Cecilia said.

“Crazy means numbers,” Bocelli said.

A township cop shooed the wood gatherers off the church rubble so some of them ran across the road and began dismantling the split cedar fence that ran the length of the park along M-23 and bordered its parking lot. Others began pulling apart a wooden gazebo near the beach.

“These people aren’t like this,” Cecilia said. “What’s gotten into them?”

38. My strongest impulse

The David used his arms to keep himself balanced on the base of his torso in the bed of Marv’s truck as it sped south toward Okinisee. Barker kept his eyes on The David, and Bocelli zoomed his Upix lenses to fill the screen with the bot’s grinning face. The sun had fully set, forcing Bocelli to use the Upix’s night vision, giving a greenish tint to the scene.

“Do I have a new boss?” The David asked Barker. “This happened once before.”

“Those men are going to destroy you when we get back to Okinisee,” Barker said. “They blame you for the death of the six children at the church.”

“Seven,” The David said. “They found a young girl in the rubble a few minutes ago.”

The David pivoted to face the cab’s rear window and rapped on it with his plastic fingernails. When the men turned around, they saw the bot grinning at them.

“I’m sure this is just a misunderstanding,” the bot shouted through the closed window, his plastic nose pressed to the glass. “I need to get back to my studio. People depend on my AccuCast. ‘First and best,’ I like to say. Can you hear me up there? I’m very good with directions and I’m sure we’re going the wrong way. You can let me off anywhere. If you call Mr. Johanssen, I’m sure he’d be glad to pick me up. He’s been very good to me.”

Marv flipped on the radio and turned up the volume on a country weeper about a young mother who, despite the hardships, is proud that her soldier husband will ship out to the Gulf the next day.

The David turned back toward Barker. “Perhaps you could talk with them. I take my public safety duties very seriously. It’s my strongest impulse.”

Barker reached back, out of view from his Upix, and unlatched the topper lid. He nudged it open a few inches to show The David.

The David used his arms to slide himself toward the back of the bed, then pushed the lid open and pulled himself out.

Holding the lid open against the wind, Barker watched The David, his arms flailing, cartwheel across the pavement. Sparks shot off his titanium skull when it met the asphalt.

Barker pounded on the sliding cab window and Bill, sitting in the middle, slid it open.

“Where’s the weather dude?” Bill said.

“He got out,” Barker said. “He jumped.”

Marv slammed on the brakes and barreled the truck through the ditch in a clumsy U-Turn, throwing Barker into the wheel well and pressing Marv and Bill against the passenger window. Back on the road, Bill reached into the glove box for the spotlight Marv used to shine deer and swept it across rows of short, leafy corn in the fields on both sides of the highway.

“There he is,” Bill said, thrusting his arm past Marv’s face to point. The David used his arms like an ape as he swung himself through the corn toward a small stand of trees. Marv pulled off the road and the three jumped out.

Barker stayed by the truck and kept his eyes on the action as Bill, once a high school track star, caught up with The David and held him down until Marv and Henry arrived, gasping

from the run. Marv pulled a roll of duct tape from his jacket pocket and used it to bind The David's wrists.

"You guys hear about the skeleton that walked into a bar?" The David said, as Bill and Henry hoisted him above their heads like a big game trophy. "He ordered a beer and a mop," The David said, sounding a rim shot. "How about the Buddhist who told the hot dog vendor to make him one with everything?"

"Let's get that bat outta your truck and take care of him right here," Bill said, holding onto one of The David's arms.

"No," Marv said. "That'd spoil the party they got planned back home."

"We gotta at least shut him up," Bill said. He and Henry dropped The David to the ground. Bill grabbed the duct tape from Marv and wrapped it around his head several times, covering his mouth.

"What'd the snail say when he went for a ride on the turtle?" The David said.

"Weeeeeee!"

"What the hell," Bill said. "I taped his damn mouth shut."

"My mouth is intended to give you the illusion that I speak as you do," The David said, lying on his back and looking up at the men. "I have a resonator in my chest."

Marv flipped The David's red tie out of the way and ripped open his white shirt. Bill pulled a jackknife from his jacket pocket, opened it and raised it above his head.

"Perhaps I shouldn't have told ..."

The David fell silent when Bill brought the knife down into the speaker, but the bot's lips kept moving through the tape.

39. Anything else come in?

The sales floor was alive with reps hustling to keep up with orders for the new hit show. Rindell and Piper sat at the center of the room watching Marv and Bill carry The David through the young corn toward the truck, which the men had left on the shoulder of the highway with its doors wide open. As they threw the bot into the bed, the show went to a commercial for Boost, the new breakfast drink clinically proven to improve adolescent self-esteem for eighteen hours.

“Get the floater feed,” Rindell said.

Piper tapped her keyboard and the commercial was replaced on her screen by a live view from the park. The crowd around the woodpile parted to make way for a small pickup carrying a fresh load of scrap lumber for the fire. A man and a woman climbed into the truck’s bed to throw the wood onto the pile.

“Looks like Barker’s got things going,” Rindell said. “Anything else come in?”

“Nothing promising,” Piper said. “Nielson’s doing a ride-along in Kansas City and they thought they caught a murderer but it was the wrong guy. All we’ve got is some cops beating the hell out of an innocent man.”

“We show that and we won’t get any more police exclusives,” Rindell said.

On the screen, Bocelli pointed the FloatPix toward the park’s tennis court where two men pulled the metal cord from the top of the net. One of the men carried the cord toward the tree and tossed an end over the big branch.

“Let’s assume we’ll get another half hour from Barker,” Rindell said. “We need something to fill another hour, then we’ll go back to Mars Girl before the West Coast goes to bed. Keep reminding the casters that we’re offering triple commissions. Maybe that’ll get them off their asses.”

40. All over it

“Ray, where are you?” Cecilia said. She stood on the picnic table next to a dapper man in a tailored white linen suit. The man, nicely tanned, spoke on his assistant and ran his fingers through his slick, graying hair as he watched people throw the last of the wood from the gazebo onto the pile.

Barker, sitting in the truck’s bed, tried to orient himself by looking out the topper’s side window. “I’ll be at the park soon,” Barker said. “I think we’re close.”

The David, lying on his side with tape around his mouth and wrists, looked up at Barker. His lips were still moving.

“How are things there?” Barker said.

“People have lost their minds,” Cecilia said. “There’s a big crowd at the park and they’re building a fire for The David

“No shit?” Barker said.

“I thought the show was about the town pulling together,” Cecilia said. “Sort of a memorial to the kids who died. This ...” she gestured toward the crowd around the big oak, “... this is insane.”

“You on this Bocelli?” Barker said.

“All over it,” Bocelli said. “Cecilia, did you find the mayor?”

“There’s no mayor,” Cecilia said. “He’s the township supervisor. He’s standing next to me.”

“All right,” Bocelli said. “We’re back on in thirty. Cecilia, we need a couple minutes of you with the mayor. Ray can take over when he gets to the park.”

A man wearing a ski mask climbed onto a grill next to the woodpile and someone in the crowd handed him a can of gasoline. He held the can above his head and the crowd roared.

“Ray, I’ve got a business in this town,” Cecilia said. “Things have gone too far. I can’t be part of this.”

“You sure?” Barker said.

The man on the grill emptied the can onto the woodpile and the crowd cheered again. “I’m sure,” she said.

“All right,” Barker said. “Bocelli, try to connect me with The Donna. She’s the weather bot at WGTB. They’re an affiliate so it shouldn’t be a problem. If they grumble, give them a taste of my percentage while she’s on. Send it back to Peter for a couple minutes if you need time. After I talk with The Donna, I should be at the park and I’ll talk to the mayor.”

“I’m on it,” Bocelli said.

41. Good night

“Welcome back to MASSnews, where the hits just keep coming,” Peter said with his trademark wink. “We’ll take you back to ‘Death on the Plains’ in a moment.”

Peter was replaced onscreen by a live view from Mars. The TractorPix used its bright lights to illuminate the silver ship.

“But first, it looks like Mars Girl has gone to bed. She’ll need a good night’s sleep because tomorrow she’ll attempt the longest trek ever by a human outside of earth’s gravity. NASA geographers estimate that she’ll have to cover fifteen perilous clicks.”

Mars Girl, wearing her “Kiss Me I’m Dead” T-shirt, appeared in the window long enough to slide down the plastic shade, blocking the TractorPix light.

“Well, I guess we can’t blame her for that, can we?” Peter said with a chuckle. “Good night, Mars Girl.”

“Let’s get back to ‘Death on the Plains,’ where I’m told things are *really* heating up,” Peter said with a wink.

42. I’m not people

“Good evening, The Donna, and thanks for joining us,” Barker said.

“You’re welcome, Mr. Barker.” The Donna was in front of a weather map that showed light green swaths over Lake Michigan inching their way east toward the Leelenau Peninsula. She shared a split screen with The David, still silently moving his lips through the tape and lying on his side in the back of Marv’s truck.

“There are some rumors flying around that I’d like to clear up,” Barker said. “I understand that you and The David were quite friendly.”

“As I understand the concept of friendship, perhaps The David and I could be considered friends,” The Donna said. Her face had an exaggerated beauty – high and prominent cheekbones, large eyes and a small nose turned up more than seemed natural. Her voice was a little tinny, and her inflection proggy a bit outdated, but she was popular in her market and emceed the annual Traverse City Cherry Festival Parade every year.

“Good friends?” Barker said.

“There is a certain collegiality among weather bots, especially among those in close proximity who deal with similar weather patterns,” she said. “The David and I have learned a great deal from each other. The Great Lakes affect micro- and macroclimates in unique ways so we often compare our forecasts to see if there are conflicts.”

Marv drove the pickup into the park and onto the grass, through where the split rail fence had been, and toward the big oak. The David tried unsuccessfully to push himself upright using his bound hands.

“There’s a lot of talk around here that you two were playing footsy through your connects earlier today when the tornado hit,” Barker said.

“I’m sorry. Footsy is not one of the words I know.” The Donna had a confident smile and spoke reassuringly. Every fourteen seconds she reached up to brush golden locks out of her eyes.

“Do you know what sex is?”

“Usually it refers to the act of procreation.”

“Have you ever had sex?”

“I’m a bot, sir.”

“Have you ever had sex?”

“Bots do not reproduce biologically. I was manufactured.”

“In other words, you don’t kiss and tell.”

The topper lid flew open and the gate dropped with a clang. Bill hoisted himself onto the gate and reached in to drag The David out by his suit coat collar.

“Tell about what?” The Donna asked. “Kiss? Bots of my genus have no tactile sensations. You are giving me human characteristics I simply do not have. I have tasks, not desires.”

“You look human. In fact you look kind of hot. Who are you trying to impress?”

Bocelli told Barker the floater was taking over so he jumped out of the truck’s bed and scanned the crowd for Cecilia.

“That’s just good design,” The Donna said. “An appealing presentation is important for ratings.”

Marv and Bill hoisted The David over their heads and carried him toward the woodpile. People in the crowd craned their necks to see, and some taunted the bot.

“You get love letters from admiring viewers,” Barker said.

“I have always failed to understand those letters.”

“All right, let’s get to the point. You and The David have a relationship, right?”

“Yes, we are colleagues.”

“Most affairs begin at work.”

“Are you referring to love affairs?”

Barker saw Cecilia standing on the picnic table next to Annisstin and walked toward them.

“Yes, love affairs,” Barker said. “You and The David were having a good time a few hours ago. I don’t know exactly how bots have a good time but you two were doing it. The David was concentrating more on you than his job so he didn’t warn anyone about the tornado. Those seven kids wouldn’t have died if he’d done his job.”

“The David and I were monitoring the same storm pattern, and it was a particularly tricky one,” The Donna said. “Two fronts of differing temperatures combined, which is what can cause tornados, but the temperature divergence between them seemed ... ”

“People always cover up for the ones they love.”

“I’m not people.”

Barker had reached the picnic table and stepped up onto it. He stood next to Annisstin, who was speaking on his assistant. The man wearing the ski mask stood on the grill with a

gasoline-soaked rag in one hand and a lighter in the other. A chant of “Burn! Burn! Burn!” rose from one side of the crowd and swept to the other. The Donna disappeared from the screen and Bocelli devoted the entire screen to the teeming crowd. Bocelli told Barker that he was overdue for a break.

“The Donna, do you have any last words for your friend?” Barker said.

“Last words? I’ve asked him to take a look at the weather pattern developing to our west, but he hasn’t responded yet. That’s very unusual.”

Marv and Bill wrapped the tennis net cord around The David’s neck and cinched it tight.

“Don’t hold your breath,” Barker said. “We’ll be back after this.” Barker turned to Annisstin. “You’re the mayor?”

Annisstin finished talking on his assistant and slid the device into his suit coat pocket. “I’m the township supervisor. Tony Annisstin.”

“Bocelli, things are moving fast here,” Barker said. “They’re ready to light the fire.”

“All right, we’ll just do a thirty and send it back to you,” Bocelli said. “Fifteen seconds.”

Barker turned to Annisstin. “Ready? We’re on in ten.” Barker spun around, facing the floater, which hovered ten feet in front of him. Bocelli wanted the crowd in the background.

Barker heard Bocelli’s countdown in his head and tapped Annisstin on the shoulder. When Annisstin looked, Barker nodded toward the FloatPix but Annisstin didn’t turn around.

“We’re back in Kiss-My-Knees, Michigan,” Barker said. “As you can see behind me, the natives are restless.”

Bocelli zoomed in to show Marv and Bill pulling on the net cord, swinging The David over the woodpile. Bill tied the cord to the grill and the masked man lit the rag and threw it onto

the gasoline soaked lumber. Flames leapt into the air, engulfing The David. The crowd gasped as one. The David's suit coat and shirt caught fire and his hair burned off in a flash.

Bocelli pulled back, bringing Barker and Annisstin into the picture, but Annisstin still faced away from the camera.

"This way, Mayor," Barker said.

Annisstin, watching The David burn, shook his head in disgust and slowly turned toward the camera.

"So, are you enjoying this?" Barker said.

"Enjoying *this*?" Annisttin said, glancing behind him. "That's an absurd question. I don't see how any responsible person could enjoy watching the wanton destruction of property."

Bocelli pipped Barker and Annisstin into the lower right and The David, largely obscured by the flames, filled the rest of the screen. Burning plastic dripped from the bot's hands as he tried to pull himself away from the flames. His fingers, now little more than metal bones, couldn't grip the cord.

"Then why don't you have the cops start busting heads? Call in the National Guard or something?"

"I can assure you that we'll deal with this foolishness as soon as emergency personnel are no longer needed at the church," Annisstin said.

"So you'll just let them have their fun?" Barker said.

"We're paying close attention and serious charges will be handed out to those responsible."

"Why not let them vent a little?" Barker said. "Some kids died. They're getting instant justice."

“I don’t see how razing a public park is justice. The hardworking people of this county paid for this park and their tax dollars will have to pay for its reconstruction. And The David has a manufacturer, a programmer and an owner. If there was negligence, I’m certain our courts can assign blame and determine appropriate punishment and restitution.”

Barker turned to face the floater. “That’s Mayor Sourpuss of Knee-kisser, Michigan. We’ll be back after this.”

43. After the fire

Rindell, still standing behind Piper and watching her desk screen, wanted to see the floater feed while the commercial played. Piper hit a few buttons on her assistant and they watched Barker walk toward Cecilia, standing alone near the dirt circle where the Gazebo had been.

“Do you think there’s anything between those two?” Rindell asked Piper.

Barker put his arm around Cecilia as they stood away from the crowd, watching The David, now mostly charred metal, swaying above the fire. The bot reached for the cord around his neck but his arm fell limp to his side.

“Does it matter?” Piper said.

“Only if we don’t have anything better when the fire goes out.”

On the screen Barker and Cecilia walked toward the picnic table where an elegantly dressed woman stood smiling at them. Barker shook her hand when they arrived at the table.

“Let’s have Bocelli follow Barker and Cecilia after the Plains show ends,” Rindell said. “My gut tells me they’re going to jump into the sack. Keep the reps on their toes. We haven’t had a good sex show in months.”

Piper rolled her eyes and looked at Rindell. “*You* tell Barker,” she said. “I’m not.”

“Tell Barker? And spoil the mood? No way.”

44. Friends

Standing on the picnic table in the FloatPix light, Barker was joined by Alexis DelVecchio, owner of DelVecchio’s Finest Apparel. Behind them The David hung motionless except for occasional arm spasms, like someone in a fitful sleep. The flames had mostly burned out but intense heat still rose from the mound of glowing coals.

Cradled in Alexis’s long, slender arms was a gift box from her store. Her bright floral dress hung beautifully on her slender body and her tanned, elegantly elongated face was dominated by a wide smile that had sold thousands of suits and dresses at the store her great-grandparents started when they emigrated from Italy in the 1950s.

“The people of Onickersbee have determined that my attire is unsuitable,” Barker said, tightening the belt on his robe. “So, Alexis ...” Barker turned to her. “I’ve always liked the name Alex for women. Mind if I call you Alex?”

“Not at all,” Alexis said. “That’s what my friends call me.”

“So I’m your friend now?”

“Absolutely. We’re friendly people here in Okinisee.”

Barker looked into the camera and raised an eyebrow. “*How* friendly?”

“*Very.*”

Barker looked into the camera and raised the other eyebrow.

Behind Barker and Alexis, one of The David's arms fell into the dying flames, sending a plume of sparks into the air. The David's charred skull bobbed to one side, and then fell to his chest.

"Okay, my new friend, take it away," Barker said to Alexis.

"Thank you, Ray. I'm Alexis, or *Alex*," she smiled at Barker, "DeVecchio, owner of DeVecchio's Finest Apparel and I'm also President of the Okinisee Chamber of Commerce here in friendly Okinisee, Michigan, located on the shores of beautiful Lake Huron. We have a wonderful marina, plenty of nearby hotel space, a small town atmosphere and we're just two hours from Detroit, and a smidge over an hour from the Tri-Cities Airport. Come see us sometime for a wonderful northern Michigan experience."

"Are you paying for this?" Barker said.

Alexis paused and gave Barker a patient smile. "I thought we were friends."

"You're taking advantage of our relationship," Barker said.

Behind them, The David raised his skull but it flopped over backward and lay against his metal spine.

Alexis looked into the camera. "Well, it *is* beautiful up here. So come up and see us and shop at our fine stores."

"The point, the point ..."

"You'll find none of Ray's big city pushiness here." Alexis smiled at Barker again. "The reason I'm here is that the good people of Okinisee treat our visitors like part of the family so we want to present Ray with a set of clothing that is more appropriate than his ragged old robe. I also want to say that this is the first tornado to ever hit Okinisee, and the odds of another one

visiting us during the next 200 years are practically zero, so come pay us a visit. This is the safest little town in America.”

“All right, let me have the clothes,” Barker said. Alexis held out the box and Barker lifted its lid.

“The shirt is made of a very special blend of mohair, wool and spider silk spun at a farm just ten miles from here,” Alexis said. “Spider silk is just one of the fibers manufactured from goat’s milk produced by engineered saanans and nubians at Juntinin’s Fiber Farm just west of town. DelVecchio’s is the exclusive retail outlet.”

“Let me guess,” Barker said, holding up the shimmering shirt. It was royal blue with flecks of silver and red that danced in the glare of the FloatPix light. “You ship.”

“Around the globe.”

“Great. Do I have pants in there?” Barker said pawing through the box that was still in Alex’s hands.

“Of course you have pants. They’re made of spider silk and lambs’ wool, for a longwearing, elegant look.”

Barker held the gray pants to his waist to check the length. They were speckled with blue accents that matched the shirt.

“Belt?” Barker said.

“It’s with the shoes.”

Behind Barker and Alexis, sparks flew out the hole left by the David’s missing arm. When the sparks subsided, the David’s other arm fell into the coals.

Barker untied his robe and flung it aside.

“I wasn’t sure if I should include boxers but I’m glad I did,” Alexis said, looking away.

“There are a few extra pairs, plus some extra socks.”

The FloatPix showed Barker from the waist up as he slipped on the underwear and pants.

“This is just one example of the hospitality that’s a way of life here in Okinisee,” Alexis said, looking into the camera. “We’re a small town with a big heart. The charracuda fishing is amazing and there are sixteen championship golf courses within an hour’s drive and a bazillion miles of snowmobile trails.”

Ray had finished putting on the socks and was now working on his shoes. He put his hand on Alexis’s shoulder for balance.

“We guessed on the shoe size,” Alexis said. “Are they a little snug?”

“Perfect.” Barker did a quick soft shoe on the picnic table to prove it. “Thanks for taking care of me, Alex.” He put his arm around her and looked into the camera. “We’ll be back in Goatkissernee after this.”

Barker swung Alexis around and dipped her. He gave her a big kiss on the lips and she made a weak effort to push him away.

44. An idea

Rindell leapt through the elevator doors as they opened on fifty-nine. He trotted down the empty hallway but slowed to a walk when his head hummed “God Bless America.”

“Who’s this?” he said.

“Bob Briter here. How are you this fine evening?”

“Bob who? How’d you get my connects?”

“Bob *Briter*. Calling from the White House. We get any connects we want.”

“Never heard of you. Get off my head, I’m busy.”

“How can you *not* know who I am? I was quoted twelve times on the front page of today’s *New York Times*.”

“I’m sure that’s a big deal to you and the four other people who read newspapers. Now get off my head.”

“I’ll tell you what’s a big deal. You’re walking away from the hottest show in the history of mass media and the president wants to know why. You’re completely ignoring your First Amendment responsibilities.”

“So sue me,” Rindell said. “Over-Now.”

Rindell disregarded the yellow caution light on Bocelli’s door and burst in. The production booth was just big enough for Bocelli and a semi-circle of nine screens arrayed three-high. Bocelli sat at the focal point of the arc in a wheeled recliner. In his lap lay a console with a joystick and several buttons. On the center screen Cecilia was doing a remote with one of the injured kids lying in bed at Alpena Memorial Hospital. A nurse sat on the edge of the bed next to the girl. The other screens were filled with views from each of the other cameras on the FloatPix, giving Bocelli a panoramic view of the park.

“I thought Cecilia was done,” Rindell said, squeezing between the back of Bocelli’s chair and the wall.

“She knows the girl and wanted to talk to her,” Bocelli said. “Don’t you ever knock?”

“I’ve got an idea for you,” Rindell said.

“At ten o’clock Barker’s show is over and I’m going home,” Bocelli said. “That’s seven minutes from now.”

“Not if my idea works.”

Bocelli, short and plump with withered legs and a thin, bearded face, swiveled his chair toward Rindell. "I don't like it when you have ideas. My wife doesn't like it when you have ideas. My kids miss me when you have ideas."

"Have you noticed anything between Barker and Cecilia?" Rindell said.

Bocelli closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair. "I've been working since six this morning. Don't give me riddles."

"Piper says there's some kind of chemistry between them."

"I don't know and I don't care."

"When Barker signs off I want you to keep the floater on them. The eyeballs like those two. If they go for a romantic moonlit walk on the beach, I want the FloatPix to go with them. If they end up in bed I want you to get a good look. Just keep the floater out of sight and mask the audio connect. I'll give you a half a point on the first fifteen minutes' net if you get vid of them screwing each other's eyes out. That'll pay for a dozen years of college."

"Rindell, you're an asshole."

"You only say that because you can't say no."

45. Show's over

Marv and Barker stood next to each other on the picnic table facing the floater. Most people had left the park but a couple dozen people milled around The David's remains, swaying in the mild breeze coming off the lake and lit from below by the fire's orange embers.

“Marv here was the ringleader of the botnappers who broke into The David’s studio and brought him to the park,” Barker said into the FloatPix. “So Marv, do you think justice was done tonight?”

Marv’s hands were stuck in his jacket pockets and his round face stared into the camera. “Nothing’s going to bring back my grandson,” he said. “But I’m a God-fearing man and I believe in an eye for an eye.” There were beads of sweat on his forehead, despite the cool night air.

“Marv, seven kids died in the church,” Barker said. “All you did was kill a machine.”

Marv looked behind him at The David’s blackened, armless body, then faced the camera again.

“The David jumped outta the bed of my truck at eighty mile an hour. He knew he did wrong.” Marv turned again to look at The David. “He got what’s coming to him.”

The David’s remains fell from the cord and sparks jumped from the coals.

“There you have it,” Barker said, as Bocelli zoomed in on The David’s empty eye sockets and toothless jaw lying on the bright coals. “Instant justice, at least in the eyes of the Okiniseans. This is Ray Barker for Cecilia Westraek. Goodnight everybody.”

The light on the FloatPix changed from green to red.

“We’re done,” Barker said to Marv. “Show’s over.”

“That’s it?” Marv lingered on the table for a moment and looked back toward the fire. “Guess I’ll get outta here then,” he said, and stepped down from the table.

Barker turned to watch Marv walk toward the parking lot. He could see the flashing lights of a police car parked next to Marv’s truck. A fire engine pulled into the lot and onto the

lawn next to the glowing coals. Cecilia, walking toward the picnic table from the fire, patted Marv on his shoulder as they passed each other.

“How’d we do, Bocelli?” Barker said.

“Somehow you managed to keep Mars Girl’s huge numbers, and you’re getting triple commissions,” Bocelli said. “I hope you invite me to your retirement party. Hey, I want you to leave your FloatPix with me. Rindell wants to replay the highlights from your show during the overnight and I want to get some shots of them putting out the fire. Just tell me where you’ll be and I’ll get it back to you later tonight.”

“Where I’ll be?” Barker looked at Cecilia, who had just reached the picnic table.

“The boat,” she said. “There’s broken glass all over my house.”

“Bocelli, just leave it under my car,” Barker said. “I’ll get it in the morning.”

46. Let’s take a chance

Rindell, standing behind Bocelli’s recliner, heard “God Bless America” in his head again. “What do you want?” he said.

“I don’t like people hanging up on me,” Briter said. “When you hang up on me, you’re hanging up on the President of the United States and she doesn’t forget things like that.”

“Let’s test her memory,” Rindell said. “Over-Now.”

Rindell heard “God Bless America” again. “Damn it, if you’ve got a show for me, I’ll listen. If you’re just trying to tell me how to do my job, I’m not interested. Which is it?”

“You’re ignoring a national tragedy,” Briter said. “If you buy the exclusive and don’t use it, our lawyers say that’s breach of contract.”

“You wanna fight with a guy who’s got half the domestic market watching his network right now? If I hear any more about a lawsuit MASSnews will spend the next hour reminding everybody that a teenager had to come up with a plan to save herself because your boss is an uncaring incompetent. Flanagan’s numbers are already in the tank and I can push them lower than any president in history. Clear? Over-Now.”

On Bocelli’s center screen, Barker and Cecilia walked hand in hand on the beach toward the marina. Lake Huron’s moonlit diamonds glistened behind them.

“Is that them?” Rindell said.

“Of course it’s them,” Bocelli said. “Production wants to know if we’re going back to Peter or staying with Barker.”

Rindell checked the latest numbers on his assistant. “People aren’t tired of them yet. Let’s take a chance on Barker. Piper said they’ve got a title worked out.”

“All right everybody, we’re staying in Michigan,” Bocelli said “You hear that Piper? We’re on in five, four, three, two ...”

Barker and Cecilia stopped where a boat shed hid them from the cottages lining the shore. As they kissed a glowing bottle of Tour Eiffel champagne appeared next to them on the shed’s wall. Cecilia leaned back against the wall and she wrapped her legs around Barker when he lifted her. The cork popped from the champagne bottle, spilling white foam from its mouth.

“I did something like this to my sister when I was twelve and I was grounded for a month,” Bocelli said.

“Just do your job and let me worry about good and evil,” Rindell said. He bumped Bocelli on the shoulder. “Pull in tighter.”

47. Don't get crazy

Jim was still at the crowded Okinisee Inn but he'd run out of cash so he was operating on credit. "'Nother beer," he said to the waitress, and slid his empty glass toward her. He pushed too hard and the crowd hushed for a moment when the glass fell over the bar's raised edge and exploded on the floor.

"You sure you need one, Jimmy?" the bartender said, pushing the broken glass into a pile with her shoe.

"Poztive."

"All the kegs are empty, hun. You want a bottle?"

"Just gimme a beer."

"Let's make this your last one, all right? You're already over the limit for someone with your credit rating and bottles are thirty bucks." The bartender popped the top off a bottle of MedicineHat Ale and set it in front of him.

When she walked away Jim had a clear view of the wall screen on the far side of the bar. He turned to look behind him at a closer screen, then stood up and walked toward it until he could hear the sound over the bar's din.

"Let's take my boat out into the bay," Cecilia said from the screen, rubbing her palms against Barker's chest. "We can anchor out there for the night. Just in case Jim's still around."

"Sure, in a little while," Barker said, trying to kiss her again.

"If we stay here I'll be thinking about Jim more than I'm thinking about you," Cecilia said, holding him off with her forehead. "I don't want to think about Jim right now."

Ben Lambton walked up behind Jim and put his hand on his shoulder. “Don’t get crazy on us, Jimbo.” The bar had become quiet and all eyes were on Jim as he watched Barker and Cecilia kiss.

“Let’s get out of here,” Ben said, squeezing between Jim and the screen. “Why don’t you stay at my place tonight?”

Jim spun awkwardly away from Ben, his wild, furious eyes focused on nothing.

“C’mon, Jim,” Ben said to his back. “We can take my car.”

“She’s my wife!” Jim shouted as he stomped past crowded tables toward the exit. He pulled the door off its hinges on his way out.

48. Enough trouble for one day

Bocelli kept the floater in the moon shadow cast by a tree on shore while Barker stood next to Ben Lambton’s cruiser, readying himself to lift the Somewhen’s bent mast that was still attached to the Cecilia’s sailboat.

“Ready?” Cecilia yelled, standing at her sailboat’s wheel across the dock from Lambton’s boat.

Barker struggled but managed to lift the mast off the cruiser as Cecilia pulled on the throttle, backing the boat out toward Big Rock Bay. Barker held the mast in the crooks of his arms and took short, quick steps to keep pace with the sailboat. When he reached the end of the dock he dropped the mast into the lake and stepped toward the boat to jump on before it cleared the dock. He stopped when he saw a pair of headlights at the marina’s entrance.

The car barreled down the drive and skidded to a halt near the storage shed. Jim jumped out, nearly falling to the gravel. He gained his balance and ran up the dock, lurching from side to side. Jim left his car in drive and it idled forward until it bumped into the storage shed.

Cecilia gunned the sailboat's inboard but it labored to push the boat through the water because of the mast's added drag. Barker stepped onto the sailboat and stood on the bow, watching Jim stumble toward him.

"Cecilia!" Jim bellowed from the end of the dock. "Stop!"

"Jim, you're drunk," Cecilia yelled from the cockpit. "Just go to my house. We'll talk tomorrow. I promise."

"Cecilia!" Just c'mere, damn it!" Jim reached for a piling to steady himself but missed and fell face first into the lake.

"Oh, God," Cecilia said. "He can't swim."

She jumped up from the cockpit, but Barker stepped in front of her. "I'll get him." Barker, threw off his new shoes and dove into the water. Jim, slapping at the water in a panicked dogpaddle, reached for the bottom rung of the rusty ladder at the end of the dock but was too far away and his head went under. Barker surfaced and gave him a shove toward the ladder. Jim's fingers clutched the rusty metal and he pulled his head above water. As he climbed the ladder he nearly fell back but managed get his feet under him on the dock. He fell to his knees, dripping water and gulping air.

Barker swam to the mast and pulled himself along, hand over hand, until Cecilia helped him onto the sailboat's deck.

Jim struggled to his feet and, without looking back at the sailboat, stumbled to his car. His tires threw gravel as he drove up the marina entrance, then squealed onto M-23. Jim held the

pedal to the floor all the way back to the Okinisee Inn, where his car bounced through potholes and slid to a stop at the front door. The bar became quiet when he walked through the doorless doorway, followed by the floater and dripping water onto the worn wood floor. People scooted their chairs out of Jim's way as he marched through the bar toward Ben, sitting at a table with a few others against the far wall. Bocelli kept the floater near the ceiling and lowered its microphone wire.

"Ben, gimme your boat keys," Jim said, holding out his wet hand.

Ben stood from his chair. "Jimbo, you need to calm down. Just do what Cecilia said. Go sleep it off and you two can talk it out tomorrow. You're making a fool of yourself."

"Goddamn it, give me the keys!" Jim said. He grabbed Ben's jacket off the back of his chair and rifled through the pockets. He found nothing so he pushed Ben against the wall and tried putting his hand into one of his front pockets but two of the men sitting at Ben's table threw Jim to the floor.

"Figure it out," Ben said, standing over Jim. "She moved away from you and she has other men. Deal with it."

Jim rolled onto his back and saw the FloatPix hovering above him near the ceiling. When he made it to his feet he picked up a glass tumbler from Ben's table and hurled it at the flying camera. He missed and the tumbler smashed against the wall, showering broken glass on two women sitting together at a table.

Jim saw the bar's owner making his way around the bar with a big wrench in his hand so he loped toward the door, stopping long enough to reach across the bar with surprising dexterity to snatch a nearly full bottle of whiskey out of the bartender's hand.

Two men stood up from the bar to go after Jim but Stu shouted at them to let him go. “We’ve had enough trouble for one day.”

Stu pointed up at the floater and said, “You! Outta here!”

Bocelli took the floater out the door and followed Jim as he weaved down M-23 to the marina with the whiskey bottle between his legs. He skidded his car to a stop by the storage shed and tossed the bottle’s cap out the window. He took a good drink, stepped out of the car and took another. As he walked to Ben’s boat he saw The Somewhen heading out into Big Rock Bay, its trailing mast creating a second wake in the moonlight.

To get into the cabin of Ben’s boat Jim had to duck his head past the roof’s jagged metal, smashed into a V by the Somewhen’s mast. He found the light switch and searched for a hidden key. He looked inside cupboard doors, under seat cushions and behind anything that looked like a hiding place. He got down on all fours to search for a cubbyhole under the cabinets but saw nothing. When he stood up the boat spun out of control. He needed to sit down but there was no time. He dropped to his knees, fell onto his face and passed out.

49. The boat gently rocks

Rindell bumped Bocelli’s shoulder. “Go see what’s happening on the sailboat.”

“You wanna do this?” Bocelli said. “You’ve got all the ideas.”

“Just get a look inside the sailboat. Jim’s done for the night.”

The sailboat’s navigator held a course due east toward Canada, which took the boat into Big Rock Bay. The moon was just above the horizon, squeezing its pale light through a narrow porthole. Peering into the Somewhen from the opposite side, Bocelli synched the floater with the boat’s gentle rocking motion.

Barker lay on his side in the bed with his head propped by his palm. Cecilia sat on the bed facing away from him and toward the camera outside the window. Barker rubbed her back through her dress.

“I really need to just end it with Jim,” Cecilia said, staring at the floor. “I should have done it already.”

Barker pulled on her shoulder and she lay down next to him, still facing away.

Cecilia reached above the bed to a console of buttons and killed the inboard motor, then hit another button that dropped the anchors.

Barker leaned into her ear and did his best impression of thunder and whistling winds. Cecilia rolled onto her back and smiled as Barker moved his face toward hers.

Day II

1. Outraged or amused

Lying asleep a few hundred yards offshore in the cabin of Cecilia's boat, Barker was awakened by his humming head. He reached out and felt only cold sheets next to him. Cloudy thoughts of the night before floated through his mind as he surveyed the empty cabin. Out the small windows he saw bright blue skies. His head hummed again and he answered.

"Barker."

"Good morning, Ray. It's Piper. How's it feel to be a rich man?"

"Where's Cecilia?" Barker said, more to himself than Piper. He noticed that the companionway door was open.

"She's not on the boat?"

Barker looked at the small clock beside the bed. He was surprised that it was already after nine o'clock. "How'd you know I'm on a boat?"

"Rindell told Bocelli to follow you with the floater after 'Death on the Plains' ended," Piper said.

Barker heard Cecilia's voice from the deck. "What!? In my boat?" Cecilia, with the almost pink robe loosely wrapped around her, appeared in the cabin door and looked at Barker with an expression he hadn't seen before. A mix of confusion and anger.

"You had great numbers for both shows last night," Piper said. "Just think if Jim had caught you."

Cecilia left the doorway and went back up on deck. Barker could hear her voice, but couldn't understand the words.

"You're saying that Bocelli followed us to the boat?" Barker said.

"*Into* the boat," Piper said. "He shot through the window using just the moonlight. It was very romantic. He did you a favor and didn't turn on the night vision, even though Rindell kept telling him to. It was sorta artsy."

"How long did the show last?" Barker said.

"As long as you did," Piper said.

Piper paused to let Barker respond but he didn't.

"Ray, I don't know what you're thinking but you made one hell of a lot of money last night and you two are the hottest casters on the planet right now."

She paused again. Still no response. "Barker? You there?"

"I'm waiting to see if I'm outraged or amused."

"You're a rich man. Two big shows in one night. Triple commissions."

"Rindell should be making this call, not you."

"I told him the same thing," Piper said. "He said you'd find out soon enough but I thought someone should tell you. By the way, the local sheriff is pretty pissed off about what happened at the park. Rindell's talking to him right now but I doubt that'll help. I'd get out of Dodge if I were you."

2. No deal

"Hello. Anybody there?" the sheriff said.

"This is Marc Rindell."

“Mr. Rindell, this is Sheriff Angstrom, Alpena County, Michigan. How are you this fine morning?”

“Busy,” Rindell said.

“Let’s get right to it then,” Angstrom said. “Your boy caused me a lot of grief last night and I got quite a mess up here.”

“My boy?”

“Your caster. Ray Barker. Since the cement plants and the gas wells are all closed up we haven’t got much but tourism going for us and your little show made us look like a bunch of savages. Who in their right mind would want to spend their vacation dollars hanging around a bunch of savages? I don’t think there’s a hotel, golf course or charter outfit in the county hasn’t called me to complain about what your boy did to our reputation as a nice and friendly place to visit.”

“I suggest you arrest the people who caused the trouble,” Rindell said.

“Yeah, well we have a habit of scanning the satellites and one of my deputies picked up your boy talking to somebody in New York – the guy who was flying the camera. We got audio of Mr. Barker explaining how he got Marv Ripley all riled up by telling him and his buddies that The David was doing a girl weather bot virtual-style over in Traverse and that’s what made him blow the tornado call.”

Rindell grinned at Barker’s inventiveness.

“I talked to DisneyNews,” the sheriff said, “and they’ve made me an offer on the exclusive for that bit of audio. They also want me onscreen to tell the world about your bloodsucking caster preying on a granddad who just lost his grandson. They’re saying it’s worth

a half million. Now, I'd rather just let this whole episode wash under the bridge but a half million is a lot of money."

"Are you trying to blackmail me?" Rindell said.

"I know how you high rollers work these things," Angstrom said. "My cousin's a police chief out East and he does exclusive deals all the time."

"I'm not buying any of this," Rindell said. "I seriously doubt you talked to DisneyNews."

"Oh, I talked to them all right," Angstrom said. "They're pretty excited about making some money and pissing you off. All you gotta do is top their offer and that audio file disappears."

"How about you make it disappear by shoving it up your ass," Rindell said.

3. Coffee

Jim slid open his eyes and tried to focus on the half full whiskey bottle sitting upright on the cabin floor a foot from his nose.

When he tried to stand up his right leg gave way and he fell back to the floor. With the whiskey bottle in one hand he crawled to the galley table and managed to pull himself to his feet. He took a couple drinks from the bottle to calm his nerves and decided he needed a cup of coffee to clear his mind.

He limped from cupboard to cupboard. Plates, cups, bowls. No sign of coffee or a coffeemaker. Tucked away on the top shelf of a floor-to-ceiling cabinet next to the sink he finally found a ten-cup BrewPal and a foil pouch containing just enough coffee to make a pot.

Jim reached for the BrewPal with his right hand but stopped short when a sharp pain shot through his back. He tried the other arm and there was much less pain. He set the BrewPal on the counter and reached up again for the foil pouch. When he tried to grab it, he knocked it off the back of the shelf and it fell behind all the way to the floor. Jim closed his eyes and cursed the idiot who built shelves with a gap behind.

Using the shelves for support, Jim dropped to his knees and put his cheek against the floor. Closing his eyes to aid his concentration, he reached under the bottom shelf for the coffee. The spinning world made him nauseous but he didn't want to give up. A little farther and he would have it. He gripped what he thought was the coffee pouch between his index and middle finger but realized it was something else. He pulled it out anyway, hoping the coffee would come along with it.

The mystery object was a stiff and heavy leather belt with a holster containing a small caliber pistol. At the center of the belt's circle was a nearly full box of .22 cartridges.

4. You were acting?

Barker pulled on his pants, still damp at the waist from his swim the night before, and threw on his shirt but didn't bother buttoning it. He walked out into bright sunshine and cool morning breeze and saw Cecilia sitting on one of the cockpit benches. She gazed at the empty horizon.

"Who were you talking to?" Barker said, sitting next to her on the bench.

"My mother," Cecilia said. "She saw us in the boat last night."

Barker grimaced. "Ouch."

“She liked it,” Cecilia said. “She never liked Jim and she likes him even less now.” She tucked her foot under the opposite leg. “She always wanted me to be an actress.”

“You were acting?” Barker said. “Damn.”

“This isn’t funny,” Cecilia said.

Barker slid his foot over top Cecilia’s and massaged her toes with his own. “I didn’t know they were going to follow us with the floater. I don’t like it either. They’ve never done anything like that to me before.”

“Now I know why Jim was so crazy,” Cecilia said. “I need to talk to him.”

“I don’t know how much it matters,” Barker said, “but you made a lot of money last night.”

“I thought I could do something to help. I thought the show would be sort of a memorial to the kids who died. I thought we could show the people of the town pulling together.” She shook her head. “Didn’t turn out that way, did it?”

Barker looked out over the sweep of Big Rock Bay. Trees hid most of the cottages lining the shore, but there were docks and small storage buildings near the water, except along Big Rock Point, the bay’s northern boundary. The pine-covered sliver of land jutted straight out from the shore then curved to the south like a drawn bow’s limb.

The entire peninsula was a state recreation area popular with picnickers and swimmers during the day and teenagers looking for seclusion at night, when the park was officially closed. For the adventurous there was Block Island, a mile from the point. On calm days a small boat, even a canoe, had little trouble making the trip, but when the weather changed it was a treacherous crossing because of the chop and submerged rocks. Kids in the area grew up with

warnings about trying to make it to Block Island, named for a graffiti-covered boulder on its eastern shore that was a favorite place for illegal beach fires.

Cecilia stood up and pushed a button next to the wheel to start the inboard engine, then pushed the throttle forward and spun the wheel to take the boat back toward shore.

The boat didn't move.

She closed her eyes, shook her head and turned off the engine.

"I forgot about the anchors," she said, dropping onto the bench next to Barker. "I'm not thinking straight."

5. Click

Jim struggled to his feet, tossed the belt and holster onto the galley counter and held onto one of the shelves until the boat stopped spinning.

When his eyes focused he saw that the holster was embossed with an image of a leaping charracuda, a fish species developed illegally fifteen years before by a Michigan State University microbiology post-doc who wanted to find out what would happen if he crossed a native brook trout, actually a char, and a barracuda. The student, believing his laboratory progeny to be sterile, secretly released a few hundred tiny fry into Higgins Lake where his grandparents owned a cottage. The torpedo-shaped, silvery fish with purple dots and bulgy eyes became a local curiosity, then a national concern, as they grew huge and voracious. The females laid thousands of fertile eggs that spread quickly throughout the Great Lakes basin by clinging to the feet of waterfowl.

The fish spurred the revival of the Great Lakes sport fishing industry, long dormant because of the lake trout's decline and the waves of diseases that decimated salmon populations.

The unwary charracuda was easily hooked, fought like the devil and lived in accessible coastal waters. Its meaty flavor pleased even those who claimed to not like fish.

The only drawback to the fish, which often exceeded eighty pounds, was the danger faced by anglers bringing them into their boats. Widely seen vid of Great Lakes charracudas breaking and lacerating legs, or tossing people overboard with their powerful, thrashing tails, caused boat owners and charter captains to carry .22 pistols. Although it was illegal to discharge guns on boats, the Coast Guard and local cops understood the need and looked the other way.

Jim pulled the pistol from its holster and examined its short stainless steel barrel and mother-of-pearl grip. He pointed the barrel at his right temple and pulled the trigger but the gun only clicked.

6. A Mars Girl Christmas

Steam curled from two mugs of coffee resting on the cherry veneer of a 1960 Philco TV sitting between Brandon and Mary Belle's chairs as they watched Mirellen's first appearance of the day on the wall screen in Mary Belle's office. The screen was above a 1967 RCA Victor French Provincial console Mary Belle rescued from her great aunt's basement in Schenectady. On both sides of the wall screen she had mounted matching, round-shouldered Sony portables from the early 1970s with mirrors in place of their screens.

Mirellen wore her sleep-wrinkled "Kiss Me I'm Dead" T-shirt, but "Not" was written before "Dead" and "Yet" after it. On the shelf behind her was a glowing glass pitcher of OldeTyme Lemonade, beaded with sweat and shaped like the body of a voluptuous woman, its hips shimmying in time with the funky OldeTyme jingle playing in the background. The camera slowly pulled back, revealing the rugged hills west of the ship, blushed by the pink sunrise.

Brandon picked up his coffee. "Who's doing the T-shirt messages?"

"Zimmel," Mary Belle said. "I heard Disney tried to steal him from us."

"I can see why," Brandon said. "That shirt's all wrinkled and the words still look right. He's got talent."

"We've got another slogan ready when she gets to the station," Mary Belle said.

"*If* she gets to the station," Brandon said. "What is it?"

"I'm Here and You're Not."

Brandon repeated the words to himself and nodded. "I like it. If she doesn't make it, we've still got the coffins."

"Of course."

The TractorPix zoomed in on a twin peaks banner ad for Tusk Toothpaste, this time featuring an affable walrus.

"Rindell met with NASA today about the rescue," Brandon said. "I hear it didn't go well. Rindell wants them to use a conventional launch but they want to use a SpaceSail. A conventional ship would bring Mars Girl back just before Black Friday. A Mars Girl Christmas would be a beautiful thing."

"Maybe the SpaceSail is the way to go," Mary Belle said. "If we drag this out too long people will get bored. Plus, a quick trip means Man Boy will have a better chance of rescuing a live girl instead of a dead one."

"It's only faster if it works," Brandon said. "A couple short test runs don't prove it's ready for prime time."

"Rindell usually wins these fights anyway," Mary Belle said, after a sip from her coffee.

“I’mmm dreeaming of a Maars Girl Christmassss ...” Brandon sang, and he and Mary Belle toasted the notion with their coffee mugs.

7. Armed and dangerous

Jim didn’t have much experience with guns and had never fired a pistol. The last time he fired a gun of any kind was more than twenty years before when he spent a week at his Uncle Cody’s dairy farm in central Michigan. He quickly learned that he hated dairy farming but he fell in love with his uncle’s .22 rifle and spent hours out by the swamp knocking tin cans off stumps. When Uncle Cody saw that from thirty yards Jim was making groups no larger than a half dollar, he sat Jim in the cab of one of his tractors each night so he could shoot raccoons as they came around after moonrise looking for chickens to kill and garbage to scavenge.

Jim stood in the boat’s cabin looking down the pistol’s short barrel. He grabbed a fistful of cartridges and started up the companionway, trying to figure out the gun’s clip mechanism as he climbed the steps. He forgot about the jagged metal hanging down in the doorway and hit his head hard. He fell backward into the cabin, slammed his back against the edge of the galley counter and collapsed to the floor. Stunned and motionless, he felt blood trickle onto his cheek from the gash on top of his head.

8. Incoming

With the anchors weighed, Cecilia pushed the throttle forward and spun the wheel to steer the boat back toward the marina, but the boat’s slow speed gave the rudder little purchase.

“Anything I can do?” Barker said, lounging on one of the benches.

Before Cecilia could answer a loud ‘ping’ came from the broken mast, followed by several sharp ‘pops’ from shore.

Cecilia left the wheel and slipped down the companionway into the cabin. Barker stood and looked toward shore and heard two more ‘pops.’ Cecilia reappeared with a monocular and peered toward the marina.

“It’s Jim,” she said. “He has a gun.”

“Jim?” Barker said, as if he didn’t understand.

Cecilia ducked low and pointed a small dial next to the wheel due east. The boat started a slow swing toward open water.

There were more ‘pops’ from the marina but Barker didn’t move until Cecilia called from below. “Ray, get down!”

9. The pitch

When Sheriff Angstrom heard that Mrs. Calocq, an elderly woman who lived on Okinisee’s Front Street, called to alert the authorities that she had heard gunshots coming from the old fish dock and that she saw the man from last night’s news drinking straight from a bottle, the sheriff jumped into his cruiser and drove to the marina.

Sitting at the top of the marina’s driveway with his assistant to his ear he kept his eyes on the nylon canopy pulled over the cockpit of Ben Lambton’s boat as he waited for DisneyNews Associate News Director Karolina Wholpert to pick up. Out in the bay Cecilia’s sailboat pattered away from the marina, its broken mast nearly perpendicular to the boat.

Just after arriving at the marina, Angstrom heard several ‘pops’ from Jim’s .22 and he knew he had his man. Like a soldier on a mission, he had fought past the front line of

DisneyNews receptionists and slogged his way through the pitch screeners until, twenty minutes later, he finally reached the assistant news director.

“All right, Mr. Astrom, what’ve you got,” Karolina said.

“That’s *Angstrom*. *Sheriff Angstrom*.”

“What’ve you got?”

“I got something hot but you people need to move fast.”

“I’ll ask you one more time. What’ve you got?”

“You watched ‘Love on the Plains’ last night on MASSnews, right?”

“Why?”

“You remember the pissed-off guy? The drunk who was after his wife and the caster.

The guy who fell in the lake, then climbed out and ...”

“I’ve got fourteen calls waiting for me, Mr. Angstrom. You’ve got ten seconds.”

“The drunk guy from last night’s show is taking pot shots at Barker and Cecilia, and they’re in a busted up sailboat so they can’t get away. Get a caster up here and I’ll tell you where the shooter is and give you the exclusive.”

“Last I heard it’s illegal to shoot someone. Is there a reason you’re not doing your job?”

“There’s a very good reason. Barker pissed off just about everybody in the county last night. He made us look like a bunch of thugs and then he puts Ceci’s bare ass onscreen. Everybody up here wants to see him get what he’s got coming.”

“Where’s the shooter?” Karolina said.

“Just have your caster head toward Okinisee on M-23. We’re right on Lake Huron. I’ll meet him at the TacoHut at the south end of town and get him onto the shooter. But you gotta hurry.”

“Our Chicago caster is in Detroit covering the auto show,” Karolina said. “How far are you from Detroit?”

“Two hours tops. Just give me a plate number and I’ll make sure no one notices if he breaks a speed limit or two on the way.”

“What do you want for the exclusive?”

“Just a half million. Drop in the bucket to you guys.”

“Nice talking to you, sheriff.”

“Hold on a minute,” Angstrom said. “That show last night was huge. This one’s gonna be even bigger. Jim’s got a gun and Barker’s a sitting duck.”

“I tell you what, we’ll call if we need help finding him.”

“What the hell?”

“Thanks for the tip,” Karolina said.

10. One in a hundred

There were a dozen .22 casings scattered at Jim’s feet as he sat in a swiveling fishing chair under the cockpit canopy at the stern of Ben Lambton’s boat. He rested the nearly empty bottle on a knee. By now the Somewhen had traveled far enough out into the bay and north along the coast that the snub-nosed .22 wasn’t much of a threat. At that distance Jim knew he’d be lucky to hit the boat once in a hundred shots.

Careful to avoid the jagged metal frame, Jim took the steps down into the cabin and found a towel in a cupboard. He slid the holster off the belt and placed it and the box of cartridges on the towel then wrapped them into a bundle. He stepped into the sun and tried to fix

the Somewhen's position in relation to the shoreline. He walked toward his car with the bundle under his arm and the bottle in his hand.

11. This is reality

"U.S. Coast Guard, St. Ignace Station. Seaman Lyte speaking. How can I help?"

"Good afternoon. I'm calling from a sailboat south of Big Rock Point, about a click north of the Okinisee marina." Barker looked at Cecilia for confirmation and she nodded.

"We're taking some small arms fire from a psychopath on shore. Our mast is in the drink and all we've got is a little runt of an inboard that's running out of juice. We need you guys to soften up the shooter with some ship-launched rockets and then bring in a couple choppers to strafe his position so we can get to shore."

"Very funny, Bob."

"This isn't Bob. This is Ray Barker."

"This isn't Bob?"

"Not Bob."

"So you're serious?"

"Forget the rockets and the strafing. But we really are being shot at."

"But your engine's operational."

"It's just a little one."

"And the guy's on shore?"

"Last time we saw him."

"Where on shore?"

"Okinisee Marina. His name is James Carlyle."

“If he’s on shore I can’t help you. Has to be in a boat or on the water somehow. You’ll need to contact the county sheriff. Did you say Okinisee? That’s Damien Angstrom. You want his connects?”

“So if he was in a boat shooting at us you’d help us?”

“Who’s us?”

“Me and my frail mother. She’s on oxygen and her tank is almost empty. I’d say she’s got an hour to live unless we’re rescued.”

“Call the sheriff. He’ll help you out.”

“I tried. He’s unsympathetic.”

“Angstrom? Try the township police.”

“They couldn’t care less.”

“The cops don’t care that you’re being shot at?”

“It’s criminal, isn’t it?”

“What did you say your name is?”

“Barker.”

“Barker? Ray Barker? You’re that caster from the show last night.”

Barker closed his eyes. “Maybe.”

“Yeah, the OD got a memo from Angstrom’s post. He said we shouldn’t believe a word you say. Says you’re just trying to stir up more trouble. I got it right here. He calls you ... ‘a piece of shit troublemaker.’ No offense.”

“Oh, c’mon. That was news. This is reality. We’re being shot at.”

“I wouldn’t mind helping you out but I got orders here. The OD says we aren’t supposed to respond to any calls from you. You’re not too popular with the law up here.”

“How about when you get off duty you come down here with some buddies and, you know, *detain* Mr. Carlyle for a little while so we can get to shore. There’d be some good money in it for you.”

“Thanks, but I don’t like the rough stuff.”

“You’re a soldier for Christ’s sake.”

“Soldier?” Lyte scoffed. “My principal wouldn’t let me graduate unless I joined the service so I joined the Coast Guard. Now I got health insurance for my little baby and I’m not getting shot at like those guys overseas.”

Barker shook his head. “You got any suggestions?”

“Maybe he’ll run out of bullets. Otherwise, I’d say you’re screwed.”

12. It's just meat

Jim was hungry but the Okinisee Inn wouldn’t open until noon and he wasn’t going to the OK Skillet, not after the last time he went there following a night of drinking at the Inn. He couldn’t even remember being there but he must have been pretty bad because Cecilia made it clear she would never again step foot inside that restaurant with him.

There was a closed sign at Howie’s Homemade Pizza Shoppe, a tidy little restaurant across the street from the marina, but Jim saw a car parked behind the shop so he pulled in and banged on the glass doors.

Will Hommel, a first-year student at Northeast Community College in Alpena, had the music turned up as he prepped for the day so he didn’t hear the pounding. When he walked back to the fridge to get more pepperoni and salami he saw Jim at the door. Will set his earphones on the counter and unlocked the door.

“Can I help you?”

“I need a sandwich,” Jim said.

Jim was unshaven, his hair was matted with blood and his wrinkled dress shirt was mostly untucked from his pants. Will could smell whiskey on Jim’s breath and decided that accommodation might be best.

“We don’t officially open for another hour, but I can probably help you out.”

“A sandwich,” Jim said, looking over Will’s shoulder into the restaurant. “Lotsa meat.”

Will considered asking Jim if he knew his head was bleeding but decided against it. “The Trapper Special has all kinds of meat.”

“Gimme,” Jim said.

“Boss says I can’t let anyone in until opening time, so I’ll bring it out in a minute.”

“Where’s the boss?”

“He’ll be here any minute,” Will lied. Howie was in St. Louis with his wife and wouldn’t be back until Saturday. Will had just been made manager and didn’t want any problems from a bleeding drunk.

Will turned the deadbolt and threw together a Trappers Special while Jim watched through the door. Will wrapped the sandwich, taped it closed and carried it to the door.

“That’s twenty-seven ninety-five,” Will said, handing Jim the sandwich.

Jim unwrapped it and used his fingers to flip through the sliced meat. “You don’t have any cheese in this place?”

“That’s the Trapper Special,” Will said. “It’s just meat.”

“That’s a law or something?” Jim handed it back to Will through the crack in the door.

“Put some cheese on it.”

“Did you know your head’s bleeding?” Will heard himself say.

“Just put some cheese on it, kid.”

“I’ll have to charge you extra.”

“Put some goddamn cheese on it.”

Will wanted to slam the door, but he remembered that he needed to ask Howie for some extra time off when he called to check in later. Having to explain why someone tossed a rock through the window would seriously hurt his chances. So he walked to the prep counter and threw a couple slices of Swiss on the sandwich. Turning his back to the door, Will pulled two plump habanero peppers out of a jar with a skull and crossbones drawn on its lid. He hid the peppers between the turkey and ham slices.

When Will handed the sandwich to Jim through the door, Jim took it and walked toward his car.

“That’s twenty-seven-ninety-five plus four bucks for the cheese,” Will shouted, but Jim continued to his car and drove off. If Will hadn’t stuck the peppers in the sandwich he would have called the cops.

13. Don’t lose him

“You still got him?” Brenda Cazin said to Art Roer as she sped north on I-75 in her sleek Motorola Nitro two-seater.

“I’d have to *try* to lose him,” Art said in Cazin’s head from his production booth at DisneyNews Towers in Anaheim. He had a bank of nine screens in front of him and Jim’s sedan

was on the center screen. Art held the floater above and behind Jim's car to keep it out of sight.

"There's nothing up there. One main road. No traffic. I can't lose him."

Wearing a clingy, white silk blouse and a flirty, floral skirt, Cazin was overdressed for an action story, but when she got the call from Karolina there wasn't time to change. She was Disney's Chicago caster but she'd been in Michigan for a few days covering the Detroit Auto Show, a parade of pretty, shiny cars with no chance of producing a hit, so she jumped at the chance to head to Okinisee after Karolina explained the details. The conversation had started with Karolina asking Cazin if she wanted to "kick Barker's ass." Five minutes later she was heading north, blowing past cars and keeping an eye out for cops.

"The floater's working all right?" Cazin said as she passed the Frankenmuth exit and a billboard promoting the world's largest gold crucifix. The billboard showed the crucifix hanging above the gaming tables at the town's newest casino, run by the Saginaw Diocese.

"Everything's fine," Art said. "Relax."

Two months before, Art was running recon missions for Navy gun ships in the Gulf. His blonde hair was still cropped short. During his Navy stint, Art specialized in sneaking recon floaters into weapons plants and munitions dumps. The experience got him a job at DisneyNews a week after he was discharged.

"What's Jim doing now?" Cazin said.

"He just got a sandwich and he's heading north along the shore. He stops every now and then to look for the sailboat through the trees."

"Just don't lose him," Cazin said, throwing the wheel to the left and zipping across three lanes to pass a clot of trucks.

"I could do this in my sleep. Maybe I'll take a nap."

“Don’t even joke like that,” Cazin said. “I’ve got a good feeling about this one. And Lord knows I need a hit.”

“Yeah, that’s what I’ve heard,” Art said.

14. Through the trees

Jim’s left forearm was draped across the wheel of his car and his head bobbed and weaved as he tried to see through trees and past cottages along the shore. He held the Trapper Special in his right hand and the whiskey bottle between his legs. He guessed that Barker and Cecilia couldn’t have traveled more than a click north of the marina so he expected to see the boat any minute.

Jim occasionally had to pull his tires off the gravel and back onto the road. Once he looked ahead and saw that he was halfway into the other lane. With the summer season still a few weeks away, he didn’t worry much about traffic.

Jim thought he caught a glimpse of the boat as he passed a low-slung Frank Lloyd Wright knock-off so he pulled onto the shoulder and got out of the car to get a better look through a stand of mature pines. He didn’t notice the elderly woman wearing faded jeans and a sweater who interrupted her work preparing a flowerbed to watch Jim study the lake with the bottle in his hand.

Seeing nothing, Jim jumped back in his car and continued down the road. As he passed a small clearing that had been bulldozed out of the woods to make room for a new cottage, Jim heard an oncoming car’s horn blaring and looked ahead just in time to jerk his car back into his own lane. In his side view mirror he saw a trail of dust follow the other car as it swerved from the gravel shoulder back onto the road.

15. Buddha, God and Jesus

Cecilia came up the companionway steps wearing a white windbreaker. Barker reclined against a pillow on one of the cockpit benches in the pants and shirt Alexis Delvecchio had given him. His face was tilted back to gather in the warm spring sun. Cecilia had two apples and handed one to Barker.

“Breakfast,” she said.

“You’d think someone would notice Jim shooting at us,” Barker said, using his hands to polish the apple like a pitcher rubbing a new baseball.

“When the charracudas are hitting you hear a lot of shots. He’s firing out toward the lake so even if people hear the shots, they’ll probably assume it’s coming from a fishing boat.”

Cecilia sat down on the bench opposite Barker.

“So what do we do?” Barker said. He peeked over the gunwale at the vast emptiness that stretched seventy miles east to Canada. The breeze felt heavy against his face and smelled vaguely of dead fish. “Maybe we should head out away from shore.”

“We can’t go far,” Cecilia said. “The mast is making her hard to handle so we can’t take big waves. If we get out too far and the cell runs out we’ll have an unstable boat with no power and that would be trouble if we get any weather. We need to stay in the bay.”

Barker sat up and shaded his eyes as he scanned the shoreline. “It’s been a while since he fired. Maybe he’s done.”

“I said a prayer for him,” Cecilia said.

Barker leaned back into the pillow. “I didn’t take you for the religious type.”

“I’m the spiritual type,” Cecilia said. “I’m not sure I’m the religious type. Once a month I go to the First Amalgamated of Northern Michigan. It’s in a remodeled old barn between here and Grayling.”

“You’re a fusioner?”

“I’m not sure. So far, I like it. Most of the people who go there are gay so the singing is really good.”

“The peace and calm of Buddha and the healing power of Jesus,” Barker said in an announcer’s voice.

“That’s just marketing,” Cecilia said. “There’s more to it.”

“I think of fusioners as people who can’t make up their minds. Like people who hyphenate their kids’ names.”

“I think of it as a long conversation between God, Jesus and Buddha. It’s more philosophy than religion. But you still get to pray. I like the singing and the praying.”

“Who do you pray to?”

“Depends on what I want. If I want to smite someone, I talk to the Old Testament God.” She smiled and pointed a finger at Barker and made thunder noises. “If I want peace and harmony, I think about Buddha’s teachings. I talk to Jesus for forgiveness.”

“Who were you talking to when you prayed for Jim?”

Cecilia looked past Barker to where the water darkened and the waves doubled in size.

“I think Jim needs all three right now.”

16. Everybody wins

Briter stepped inside the Oval Office door and sat down facing the president. She was seated at her desk, rocking slowly in her chair.

“I’ve got this figured out,” Briter said. “Black Goat says he can’t touch Mars Girl during the trek. Whether he’s telling the truth or not doesn’t matter. We can still let her go to the station.”

The president stopped rocking. “If she makes it to the station, as soon as the power’s turned on they can get to her head and find the sabotage code. You’ve been telling me that all along.”

“Not necessarily. When Mars Girl arrives at the station, the techs will be a lot more concerned with keeping her alive than downloading her head. Even the Goat agrees with that. So as soon as the systems are operating, MASSnews starts the interview. As it’s about to wrap, the Goat kills the station’s O₂. This way we’ll get the interview payoff, which will be huge, and before the techs even think about downloading her head, they’ll be scrambling to fix the O₂. They won’t be able to fix it and Mars Girl sets a new ratings record as she gasps her last breath on every screen on the planet. This way, everybody wins.”

“What happens if they get to her head before she dies?”

“We turn on Black Goat. We’ll probably have to do it sometime anyway. We’ll just do it a little sooner.”

17. Skull and crossbones

Jim guzzled the last few swallows from the whiskey bottle and left-handed it over his car into the ditch. He picked up the Trapper Special with cheese from the passenger seat and used his knee to steer the car across the rust-streaked bridge over the Grayling River while he unwrapped the sandwich.

The river provided a narrow break in the tree line and Jim took a big bite of his sandwich as he searched the water. He didn't see anything so he punched the accelerator to speed past a long brick privacy fence that blocked his view of the lake. He took another big bite from his sandwich and the habanero fireworks exploded in his mouth and sinuses.

Jim's eyes flooded and he had trouble breathing. He used both hands to clear his eyes just as his car slammed into a mailbox and slid into the ditch. He pressed the pedal to the floor and threw the wheel to the left, trying to get back onto the road but the incline was too steep and the car simply accelerated through the ditch.

He cleared his eyes again and hit the brakes hard when he caught a glimpse of a driveway embankment ahead. The car thumped the culvert hard enough to send air bags slamming into Jim from three directions.

18. Stuck

The Somewhen's inboard sputtered, clicked, and then stopped. Cecilia reached for a button next to the wheel and Barker heard gentle kerplops fore and aft.

"We're stopping?" Barker said, sitting up on one of the cockpit benches.

"The cell's out of juice," Cecilia said. She sat down across from Barker and tucked her hands between her knees. "No sail and no motor."

“So we’re stuck.” Barker said, surveying the vast lake.

“We don’t know where we’re going so I guess it doesn’t really matter,” Cecilia said.

“Think we could swim it?” Barker said, turning to look at the distant trees. “We could wait until dark when Jim can’t see us.”

“A cramp would kill you.”

“No life jackets?” Barker said.

“They’re in the storage shed at the marina.”

Barker leaned back on the bench. “Any ideas?”

“Not at the moment,” Cecilia said.

19. Indifference

Wearing a brightly colored knee-length dress that resembled a coral reef, Ania Jaspers stepped out of a cab in front of the MASSworld Building. She had bought the dress in Melbourne eleven years before on the last trip she and her husband had taken together. Her blonde hair was pulled into a knot at the back.

For two weeks Ania had been looking forward to meeting the Hendersons for lunch. They had called Ania to ask if she and John would like to come to their house in Connecticut for dinner to see pictures of their second honeymoon to Moonbeams, the newest lunar resort. John said he really didn’t have time but Ania persisted so he counter-offered with lunch, saying that his evenings were unpredictable and sneaking away for a half hour during the middle of the day was much more doable. The Hendersons agreed to meet in the city but Ania was embarrassed that her husband’s lunch suggestion carried the weight of let’s-just-get-it-over-with indifference.

It wasn't hearing about the Henderson's trip or seeing their pictures that interested Ania. She wanted to understand their desire to go on a second honeymoon after thirty years of marriage. Ania thought that maybe spending time with a couple their own age who were still in love might help fan the embers she hoped still smoldered inside John's heart. She hadn't felt any heat since they moved to New York from Missoula fifteen years before, but she didn't want to give up on intimacy yet. She was too young for that.

Standing on the sidewalk looking up at the spiraling metal and steel of the MASS Building, its obvious pretensions annoyed her.

Ania always felt a sense of relief when she went back to Montana for visits that had become longer, more frequent and, for the past five years, taken alone. New York became something she endured between trips back home to visit their daughter, Regan, a mining company executive in Bozeman, and Bea, her only grandchild. On each trip she also spent time at her sister's ranch near Missoula and visited old friends scattered throughout Montana and Wyoming. Although Ania told herself that she would never accept his advances, the trips home had gained the added interest of evening walks around her sister's place with an old boyfriend from high school, now a widower. She cried herself to sleep one night after he told her about the crushing loneliness of coming home to an empty house.

Ania's feelings of being an outsider in New York extended to her husband's office. Her rare visits were never enjoyable. She went because she wouldn't know anything about her husband's working life if she didn't make an effort to stop by once in a while. At home Jaspers rarely mentioned anything related to work, and Ania's occasional questions were usually met with looks that implied she wouldn't understand even if he felt like talking.

20. Do you for

The wrinkled skin of the deflated air bags lay around Jim and his forehead rested against the steering wheel. The peppers' searing intensity had faded, but left him with a gurgling stomach, dripping nose and watery eyes. He desperately wanted to be somewhere else so his mind drifted off to a hot tub in some snow-covered mountain resort with Cecilia. No, not Cecilia. That secretary in securities. Madeline. Madeline leaned toward him and opened her mouth ... and he heard someone rapping on his car window.

Jim saw a person from thighs to chest wearing a long-sleeved shirt with the message, "I'm Alive. She's Dead. No Rescue!" across the front. The person took a step back and Jim noticed the braided hemp pants, hemmed just below the knees, and army boots painted gold.

All Jim's instincts told him to escape. He threw his car in reverse and pushed the accelerator to the floor but the wheels just spun.

Jim let his forehead fall back to the steering wheel and closed his eyes. He wanted everything and everyone to go away but there was another rap on his window. Without taking his forehead off the steering wheel, he reached over to lower the window a few inches.

"Hey man, you might as well save your cell cuz you ain't goin' nowhere." The voice sounded young, which was a relief to Jim.

Barker lifted his forehead off the steering wheel and saw a kid of no more than eighteen or nineteen. His straight white hair was parted in the middle and a few bright red zits dotted his fleshy, pale face divided by a sharply pointed nose. His clothes were too small for his puffy body.

“You’re wedged in here real good,” the kid said, pointing at the front of the car where the left corner of the bumper was dug into the moist, sandy soil. He spoke loudly so Jim could hear him through the gap in the window.

“I got a strap,” the kid said, bending over so his head was at the same level as the window gap. “I can yank you outta here with three or four good runs. My girlfriend’s a pro at steering while I’m yanking.” He nodded back toward his pickup, parked on the shoulder behind Jim’s car. Jim looked in his rearview and saw a round-faced girl with hair identical to the kid’s, but longer. She had her assistant to her ear and spoke occasionally while she stared at Jim.

The kid walked around to the front of the car to see what he had to work with. “So long as the frame ain’t bent you could be going down the road feeling good in ten minutes.” The kid shouted to make sure Jim could hear him.

Jim closed his eyes and let his forehead fall to the steering wheel again.

“Give me two-fifty and I’ll get you outta here,” the kid shouted from the other side of the Jim’s car. “That’s half what they’ll do you for at the tow shop back in Oki.” The kid walked back to the open window. “And we’ll keep the asshole cops out of it.”

21. Just this

Ania was fifteen minutes early so she decided to wander into a nearby store rather than sit alone in the reception area waiting for her husband. Next to the MASSworld entrance was Everything New York, a small shop with souvenirs, batteries, pain relievers, cold drinks and other useless and essential items. She thought she might find something to take her granddaughter on her next trip west.

As she crossed the grain of pedestrian traffic Ania unsnapped her purse, a bag the size of a thin hardcover book. When she walked through the open door of Everything New York, she had to turn sideways to move past a couple speaking Spanish, their arms loaded with packages as they stood at the beverage cooler deciding which drinks to buy. The middle-aged Asian woman at the scanner eyed Ania as items beeped past her on a small conveyor. When Ania smiled at her the woman turned her attention back to the scanner. After all the items had slid into the plastic bag at the end of the counter, a mother told her daughter in Portuguese to take the bag off its frame. The little girl struggled with the full bag but managed to carry it to the door where her mom took it from her and held her hand as they walked into Times Square's midday bustle.

A smiling elderly couple placed a two-foot long replica of the old Staten Island ferry on the conveyor and tried to tell the indifferent clerk that they rode the ferry on their first date.

Ania stood spinning the postcard rack looking for cards featuring Central Park, her granddaughter's favorite place in New York. By the time the rack had made a complete revolution, she held four cards in her hand. She turned so that the cards were between her body and the rack then slipped them into her purse, snapped it shut and walked toward the back of the store where she found a bin of bulky pens marked twenty-five percent off. Ania picked up one of the pens, pressed the clip and a floor-to-ceiling holo of the Statue of Liberty appeared. Ania was pleased that the statue's flame flickered, but disappointed that it was a one-color holo. She decided to buy it anyway and took it to the front of the store.

"Just this?" the clerk said, sounding like she was scolding Ania.

"That's all," Ania said.

22. Commerce

Jim pushed the airbags out of his way and reached down by his feet to grab the pistol and box of cartridges, still wrapped in the towel. The kid moved back from the car so Jim could open the door. When Jim stepped out the pistol fell from the bundle.

“Shit,” the kid said staring at the gun. “You a cop?”

“I’m the opposite of a cop,” Jim said, after he had retrieved the gun and tucked it back into the towel. “I’m a lawyer.”

“Listen, I don’t want trouble. I’ve been out for three months. I’m just doing legal business out here on the open road.”

“You got a towing license?”

The kid looked up the road then back at Jim. “Not on me.”

23. It’s all in her head

Jaspers was attempting to write his weekly update for the MASScorp board but he found himself distracted by the conversation happening on his wall screen. Peter was talking with Zilda Mears, NASA’s deputy secretary. Tall, pale and angular, with frizzy red hair and wearing a bright blue cable knit sweater, Mears was pipped into the lower right while an animated tour of the Gemini Cricket Family Restaurants Mars Station filled the rest of the screen.

“I know there are serious concerns about Mars Girl’s trek to the station,” Mears said, “but there is one huge advantage if she makes it. As far as we can tell, once the station’s power is up and running, its comm links will work.”

“Well, that’s great news for Mars Girl,” Peter said.

“Getting the comm links working will let us give her instructions on station operations,” Mears said. “But, just as important, she’ll have someone to talk to.”

“We’re hearing now that a space sail rescue mission could arrive in as little as thirty days,” Peter said. “Doesn’t that argue against a trek to the station? I mean, if a rescue ship can get there in a month, why not stay put?”

“If we were certain of the food and water situation on the ship, I might agree with you,” Mears said. “And there’s another very good reason for her to go to the station. Once she’s there, the comm links will give us access to Mars Girl’s head and that will allow us to figure out why the lander crashed. We want to identify the problems as quickly as possible so we can get on with the business of ensuring the survival of the human race. Also, there are a lot of rumors swirling around here and we’re all very anxious to stop the finger pointing. We won’t be able to do that until we get to her head and figure out what really happened.”

“What do we know so far?” Peter asked.

“Nothing conclusive, but the lander’s behavior was very peculiar,” Mears said. “It acted like it was behaving as it was supposed to, even though it was wrong. There were no warnings of trouble and that has us baffled.”

Jaspers’ secretary walked in with his lunch, ordered in from Donatelli’s Deli, on the first floor of the MASS Building. Helena placed the plastic tray on his desk, unwrapped the club sandwich and opened the soup bowl lid.

“Once we get to her head, it shouldn’t be too much trouble pinpointing the cause,” Mears said from the screen. “The sheer volume of code is mind-boggling, but we’re very good at finding anomalies and we know exactly when things started going wrong. Her head holds the key.”

“Who are they talking about?” Helena asked, still standing next to Jaspers.

“Dead Girl,” Jaspers mumbled.

24. The drunk guy

The kid walked around the rear of Jim’s car, stopped to look for damage, then continued around to the far side. When he got back to the driver’s side window he examined the display panel and whistled through his teeth. “This is one nice ride, man. Windscreen projection too.” The kid whistled again.

“You said you’re gonna keep the cops out of this,” Jim said, standing on the edge of the road with the towel bundle under his arm. “Let’s get moving.”

“The only cop working this road just went south in a big hurry cuz of some accident on the county line,” the kid said. “Picked up the call in my truck. He won’t be back for a while.” The kid studied Jim’s face. “I seen you before. You from around here?”

“You gonna pull my car out or not?”

“Hey, you’re that guy from the news. The guy who was after those two casters down in Oki.”

The kid turned to his girlfriend, still in the pickup talking on her assistant. “Hey, Ashley! It’s the guy from the news last night! The drunk guy!”

Jim considered pulling out the gun.

“Damn that would really piss me off,” the kid said to Jim. “Bad enough the asshole takes your girl but then he goes onscreen with it for everybody to see.” The kid shook his head, fluttering his hair like curtains. “But I’d rather watch a pathetic motherfucker like you than that whiny Mars Girl shit. At least you ain’t costin’ the taxpayer a zillion dollars.”

Jim pulled out the gun and shot the pavement next to the kid's feet.

"Hey! What the hell."

"Just pull the goddamn car out of the ditch," Jim said.

"What the hell's wrong with you?" the kid said, stepping back to the middle of the road.

"I'm trying to help you out. Maybe I'll just leave your car where it is."

Jim slid the gun back into its holster, pulled off his Rolex wrist screen and tossed it to the kid. "Cost me twelve grand. Just pull the car out. And hurry up."

25. One more won't matter

Ania Jaspers stepped off the elevator and into the empty hallway on sixty-three. She proceeded through a set of glass doors to the receptionist's desk where she waited for a young woman she didn't recognize to look up. The receptionist's silver hair was shaped like a giant whisk and Ania resisted the urge to reach across the desk to find out if it was as metallic as it looked.

"Hello, how can I help you?" the woman said when she finally acknowledged Ania.

"I'm Ania Jaspers." She held out her hand to the young woman.

The receptionist hesitated, then extended a limp hand while her eyes searched the screen in front of her. "I'm sorry, did you have an appointment with someone?" She retracted her hand quickly after an unenthused shake. "I'm not finding you." The whisk wires trembled as she shook her head.

"I'm here to see John," Ania said.

"John? I'm sorry. John who?"

"Jaspers. The boss. I'm Ania *Jaspers*."

“Oh, I’m sorry,” the woman said, giggling at her confusion. “I didn’t realize.” Her eyes went back to her screen, searching for some indication that Ania was expected. “So you’re his mother?”

For the first time ever, Ania wished she had taken her daughter’s advice and had her face lifted like everyone else. “I’m his wife.”

The receptionist was horrified. “Oh, I’m *very sorry*.”

“It’s all right,” Ania said. “I know the way.” She left the receptionist so they could both face their embarrassment alone and walked through another set of glass doors, then turned left into the empty reception area outside her husband’s office. She stood at the desk waiting for a moment, then started toward the door past the desk. After a step she heard a voice behind her.

“Well, hello Mrs. Jaspers. Maridonna just told me you were here. It’s nice to see you.”

“Hi, Helena, nice to see you too.”

“Did JJ know you were coming?” Helena looked worried and sat at her desk to check Jaspers’ meeting schedule. Helena, always dressed in tight business suits that tugged against her belly, was ten years younger than Ania, and never betrayed her character as a serious and dedicated executive assistant.

“Yes, we’re having lunch with the Hendersons,” Ania said.

“Lunch?” Helena tapped her desk screen with her index finger and shook her head as she searched the screen. “Are you sure it was today? I just took him his lunch.”

“I reminded him this morning,” Ania said. “I’ll just go in.”

Ania started toward the heavy, wood door.

“He just took an important call and asked to not be disturbed,” Helena said. “You can have a seat out here if you’d like.”

“No, thanks,” Ania said, without turning around. She opened the door and saw Jaspers at the far end of the room facing away from her, looking out the window toward lower Manhattan and talking to someone on his assistant. She let the door close silently and took a few steps across the carpet to a leather chair by the door. After she sat down she looked around for something to read but there was nothing.

On the wall screen Peter stood next to a girl Ania recognized as a minor character on a MASSfun sitcom. The girl wore a space suit like the one Mars Girl would wear later that day on her trek to the station. A NASA tech stood on the other side of the girl and explained the suit’s features as she held her arms out and spun around.

Still looking out his office window and talking on his assistant, Jaspers voice was rising and his gestures became more animated. Ania could tell from the way his shoulders pinched his neck that he was upset. No matter what the phone call was about, she assumed he would use it as an excuse to skip their lunch date. She considered avoiding the inevitable argument by sneaking out before he knew she was there, but decided to stay. It was simply a matter of making a little time for lunch with friends. Certainly she could expect that much from him.

“You already killed sixteen, one more won’t matter,” Jaspers shouted into his assistant.

Ania thought, “Killed sixteen? One more?”

“Briter, we can’t let her get to the station!” Ania had never heard her husband’s voice so angry. “Do you understand what you’re saying? The links are working at the station. If killing the girl solves the problem, what the hell are you waiting for? Black Goat needs to get it over with. *Now!*”

Ania felt like she had been kicked in the stomach.

“Goddamn it, Briter,” Jaspers said. “We’ve made enough money.” He put his hand to his forehead. “Fuck public opinion. I’m not going to prison for this. Mars Girl has to die. Now.”

Ania wanted to run from the room but she couldn’t move. Her heart was beating so hard it hurt.

“Briter, just tell the president to do it.” Jaspers said. “If Flanagan thinks this is just ...”

Ania stood up and her purse fell from her lap.

Jaspers heard a noise behind him and wheeled around to see his wife staring at him. “Oh, shit,” he muttered. “Over-Now.”

Ania turned and walked to the door. She reached for the knob but Jaspers raced across the room and held his hand against the door.

“Let me go,” Ania said. She pressed her forehead against the door and everything inside her ached.

“Ania, it’s just business,” Jaspers said into her ear and leaned into her, pressing her against the door. She could feel his hot breath against her face and the doorknob pressed against her hip.

“JJ, your one o’clock is here.” Helena’s voice came from Jaspers’ desk. “Should I send him in?”

26. *My kingdom for a boat*

Jim tucked the towel under his arm and started walking up the paved driveway and over the culvert.

Through the trees he could see a two-story cottage. He didn't see any cars in the driveway but the garage door was closed so he couldn't be certain that no one was home.

"I don't know what you're up to, but all these places have sensors," the kid said from the bed of his pickup where he and his girlfriend stood untangling his tow strap. "You touch anything and every cop in the county'll know about it."

Jim kept walking and didn't turn around. Just past the ditch to the left of the driveway there was a post with a sign announcing "Shady Half Acres" in purple letters. The cartridges in his pockets sounded like marbles as they jostled each other and they felt cold and hard against his leg.

Jim could hear small waves breaking on the beach as he walked through a stand of mature trees toward the tidy cottage, painted melon-yellow with bold green trim. Patchy grass grew in the sandy, shaded soil and there were high hedges on each side of the yard. At the intersection of the driveway and the front walkway, there was a wooden sign attached to a lamppost surrounded at its base by unnaturally white stones. The text, painted in the same green as the cottage's trim, formed a circle with the silhouette of the cottage at its center. On top was "Welcome!" and below was "Shady Half Acres."

Jim walked across the lawn past the cottage and saw Cecilia's boat in the distance to the south.

Near the beach he noticed a rowboat resting upside down. It was chained to a birch tree with its oar handles sticking out from underneath. Even with just a rowboat Jim was sure he could catch the crippled sailboat. Barker would see him coming and he'd have plenty of time to consider his fate.

Jim picked up the rusty chain and combination lock. He tried to pull open the lock but it wouldn't budge. He could cut down the tree and slip the chain off. He could break the thwart that the chain circled or he could shoot the lock.

Jim dropped the lock onto the ground, pulled the gun from the towel, took aim and fired. The lock popped open but the bullet ricocheted, putting a neat, round hole in the hull of the boat, just below the seam connecting the side and bottom. Jim bent over and ran his index finger around the smooth circumference of the hole and felt an overwhelming need for a drink.

27. A bit of a shock

Ania's panic turned to anger as she walked through the lunchtime crowd in Times Square, searching her husband's words for some explanation other than the one that seemed inescapable.

She was surprised a few minutes later when her feet delivered her to the Diamond Mine on Thirty-Ninth Street. She stood outside the door as people walked past her like a stream flowing past a rock.

"Ania! Hi!" Sara Henderson stood waving near the costume jewel-encrusted door of the restaurant.

Ania walked through the crowd toward Sara without excusing herself as she forced people to step around her. Sara's husband, Jack, stood next to his smiling wife and raised a hand as a beacon to help Ania navigate. The Hendersons, once fashionable and stylish, seemed to have stopped updating their wardrobes, giving them a quaint, old-fashioned and complementary style that left no doubt that they were a couple.

“You look lost, Ania,” Sara teased. “Where’s JJ? We were worried this Mars Girl thing would keep him from coming.”

“Yes,” Ania said. “It’s Mars Girl.”

“Ah, that’s a shame,” Jack said. He put an arm around Ania and gave her a squeeze. “I’m sure he’s got his hands full. People seem to think she’s going to make it, but ... ” He shook his head. “What a tragedy. Great for ratings, though.”

“Jack!” Sara said.

“What?” Jack said. “You can’t deny that MASS is getting their money’s worth on this one,” he said. “That’s all I’m saying.”

Sara rolled her eyes and turned to Ania. “Are you all right? You don’t look so good.”

“I’ve just had a bit of a shock,” Ania said. “There’s something I need to do.”

“What is it, Ania?” Sara said.

“Can we help?” Jack said.

“No,” Ania said, unsure of what words would follow. “It’s something between John and I. I just came here to let you know we can’t make it for lunch. I’m sorry.”

Ania didn’t hear Sara and Jack calling her name as she turned and stepped into the pedestrian flow.

28. Kids these days

Jim used his hands for shade as he looked through the cottage’s kitchen window for signs of a liquor cabinet or wine rack, but he saw nothing promising in the antique and kitsch-filled cottage. Soon his car would be out of the ditch and he knew of a liquor store just a few miles up

the road. He was out of cash but maybe they wouldn't be as nosy about his credit as the waitress at the Inn.

Next to the house, a child's fort was set on four wooden posts eight feet above a sandbox. The walls of the fort were made of sharpened aspen saplings to resemble a colonial fort. Jim pulled on a rope that hung down from its floor, releasing a wooden ladder that creaked into place as leaves and twigs fell past his head.

After a look around for witnesses, Jim climbed the ladder and stuck his head through the opening in the wooden floor. Four windows, one cut into each wall, illuminated the fort, which was empty except for a small plastic chair lying on its side. As Jim pulled himself into the fort, he had to stay on his knees because of its low plywood roof. Through the window facing the lake he could see Cecilia's boat, a sliver of white against the bright blue water. His sore back couldn't take stooping, so he put the chair near the window and sat down. The chair was so small his knees were well above his waist.

Jim pulled out the pistol and checked the clip. After leveling the sights of the gun on the Somewhen, he raised the barrel to add some loft. He fired four shots, then rested the gun on his thigh. Jim felt an uncontrollable urge to sleep but he didn't want to give in. He needed to stay awake until his car was out of the ditch and then he would get a bottle and rent a boat. But his eyelids were unbearably heavy and he slumped in the little chair, drifting toward sleep. His eyes popped open a minute later when he heard his car squeal onto M-23 and head north, followed by the kid's pickup.

29. Swept away

Ania found herself walking down the steps into the Thirty-Fourth Street subway station. She allowed herself to be swept along with the crowd and soon she was on a train heading downtown. She looked around the car and saw the excited faces in a huddle of pre-school children gathered around a young woman. Near them a blank-eyed man with an untrimmed mustache and paint splotches on his worn clothes slouched in his seat as he watched Mars Girl on his assistant. By the door a large red-haired woman in coveralls sat next to two bags of groceries. Across from Ania, a smiling African-American woman in a business suit watched her wrist screen as she quietly spoke Chinese into her assistant as if she were flirting. Next to her, a teenaged boy, his arm draped over a young girl's shoulders, had taken off his wrist screen and held it out so they both could watch.

The train screeched into the Twenty-Third Street station and a police officer stepped onto the train when the doors parted. The officer, handsome in his dark blues with his cap tucked under his arm, stood by the door and nodded pleasantly to Ania.

Three stops later she almost ran after him when he stepped off the train but the doors closed and he was gone.

30. Not again

Brenda Cazin was the only DisneyNews staff caster whose monthly numbers were consistently lower than those of a rival in a major market. Barker's numbers had topped hers thirteen of the past fifteen months and Karolina made it clear that there were plenty of talented freelancers looking for staff positions and one of them would take her place if her numbers didn't improve soon.

Cazin's struggles weren't caused by a lack of effort. She followed up on any promising lead, but too often when a story looked like it had potential, Barker got there first.

The previous month had been one of Cazin's best ever and on the evening of April 29 she headed out with a floater to an Evanston, Illinois address where she was expecting to get a story that would give her a great finish to an already strong month.

The abduction of an eight-year-old girl at a Chicago Blackhawks game while she stood in a concessions line with her mother, a wealthy restaurateur, had become big news across the country and, as the Vegas and BetCom odds indicated, the girl was widely thought to be dead. But Cazin got a tip from a friend at Evanston City Hall that the girl was still alive and the police had located the house where she was being held. Cazin followed the assault vehicle to the house that night, assuming the officer in charge would be happy to liberate the girl on screens throughout the nation. Cazin had told Karolina that Disney didn't need to buy the exclusive because her informer assured her she was the only caster tipped off.

When Cazin arrived on the scene, she saw Barker jump out of the van with the assault team and run into the house with a floater following. When she attempted to enter the house, a lieutenant physically restrained Cazin and told her he would arrest her if she didn't turn off her floater. Barker had bought the exclusive.

Barker's show went national, giving him the numbers he needed to swamp Cazin for yet another month.

31. Tell everyone

A line of screens ran the length of the subway car above head level on each side. Some of the screens displayed sports highlights, a few were tuned to the transit authority's information network, and the remainder showed MASSnews or DisneyNews.

On the MASSnews screen Mars Girl stood in her window with headphones in her ears, swaying slowly to the beat of a song only she could hear. She began to sing along with the music, raised her arms and threw her head sideways in time with the music.

As Ania watched, she realized what she needed to do. She could take care of everything with just one call.

Ania stood as the train slowed and waited for the doors to part. She walked with the crowd to the escalator that took her toward daylight. When she emerged on Fourth Street she looked for a good place to make a call and stepped off the curb to head toward Washington Park. A huge yellow streak flashed in front of her and a man's voice yelled at her as the car sped away. She retreated to the curb and waited for a break in the traffic.

A group of identically dressed Japanese schoolgirls swarmed past her. She followed in their wake and walked down Fourth until she reached Washington Square's arch. Solitary pigeons trotted out of her way as she walked past the fountain and found an empty bench under a spreading maple. She took a moment to gather herself, wiped away a tear, pulled her assistant from her purse and dialed one of the preset numbers.

"Good afternoon, MASScorp. This is Maridonna."

"Hello Maridonna, this is Ania Jaspers."

“Oh, hello,” the receptionist said. “Listen, Mrs. Jaspers, I’m *so* sorry about what I said earlier. The lighting in here is just awful and I didn’t even hardly *look*. I just assumed for some reason ...”

“Don’t worry about it,” Ania said.

“I really feel awful. If you’re looking for Mr. Jaspers he’s in a meeting right now. I’d ask Helena how long he’ll be but she’s in there too.”

“Actually, I need to talk to Ray Barker, one of the casters,” Ania said. “It’s very important. John asked me to talk to Mr. Barker for him because everyone’s so busy with Mars Girl. He gave me Mr. Barker’s connects but I must have deleted them somehow. Could you do me a big favor and tell them to me?”

“Can you wait until Helena’s back at her desk?” Maridonna said. “I think it’ll be all right, but I have to make sure. I’m still new and ...”

“Maridonna, I’m Jaspers’ *wife*.” Ania wasn’t used to being firm, so it came out angry.

“Maybe you could tell me the message and I’ll call him for you. I’m really not supposed to give out connects.”

“John asked me to take care of this personally,” Ania said. “It’s very sensitive.”

“I have an idea.” Maridonna said. “I can patch you through to Barker. That way, you can talk to him and I’m not really giving you his connects.”

Ania started to say that would be all right when she was interrupted.

“This is Barker.”

Ania’s heart stopped.

“Ray Barker speaking. Anybody there?”

“Yes, I’m here,” Ania said. “

It was a voice Barker didn't recognize. "Who's this?"

"Well," Ania said, testing her courage. "We met at last year's Christmas party. I'm John Jaspers' wife, Ania. We talked about Montana, where I grew up. You wanted to know what it was like to live in the mountains."

"Yes, Ania, of course," Barker said. "How are you?"

"There's something I need to tell you. And I want you to tell everyone."

31. Turn around

"It's the next driveway," Cazin heard Art say in her head as she drove north on M-23.

"There's a car in the ditch and a pickup parked on the shoulder. Pull in the paved drive just past them."

"I don't see any cars!" Cazin said. "Is it a gravel driveway?" Cazin said.

"No! It's paved," Art said. "I've told you ten times."

"I don't see any cars."

Art wanted to keep the floater above the fort so he could see if Jim wandered off, but he flew the floater over the trees and toward the road to help Cazin find the cottage.

"Damn," he said. "They're gone." He looked down the road and saw Cazin's car creeping along, north of Shady Half Acres. "You need to turn around and go in the driveway with the purple sign."

Cazin pulled onto the shoulder. "Art, I need you to listen." She closed her eyes and tried to keep her composure. "If this show doesn't hit, I'm through. I'll have to go back to Omaha

and work at my dad's insurance agency. I can't think of anything worse. This is very, very important to me. Okay?"

"Then turn around and pull in the next drive."

33. Cold steel

Slumped in the little tree fort chair, Jim imagined his coworkers shaking their heads and rolling their eyes every time his name was mentioned. His struggles with the bottle were well known and so was his diminishing caseload. After his third drunk driving arrest he had managed to escape jail time on a technicality and kept his job only by promising the partners that he would never drink again. As he sat in the little fort he pictured men in coveralls lugging boxes from his office to some unused closet.

God he needed a drink.

Jim picked up the gun and put the barrel in his mouth. He released the safety and maneuvered his thumb onto the trigger. He closed his eyes and felt the barrel's cold steel against the roof of his mouth. Before he pulled the trigger, he heard a car coming up the driveway.

34. I know you're up there

"Do you see the fort?" Art said.

"Yes." Cazin said. "I see it. Straight ahead next to the garage."

"He's in there," Art said.

"You're sure?"

"Of course I'm sure," Art said.

"You were sure about the cars by the road, too."

“Unless he has magical powers, he’s in there.”

Cazin leaned forward against the steering wheel so she could see the fort as she rolled her car to a stop. She fished through her purse for lipstick and adjusted her rearview to apply it.

“Be careful,” Art said. “He has a gun.”

“Of course he has a gun,” Cazin said, dropping the lipstick back into her purse.

“Wouldn’t be much of a show if he didn’t have a gun.”

Jim stayed away from the window as Cazin swung her legs out of the car, slipped on her heels and walk around the car toward the fort.

“Hello?” she called. “I know you’re up there.”

Jim stayed in the shadows.

“I’d just like to talk to you,” Cazin said.

Jim slid forward on his knees and pointed the gun out the window at Cazin.

“Good, good,” Art said. “Make him keep the gun on you.”

“Hey, relax,” Cazin said to Jim. She almost giggled as she spoke and wore a bright, confident smile. “I don’t want any trouble.”

“You got any booze in there?” Jim pointed the gun at the house, then back at Cazin.

Cazin looked at the cottage as if she hadn’t realized it was there, then faced Jim again.

“No,” she said. “No booze.”

“The gun’s loaded,” Jim said, “and I need a drink.”

“I can’t hear him,” Art said. He had positioned the floater so that it shot through the fort’s south window and captured Jim from the back as he talked to Cazin through the north window.

“What?” Cazin said. “I can’t hear you.”

Jim didn't respond.

"Are we live?" Cazin whispered to Art, trying not to move her lips.

"Not until something happens," Art said. "That's the word from Karolina."

"I've got the star of 'Death on the Plains' here. He's got a gun and he's been shooting at his wife and her lover," Cazin said, still whispering. "What else does she want?"

"Who are you talking to?" Jim said.

"Myself," Cazin said. "Bad habit. Hey, you look familiar."

Jim leaned his head back into the shadows but kept the gun on Cazin.

"You're that guy from the news last night, aren't you?" Cazin said. "Your name is Jim, right?"

Jim moved forward into the light.

"If I were you, those two bastards wouldn't have woken up this morning," Cazin said.

"This is just my summer place," she said, gesturing toward the cottage. "I live in Chicago. That asshole Barker's been fucking with people down there for years. I'm surprised no one's taken him out by now. He pulls this kind of shit all the time." She waved a hand out toward the lake as if that explained what she meant. "Why'd you give up so easy last night? I guess you don't really want her back. If I was her I'd be pretty disappointed."

Jim stared at Cazin for a moment. "I need your car," Jim said.

"My car?" Cazin said.

"I'm taking your car."

"I can't just *give* you my car," Cazin said, giggling again.

"You got a boat?" Jim said.

"A rowboat," Art said in Cazin's head. "By the lake."

“Just a rowboat,” Cazin said. “By the lake.”

“Then I need your car,” Jim said.

35. Still crooked

A stage tech leaned across Peter’s desk trying to pin an ochre ribbon to his lapel.

“I don’t understand why you’re so negative about this,” Peter said.

Rindell was trying to end the discussion and get back to his office. He had already turned halfway toward the studio exit. “Peter, you’re a news anchor, not an astronaut.”

The tech, a winsome young woman in a black jumpsuit who dreamed of an anchor job at a news network after she finished her masters in theater at NYU, finally plunged the pin through Peter’s lapel and stepped back to see how it looked.

Peter looked into the monitor buried in his desk. “It’s not even *close* to being straight,” he said without looking at the stage tech.

The tech looked at the clock above the anchor desk. The break would be over in one minute and fifteen seconds. She reached over the desk, held the ribbon with one hand and pulled the pin out with the other.

“Rindell, you’re telling me that Man Boy Floyd is more of an astronaut than me?” Peter said. “You want some dolled-up punk to be the hero instead of a man people trust enough to invite into their living rooms and bedrooms every day?”

The stage tech leaned across the anchor desk for another try.

“You want to know what will happen, Peter?” Rindell said, turning back toward his chief anchor. “We’d hire some hot new face and when you come back months later, you’d be out of a job.”

“When I come back a hero you’ll beg me to sit in this chair again,” Peter said.

The stage tech held the ribbon against Peter’s lapel and worked the pin through one of its loops.

“I’ve thought a lot about this,” Peter said. “Rescuing Mars Girl would build the kind of credibility that’ll pay off for the rest of my career. We’ll all benefit from that.” Peter looked into his monitor. “It’s *still crooked!*” He looked at Rindell. “Get somebody else to do it.”

Rindell looked at the exasperated tech and nodded toward Peter, signaling her to keep trying. She looked up at the clock and saw that she only had forty seconds.

36. Don’t do it

“Jim, honey, you’re not going to change my mind,” Cazin purred. “I’m not giving you my car. If you want to go somewhere, maybe I can take you.”

“There are four, five ... six places in Alpena that rent boats,” Art said to Cazin.

“I’m sure we can find you a boat in Alpena,” Cazin said.

“Just leave your key on the seat and step away from the car,” Jim said.

“Hey, I’m all for helping you, but I’m *not* giving you my car.”

“Is there another car in the garage?”

Cazin looked at the closed garage door. “Art?” she whispered.

“No idea,” Art said.

“No,” Cazin said to Jim.

Jim pointed the pistol at Cazin’s head. “Then I’m taking that one.”

“Try to look at least a little scared,” Art said. “He’s got a gun on you.”

Cazin took a few steps toward the fort. “Come down from up there and let’s go find a boat.”

Jim kept the gun on her as she continued toward the fort.

“C’mon, Jim,” Cazin said. “You’re wasting time. Let’s get a boat before they get away.” She gestured out toward the lake again.

Jim raised the pistol above Cazin’s head and fired. Cazin flinched but held her ground.

“What was that for?” she said. “Do you want me to help or not?”

Jim looked Cazin up and down. Her silk skirt reacted to every gentle waft of breeze coming off the lake. He wondered why he’d never seen her around when he came north to see Cecilia.

“So whaddaya say?” Cazin said. “Let’s go.”

“Put your key on the seat and step away from the car,” Jim said.

“Here we go,” Cazin whispered to Art. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath and took a few more steps toward the fort.

“I’ll kill you if I have to.” Jim held the gun on Cazin. “I need your car.”

Cazin held up her car key for Jim to see. “Without my thumb print this won’t do you any good. You kill me, you still don’t have a car.”

“I can drag you to the car,” Jim said. “Or I can cut off your thumb and take it with me.”

“He’s right,” Art said. “Saw it in a movie.”

“Jim, I’m going to get in my car and drive out of here,” Cazin said. “You can either come with me or stay up there and feel sorry for yourself. Your choice.” She turned and began walking back to her car.

“I’ll shoot,” Jim said.

Cazin walked around to the driver's side of her car. "You coming?"

"Final warning!" Jim said.

Cazin was unfazed. "C'mon, Jim. Let's go." She popped the door open and rested a foot on the doorframe.

"Ah, screw it," Jim said. He put the gun in his mouth and put his thumb on the trigger.

"Jim! What are you doing?"

Jim closed his eyes tight and the corners of his mouth curled into a grotesque smile. His hands quivered.

"Jim! Don't be a fool." Cazin trotted around her car toward the fort. "No Jim! Jim!"

He moved back away from the window and into the shadows.

"Please don't do it," she whispered. "I need this. Please don't."

Jim slid over to the lakeside window and pulled the gun from his mouth. He could just make out Barker on the sailboat, standing in the cockpit of the boat. He put the sites on Barker's head.

Cazin couldn't see into the fort but every passing second without a gunshot gave her hope that he wouldn't do it. "Jim? Jim?"

Jim raised the tip of the barrel a few inches and fired.

The gun's report made Cazin jump. "You son-of-a-bitch!" she said, slumping to her knees.

37. Knock out

Peter yanked the pin and ochre ribbon from his lapel and tossed them onto his anchor desk. "Get somebody else, willya?"

“You really want to spend a month with a bored and bitter teenager?” Rindell said. “We send Man Boy and all he needs to do is sing love songs. What are you going to do? How many times can you ask her how she feels about her dead family? You can’t make it interesting after the first half hour.”

“I’m a news professional,” Peter said. “That’s the thrill of this business. The dance between me and the heads. Holding them back when I need to. Riding them hard when they’re charging in the right direction.”

Peter bounced up and down in his chair just as the stage tech was about to slide the pin through the ribbon. She gave up and shut her eyes in frustration.

“I was born for this stuff,” Peter said. “Working in the spins and keeping the story line intact. You need *me* on this, Rindell, not some snot-nosed kid with no experience.”

Peter stopped bouncing and the stage tech saw her chance. She worked quickly and slid the pin through the ribbon, but saw that it was slightly off so she slid the pin halfway out to adjust one side.

“Peter, I haven’t got time for this,” Rindell said. “You’re not going to Mars. The decision’s final.”

“Bullshit,” Peter said. “I’m going to announce to the world that I’ll be on the rescue mission. Once I say it you have to send me. You’re going to lose this one Rindell, so you might as well give up.”

“If you announce it, you’ll be looking for a new job tomorrow,” Rindell said, and headed for the exit.

Peter spun toward Rindell in his chair. His sudden movement forced the pin deep into the tech's index finger. She shrieked and yanked out the needle. Blood dripped from her finger onto Peter's white shirt.

Peter looked with disgust at the blood soaking into his shirt, and tried to backhand the tech across her mouth but she parried his attempt with her left arm and reflexively slammed her right palm into Peter's chin. Peter flew back off his chair and everyone in the studio heard the snap when his head hit the black tile floor. Peter lay motionless with his chair across his chest.

Rindell looked up at the clock and saw that there were only ten seconds to airtime.

38. Since when?

"What are we doing about lunch?" Barker said.

"How can you think about food right now?" Cecilia said. She had trouble sitting still but the possibility of flying bullets kept her on the bench.

"I was thinking about sex a minute ago," Barker said, leaning back into the pillow on the bench. "Is that better?"

"You heard what Ania said. This whole Mars thing was planned. It was sabotage. The White House was involved and so were people you work for."

"That's what she *said*." Barker put the crook of his arm over his eyes to block the sun.

"You don't believe her? That woman is willing to send her husband to prison, maybe even to his death, because of what she knows."

"Because of what she *heard*," Barker said. "I barely know her and you've never met her. You're basing a lot on someone who happened to overhear half a conversation."

Cecilia crossed the cockpit and nudged Barker's legs against the hull to make room to sit. "Ray, I think Ania is telling the truth. I have a sense about these things. We need to get onscreen and tell what we know."

"I'm done with casting." Barker covered his eyes again. "I'm quitting while I'm ahead."

"I can't believe you don't care about this," Cecilia said. "The president and a news network conspired to murder an entire crew of astronauts. People need to know."

"Know what? I don't know the truth and neither do you."

"Since when are you worried about truth?"

Barker raised his arm away from his eyes and considered the question. "This is different."

"Why? Because it matters?"

Barker pulled his legs from behind Cecilia and sat up. "Even if she's right, you're asking me to tell Rindell to put us onscreen so we can tell everyone he's a murderer."

"Maybe Rindell doesn't know," Cecilia said. "Maybe it's just Jaspers' deal. All Rindell cares about is numbers and this is one hell of a story."

Barker stood up and walked to the stern. The warm sun and the cool breeze felt good against his skin. "I don't have the coziest relationship with the truth. I'm not sure people would take me seriously anyway."

"Ania said she hasn't told anyone else. It's you or nobody."

Barker sat down next to Cecilia. "I know you're right about one thing. The numbers would be incredible."

39. Done

Cazin, on her knees, her fingernails dug into the sandy turf, looked up at the empty window of the fort where she was sure Jim lay dead. She pictured him collapsed onto his back, eyes vacant, legs and arms at odd angles.

Now with the show over before it started, returning to Omaha seemed certain. Her mother would be elated and immediately launch into stories about her old boyfriends who were married and having children.

“We need to get some vid of Jim,” Art said in Cazin’s head.

Cazin stood up and walked toward her car. She didn’t bother brushing the powdery sand from her knees.

“Do what you want,” she said. “I’m going home.” It bothered her when she realized that “home” meant Omaha.

“What are you talking about?” Art said. “I flew a floater all the way up there. Let’s get *something* out of it. Jim’s still got good name rec. I think Karolina will go for something short. Maybe ‘Suicide on the Plains.’”

“Art, I’m all done,” Cazin said, leaning against her car.

“At least make sure he’s dead,” Art said. “I don’t want to fly in there and find the guy alive. He’ll put a bullet in the floater and the show will be over for sure. Put your Upix on and take a look.” He flew the floater down and rested it on the roof of Cazin’s car.

“I wasted five years doing this shit,” Cazin said.

“Just climb up there and take a look.”

In disgust, Cazin picked up a jagged rock from the white gravel that bordered the driveway and threw it hard at the Shady Half Acres welcome sign. It sailed straight at the sign

but skipped off the top and broke through a picture window at the front of the cottage. Lights inside and outside the house began to flash, and the cottage's alarm let loose a high-pitched squeal.

39. On with the show

Rindell threw off his suit coat, rolled up his sleeves, loosened his tie, righted Peter's chair, sat down and faced the camera just as floor director Mayvee Coles finished her countdown and thrust a stubby finger in his direction.

Rindell stared into the camera but said nothing. He could hear Peter's heels slide across the tile floor as two stage techs dragged him toward the exit. Mayvee, peering over her portable station, pointed at Rindell again, and then again, but he still didn't respond. He looked into his monitor and saw Mirellen at her shelf with her back to the window writing something on the ReadWrite. Mayvee, eyes wide, waved her short arms above her head, trying desperately to get Rindell to respond. Rindell glanced at Mayvee and smiled, then looked into the camera.

"Welcome back to MASSnews, your favorite for contemporary news hits." Rindell lowered his eyes for a moment, causing Mayvee renewed panic, then looked back into the camera. "You're used to hearing Peter Cloud say those words. But I'm saying them for him because a few minutes ago a freak accident left Peter, the man more people invite into their lives everyday, unconscious and struggling to survive. We're all praying that he'll pull through and be back on his feet soon so he can once again bring you the news the way you want it."

Accompanied by poignant keyboard music, vid of Peter appeared in the upper right pip. Scenes dissolved into each other, first of Peter reading to young school children in a park, then yukking it up with President Flanagan at her inaugural ball.

“Peter is not only a member of your family,” Rindell said, “but he is also a member of our family.”

The pip changed to a casual portrait of Peter, with his wife and daughter, lounging barefoot on an ocean beach. They all wore jeans and matching short-sleeved shirts.

“It’s difficult with our friend and colleague in peril,” Rindell said, “but we must carry on. While Peter fights for his life, let’s share a moment of silence in his honor. As Mars Girl prepares for her trek, perhaps you’ll hear Peter’s calm, reassuring voice – a voice that, until now, has never faltered.”

Rindell disappeared and Mirellen filled the screen. She turned to face the window and held up a ReadWrite question for NASA techs she had written on the screen with her finger.

“How far to station?” After a moment she pulled the sign out of the window and added. “5 clicks?”

The TractorPix camera moved from side to side.

Mirellen pulled down the sign and changed it to, “7 clicks?”

The TractorPix camera moved side to side.

She frowned. “10 clicks?”

The TractorPix camera moved side to side.

“15 Clicks?”

The camera nodded.

Mirellen wrote another message. “How long?” And then, “2 hours?”

The TractorPix camera went side to side.

“4 hours?”

The TractorPix camera nodded.

She held up another sign: “2 O₂ tanks?”

The TractorPix was silent for a moment, then shook its camera.

She crossed out “2?” and wrote “4?” next to it.

The TractorPix camera nodded.

Mirellen pulled the ReadWrite down from the window and tried to muster a confident smile.

40. Knock it off

While the Shady Half Acres alarm blared in her ears, Cazin jumped in her car, punched the pedal, threw the wheel to the left and fishtailed through the front yard.

With the gun in one hand and the towel over his shoulder, Jim descended the fort’s ladder two steps at a time, then ran toward Cazin’s car. “Hey!” he shouted at Cazin but she didn’t hear him over the alarm. Jim raised the gun and sprinted to cut her off before the car swerved back onto the driveway.

“He’s alive!” Art said in Cazin’s head. “Watch out!”

Cazin laid into the brakes but it was too late. Jim leapt into the air, bounced off the hood and windshield and landed hard at the edge of the asphalt.

“Excellent!” Art said. “Karolina will love this.”

Cazin jumped out of her car and ran to where Jim lay, hips on the pavement and shoulders on the patchy grass. His eyes were open but there was blood in the corner of his mouth. He still held the gun and cartridges were scattered around him.

Cazin knelt down to pick bullets from the grass. “Next time you put a gun in your mouth you better mean it or I’ll finish the job for you,” Cazin yelled above the alarm. She picked up the last of the cartridges then held out her hand to help Jim stand up.

Jim refused her assistance and got up to his knees, then struggled to his feet and pointed the pistol at Cazin.

“Oh, knock it off,” Cazin said. “Just get in the damn car and let’s get out of here before the cops show up.”

“An abduction will sell more tickets,” Art said in Cazin’s head. “At least hold up your hands.”

Cazin put her hands in the air. “All right,” she said to Jim. “I’ll play along. You want to be in charge? Fine.”

“Good, good,” Art said. “I’ll make sure Karolina sees this.”

42. She said

Jaspers held his office door open for Toby Crahne, MASScorp’s procurement chief, and walked with him through the double glass doors to Maridonna’s desk. He thanked Crahne for getting Mars Girl merchandise on the shelves so quickly and sent him on his way through the second set of doors.

Jaspers turned to Maridonna. “My wife. Where’d she go?”

“She left quite a while ago,” Maridonna said. “I can check the elevator log.” Maridonna tapped her screen a few times. “She exited the elevator on the ground floor at 12:47. A little more than an hour ago.”

“I told her to stay here.” Jaspers seemed to be scolding Maridonna. “Did she say where she was going?”

“No,” Maridonna said. “But she called.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? When did she call?”

“A little while ago. I can check the log. She didn’t ask to speak with you and you were in a meeting so I didn’t ...”

“What did she say?” Jaspers’ grimaced as he ran his hand through his hair.

“She wanted Ray Barker’s connects.”

Jaspers froze.

“But I didn’t give them to her,” Maridonna said quickly.

Jaspers reached for the back of his neck. “Why did she want Barker’s connects?”

“She said you wanted her to talk to Barker about something.”

“I wanted her to talk to him?”

“That’s what she said. She said she was doing you a favor because you’re so busy.”

“But you didn’t give her his connects, right?”

“I did not give her his connects,” Maridonna said. She was about to say that she had patched Ania through to Barker but Jaspers had already turned to go back through the double glass doors.

42. On the road with Jim and Cazin

Cazin drove north on M-23 along the Lake Huron shore toward Alpena. Jim sat in the passenger seat.

“Jim?” Cazin said. “Jim, I want you to listen to me.”

He didn't respond.

"Jim!"

He was impassive.

"I want you to promise me something," Cazin said. "Just one thing."

She looked at Jim but he kept his eyes ahead, down the gently curving road bordered on the right by a steady stream of cottage signs. On the left was a state forest with rows of pines that would have been logged off a decade before if the paper and lumber markets hadn't collapsed.

"I know you're listening," Cazin said, "so I'll just tell you. No more of this suicide stuff. I don't want to go through that again."

"I haven't done it yet," Jim mumbled.

"You know what I mean," Cazin said. "I don't think I can take any more of that."

"You mean you love me?" Jim said.

"What?!" Cazin said, screwing up her face. "I just don't want you killing yourself while I'm around."

Jim pulled up his left sleeve and held out his badly scarred wrist so Cazin could see it.

"Oh, God," Cazin said after glancing at Jim's wrist. She felt nauseous and put her hand to her mouth.

Ahead she saw a sign for Shep's Grocery and Convenience so she pulled into the lot and parked behind a bread truck, shielding her car from the road. She put the car in park and took a deep breath.

"Give me a hundred bucks," Jim said.

"Why?"

“Just give it to me.”

“Listen, Jim. We need to get something straight. I’ll help you but you need to ...”

Jim opened the door and stepped out of the car.

“Where are you going?” she said as Jim slammed the door shut.

“Damn it.” Cazin hit the steering wheel with her fist. She looked around for the gun but didn’t see it.

A moment later Jim ran from the store with two fifths of Liquor’s Quicker whiskey. As Jim jumped in the car, a clerk came out the door and trotted toward them with his assistant to his ear.

“Go!” Jim said. “C’mon, go!”

Cazin squealed through the parking lot and into the northbound lane.

“Are you crazy?” she said.

Jim unscrewed the cap of one of the bottles and took a long pull. Cazin lowered her window, grabbed the other bottle from Jim’s lap and threw it out onto the road. She tried grabbing the other but couldn’t wrestle it away from him.

“Goddamn it, Jim,” Cazin said. “I’m trying to help you and you’re doing your best to fuck things up.”

Watching Cazin out of the corner of his eye and leaning against his window to keep the bottle as far from her grasp as possible, Jim took another long drink.

“You want cops all over us?” Cazin said to Jim. “You got a plan for that?”

Jim picked up the pistol with his left hand, looked at Cazin and put the gun to his head.

“Bang!” he said.

43. She must be starving

A month later four employees would struggle to keep up with orders at Howie's Homemade Pizza Shoppe, but by 1:30 on this Saturday afternoon in May, Will had sent home the only other employee scheduled for the day. There hadn't been a customer for more than an hour and probably wouldn't be another one until dinnertime.

Howie's Homemade was a cinder block building that dated from the previous century but Howie, a former plumber, had made it into a bright and cozy restaurant. Howie made enough to pay the bills during the colder months and made his money on the cottagers who came in swarms all summer and raved about Howie's Chicago DeepDish to their friends back home.

Will's girlfriend, Ally Annisttin, a senior at Okinisee High, slouched in a padded, metal-frame chair as she sat alone at the center table of the empty restaurant watching Mars Girl on a wall screen that covered half of the south wall. Ally had dropped by to spend the afternoon with Will because Howie was out of town and school had been cancelled to honor the seven kids killed by the tornado.

Will had moved to Okinisee from Kalamazoo ten months before to live with his dad and take classes at Northeastern Community College. Not long after he arrived in Okinisee, he and Ally met by chance at a ski resort near Petoskey and discovered that they lived in the same town.

"What a nice boy," Ally's stepmother had said in the car on the way home. Two weeks later Will and Ally were inseparable.

Ally, wearing a flouncy, multi-colored skirt and sleeveless white blouse, sat at her table waiting for Will to fix the soda machine so she could have her usual glass of CokaLait with lemon that Will made for her when Howie wasn't around. The plan was to spend the afternoon together at the restaurant, then go to Alpena for Will's evening science class. On Tuesdays and

Thursdays she often bundled up her homework for the trip. When she finished her homework she'd spend the rest of the class messaging her friends or watching her favorite shows while Will took notes.

Will, wearing a T-shirt and blue apron with "Howie's" written in yellow script across the front, brought out Ally's frothy CokaLait and set it in front her. She didn't take her eyes off Mars Girl and left the drink on the table. On the screen, a NASA geographer wearing a flight suit used a 3-D map to describe the route the TractorPix would use to lead Mars Girl to the station. A red line skirted the row of rugged hills then zig-zagged its way through a pass and onto Moskey Basin, which was table-flat except for a few boulder fields and dozens of shallow craters. On the far side of the basin stood the Gemini Cricket Family Restaurants Mars Station.

Will slid a chair next to Ally's and sat down. He put his arm around her and spoke into her ear. "Why don't we go into the back room and fool around a little."

"I'm watching Mars Girl," Ally said. "She's going to walk all the way to that station with the restaurant sign. God, she must be starving."

"She's not even on right now," Will said, burrowing through her hair to kiss the back of her neck.

"Yeah, but they're showing where she's gonna go. See? All the way around those hills, and then across that little flat part with the craters, and then through those big hills, and then across another flat part. The station's in front of those other hills. See the big sign?"

Will gave up on her neck and sat back in his chair. "Nothing's going to happen until she starts walking." He took a long drink from the bottle of OverLoad force drink he brought out with Ally's CokaLait.

Ally winced when she saw the bottle. “I wish you wouldn’t drink those. They make you stupid.”

“It gives me the power to go all night long, baby,” he whispered into her ear and licked her cheek.

She rubbed the wet spot on her face and pushed him away. “See what I mean?”

43. Our kind of guy

Jim hugged the bottle to his chest as he and Cazin drove north on M-23. They crested a hill and saw a green reflective sign with white text that read:

Alpena 11

Cheboygan 87

After another mile they passed a brown Department of Natural Resources sign with yellow text and an arrow pointing to the right:

Big Rock Point Recreation Area

No Camping No Fires

“Cops!” Art said in Cazin’s head. “Two cruisers three clicks behind you. They’re in a hurry.”

Cazin pulled into the Recreation Area entrance and drove fast down the well-groomed dirt road that followed the gentle southward arc of Big Rock Point. Two ruffed grouse picking at

pea stone bolted into the pines that bordered the road when Cazin's car rounded the bend that led to an empty gravel parking lot with several fishtail swirls at its center. Cazin pulled the car into the shade cast by some overhanging branches at the opposite side of the parking area from a multi-colored trail map.

Jim capped the bottle, slid it into the rolled towel and stepped out of the car. With the towel bundle under his arm he walked toward the sign.

"Jim, where are you going?" Cazin said after she lowered the passenger side window.

Jim knew Big Rock Point well. He used to take his black lab, Ransom, for walks along its shores until the previous summer when the dog pawed his way into Cecilia's neighbor's shed and ate a bag of rat poison. Jim found Ransom dead on the kitchen floor the next morning.

Jim pulled the bottle from the towel and took a long drink as he scanned the graffiti carved and scraped into the trail map. With his index finger he traced the outline of a heart someone had scratched into its center. The artist must have been interrupted because the message only had initials on top of a plus sign. Jim put a bullet into the center of the heart and followed a trail into the cool shade of the woods.

"Karolina said we'll go live when you find a boat," Art said in Cazin's head. "I hope Jim holds it together until then."

"Where is he?" Cazin said, still sitting in her car.

"He's taking a trail toward the beach," Art said. "I'll keep an eye on him."

"Anything new?"

"Yeah," Art said. "A couple things. Jim had some kind of disease when he was young so he's got a new liver. Apparently he's been testing it because he drops about a grand a week in bars, including some hefty tips. He's had three drunk driving arrests and two convictions in the

last couple years. He couldn't drive for more than a year so he finally got smart and takes a lot of cab rides now. Somehow he's managed to keep practicing law. The last judge gave him a final warning speech, even though the arresting officer screwed up and he wasn't convicted."

"How about family?" Cazin asked.

"His dad's dead. His mom lives in Florida. His sister's married with two kids. She's a mid-level manager at a software company in San Diego. I don't think he sees his mom much. I can't find anything to show that the family's been together since Jim and Cecilia flew to Florida seven years ago. His mom seems to have disappeared over the last few days. No records of purchases, phone calls, medical treatment ... nothing. We've been trying to find her all day. Just by breathing people leave some kind of data but there's nothing since Monday."

"How about Jim and Cecilia?"

"Jim consented to a limited partnership two years ago, six months after Cecilia had a miscarriage and two months after she took a golden handshake and bought the café."

"She filed for the change?" Cazin said.

"She made him choose between limited partnership and divorce. Two days after they signed the agreement he spent a night in the tank because of a bar fight. At his law firm they're shifting clients away from him and he hasn't been given anything new for months. He approached them twice about becoming a partner and he was denied unanimously both times. Looks like he's on a downward spiral."

"Our kind of guy," Cazin said.

"And he's good looking to boot," Art said. "I think you're going to hit with this one."

44. Slow day

A low hum filled Howie's Homemade and Will, sitting next to Ally, pulled his headset's microphone down to his mouth. "Howie's. Let's make a pizza."

"Will, Will, Will. It's supposed to be 'Let us make a pizza for *you*!' How long you been working for me?"

"Hi Howie." Will looked at Ally and rolled his eyes. "Oh, I don't know. A million years? How's St. Louis?"

"St. Louis? Jeez, who cares? I was in the hospital all night and I watched everything in the lounge. What the hell's going on up there?"

"You mean the tornado?"

"Yeah, I guess we can start with that. And the riot. And then Ceci and that caster. And Jim smashed on his ass chasing after them. It almost made our little town seem interesting."

"I wouldn't exactly call it a riot," Will said.

"Sure as hell looked like one."

"Seemed more like a town festival or something. You know those old busted up two-by-fours out back? The ones you've been bugging me to get rid of? I took them down to the park last night for the fire."

"Shit, Will. I hope no one knew those were mine. If Annisttin finds out he'll rezone my property."

"He got there after we threw them on the fire," Will said. "Man, I've never seen him so hot."

"Well, somebody's gotta be responsible. I've been feeling weird since I woke up. I keep seeing that fire, and then Ceci. Just gives me a bad feeling. How's the weather?"

“Good. Low sixties and sunny.”

“How’s biz?”

“Slow.”

“The weather’s turning,” Howie said. “We’ll be busy this weekend. People will come up to check on their property.”

“We’ll be ready. Things all right down there?”

“God, Mike is helpless. I mean if the baby wasn’t healthy I could understand, but the kid’s fine. If Becky had twins Mike’d go mental.”

“Speaking of the weekend, I was hoping I could get Saturday night off,” Will said. “Ally and I want to go over to Traverse for a concert.”

“Willy, you got the manager’s job because I thought I could rely on you to be there.”

“I’m just saying one Saturday off before the season starts. With working here and taking classes I been bustin’ hard for months. I just want a little break before I practically start living here.”

“Check with Jennifer. If she can cover for you, it’s all right. But we can’t have this discussion every weekend.”

“We won’t. I promise.”

Ally heard him ask for Saturday off and looked expectantly at Will. He smiled and nodded.

“All right,” Howie said. “I’ll see you tomorrow afternoon.”

Will flipped his headset mic up and out of his way but there was another hum so he flipped it down again. “Howie’s Homemade Pizza. *Let’s* make a pizza for you.”

“Will?”

“Yeah. Who’s this?”

“Cecilia. Cecilia Westraek from the café.”

“Hi Ceci. I was just talking about you. I hear you had quite a night.”

“Yeah, it’s kind of embarrassing. You didn’t watch that, did you?”

“No. I was out partying but I heard about it.”

“I’m afraid to walk through town. Hey, I’ve got an order for you. A delivery.”

“Sorry. I’m here by myself today.”

“I just want one large pizza delivered to my boat. I’ll pay you a thousand dollars for the pizza and a ride back to shore.”

45. Big parade and everything

“Isn’t this exciting?” Amber said, sitting at her counter. She watched Mirellen on the wall screen ducking in and out of view as she put on her space suit in front of the window. Occasionally Mirellen wrote out yes or no questions on her ReadWrite for the NASA techs and the TractorPix answered them.

“I knew she’d find a way out of this,” Amber said, chewing her nails. “I *told* you she’d make it.”

Fred stood near the swinging doors, staring up at the screen as he wiped axle grease off his hands. “She’s a long way from getting out of this,” he said. “One mistake and she’s dead.”

Amber let her hand fall from her face and thud onto her desk. “You sure know how to poop on the party. She’s going to make it to the station and she’s going to get all the food and other stuff she needs and she’s going to be just fine. She’ll get rescued and come back home a honest to goodness hero. Big parade and everything.”

Fred finished wiping his hands and tossed the rag into a blue laundry bag. “Did you hear the BetCom odds? Fifteen-to-one against her holding on long enough for a rescue.”

“She’s gonna make it,” Amber said. “I just know it.”

“You could make some good money if you’re right.” Fred opened one of the swinging doors, leaned into the garage to spit into a can.

“People shouldn’t bet on Mars Girl. That ain’t right. They should hope and pray for her. That’s what I’ve been doing.” Amber started working on the nails of her other hand. “And I’m gonna be shopping at MASSmart all the time now. I figure since they offered to pay for the rescue, it’s the least I can do.”

“They didn’t offer to pay for it, they bought an option on the exclusive,” Fred said.

“Same difference.”

46. A lot of money for a pizza

Will wanted to make sure he heard Cecilia right. “You said a thousand dollars?”

“A grand, Willy,” Cecilia said.

“That’s a lot of money for a pizza. That’s all you want?”

“Just one large pizza and a ride back to the marina. We’re a click south of Big Rock Point. My friend and I are stuck out here with a broken mast and a dead cell.”

“A thousand dollars?”

“This is legit. Promise. You and Ally could have a real nice night somewhere with a tip like that,” Cecilia said. “She’d be pretty impressed.”

Will looked at Ally at the next table watching Mars Girl. Her bare feet were resting on a chair in front of her and her skirt had slid up her thighs. She grabbed her drink and wrapped her lips around the straw.

“I guess I could do it,” Will said. “Howie’s gone and my dad’s at work so I can use his fishing boat. How’s the bay?”

“Calm. Waves no more than a foot.”

“I’ll need to find someone to cover for me while I’m gone,” Will said. “I’m going to put you on hold for a second.”

Ally put down her drink and smiled at him.

He smiled back and thumbed some numbers on his assistant.

“Jennifer!” Will said. “It’s Willy. I need a favor. I need you to come back to the shop for an hour. I’ve got an emergency. I’ll give you fif ... You don’t mind? Thanks, Jen. I really appreciate this ... No, there’s no hurry. I’ve gotta finish an order ... Twenty minutes is great.”

Will thumbed a button on his assistant. “Cecilia? You gotta promise me that my dad never knows I took his boat. He’d kill me.”

“Absolutely. He’ll never know.”

“All right. What do you want on the pizza?”

47. Dread

Ania gazed across the Hudson at the New York skyline from the back seat of a cab traveling on the Clinton Parkway toward LaGuardia. She wondered if she would ever see Manhattan’s clustered peaks again.

And she wondered how she could be married to a man for thirty-three years and never know he was capable of such horror. There must have been signs. Why didn't she see them?

He hadn't been a bad father. Too absent, perhaps, but their daughter had turned out well. Maybe Regan was a little too driven, but she had lots of friends and loved her little daughter. She and her husband made good partners and their home felt warm and happy. But maybe Ania didn't know her own daughter. If she didn't know her husband, maybe she didn't know anyone.

An elevated commuter train rushed past her cab and made her jump. She closed her eyes and reminded herself that she was going home.

Home. Dread soaked through her when she realized she no longer had a home.

48. You first

Mirellen stepped onto the surface where her footprints from the previous day's excursion had already been obscured by wind-blown dust. She closed the hatch, walked around the ship and faced the TractorPix. After a moment of staring at each other, Mirellen gave the bot a shrug – a combination of “where to?” and “what are we waiting for?”

The TractorPix swiveled its camera one hundred eighty degrees so that it pointed southeast, along the edge of a line of hills, then turned the camera back toward her. She walked past the TractorPix in the direction it indicated and, after several steps, turned back to make sure the bot was following.

The TractorPix followed but stopped whenever Mirellen stopped. She motioned for it to go ahead, but the bot's camera went side to side so she continued walking, occasionally glancing back over her shoulder.

The boulders and rock faces they passed featured glowing good luck messages from corporate well-wishers and animated pitches for everything from laundry soap to beer. As they approached a rock wall that shot up a couple hundred feet, a glowing Jaguar Safari bounced across the edge of the cliff, then defied gravity by driving straight down the escarpment. Just as Mirellen reached the base of the cliff, the Safari swung down off the wall and came to a stop ahead of her. A handsome man in evening clothes stepped out and opened the passenger door for Mirellen. As she continued walking, her body passed through the Safari's front quarter panel. Written on the rock wall in large glowing letters was the message: "If Mars Girl could, she'd take a Safari."

49. Do what you gotta do

As she rode toward LaGuardia in the back of the cab Ania wondered where she would live.

Both of her parents had died years before and their land was sold soon after. There were various guestrooms that she occupied for a few days or a week at a time, but she couldn't call any of them home.

Who would she live with? Her sister? Her daughter? What friend might take her in?

How could John do this? How could she let it happen to herself? Ania caught the cabby's eye in the rearview and felt the urge to dissolve into tears and tell all her troubles. She needed to talk to someone so she pulled her assistant out of her purse, but before she could make a call it hummed and she answered immediately.

"Darling, where are you?" Jaspers said. "I've been worried sick."

“How could you? God, I’m so ...” Ania closed her eyes and felt rage boiling inside her. She knew she shouldn’t talk to him but she couldn’t help it. “I’m so *pissed*.”

“Ania, we need to talk. I think you’ve got some strange ideas.”

“John, I heard what you said,” Ania said. “I know what you’ve done.”

“Ania, just go home and we’ll talk about it,” Jaspers said. “I’ll meet you there in an hour.”

“I *am* going home,” Ania said. “The only home I have.”

“Ania, just go to the apartment. There are some things I need to tell you.”

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

“Darling, there’s a lot for us to talk about. I’ve been thinking. Maybe it’s time for me to get out of this rat race. You know, take it a little easier. I haven’t been around much and I’m sorry about that. Maybe we can start all over.”

“I don’t believe anything you say. I never will.”

“Damn it, Ania,” Jaspers said. He paused to calm himself. “We’ve been married for more than thirty years. You owe me a chance to explain.”

“Goodbye John,” Ania said, with her thumb hovering over the red button on her assistant.

“Wait! At least tell me why you wanted to talk to Barker.” Jaspers said.

“Why do you *think* I talked to Barker?”

“You already talked to him?”

Another commuter train flashed by her window, startling Ania and causing her to push the red button.

“Trouble at home, hun?” said the cabby, a muscular middle-aged woman wearing a leather vest and leather driving gloves. “I been there. Oh, *yeah*, I been there. Dumped the loser

three years ago. Best thing I ever did. It's not worth beating yourself up over it. Just do what you gotta do. It may not seem like it now, but things'll be fine."

50. Special delivery

The wood-chipped trail through the woods that covered Big Rock Point's spine finally led Jim through some brush and onto the sunny beach. He noticed a set of footprints along the border where trees met sand but he didn't see anyone when he looked up and down the shoreline.

From where he stood he could see all of Big Rock Bay to the south. As he expected, he saw the Somewhen in the distance glowing white in the sun. But he hadn't expected to see the small fishing boat pulling alongside it.

Jim stepped back into the bushes and pulled the pistol from the towel. He parted the branches with his left hand, put the iron sights on a point between the two boats, raised the barrel and fired.

51. Lucky shot

Will heard a loud ping from the bow of his father's fishing boat and a 'pop' from the point.

"What the hell was that?" Will said, standing in the boat with a pizza box in his hand. Barker, leaning over the Somewhen's gunwales, held the other end of the box but Will kept a tight grip.

"That was just a lucky shot," Barker said, tugging on the pizza box.

"Shot?" Ally said, from the fishing boat's bow. She could see water running into the boat from a small hole near her feet.

There was another ‘pop’ from the point and all four looked in that direction but they couldn’t see Jim hiding in the bushes.

“Don’t worry about it,” Barker said. “He can’t do that twice.”

Ally heard a bullet buzz over her head and then she heard another ‘pop’ from the point. “Someone’s ... *shooting* at us?” she said, her eyes darting between the point and the hole in the boat. Water already covered the floor where she sat and began to soak her feet. When she heard another ‘pop’ from shore she ducked down and put her hands over her head. “Get me out of here!” she screamed.

Will finally let Barker take the pizza box, then jumped over the middle bench to the front of the boat. He straddled the front seat next to Ally and looked in horror at the hole the bullet had ripped open. “My dad’s gonna *kill* me.” He leaned down and tried to stop the water with his hand but sliced open his palm on the jagged metal. “How am I gonna explain this?” he said, ignoring the blood dripping from his hand and coloring the rising water.

Cecilia slipped down into the cabin to get a hand-operated bilge pump and there was another ‘pop’ from Big Rock Point.

“Cecilia, where are you going?” Barker said. “We need to get out of here.”

“We’re going to get shot!” Ally said, hugging her knees and rocking back and forth.

Will jumped to the rear of the boat and threw open the outboard’s throttle. The boat’s nose rose into the air, taking the bullet hole above the waterline.

Cecilia bounced up the companionway with the bilge pump and stood next to Barker, still holding the warm pizza box in his hands. The fishing boat turned in a tight arc and sped back toward Okinisee Marina.

52. Stress relief

Ania's cab pulled into LaGuardia's multi-lane entrance with rows of digital messages overhead and traffic cop holos standing on the dividers pointing cars one way or the other, or motioning for them to slow down.

"Which airline, honey?"

"Avis," Ania said, and the cabby slid the car across three lanes, eliciting a whistled warning from one of the holo cops.

Ania scrolled through the list of connects on her assistant until she found "Zach" and hit the call button.

"Zach Forillon."

"Zach, this is Ania."

"Well, hi Ania. It's good to hear your voice."

"I need a favor."

"Sure. Name it."

"I'm flying into Missoula tonight at 8:08."

"Tonight? Great! You need me to pick you up?"

"Yes, but there's something else. I need you to buy the ticket for me. It's Avis flight 443, LaGuardia to Denver. Then flight 117 to Missoula. I need to get out of New York right away. Use my name for the ticket and my connects as the password and I'll pick it up at the kiosk."

"What's going on? You don't sound so good."

"I can't talk right now but I'll tell you all about it when you pick me up."

"Is everything okay?"

“I’ll be fine. I really can’t talk right now.”

“All right,” Zach said. “It’ll be great to see you.”

Ania hung up as the cab pulled alongside the curb. She sat still for a moment, giving herself a chance to reconsider what she was doing. She couldn’t imagine any alternatives, so she thumbed the fare and a generous tip into her assistant and stepped out of the cab.

“Luggage, ma’am?” A porter asked her.

“Luggage?” Ania shook her head and went through the automatic glass doors and toward a bank of ticket kiosks. She typed in her password and pulled her ticket from the machine.

Her plane wasn’t boarding yet and she knew she’d have trouble sitting still so she walked to a newsstand to relieve some stress and get her mind off her troubles. She unsnapped her purse as she walked toward the brightly lit shop, recessed into the wall behind a glass front.

Ania scanned the meager selection of magazines and the even smaller selection of books and then looked through the many racks of interactives specially designed for the small screens on the backs of airplane seats. The clerk was at the center of the shop inside a square counter with items stocked on all sides. Ania stood at the back of the square, behind the clerk, studying the neat rows of hair care products, nail clippers and medications. She picked up a thin foil packet containing a dozen aspirin tablets, then turned and crossed her arms with the packet enclosed in her fist. She looked around the shop once more then wandered out the door with her arms still crossed.

53. Work

Greg Molson swiveled his bulked-up body from side to side as he sat in a captain’s chair outside the entrance to Molson Marine, a business he had run, more or less, since his dad’s third

heart failed five years before. Greg had nailed his favorite chair to the unpainted wooden porch where years ago his father, who started the business after retiring from General Motors, had plunked an American flag into an antique milk can.

The can and flag stayed there until earlier that spring when, in a burst of inspired business management, Greg threw out the old, ragged flag, put the milk can out by M-23 with a “free” sign on it and hired a young woman with an associate’s degree in bookkeeping from the community college in Alpena.

Getting rid of the milk can gave him room on the porch for the captain’s chair and hiring the young woman to come in once a week to make sure the numbers all added up gave him time to use it. Greg was determined not to burn through three hearts like his dad and if that meant a little less income, so be it. But sometimes, after lounging in the afternoon sun for an hour or so on a slow day, Greg would be energized by his father’s dying words: “Greg, don’t fuck up the business or so help me God I’ll come back and kick your ass.”

Greg wore vintage reflective wraparound sunglasses, a bright blue tank top and a sailor’s cap. His baggy white cotton pants were rolled halfway up his calves and he swiveled slowly in his chair like a weathervane in a mild, indecisive breeze.

When Jim and Cazin pulled into the parking lot, Greg had been thinking hard about unpacking the fourteen boxes of beach wear that had arrived the day before. Greg watched Cazin’s car cross the lot and park behind his shop, leaving it hidden from the road. He decided that after he dealt with these two customers he’d take care of the new shipment.

54. Busted

Ania walked back to her boarding gate but there was a long line at the security arch. She looked around at the swarm of blank-faced travelers and wondered if any of them were after her. If they were willing to kill the colonists, they wouldn't hesitate to keep her quiet. Maybe it was better to keep moving.

She regretted answering the phone when Jaspers had called. And what did she say? She was going home? He had to know she meant Montana. And he knew that she had talked to Barker. Maybe she should warn Barker. About what, she didn't know.

Ania saw a smiling man walking toward her. He wore a tightly cropped gray beard and used a cane, although he didn't seem to rely on it. She knew it was crazy to worry that the cane had a poison tip, but it still made her heart race. The man continued toward her, smiling. Ania turned and walked back toward her gate and looked behind her to see if the man was still there and didn't notice another man ahead of her wearing a business suit and dark glasses. As he walked he was preoccupied with pulling something from his shirt pocket and, like Ania, wasn't watching where he was going. When Ania turned forward the man in the sunglasses bumped into her, jolting her hard enough to stop her momentum. He apologized and kept walking. Ania took a few more steps and then heard the final boarding call for her flight so she cut across the hallway, excusing herself as she slipped past people.

Taking her place at the security arch behind two others, she tried to calm herself by breathing slowly and deeply. She thought of Bea, her granddaughter, and remembered the holo pen she bought. She thought about the pie they baked together the last time she was in Bozeman and their plans to make a cake next time. A cake with pink frosting.

She wondered if she could handle the pressure. She couldn't make any more mistakes. This was serious. She was flying across the country and leaving her husband. She had accused him and the president of conspiracy and murder – of authoring a national tragedy. She felt herself coming undone and she needed to keep herself together. Inventing assassins with poison-tipped canes wouldn't help. In just a few hours she would be with people who loved her.

She realized how wrong she had been to think that she could solve everything by telling Barker what she knew. Everyone would want to know his source and she would be found out. And if there wasn't proof, she would be called a liar and a traitor. What proof did she have?

As Ania approached the security arch she realized she still had the aspirin packet in her hand so she reached down to unsnap her purse but it was already unsnapped. When she stepped forward under the scanning arch she unfurled her fingers to let the aspirin drop but felt something odd. She looked into her purse and saw that it was half-filled with tiny plastic balls. An alarm sounded and security guards swarmed around her, pushing her against a wall.

55. Progress

Mirellen and the TractorPix skirted the rugged hills that encircled Moskey Basin. They would follow the line of hills south and then east for ten clicks until they reached a pass that led through the hills and onto the southern end of the basin. From there it would be an easy one-click hike to the station. A more direct route would mean climbing through the hills – difficult and dangerous for Mirellen, impossible for the TractorPix.

Unless a change in direction was needed, or a placement required a specific background, the TractorPix followed behind and kept Mirellen at the center of its lens. Now and then the bot swung out wide for a side view or pushed ahead to look back at her marching over the dusty soil.

56. *Jimbo*

When Cazin walked around the corner of his shop from the rear parking lot, Greg Molson gave her a salute from his captain's chair. "Afternoon, Ma'am." Then he saw Jim following behind her. "Jimbo, how you doing, man?"

Molson stood up, felt the need to stretch, eschewed the porch steps and landed on the asphalt parking lot with the grace of a formerly athletic forty-four year old. He walked past Cazin and gave Jim a solid handshake. Molson had a big smile, big teeth and a thick mop of graying, sun-bleached hair.

"Haven't seen you in ages," Molson said. "I'm surprised you're up and around. You were pretty wasted last night. Damn, that was something seeing you and Ceci onscreen like that. Pretty good show, but kind of a bummer for you."

"I'll meet you inside," Cazin said to Jim.

Molson watched Cazin walk through the screen door under the sign that read "Shore Shack" in hand-painted black letters, then grinned at Jim. "You're not wasting any time, you dog you. Who is *she* and does she have a sister?"

"I want to rent Big Red," Jim said.

"Yeah, c'mon in, man," Molson said. "Fred's got her all tuned up and ready for the season. Took her out myself for a spin yesterday. She's purring like a pissed off tiger. Can't beat those old Chevy big blocks."

When they were inside Greg turned back toward Jim and showed his teeth again. "Like the new carpet?" There was three inches of sand on the floor. "Sure beats vacuuming everyday. And it's free. Kind of an atmosphere thing, too, you know?"

Cazin came out of the unisex bathroom with her hair pulled back and fresh make-up.

“We should get going,” she said to Jim. She turned to Molson. “What do we need?”

“The lady’s in a hurry,” Molson said. “The boat’s all set. Just need a couple PFDs over there.” He pointed to the far wall where a dozen life jackets hung from a large coat tree. “You don’t have to wear them, but I get my ass ground up if they ain’t on the boat.”

Cazin walked to the life jacket tree and began looking through the selection.

Molson put his shoulder into Jim and nodded toward Cazin who was bent over looking at life jackets on the lower level of the rack. “Living high is the best revenge, right?” he said quietly. “Hey, now that I see how things are, maybe I’ll give Ceci a call sometime.”

Jim snapped his head toward Molson. “*Call* her?”

“Yeah. Just give her a call and see if she’s, you know ... busy.”

Jim wondered how many people he would have to kill.

“Maybe not, huh?” Molson said.

57. Pot luck

“Hun!? Hun!? We can’t go bowling tonight!” Amber yelled, as she shambled up the stairs. Fred was in their bedroom buttoning his monogrammed shirt.

“They just announced it,” Amber said, nearly breathless standing in the bedroom doorway. “Mars Girl. She’s talking. In a couple hours.”

Fred slipped the last button through and sighed. “Amber, you’re part of a team and your team has a game tonight. You can watch Mars Girl while we bowl. There’s a hundred screens at the lanes.”

“I’m staying home,” Amber said.

“We can’t just cancel on Ted and Mollie,” Fred said, tucking in his shirt.

Amber started to respond but there was a hum throughout the house and she said,
 “Phone-Now.”

“Amber, you there?”

“Yes, Mollie. I’m upstairs.”

Mollie, with black hair, high, prominent cheekbones and an arched nose inherited from her Potawatamie grandmother, appeared on the wall screen above the dresser. “Patches is laying in your vid chair again,” she said. “It’s like I’m talking to your cat.”

Amber walked to the head of the stairs and screamed, “Paaaaatches!”

“That worked,” Mollie said. “She’s gone. Hey, I gotta skip bowling tonight. I can’t miss Mars Girl. Ted says if *I’m* staying home so is he. You and Fred should come over. We’ll do a pot luck.”

Amber smiled at Fred. “We’d love to.”

“Great!” Mollie said. “The show starts at eight.”

“We’ll stop at MASSmart’s and get some chockies for dessert, OK?”

“Excellent,” Mollie said. “London’s bringing beer.”

“London’s coming?”

“I know, I know,” Mollie said. “Ted feels sorry for him living all alone. And he’s still family. Sorta.”

58. Undone

Barker stood on one of the cockpit benches, shielding his eyes from the sun as he gazed back toward Okinisee’s marina.

“Isn’t there some way we can get the boat moving?” Barker said.

“We could pull up the anchors and see which way we drift,” Cecilia said. She sat on the companionway steps watching Mars Girl on the ReadWrite she had attached to the cabin door.

“We might hit land in a week or two. Probably Canada. Did you try Ania again?”

“No answer.” Barker stepped off the bench and sat on it. “I’ve been thinking. Maybe we could sell the story to Disney. They’re probably desperate for something that can compete with Mars Girl,” Barker said.

“Ray, that’s a great idea,” Cecilia said, turning to face him. “DisneyNews would let us tell everything.”

“We’ll have to convince Ania to go public or I doubt they’d go for it, but if Disney doesn’t have anything strong on deck they might put us on right away.”

“DisneyNews-Now,” Cecilia said.

Zinc Spender, Disney’s chief anchor, filled the ReadWrite screen, except for the upper right pip showing security vid of Ania at LaGuardia standing in line waiting to walk under the security arch. Cecilia was close enough to read the crawl at the bottom of the screen: “Wife of MASScorp CEO arrested on terror charge ... Plot to blow up jetliner ... Ania Jaspers in custody...”

Cecilia gasped and pointed at the screen. “Ray! It’s Ania. Volume-Five-Now.”

“... took place just twenty minutes ago as she attempted to board a plane scheduled to depart New York for Denver. Ania Jaspers, wife of MASScorp CEO John J. Jaspers, is being held on charges of attempted terrorism with the intent to kill or injure – an offense punishable by death. Officials on the scene say that she was carrying a purse full of Detonate balls. Administration sources tell us that the use of this new explosive indicates that this was a highly sophisticated operation, most likely backed by the Chinese. Only three days ago airport scanners

were secretly outfitted with sensing devices capable of detecting the new material, developed by Beijing for just this kind of operation, according to high-level administration sources.”

“DisneyNews has obtained the exclusive rights to the vid of the arrest,” Spender said.”

The pip grew to take over the entire screen. “What are you doing?” Ania cried as uniformed personnel and plain-clothes agents pushed her face-first against the wall, cuffed her wrists and shackled her ankles. She struggled to break free so one of the men put a stunner stick against the back of her neck and she slumped to the floor.

59. Nostalgia

The woman on Jaspers’ wall screen – sprawled on the floor, ankles and wrists bound, eyes lolling – made him think for the first time in many years about the day they met at his older brother’s backyard barbecue thirty-five years before. He remembered how their eyes had lingered as they stood talking in separate groups. Yes, she was pretty, but there was something else. There was a natural innocence. An openness.

After dinner Jaspers saw her alone at the dessert table and started a conversation that lasted most of the night. They sat on a picnic table next to each other with their feet on the bench and talked until dark. When the others went inside, they went for a walk through the new subdivision built into the Bitterroot foothills. They joked about who could run faster if a cougar attacked. Jaspers remembered how beautiful Ania was in the moonlight.

He looked at the woman on his screen – nearly unconscious, hair tangled, a spaghetti strap fallen off her shoulder, her face streaked with tears – and wondered what had happened that he could feel nothing but nostalgia for better times.

60. Burning lungs

Marching along in front of the TractorPix, with the banner displaying an ad for BigBlast Amusement Parks in the background, Mirellen stopped on a small mound of ochre and black gravel to check her wrist screen. She seemed concerned and quickly dropped to her knees. She pulled an oxygen tank from her small backpack and opened a shoulder panel in her suit to expose two thin hoses. She left one in place and pulled out the other. After removing a plastic cap from the tank in her hand, she tried to attach it to the hose but fumbled the canister. The tank fell to the ground and rolled several feet down the gravel slope.

Mirellen scrambled to retrieve the tank and tried to clean off the dust and sand that now covered its seal but her gloves made it difficult. With her shoulders heaving, she tried to attach the new tank to the hose but it wouldn't seat properly. Her lungs burned as she wiped again at the debris coating the seal but the narrow grooves were still covered. Struggling to remain conscious, she pulled a small tool that resembled a screwdriver with a metal circle on its end from a pocket on the side of her trousers and used it to flick sand particles from the seal. She was no longer attempting to breathe as she tried again to connect the tank to the hose.

This time the seal held. She toggled a switch on her shoulder panel to change tanks, then fell to the ground gulping air as she writhed in the gravel.

61. All in a day's work

Zinc Spender slid to the left of the split screen and one of the arresting officers, Lieutenant Goran Jokovic of Homeland Transportation, appeared on the right.

Jokovic, an unsmiling, pale man in his late thirties with hollow cheeks and a blonde mustache, looked like a cadaver in the harsh airport lighting. The bill of his security cap cast a

dark shadow to the tip of his nose. Behind him uniformed security officers milled around the cordoned-off security arch.

“Lieutenant Jokovic, I understand that you had reason to believe that Ania Jaspers might be up to something before she arrived at the boarding gate.”

Jokovic looked down to check the notes he had made on his assistant. “We grew suspicious when the subject indicated that she had no luggage.”

Someone spoke to him from off camera. He removed his cap and smoothed his thin blonde hair into place.

“Of course,” the lieutenant continued, “it’s not unusual for passengers to have no luggage if they’re flying from New York to Boston, but the subject was flying from New York to Denver, and then on to Missoula, Montana. People traveling that distance tend to have luggage.”

“Was that all that led you to suspect something was wrong?” Spender asked. “The lack of luggage?”

“Negative,” Jokovic said. “Our ICU cameras also profiled her as a potential threat. Before she attempted to board her flight she wandered aimlessly and showed signs of emotional stress. Once we ascertained that she was traveling without luggage we watched her closely and observed her shoplifting a packet of aspirin at a newsstand near her boarding gate. We found the stolen item in her purse along with the explosives.”

Security vid of Ania stealing the aspirin was piped into the bottom center of the screen.

“We also found four unscanned postcards in her purse so we suspected that those were also stolen. We traced them to a tourist shop in Times Square, a place called” – Jokovic checked his notes again – “Everything New York. Apparently she went on a petty crime spree before attempting to destroy the aircraft.”

Black and white vid of Ania picking out the postcards at Everything New York filled the center pip.

“Doesn’t it seem odd that Ania would steal postcards and aspirin before attempting a suicide bombing?”

“I’m no psychiatrist, sir,” Jokovic said. “I’m here to protect American citizens and those allowed to travel to our shores.”

“As I understand it,” Spender said, “Ania Jaspers purchased her ticket shortly before she attempted to board the plane.”

“That’s partially correct, sir,” Jokovic said. “The ticket was purchased by an individual in Montana and Ms. Jaspers obtained the ticket at an airport kiosk. We alerted the local authorities and her accomplice has also been arrested.”

“Good work lieutenant,” Spender said. “It looks like this is a case where everything worked the way it’s supposed to.”

“We do our best, sir.”

62. Crazy lady

At the MASSmart Guest Lounge, just inside the entrance of the huge store on M-23 a mile south of Alpena, Fred and a dozen others sat alone with beers at their elbows as they stared into the screens imbedded in their tables. The lounge was a dark and quiet refuge from the bright lights, gaudy displays and chronic vid and holo exhortations that filled the megastore, the first in northern Michigan with elevated trams shuttling shoppers from corner to corner.

Fred had almost finished his beer when Amber plunked a large plastic bag on his table and sat next to him. “Ready?” she said.

Amber had chosen a knee-length black cotton dress to wear to the Mars Girl party. Fred picked out a pair of jeans and a clean shirt.

“I thought you were just getting some chockies,” Fred said, eyeing the bulging shopping bag.

“It’s a *party*,” Amber said. “We need more than just chockies. C’mon, let’s go.”

“I want to see this,” Fred said, nodding at his table screen where plainclothes officers shoved Ania into a black van parked at the curb under an airport departure sign. Cops in riot gear held back jeering onlookers.

“Is that the crazy lady?” Amber said. “DisneyNews was on in the tram and they were talking about her.”

The bartender approached the table and asked if Amber wanted a listener. He held out a small foam, banana-shaped device.

“Oh, all right,” Amber said, slipping it behind her ear. “But we’re not staying long.”

“Shhh,” Fred said.

63. On deck

With the towel bundle stuffed under his seat and the whiskey bottle resting on his left knee, Jim steered Big Red’s long nose south along the coast toward Big Rock Point. There was still a little throttle left so he pushed the lever forward, pressing he and Cazin back against their leather seats.

To give the impression of a kidnapping, Art advised Cazin to put her hands behind her back as if they were bound. Art also told her that Karolina had finally put “High Plains

Showdown” on deck and the show was scheduled to go live as soon as “Denver Death Plane” started losing numbers.

Cazin hadn’t felt this good about a show since a married congressman hit on her in front of a hidden camera.

64. Lies that satisfy

Jaspers was alone in his office, sitting at his desk and waiting on hold for Briter to pick up. On his wall screen a Disney caster talked to a young girl clutching a Mars Girl doll. Text at the bottom of the screen read, “Saved from Denver Death Plane.”

“Jaspers, I hope you’re not going to call me every ten minutes,” Briter said, when he finally answered.

“Did you have to turn her into a deranged terrorist?” Jaspers said.

“I’m cleaning up *your* mess,” Briter said. “You try running the country and see how easy it is.”

“My wife is not a thief,” Jaspers said. “She’s not having an affair, she’s not crazy and she’s not a terrorist. Eventually all that will come out.”

“Maybe you don’t know your wife very well,” Briter said.

“I know her well enough to know it’s all bullshit and when they find out the truth, they’ll question everything else you’re saying.”

“Jaspers, it’s her or us,” Briter said. “Just back off.”

On Jasper’s screen the little girl’s mother picked her up, gave her a hug and carried her off. A man in a security uniform stepped in front of the camera and the text at the bottom of the screen changed to: “Bill Neville ID’d explosives bound for Denver Death Plane.”

“You can’t get away with making up bizarre stories whenever you want,” Jaspers said.

“If you really want to know, this morning the Village Voice sent Ania to interview the leader of the Transdniestr Liberation Congress at a café on East 89th Street,” Briter said.

“Therefore she has a history of consorting with terrorists.”

“The Trans *what?*”

“Your wife met with the TLC’s leader early this morning, the same day she attempted to blow up an airplane. The group has a history of attacking American interests, and receives funding from a Chinese front group. Connect the dots.”

“What American interests?”

“The leader’s nephew started a wastebasket on fire at a McDonald’s in the Moldovan capital two years ago. I don’t know if the shoplifting vid is real but our guys did a bang up job if we faked it. And we’ve got a half dozen people who’ve seen her taking moonlight walks with some guy out in Montana.”

“She’s got a hundred relatives out there,” Jaspers said.

“Preliminary numbers say that seventy-eight percent of likely voters believe Ania is a thieving, philandering terrorist,” Briter said. “When the Mars Girl interview starts in a little while everyone will forget about her anyway. The only thing people will remember tomorrow is that we stopped a nutcase terrorist from bringing down a plane full of innocent people. Lies that satisfy always beat the messy truth.”

On the screen the security officer stepped away from the camera and a pilot took his place. “Captain of Denver Death Plane” appeared at the bottom of the screen. Pipped into the lower left, Ania’s friend Zach Forellon was led from his house to a waiting police van parked on his quiet, tree-lined street in Missoula. His wrists and ankles were shackled.

“What are you going to tell the FBI?” Briter asked.

“Christ, I don’t know,” Jaspers said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “How about ‘she beats our dog.’”

“Good,” Briter said.

“Good? Briter, this is insane.”

“It’s good because no one can prove you wrong. And tell them about the weird things she’s been saying.”

“You mean like people are out to get her?”

“Perfect.”

65. Cat and mouse

Mary Belle and Brandon stood shoulder to shoulder on the fifty-eighth floor in a room crowded with platoons of switch and connection boxes silently processing a world of data.

Wyndela Mahoney, sitting on a stool in front of Mary Belle and Brandon, made a makeshift private screening room by hanging a ReadWrite from the top of one of the boxes so she could show what she had found. Wyndela leaned her big-boned frame over a black box the size of a paperback book with a ten-key pad and a flip-up display panel.

“It usually doesn’t take me this long to undo a signal,” Wyndela said. Her kinky, rusty hair hid her freckled, milk chocolate face as she bowed over her scanner. “They put some extra effort into this one.”

Until the International Data Rights Agreement shut her down two years before, Wyndela had run a pirate shop out of a stolid low-rise in Kabul and fed news organizations throughout the world with vid she lifted from any device connected to a satellite.

She didn't like talking about it, but it was Wyndela's month-long effort to break into Princess Larissa's assistant, where she found coronation week vid of the Prince of Wales' all night, drug-laced orgies, that convinced British voters to favor a referendum cutting the Royals' annual stipend in half.

IDRA ended the careers of most data thieves but it also created a ready supply of talent for information security departments that corporations were staffing in larger and larger numbers. Despite the name, I-Secs were more concerned with spying than securing their own data. Trading in data belonging to other companies was illegal but it was sound business practice to happen upon a competitor's signal pulsing through space and beat its encryption.

Wyndela's job at MASSnews was to play the cat and mouse game of scanning satellites for DisneyNews preshow vid to see what the competition had in its pipeline. Wyndela's years of experience trying to beat the best encrypters on the planet made her the top spy on the MASSnews staff.

When Wyndela connected with Disney's pre-show vid of Big Red carrying Jim and Cazin south toward Big Rock Bay she thought it was important enough to call Brandon. He called Mary Belle and she called Rindell.

The DisneyNews floater flew above Big Red and looked straight down into the speedboat's cockpit. Cazin's arms were behind her and Jim lifted the bottle off his thigh to take a drink.

Rindell, finally relieved of anchor duty by morning anchor Sally Timmens, burst into the room. "What've we got?" Rindell said, as he elbowed his way past Brandon and Mary Belle and stood next to Wyndela.

“Jim,” Mary Belle said. “From last night. Barker and Cecilia are still on the boat and Jim’s going after them.”

“Does Jim know he’s onscreen?” Rindell said, watching Jim and Cazin motoring south toward Big Rock Point.

“Hard to say,” Wyndela said. “But I doubt it.”

The scene changed to a view from Cazin’s Upix looking through the windscreen, then a close-up of Jim when Cazin turned toward him. Jim held up the half-full bottle to check its contents and took a drink.

The scene switched back to the floater, which held steady behind the boat and kept Big Rock Point in the background.

“How about a location?” Rindell said.

“They’re traveling south and they’re about four clicks from the sailboat,” Wyndela said. “Once they get around that point, they should be able to see it.”

As if on cue, the floater shot up into the air for a look over the peninsula and zoomed in on the distant sailboat.

“When are they going live?” Rindell said.

“No way to be sure unless they start teasing it,” Wyndela said.

“*If* they tease it,” Mary Belle said.

“Who’s the caster?” Rindell said.

“Cazin,” Wyndela said. “Brenda Cazin. She was in Detroit covering the Auto Show. She only has a few nationals to her credit. I’ve picked up her stuff lots of times before. For some reason they’re using outdated encryptions for her Chicago shows. Barker sees almost

everything Cazin's ever bounced off a satellite. He steals a show or two every month. It's so easy I almost feel sorry for her."

"But you said this one was tougher," Mary Belle said.

"That's what got my attention," Wyndela said. "This one's going through their security system in Anaheim and they're working hard to keep everybody out."

"Where's the gun?" Rindell said.

"Not sure where it is right now," Wyndela said. "But they ran some B-vid a few minutes ago of him shooting at the sailboat from a couple different places and they've got some good stuff of him putting the gun to his head and pointing it at Cazin. They could build one hell of a teaser from what I've seen."

"We need to get Barker and Cecilia out of there quick," Brandon said. "We've got too much invested in Mars Girl to let them cut into our numbers with this."

All four watched in silence as Jim took another drink and reached below the seat. He pulled the gun from the towel and took aim at a seagull floating in the breeze ahead of the boat. When he squeezed the trigger the bird folded its wings and dropped to the water.

"Perfect," Rindell said. "Good work, Wyndela. I'll take it from here." He pushed past Brandon and Mary Belle and headed for the door but turned back before he left the room. "I don't want anyone but me talking to Barker and Cecilia."

66. There it is

Fred pulled the wrecker out of the MASSmart parking lot and headed south on M-23 toward Okinisee.

“You better step on it,” Amber said. “The party’s already started and Mars Girl’s gonna be at that station soon.”

Amber pulled a ReadWrite out of the glove box, unrolled it and pressed its adhesion strips onto the dash. “MASSnews-Now,” she said.

Mirellen and the TractorPix were still working their way south along the hills toward the pass that led onto Moskey Basin. To her left was a hill formed by ridges of stratified rock, like huge steps leading to the top.

Mirellen stopped and gazed up toward the hill’s summit and looked for a way to climb up onto the first ridge. She looked back at the bot and pointed at her eyes, then toward the top of the hill. The bot’s camera went side to side to warn her away from the hill, but Mirellen had already pulled herself up onto the first ledge and didn’t look back.

She moved quickly up the ledges. Some were low enough that she could simply step up to the next one, others required her to search for hand and foot holds to pull herself up in the low Martian gravity. Twice, she had to take a few steps back to leap over narrow chasms. The TractorPix, unable to climb the ridges, stayed at the bottom of the hill and occasionally repositioned itself to get a better view of her ascent.

After scurrying up the final ridge, Mirellen scanned Moskey Basin stretching out before her. She was careful to keep her balance in the shifting, bowling-ball-sized rocks that covered the hill’s summit. Suddenly she pointed across the plain, straight ahead from where she stood. She turned back toward the TractorPix, still waiting at the bottom of the hill, and pumped her arm repeatedly toward the other side of the basin where the Gemini Cricket Family Restaurants Mars Station reflected the pink evening sun. When she turned back to look again, the rocks under her feet gave way and she fell out of view.

Amber screamed and Fred, just pulling away from Okinisee's only stoplight, jerked the car to a halt in the middle of the intersection.

"What? What?" Fred said.

Amber covered her mouth and pointed at the ReadWrite.

67. Chance of a lifetime

"Poor Ania," Cecilia said. "Maybe we should call Disney and tell them we know she's innocent. Tell them she was framed."

"They've already got their storyline," Barker said. "Disney won't want to muddy the waters."

"Bad things are going to keep happening unless we do something," Cecilia said. She had rolled out her ReadWrite on the galley table between them. She watched MPs hustle Ania into the brig at an unnamed naval base.

Barker heard the dull moan of an engine. He bounded up the companionway steps only to see a fishing boat several hundred yards out and sailing away toward shore.

He turned to go back into the cockpit but stopped when his head hummed.

"Barker."

"Rindell here. I'm going to give you the chance of a lifetime."

"My lifetime has a chance of ending pretty soon because of you," Barker said. "I've been dodging bullets all day."

"I made you a rich man. You're welcome."

"I'm sure your cut was bigger than mine, so the way I see it you owe me a favor. Here's what I want: You put Cecilia and me on..."

“Barker, I’m the one with the ideas,” Rindell said. “I want you and Cecilia to do the Mars Girl interview.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’ll give you a half percent on the gross,” Rindell said. “Give Cecilia whatever cut you want. Add this to what you made last night and you’ll have more money than the Pope.”

“You’re can’t be serious.”

“Barker, I’ve got better things to do than fuck with you.”

“We’re in the middle of nowhere stuck on a broken down boat.”

“I know. You’ll be on just after 8:00”

“We need two percent.”

“Goddamn it Barker, I just offered you a fortune.”

“Two percent.”

“One percent. Final offer.”

“I want a contract.”

“It’ll be on your assistant in a couple minutes,” Rindell said. “Bocelli will run the floater. You’ve got your Upix with you?”

“Of course.”

“You and Cecilia sign the contract when you get it and your money will be deposited an hour after the show wraps. Standard procedure.”

68. Let’s see some shooting

Big Red was close enough to Big Rock Point that Cazin could see separation between the peninsula and Block Island.

She could hear Art in her head. “Mars Girl just disappeared over the side of a hill so ‘Denver Death Plane’ is dropping like a rock. You’ll have to win back the eyeballs on your own. Karolina doesn’t want to tip off MASS so we’re not doing any teasers. We’ll go live when you get closer to the sailboat. By the way, we’re calling your show ‘High Plains Showdown’ so Jim better be ready to use that gun. I practically had to guarantee Karolina that we’d see some shooting.”

Cazin, her hands still behind her back, resisted the urge to bite her nails.

69. Opportunity knocks

Barker came down the companionway steps and sat across from Cecilia, resting her chin in her hand and still watching “Denver Death Plane” at the galley table. The screen was split in two for replays of Ania’s arrest at the airport and Zach’s arrest at his home in Missoula. The slow motion vid was redone in grainy black and white.

“Rindell wants us to do the Mars Girl interview,” Barker said.

Cecilia raised her eyes from the ReadWrite.

“We’re live with Mars Girl a little after 8:00,” Barker said.

Cecilia stared at him, waiting for a smirk to betray the joke. “You’re not serious. That doesn’t make sense.”

“Rindell said he picked us because of last night’s numbers.” Barker slid his assistant across the table to show her the contract. “He’s offering us one percent on what could be the biggest grossing show ever. He could offer a hundredth of a percent and no one would consider turning it down. All we have to do is sign it and the show is ours.”

Cecilia's eyes lit up. "This is better than we could have hoped for. We can tell the entire world about the sabotage. How should we do it? Just blurt it out?"

"Let's think about this," Barker said. "There's no reason we can't wait until tomorrow to tell the world. You know, *after* we get paid. That will give us time to check Ania's story."

"We'll never have an audience like tonight," Cecilia said. "Plus, look at what they're doing to Ania. Who's next? We have to do it now. We can't wait."

Barker picked a black olive off the remaining slice of pizza and ate it. "I was afraid you'd say that."

Cecilia looked up from Barker's assistant. "Do these contracts always say they don't have to pay if the casters die during the show?"

70. *She dead yet?*

Molly was setting out plates and silverware on her kitchen counter when London, trying not to limp, came in the back door carrying two thirty packs of beer. In big block letters his T-shirt read "New York Fucking City" and almost covered his ample belly.

"She dead yet?" London said, setting the beer on the polished copper table in the breakfast nook. His hairless head was shaped like an anvil and the folds in his double chin were rubbed red by chafing stubble.

"That's not funny," Molly said as she wrapped forks in paper napkins, then tied them closed with ribbon.

"Wasn't a joke," London said. "Keep my beers cold, willya?" He ripped open one of the packs, pulled out two cans of Boxer Rebel Beer and took them into the living room where Amber

and Fred sat next to each other on the couch watching “The Mars Girl Show” on the wall screen. Without saying hello, London sat on the far end of the couch next to Amber.

“She was just ... *so excited*,” Amber said as she dabbed her eyes with a tissue. “She could see the restaurant sign. She was almost there. That girl just breaks my heart.”

The TractorPix was trying to find a way up the hill but the ridges were too high for its retractable arms.

“Isn’t there a ball game on?” London said, looking at Molly’s husband, Ted, who came out of the bathroom and sat in the easy chair past the couch. “I think the Tigers are playing tonight.”

Amber gave London an elbow in the ribs.

Ted checked his wrist screen. “Yeah, started ten minutes ago.”

“Maybe she’s all right,” Fred said. “Those space suits are tough. They can stop bullets.”

“No one’s gonna shoot at her on Mars,” Amber said.

“The Martians got snipers in them hills,” London said, aiming a pretend gun.

Amber gave him another elbow in the ribs.

“You put up with this kind a shit from her, Fred?” London said, rubbing his side. “My woman does that to me she gets it back double.”

“You don’t *have* a woman,” Amber said. “You’re zero for three, remember?”

“Their friggin’ loss,” London said, popping the top on one of his beers.

The TractorPix couldn’t find a way up the hill so it bounced along at top speed on its original path toward the pass.

“They’ve *got* to find her,” Amber said. “They’ve just got to.”

“If she’s dead we can still catch most of the game, huh Fred?” London said.

Amber reared back and slugged him in the shoulder.

71. I know what I'm doing

Jaspers stormed into Rindell's office and slammed the door behind him. "You *cannot* be serious. Barker and Cecilia are *not* doing the interview."

Rindell, reviewing new ad rates, didn't bother looking up. "Back off Jaspers," he said. "I know what I'm doing."

"No, you don't," Jaspers pounded his fist on Rindell's desk. "If we're lucky, Mars Girl didn't survive the fall off the hill. If she did, Sally's doing the interview. Case closed."

Rindell laid the rate sheets on his desk and leaned back in his chair. "I'm sure Mars Girl is fine and I'm also sure that Barker and Cecilia are doing the interview."

"I'm the CEO of this corporation and you will do what I say," Jaspers said. His eyes bore into Rindell.

"Jaspers, I really don't think you want to fight me on this. I've raised MASScorp shares more than seventeen percent in the last thirty hours. I've given MASSnews its first profitable month ever."

Jaspers leaned across Rindell's desk. "*You?* You didn't do that. *I* did. I had the balls to take the risk and it's paying off but you're ruining everything."

Rindell rose from his chair to meet Jaspers' glare. "We've got two hot casters and everybody wants to see them again. The husband of one of them is armed, drunk and going after her lover, who happens to be one of the casters. We've got that *and* Mars Girl. The stars are aligned for us tonight and you're blind if you can't see it."

“No, *you’re* blind!” Jaspers said. “You’re blind because there are things you don’t know. You put Barker and Cecilia onscreen with Mars Girl and MASSnews is finished. *I’m* finished.”

Rindell had never heard fear in Jaspers’ voice. He sat down, leaned back in his chair and motioned for Jaspers to sit down. “Then you better tell me what’s going on, and make it fast.”

72. Something pretty bad

Wyndela had lost the Disney preshow because of a satellite switch so she watched Jethro Clampett explain his fascination with his family’s ce-ment pond on one of her four wall screens, each surrounded by pictures of famous gangsters, from Blackbeard to Mats Wilkie, the first to successfully rob an orbiting casino. Her rack of gadgets teraflopped through code permutations looking for the DisneyNews signal but so far all she could find were decoys – relic TV shows like “The Beverly Hillbillies” and “Dallas.”

As Ellie Mae dipped her toe into the pool, Wyndela’s head hummed and she lowered the screen’s volume.

“Hi, Ray, how you holding up?”

“Never better,” Barker said. “Hey, you still gonna break my heart and get married?”

“In three weeks,” Wyndela said. “You coming?”

“Wouldn’t miss it. Are we on a secure connect?”

“As secure as it gets, which doesn’t mean much anymore.”

“I need to talk to Jaspers. I want you to put me through to his direct.”

“Ray, I’m not in love with this job, but I really don’t want to get fired. I’m already breaking Rindell’s rules just by talking to you.”

“So Rindell’s in on it too?”

“In on what?”

There’s something happening. Something pretty bad.”

“I know,” Wyndela said. “I’m the one who found the preshow.”

“What preshow?”

“The Disney show.”

“Wyn, what are you talking about?”

“Jim and the DisneyNews caster. In the boat. Heading your way.”

“Jim?”

“You know, Cecilia’s husband,” Wyndela said. “Or ex or whatever the hell he is. You didn’t know?”

“What kind of boat?” Barker stood and scanned the water around him.

“It’s a big red speed boat,” Wyndela said. “They’re coming from the north.”

Barker looked over top of the cabin roof and could just make out Big Red’s white-capped wake in the distance. He called down the companionway to Cecilia, watching Mars Girl background vid Piper had sent to the ReadWrite. “You better connect, Cecilia.”

“Your pal Cazin is with him,” Wyndela said. “Jim’s been drinking all day and he’s got a gun. I can’t believe Rindell didn’t tell you.”

Cecilia came up on deck carrying her monocular. Barker pointed toward Big Rock Point and Cecilia found the speedboat.

“That’s Big Red out of Alpena,” Cecilia said. “Looks like two people in the cockpit.”

“Wyn, there are bigger things happening than Jim,” Barker said. “I need to talk to Jaspers. You need to put me through on his direct.”

“You gotta tell me what this is all about, Ray. At least give me a reason why I should get myself fired.”

“The Mars crash wasn’t an accident,” Barker said.

“MarsDestiny? Ray, you’re going too far with this one.”

“No, I’m serious,” Barker said. “This is real. Jaspers is in on it and the White House too. I just need a couple minutes on Jaspers’ direct to prove it.”

“Ray, I usually go along with your stories but you can’t accuse the president of murder just to help your numbers. Even you should know better than that.”

“Wyndela, I swear to you I’m not making this up,” Barker said.

“You don’t know me very well,” Cecilia said, “but you need to believe us. We’re serious and we need your help.”

73. Footprints on Mars

Amber could hardly contain herself. “Footprints! They found her!”

“Oh, joyous day,” London said, popping the top off another beer.

“They found foootpriints!” Amber yelled toward the kitchen where Molly was preparing a tray of burgers.

“They haven’t found *her*,” Fred said, still sitting next to Amber on the couch.

“Who else would be making footprints?” Amber said.

The TractorPix zoomed in on the dimpled tread marks Mirellen’s boots had made in the Martian dust and its camera followed the prints until they disappeared around a hillock.

The bot moved fast, making the image jump and jolt on the screen.

“That damn bot’s gonna make me barf,” London said.

The TractorPix rounded a corner and stopped where the footprints led out of the hills and straight across Moskey Basin. The bot zoomed in on Mirellen, limping slightly as she trudged toward the station.

74. Under control

Jaspers paced in front of his desk, waiting for Briter to return his call.

“JJ, your daughter wants to talk to you,” Helena announced from his desk screen. “She’s pretty upset.”

Jaspers walked behind his desk and was about to connect with Regan when his direct line hummed so he took that instead.

“Briter?” he said.

“Mr. Jaspers, we’ve never met, and I hope we never do, but you know me as Black Goat.” Wyndela disguised Barker’s voice by taking it down a step and adding a breathless, nervous quality.

“Who is this?” Jaspers said.

“Briter said we’re secure so don’t bother pretending. We need to talk.”

“Who ... there are procedures, damn it.”

“We’ve got bigger problems than procedures,” Barker said.

“I don’t like this,” Jaspers said. “I don’t like this at all.”

“Yeah, well I don’t like the Feds crawling all over me. They must know something’s up. I can’t make a move right now. You and Briter need to do something or we’re all going down.”

“I want to know who you are.”

“Damn it, forget the cloak and dagger stuff and deal with the problem,” Barker said. “I need more time so I want you to make sure the interview lasts as long as possible. I wrote some code to knock out the station’s O₂, but I can’t run it right now. Briter’s going to try some kind of decoy to get the FBI guys out of here. You following all this?”

“Get Briter on the line,” Jaspers said.

“Call him yourself,” Barker said. “We’re running out of time.”

“Briter told me you had things under control,” Jaspers fumed. “He said Mars Girl would be dead before they could download her head. What the hell is wrong with you people? I can’t believe the president is so incompetent. I don’t care what you have to do, just do it. We don’t have much ...” Jaspers moved his assistant away from his ear to check the time and saw data on the incoming call at the top of its screen. It should have told him that the source was Houston, but the ID said Michigan.

“Over-Now,” Jaspers blurted. He dropped his assistant onto his desk and buried his face in his hands. When he looked up at his wall screen he saw a distant view of the station, shot by the TractorPix as it raced across the basin. When the bot’s camera zoomed in on the station, its windows lit up and the glowing, two-headed Gemini Cricket rose above the three modules, waving an American flag in each of its hands.

75. Fate

Wyndela sat in her office making a mental list of the reasons she shouldn’t get involved in Barker and Cecilia’s scheme. When her head hummed, she answered it.

“Wyn, it’s real,” Barker said. “Jaspers admitted the crash was planned. Listen.”

Barker played his conversation with Jaspers for Wyndela. Her mental list changed from reasons she shouldn't get involved to a list of equipment she would need to make it work. She was getting the old feeling back, the excitement and danger of bringing down the high and mighty.

"Convinced?" Barker said, after the replay finished.

"I could name a dozen federal laws we're breaking just by talking about this," Wyndela said.

She picked up a canvas bag from the floor and began filling it with personal items from her desk – a picture of her fiancé, a pirate hat sent to her by a Canadian judge she vindicated, a picture of her and her mom holding hands on a beach.

"In a few weeks," Wyndela said, "I'm marrying a guy who loves me and we're going to have a baby girl in the fall. Chances are good I'll go to jail for this so what's going to happen to her?" Wyndela picked up a picture of her grandmother, who raised her after her mother died when a landmine exploded under her troop transporter on a Syrian highway.

"You were born to do this," Barker said. "It's fate."

"I don't believe in fate," Wyndela said, stuffing her grandmother's picture into her bag. "I'll need at least thirty minutes to get the new network up."

Cecilia used her monocular to look across the bay at Big Red. "Can you do it sooner?" she said.

"I'll try."

"Cecilia likes the name notMASS," Barker said.

"All right, that'll work," Wyndela said, with a deep sigh, looking around the office she was sure she'd never see again.

76. It gets worse

Jaspers stared into the sheen of his varnished mahogany desk, listening to his sobbing daughter ask question after question about her mother. All Jaspers could muster was an occasional “I don’t know.” While Regan spoke, he tried to remember which South American country gave safe haven to wealthy criminals. Paraguay? Maybe Uruguay.

His direct hummed and Jaspers hoped it was Briter calling him back. He told Regan he had to take a call with the excuse that it was someone with more information about Ania.

“Jaspers, why do you keep calling me?” Briter said. “I told you before. Black Goat will come through for us. Just stop calling.”

“There’s something I need to tell you,” Jaspers said. “I think Barker knows about the sabotage. Ania talked to him before she was arrested. He just called me and ... I might have told him that Ania’s right.”

“The caster? He knows? Jaspers, what the hell is wrong with you?”

“It gets worse,” Jaspers said. “Rindell’s got Barker and Cecilia doing the Mars Girl interview.”

Briter was silent for a moment. “You’re telling me Barker knows about the sabotage and he’s going onscreen with Mars Girl?”

“That’s Rindell’s plan.”

“Then change the plan!”

“There’s another problem,” Jaspers said. “I talked to Rindell. He knows too.”

“Jaspers! What the *hell*...”

“I thought if I told him he’d understand why Barker and Cecilia can’t do the show. But after I told him he said if I tried to stop him he’d go onscreen himself and tell everything.”

“Have you completely lost your mind? Did you tell anyone else? Your neighbor? Your barber?”

“Listen, Ania called Barker and Cecilia so that implicates them in the Death Plane plot, right? They’re terrorists. We can deal with Rindell later. I think he’s with us for now.”

“I can’t believe you’re such a fuck up,” Briter said.

“Briter, I didn’t ask for this.”

“All right, all right, all right,” Briter said, trying to focus. “Your wife’s been in contact with Barker and Cecilia so we’ll build a conspiracy case and send some firepower after the casters. They’ll die guilty. I think we’ve taken care of Ania but you better let me know pronto if Rindell gets out of line.”

77. Trouble

Wyndela ran the three blocks to her loft. When she unlocked the door she saw Marvin on the living room couch eating a plate of nachos and watching Mars Girl on the wall screen.

“Wyn! I thought you’d be working until midnight,” Marvin said. He put his plate on the coffee table and walked to the door to give her a hug.

Wyndela let the hug happen but didn’t participate.

“Everything all right?” Marvin said.

Wyndela, breathing hard from her run, leaned back against the door. She held her canvas bag in one hand and her forehead in the other. “You love me, right?” she said.

“You know I do, baby,” Marvin said.

“I’m going to do something that could get me into a lot of trouble and I want you to help. We could both go to prison.”

78. Excitement!

The hockey-rink sized MASSscreen unfurled across Times Square and one-hundred-dollar bills began fluttering from two small, remote-controlled MASS blimps, sending people leaping into the air and scrambling on the ground. People in the square messaged friends and they messaged others and within ten minutes police put up barricades to keep traffic away from the crowd filling the streets.

The clock at the bottom of the screen had just passed three minutes as it ticked down the time until “Mars Girl Talks!” A dance version of the Mars Girl theme thumped from microspeakers attached to the facades of buildings and many in the crowd moved to its beat.

Rindell, standing on a half-circle balcony attached to the MASS Building four stories above Times Square, warmed up the crowd while techs scurried behind him preparing for the show. The music faded to half its volume as Rindell’s voice carried across the crowd and his face appeared on the MASSscreen.

“Is everybody having a good time?” Rindell shouted.

The crowd roared.

“We’ve got lots of surprises for you tonight,” Rindell said. “I can’t tell you about all of them, but I can tell you the little blessing we just gave you is only a down payment. We’ve got a great show and we’ll keep the blessings coming as long as you do your part. We want excitement! We want noise!”

The screen flashed “Scream!” in bright orange letters.

The crowd roared again and the blimps let loose with another shower of bills.

79. All hard ass

Seaman Lyte stood very much at ease in the Captain's quarters aboard the Coast Guard cutter William H. Milliken as it steamed south toward Big Rock Bay from its base on Thunder Island near Alpena. Captain Tozo, a third generation Japanese-American who had lost most of his Asian features – although not his jet-black hair – due to a Polish grandmother and a Mexican mother, sat at his metal desk and tried to impress upon Seaman Lyte the significance of his mission. Lyte, his too-large uniform hanging loosely on his lanky frame, stood with his legs crossed at the ankles. His thumbs were hooked on his front pockets, and his cap, with sandy locks sticking out from underneath, was turned backwards.

“All right, Lyte, this is beyond important,” Tozo said. “This is fucking vital. You gotta love this assignment like life itself.”

“I need some details, Toze,” Lyte said.

“Knock off the ‘Toze’ shit,” Tozo said. “It’s ‘sir’ or ‘Captain Tozo.’ And straighten your hat.”

Lyte winced. “Why are you getting all hard ass?”

“I’m serious about this,” Tozo said, standing up from his desk. “This is big. Real big. We’ve got orders from all the way up the line.”

“Toze, this is the *Coast Guard*,” Lyte said. “If it was that big they’d give it to someone else.”

“You want to spend a night in the brig, smart ass?” Tozo said.

“C’mon, Tozeman. Cut the dark side shit. You’re one of us.”

“Not any more. I got forces working on me you can’t even comprehend, so don’t fuck with me or I’ll bust your ass.”

As a junior officer, Tozo was at the helm for the first time in his career because the ship's two senior captains were unavailable. One was on leave in Toronto, the other ate some bad smoked whitefish and was spending most of his time in the officer's latrine.

Tozo leaned forward with his fists on his desk and stared at Lyte. "I'm waiting."

"For what?"

"Straighten your hat."

Lyte rolled his eyes, then reached up and pulled his hat around so it was almost straight.

80. Do the right thing

Marvin Malone was a large, strong and patient man. He could have stood in the foyer of the apartment he shared with Wyndela all day holding the pile of switch boxes, cables and ReadWrites she had placed piece by piece in his outstretched arms as she went from room to room pulling equipment from buried boxes and high shelves.

While he stood there holding the ever-growing pile of paraphernalia, Wyndela gave him a nearly word-for-word recitation of the conversation between Jaspers and Barker, pausing when she ducked into a closet or had to stretch to reach something.

Wyndela came out of their bedroom with the last item on her list, a small parabolic dish, and placed it on top of the other gadgets, blocking Marvin's view.

"And when he realized it was Barker, he hung up," She said. "Ready?"

"Sure," he said from behind the pile.

Wyndela removed the dish and tried to give him a kiss but couldn't get close enough because of the armful of equipment.

"It was a nice thought," Marvin said.

Wyndela stood at the door with her hand on the knob. She turned to face Marvin.

“You’re sure you want to do this?” she said.

“You still think it’s the right thing to do?” Marvin said.

“I know it’s the right thing to do,” Wyndela said.

“And we can make it work?”

“The network’s a piece of cake.”

“Then let’s do it,” Marvin said.

81. Dead or alive

“All right, listen up,” Tozo said, and sat down behind his desk. “You’re going to take the dinghy and pick up two people. A man and a woman. They’re stranded in a sailboat anchored in Big Rock Bay. Their mast is busted and their cell’s out of juice.”

Lyte shook his head. “You’ve got the wrong guy for the job.”

“Don’t even try to get out of this,” Tozo said, rising out of his chair.

“You’re talking about Ray Barker,” Lyte said. “I told him earlier today that he was screwed.”

“What?” Tozo said, crinkling his face.

“He called this morning when I was riding the desk. I told him we weren’t supposed to help him because he was just causing trouble. Remember the memo?”

“He’s never seen you,” Tozo said. “Don’t worry about it.”

“I told him my name when I answered. And he’ll recognize my voice.”

“Then don’t say anything.”

“Might as well tell me to stop breathing.”

“Listen, Lyte. You’re not getting out of this. You’ve got at least half a brain, which is more than I can say for the rest of the clowns on this ship. So you’re it. And the two subjects might be dead anyway by the time you get there. There’s some nut with a gun after them.”

“Jim?”

“I don’t have any names.”

“From the news last night. Didn’t you see it?”

“I’ve got nocturnal four-month-old twins,” Tozo said, suddenly weary. “Just bring them back to the ship dead or alive. You’ll take delivery from Sheriff Angstrom. He’s on his way to the scene in a chopper right now. He’ll beat you there by a good ten minutes.”

“I really, *really* hope they’re not dead,” Lyte said. “I’m not into that.”

“Lyte, you’ll collect them no matter what,” Tozo said, losing his patience. “Then bring them back to the boat *immediately*. If they’re alive, it’s extremely important that they don’t know anything’s up.”

“What if they’re dead?” Lyte said.

“Damn it, Lyte. Get serious. Pick ‘em up, bring ‘em back here and don’t say anything.”

82. Ready for anything

Barker attached the ReadWrite to the rear of the cockpit so he and Cecilia could use it as a monitor during the interview. As he secured the bottom of the screen to the deck he heard Cecilia coming up the companionway steps.

“Good news?” Barker asked without turning around.

“Maybe,” Cecilia said.

Barker finished attaching the ReadWrite and walked to Cecilia, looking north at Big Red as it plied toward them. Barker massaged Cecilia's shoulders from behind.

"I called the sheriff's office," she said. "They got a call from some general so they're sending a chopper to pick us up. It's already on its way."

"A general?" Barker said. "I'm not sure I like that."

"After being ignored, now we're getting too much attention," Cecilia said.

"Are you ready for this?" he said, wrapping his arms around her.

"Ready for what?" she said. "Telling the world that the president's a murderer? Jim shooting at us? Getting arrested?"

"Yeah," Barker said. "All that."

83. Breathe

The TractorPix scrambled across the windswept rock surrounding the station, trying to find an angle that would allow it to see Mirellen inside. The bot finally found her, still wearing her space suit and standing in front of a display panel on the second story of the module that contained the living room, kitchen and sleeping quarters. Mirellen flipped down the panel's plastic cover, made some adjustments using a row of buttons along the bottom of the screen, then walked to the windows that encircled the module and stared down at the TractorPix.

The TractorPix rolled a short distance so it was positioned directly in front of her. She released the three latches that held her helmet to her spacesuit and slowly lifted it above her head. The TractorPix zoomed in until Mirellen's face filled its lens. She closed her eyes and took a breath. A satisfied grin spread across her face as she took another, deeper breath.

84. Alleged lunatic

“High Plains Showdown” was spelled out in bulbous, animated cacti that were peppered by bullet holes with each ominous beat pounded out on timpani. By the time the prelude reached its rousing, machine-gun finale, the cacti had been obliterated, revealing Jim and Cazin in Big Red, running wide open in the dimming light.

“Good evening, this is Zinc Spender for DisneyNews, where the hits just keep coming.” The network’s chief anchor appeared in the upper left pip. “Last night, if you wandered off to MASSnews, we forgive you. The little-network-that-never-will finally got lucky and had a big night. But they aren’t smart enough to know a good thing when they’ve got it.”

Art wanted a profile shot of resolute Jim with fearful Cazin in the background so he took the floater from behind the boat to Jim’s side and kept it low, skimming across the water.

“Our intrepid caster Brenda Cazin went to northern Michigan to pick up the story and was kidnapped at gunpoint by Jim, the alleged drunken, homicidal lunatic from last night’s ‘Revenge on the Plains.’”

Images of Jim pointing the gun at Cazin flashed in the lower right pip.

“Together, they’re speeding toward the floating love nest where Jim’s estranged wife, Cecilia Westraek, has fled with her lover, MASSnews caster Ray Barker. We understand the county sheriff is on his way by helicopter but it looks like Jim’s going to get there first.”

The lighting was difficult because the sun, dropping behind the hills to the west, put Jim and Cazin in silhouette. That wasn’t the effect Art wanted.

“I’m hitting the light,” Art said in Cazin’s head.

“No!” Cazin whispered, but it was too late and the floater light blasted the boat.

“What the hell is that?!” Jim bellowed, shielding his eyes from the glare.

“Art, no!” Cazin whispered.

Jim guzzled the last few swallows from the whiskey bottle and swerved the boat toward the floater. “Fucking vultures!” he yelled, and threw the empty bottle at the camera.

Jim kept the boat in a tight turn, trying in vain to catch the floater while he reached down by his feet and pulled the gun out of the towel.

Art saw the gun and kept the floater behind the boat.

With Big Red heading back toward Block Island, Jim let go of the steering wheel and turned around, putting his knees on the seat. He steadied his arm by laying it across the headrest and fired at the blinding light until the clip was empty, then threw the gun at the floater.

Cazin, her hands still behind her back, shouted “No, Jim!”

“Careful, Cazin,” Art said. “You’re supposed to be a kidnap victim.”

As if he was taunting Jim, Art flew the FloatPix close to the boat. Jim reached down, pulled off a shoe and threw it at the floater but the force of the wind blew it badly off course. He tried the other shoe but missed again.

Art flew the floater to the boat’s bow and held the camera just in front of the windscreen, peering into Jim’s angry face.

After reaching behind him to grab his life jacket, Jim stood awkwardly with the steering wheel pressing against his legs. He tried beating the floater with the jacket but couldn’t reach it. Out of disgust he threw the life jacket at the floater, then grabbed Cazin’s and threw hers too. Both were blown backward by the wind and landed in the water well behind the boat.

85. Mars Girl Talks!

With the teeming Times Square crowd as a backdrop, an animated Mars Girl silhouette danced across the screen to the beat of a new variation on her theme featuring drums, bass and jangly guitar.

Above the music an excited voice announced, “You’ve seen her smile! You’ve seen her cry! You almost saw her die! Tonight! Mars Girl Talks!”

The dancing silhouette disappeared and a FloatPix took over as it swooped across Times Square above the exuberant faces and outstretched arms. The floater made a complete circuit around the square then headed back toward the MASS building where it rose to the balcony where Man Boy Floyd pretended to strum a guitar. As he broke into the love ballad “Miss You More Every Day,” images of Mirellen’s past faded in and out – as a baby taking her first steps, dancing at her first recital, playing soccer for her high school team, dressed up for a school dance and waving to a crowd of well-wishers as she boarded MarsDestiny.

The revelers in Times Square held their arms above their heads and swayed from side to side as Man Boy sang. When the abbreviated version of the song wound down, Sally stepped in front of the camera. “Man Boy Floyd! Let’s hear it for Man Boy Floyd!”

The huge screen flashed “Noise!” and the crowd responded.

“When we come back, we’ll turn it over to our special guest anchors, so don’t go away.” Barker and Cecilia filled the screen, smiling and waving from the Somewhen’s deck.

86. *Jump*

Jim's unblinking eyes were fixed straight ahead on the Somewhen, gleaming in the light of Barker's floater. Big Red was close enough to the sailboat that Jim and Cazin could see some of the details in the placements projected onto its hull.

Jim yanked the throttle all the way back, throwing Cazin, her hands still behind her back, face first into the dash.

"Jump," Jim said, staring straight ahead, gripping and regripping his hands on the steering wheel as the boat continued to lose momentum. "I don't know who you are, and I really don't care. Just get the hell out of the boat."

"I'm not jumping," Cazin said, her face red where it hit the dash. "Just tell me the plan."

"Jump."

She looked toward the cottage lights dotting the distant shore. "*I can't swim*," she said.

In the rearview Jim saw the lights of the Sheriff's chopper come over top the trees of Big Rock Point. "Neither can I." He reached down and buried the throttle.

87. *The earth is fine*

Once Mirellen turned on the station's power, NASA techs scrambled to get its communications systems working. By the time the commercial break was over, the module's three interior cameras had taken over from the TractorPix. They followed Mirellen as she gathered what she needed to prepare her first meal at the station.

On the counter a glowing bottle of NovaCola rose into the air and poured its amber contents into a glass filled with ice, sending fizzy streamers into the air. Beads of condensation on the outside of the glass formed a glistening image of a backward "N," NovaCola's logo.

After she filled two plastic containers and slipped them into separate hydrator compartments, she turned her attention to the pull-down table that folded into the wall of the dining room/living room. The camera zoomed in on Mirellen's determined face as she struggled with the latch that wouldn't release the table from the wall. The latch finally gave way but the table still wouldn't move. She tried to free the table with her fingers but its seams were too tight.

Mirellen took a few steps back, ran at the hidden table and body-slammed it with her shoulder and hip. She bounced off, lost her balance and landed on her back. The table came free of the wall and she rolled away just in time to avoid one of the legs that landed hard an inch from her ear.

She heard a series of clicks and her head snapped left and right as she looked for the source of the sound. Eight speakers surrounded her so the sound came from everywhere.

"This is God," Barker said in the best *basso-profundo* he could manage. Bocelli added some reverb for a hint of the otherworldly. "All humans are dead and the earth is a scorched wasteland. I have chosen you and you alone to carry on the human race. Through you, we will repopulate the earth.

Mirellen got up on her knees. Her eyes darted around the module.

"That's enough, Ray," Cecilia said. "Sorry, Mars Girl. I guess he thinks that's funny. He's certainly *not* God. The earth is fine and so is the human race. There are still several billion people down here on earth and almost all of them are watching your show right now."

88. Code red

General Shelton stood at his office bar in his shirtsleeves and plopped a black olive into a gin martini, sending a few drops onto the polished copper. With martini in hand, he plunked

down in an overstuffed chair facing his wall screen, slopping some of his drink onto his freshly pressed uniform pants.

“Hockey-Now,” the general commanded and the wall screen came to life with colorful, fast-skating players and the room filled with the sounds of scraping blades, colliding bodies and a droning rock and roll soundtrack.

Bad news hit him twice as he took his first sip. The score in the upper left of the screen told him that his beloved Atlanta Blizzards were down two goals to the Vegas Vandals late in the second period, and, worse, his head hummed “God Bless America.”

“Shit!” the general shouted with enough force to spill more of his martini. He sighed, closed his eyes, and answered. “Shelton.”

“Shelton, it’s Briter. Where’s your bird? We need to get it there now.”

“I’m sure he’s got her wide open,” Shelton said, stiffening then slumping as a Blizzard forward flew toward the net and sent a shot off the post.

“We need to bump it up to Code Red,” Briter said.

“Code Red? They aren’t going anywhere. I mean they’re dead in the water. This is a simple pick up and delivery.”

“Not as dead as I’d like,” Briter said.

“How dead do you want them? They’re just a couple casters.”

“General, can you think of a crime more serious than conspiring to undermine the United States Government.”

“How exactly do we know they’re part of a conspiracy?”

“I’m not at liberty to divulge the details, but just before her arrest, the Denver Death Plane bomber called Barker and Cecilia.”

“That’s it? Aren’t there some First Amendment issues we should be thinking about? I mean, are we going to accuse casters of conspiracy every time they talk to someone who might have committed a crime?”

“We have information that they will soon signal their comrades to put some kind of terrorist plot into action. Neither one of us wants that blood on our hands, do we? We need to act right now with extreme prejudice.”

“You’ve seen too many movies,” Shelton said. “If you want them dead, just tell me you want them dead.”

“They need to be stopped before they tell the world that MarsDestiny was sabotaged.”

The Vandals put a deflection past the Blizzard goalie and Shelton threw his head back in disgust. “Was it?”

“What?”

“Was it sabotage?”

“Of course not!” Briter said.

“How do you know? I wonder about half the shit that happens every day. How can you prove anything anymore?”

“Just trust us on this, Shelton,” Briter said. “What’s the bird’s ETA?”

“Ops-Now,” Shelton said. “His screen changed from the hockey game to a map of northeastern Michigan with different colored dots against blue water and pale green land. One represented Lyte’s dinghy coming from the north, another the WarClub assault helicopter coming from the west. The third was the sheriff’s chopper coming from the northwest. A blinking star represented the Somewhen and live vid from the WarClub’s nose was pipped into the lower right.

“Looks like the sheriff is going to win the race,” Shelton said. “He’s almost there now.”

“The drunk guy in the speedboat is going to beat everybody and we don’t know what he’s going to do,” Briter said. “If we’re lucky he’ll do the shooting for us.”

89. Desperate and insane

London limped into Molly and Ted’s living room, tucking his shirt into his undone pants. “Hey, when I was in the can I got a call from my buddy over in Black River. He says DisneyNews has a camera on Jim and he’s going after Ceci and that caster. DisneyNews-Now.”

The wall screen changed to a view from behind Big Red with The Somewhen in the distance.

“We’re watching Mars Girl!” Amber said. “This is a Mars Girl *party*. MASSnews-Now.”

The wall screen changed back to MASSnews, where Mirellen was at the control panel talking with a NASA tech helping her calibrate the device used to extract oxygen from ice crystals.

“Goddamn it,” London said, zipping up and moving toward the wall screen. “Jimbo’s on a mission and he needs us. DisneyNews-Now.” He put his hand over the screen’s sensor so Amber couldn’t change it back to MASSnews.

“All right, children,” Molly said, leaning against the back of Ted’s easy chair. “I’ll get the ReadWrite from the kitchen so we can watch both.”

Amber stuck her tongue out at London after he sat down next to her on the couch.

On the wall screen, Art held the floater directly above Big Red, looking down into the cockpit. Jim held tight to the wheel and Cazin’s hands were still behind her.

Molly stuck her ReadWrite to the wall and ordered it onto MASSnews. The techs had finished with Mars Girl so Cecilia talked with her while Barker, facing away from the camera, stared at the boat speeding toward them.

“My buddy says Jimbo had a gun but threw it away or something,” London said.

“What’s he gonna do then?” Ted said from the other end of the couch. “Ram the sailboat?”

“That’d be sweet!” London said. He held up his beer and clanked cans with Ted in front of Amber’s face.

“You guys are morons,” Amber said, pushing Ted and London’s arms away.

On the wall screen, Cazin made a quick pretense of untying the imaginary rope binding her hands and reached for the steering wheel. She jerked it hard to steer the boat toward shore and away from the Somewhen, but Jim pounded on Cazin’s fingers until she let go of the wheel, then pushed her away and pulled the speedboat back on course. Cazin struggled again to get control of the wheel but Jim kept the boat headed straight for the Somewhen.

At the bottom of the screen three words appeared: “Desperate,” “Righteous” and “Insane.”

“A desperate bid for attention?” Spender said from the wall screen. “Justified revenge? Driven insane by jealousy? The polls are open and we want to know what you think.”

Immediately the numbers began to add up under each word. “Desperate” and “Insane” took the early lead.

Cazin rose to her knees on Big Red’s center console so she could gain leverage but Jim had a firm grip on the wheel and wedged his shoulder into her stomach so she couldn’t lean into the effort.

“That boat looks familiar,” Ted said.

“That’s Big Red out of Molson Marine,” Fred said, from the easy chair. “I tune her up every spring.”

“Tune it up?” Ted said.

“Old style Chevy V-8,” Fred said.

Ted looked at London. “You know what that means?”

“Kabooooooooom!” London said. He and Ted toasted in front of Amber’s face again.

Amber pushed their arms away and slid up to the edge of the couch. “You guys are assholes,” she said. “Someone’s gonna *die*.”

“Yeah!” Ted and London shouted. They high-fived each other behind Amber’s back.

On the wall screen, Cazin fell on Jim’s right hand with her teeth and clamped down hard. Jim’s bloodied hand recoiled from the wheel and Cazin managed to turn the boat a few degrees off course while Jim had only one hand on the wheel.

“Don’t take that shit from her, Jimbo,” London said, slopping beer as he gestured at the screen.

90. A hero to billions

“Why do you keep calling me Mars Girl?”

“That’s what everybody calls you,” Cecilia said. “You’re a hero to the billions of people watching you right now. Listen, there’s something I need to say to you and everyone else.”

“What do you mean that’s what everybody calls me?”

“It’s the name of your doll, your interactives, your games and there’s even Mars Girl chockies. They’re working on a movie too. MASSnews is making a fortune off you. But listen, I need to ...

“There’s a doll of me?” Mirellen said.

“Yes, millions of them. Just give me a second to ...”

“And it looks like me?”

“Mars Girl, the crash wasn’t an accident,” Cecilia said. “It was planned. The president knew all about it, so did John Jaspers, the MASScorp CEO. The government and MASS are making billions of dollars because of the tragedy they caused. They’re responsible for the death of your family and the other colonials.” Cecilia looked over her shoulder to check on Big Red’s progress. She could see Cazin and Jim fighting for control of the wheel. “Everyone listen carefully. Go to notMASS for the truth about what happened on Mars. Remember: notMASS. They’re going to try to keep us quiet, maybe even kill us. The truth has to come out. Don’t let the White House and MASScorp get away with murder.”

She walked to the bow where Barker watched Big Red’s approach.

Cecilia gave Barker a kiss on the cheek. “Go deep,” she said, and dove into the black water.

91. A thousand miles away

Art positioned the floater above Big Red’s bow for a good view of the struggle between Cazin and Jim, then lowered the audio wire so that it was just above the windscreen.

Cazin, in a panicked, last-ditch effort, put her feet against the side of the boat and pushed off, lunging at Jim. Jim ducked low and Cazin's momentum carried her onto his back. Jim raised himself and sent her tumbling into the water.

Jim reached up and grabbed the floater's audio wire. He pulled the floater in like a kite in a powerful wind and tied the wire to the steering wheel.

Art gave the floater jets maximum power but the knot held so he abandoned the effort and held the camera on Jim's face. Jim's eyes were a thousand miles away as Big Red slammed into the Somewhen at full speed.

92. It seems so real

Ted and Molly's wall screen went black as the Disney floater broke into pieces. On the ReadWrite a plume of fire writhed into the evening sky.

Ted and London were on their feet.

"Jimbo did it," Ted said, falling back onto the couch in disbelief. "That son of a bitch did it."

Molly walked to the picture window and parted the drapes. Through the budding trees she could see glimmers of the fire plume on Big Rock Bay. "It seems so ... *real*," she said.

"Where's Ceci?" Amber said, sitting on the edge of the couch. "Where is she? She jumped in time didn't she?"

The Somewhen's bow had been sheared off and her stern slowly sank as it listed toward vertical. Little more than smoldering splinters remained of the speedboat.

The wall screen came back to life when Art switched to Cazin's Upix. As she fought desperately to keep her head above the surface, the view alternated between a clear but unsteady

look at the burning wreckage to surreal, leaping flames seen from underwater. When exhaustion and chill overcame Cazin, the picture became murkier and murkier until everything brightened as Sheriff Angstrom and his pilot drifted over her in their rescue chopper with its high-powered searchlight. The sheriff sent a boom out over the shimmering water and its padded claw plunged into the water and plucked choking and gasping Cazin from the lake.

“That’s not Ceci,” Amber said. “*Where’s Ceci?*”

“And that Barker guy,” Molly said, still standing at the window but watching the wall screen.

“Damn, I didn’t think Jim would really do it,” Ted said, slumped on the couch.

“I knew he’d do it,” London said. “That guy’s got balls.” He held out his beer for another toast but Ted didn’t respond.

93. Burning water

“Tozeman!” Lyte yelled into his assistant. “There’s one huge mother of a fire out here on the bay. Tozeman? You there?”

Lyte pulled back on the dinghy’s throttle, slowing it to a crawl.

“Toze! You there? Talk to me.”

“Go ahead Lyte.”

“I don’t think anybody’s coming back alive,” Lyte said. “The boats just blew up.”

“I told you it doesn’t matter,” Tozo said. “Dead or alive, just get the two casters back here. Now!”

“There’s a fire,” Lyte said. “How’m I gonna get anybody when the water’s burning?”

“Do you see the sheriff’s chopper?”

“Yeah.”

“He’ll do the search and rescue. When he picks up the two casters, grab them and get your ass back here. Got it?”

“Man, I didn’t sign on for this kind of work.”

“You’re in the bloody Coast Guard!” Tozo said. “This is exactly the kind of work you signed on for. Just do your job. We’re counting on you.”

94. Two red dots

Cazin had collapsed onto a bench in the rescue chopper’s cargo hold. After checking to make sure she was breathing, Sheriff Angstrom, spread a wool blanket over her as the pilot flew toward the smoldering wreckage and the two red dots on his screen. He’d worry about the black dot when the survivors were picked up.

Angstrom held onto a metal handle and leaned out of the chopper’s sliding cargo door with one foot on the landing float as the chopper settled to the water. Bocelli positioned the MASS floater just above the water to get a good view of the sheriff as he tossed a floating harness between Barker and Cecilia, treading water next to each other. They both held onto the harness and Angstrom reeled them in, offering wool blankets as they climbed into the chopper.

“I have a mind to leave you two the hell out there,” Angstrom said. “After what you did last night, and now you’re at it again talking about our president as if she was some kind of murderer. What the hell’s wrong with you people?”

95. Get with the program

When his head hummed the first few notes of “Onward Christian Soldiers,” Captain Tozo lowered his binoculars but kept his eyes in the distance where he could just make out the bright lights of the rescue operation.

“Tozo here.”

“Captain Tozo, this is Ranger Howzer with joint operation Yardarm. I’m the commander of the WarClub winging your way. We’re coming up your ass end at 5 O’clock. You got me?”

Tozo looked out the bank of windows behind him but saw nothing. “No, I’m not picking you up.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve got no night vision.”

“Oh, right.” Tozo flipped a switch on his binoculars and found the helicopter, skimming the lake with no lights. “Yeah, I see you.”

“Our ETA is less than one minute. Is the landing deck ready?”

“Ready and waiting.”

“I know you CG types aren’t used to a lot of fireworks,” Howzer said, “but you better be ready in case things get hot. If you got any sissies onboard you better give them something to suck on and send them below decks. We clear?”

“Clear?”

“*Do you read me?*”

“All I know is that we’re supposed to get the two casters here as quick as possible so I sent our best man with our fastest boat.”

“Is he armed?”

“Lyte? Probably not,” Tozo said.

“No sidearm?”

“Usually leaves it in his locker,” Tozo said.

“Jesus, Tozo. Whose side are you people on?”

“It’s just a simple pick up,” Tozo said. “No one said anything about needing weapons.”

“Listen numbnuts, any minute those two casters are gonna give some kind of signal that’ll unleash who knows what kind of terrorist hell on innocent people so you’d better get with the program.”

“I’m with the program,” Tozo said. “Just tell me what’s up and we’ll do our part.”

“Here’s what’s up: One wrong move by the terrorists and things get ugly right now. My orders say that no one’s gonna worry if those casters get splattered so you Coast Guard sissies just might get your cherries popped tonight. You got body bags onboard?”

“Not that I know of,” Tozo said.

“Jesus, Tozo! What the *hell* kind of outfit are you running?”

96. You can’t say that

The sheriff leaned into the pilot’s compartment to talk about their next move. Standing in the chopper’s large cargo door with a blanket over his shoulders, Barker ignored his humming head. Cecilia sat on the bench attached to the hull with her arm around Cazin, who had occasional coughing and shivering spasms. Cecilia and Barker had Wyndela in their heads.

“MASS just went to a break,” Wyndela said. Surrounded by piles of gear, she sat on the floor of Marvin’s van as he navigated the streets of Manhattan. “There’s no indication they’re cutting you yet. I bet things are boiling on sixty-three. I’ll have notMASS ready in a few minutes.”

“Wyn, I want to talk to the Sheriff onscreen,” Barker said. “I’ve got some unfinished business. We can go live on notMASS after that.” Barker’s head was still humming. He switched connects to answer Bocelli’s call. “Hey, Bocelli. How are the numbers?”

“Barker, what the hell are you doing?” Bocelli said. “You can’t say things like that. And what’s this notMASS business? I can’t believe Rindell’s leaving you on.”

“How are the numbers?”

“They’re incredible, but you’re gonna put us all in prison.”

“I want to talk to the sheriff next. When are we going to Mars Girl?”

“The station’s O₂ system is failing but Rindell said to just pip her for now,” Bocelli said. “We’re back on in twenty. Just knock off the conspiracy shit.”

97. Just do your job

Piper threw open Rindell’s door. “You need to tell me what’s going on,” she said.

“Have you seen the numbers?” Rindell said. “Through the roof.”

“Are you even paying attention?” Piper said. “Barker accused the president of murdering sixteen astronauts. He accused Jaspers too. That’s going way too far, even for Barker.”

Rindell held up his assistant so Piper could see the numbers. “I don’t argue with the eyeballs.”

“I can’t believe this,” she said. “I’m going to Jaspers.”

“Let me know if you find him,” Rindell said. “Helena said he walked out more than an hour ago.”

“Then you need to stop this *right now*. If Barker keeps this up we’ll lose our license.”

“Not if he’s right,” Rindell said.

“When’s the last time he was right about anything?”

“Piper, just do your job,” Rindell said.

“This is wrong. Very wrong. I’m pulling every placement and commercial until you stop Barker.”

“I’ll fire you.”

“Then I resign. Effective immediately.” Piper stormed out and slammed the door behind her.

Rindell rose from his desk to follow Piper but stopped when he heard “God Bless America” in his head.

“Rindell, this is Bob Briter. I’ve got a deal for you.”

“Hi Bob,” Rindell said. “I thought I might hear from you.”

98. An ERT man

“Sheriff, we’re up,” Barker said.

Sheriff Angstrom was standing by the cockpit bulkhead, talking on his assistant and muttering an occasional “Yes, sir.” He signed off and slipped his assistant into his shirt pocket and walked to the cargo doorway where Barker waited. The chopper still floated on the lake, waiting for the Coast Guard dinghy.

“We’re live in ten seconds,” Barker told him.

“That exclusive deal I made with your boss still stands?” Angstrom asked.

“Not my department,” Barker said. “What’s the time, Bocelli?”

“Five, four, three, two ...”

“We’re on,” Barker said to Angstrom, who sucked in his gut and smiled into the floater, hovering outside the cargo door.

“Some of you probably thought you wouldn’t see me standing here,” Barker said. “In case you’re wondering, Cecilia’s fine. And so is Brenda Cazin, the DisneyNews caster. Jim wasn’t so lucky. Standing next to me is Demented Angstrom, Alpena County Sheriff, the person, other than Jim, most responsible for our exciting brush with death.”

“That’s *Damien* Angstrom,” the sheriff said.

“Sure it is, Darren,” Barker said.

“*Damien*,” the sheriff said, faking a smile.

“Sorry, Dickhead,” Barker said.

“Hey, what the hell ...”

“It only took him the entire day to make a twenty minute helicopter ride, but the sheriff here is responsible for rescuing Cecilia and I,” Barker said. “We’re glad you’re on top of things, sheriff.”

Angstrom shifted his weight, stuck a thumb into his gun belt and sent his toothpick to the other side of his mouth. “As the leader of our crack ERT unit, I *need* to be on top of things. We’re ready for anything twenty-four-seven.”

“What’s ‘ERT’?” Barker said.

“That would be our Emergency Response Team,” The Sheriff said, and slid his toothpick back to the other side of his mouth.

“It’s funny how you wait for a situation to become an emergency before responding,” Barker said. “Is that some clever bureaucratic technique – a ploy to justify your ERT budget?”

The sheriff paused for a moment. “I’m afraid I don’t follow you, son.”

“I called your office twelve hours ago when Jim started shooting at us,” Barker said.

“Apparently you were too busy chewing toothpicks. We could’ve had four deaths here. If you’d been doing your job no one would have died.”

The sheriff jabbed his index finger into Barker’s sternum. “Listen, son. I don’t know what high horse you rode in on, but you best change your tune.” He leaned toward Barker’s ear and whispered, “C’mon, I’m on *contract*.”

“What’d you get for the exclusive?” Barker said. “A hundred grand?”

“*Hundred?*” The sheriff said.

“Don’t tell me they only gave you scale,” Barker said. “You got at least fifty, right?”

The sheriff didn’t say anything.

“Less? Oh, *man*. They paid Mars Girl’s neighbor’s cousin eighty grand for thirty seconds. You’re an ERT man and the best they can do is throw you some pocket change?”

“I don’t think this is any of your damn business, son,” Angstrom said. “I’m here to do a job for the good people of this county who have reelected me twice and, God willing, will keep me in office for a third term this fall.”

“You must’ve got at least *twenty* thousand,” Barker said.

The sheriff shifted his toothpick a couple times. “Son, I *told* you it’s none of your damn business.”

“Man, they saw you coming,” Barker said.

“Rindell, you there?” the sheriff said, looking into the floater and shading his eyes from its bright light. “We gotta talk.”

99. Upgrade

“There’s a better story than the one you’ve got,” Briter said to Rindell.

“Better than your boss murdering sixteen astronauts?” Rindell said. “I can’t wait.”

“We know who the bad guy is and you can be the only network with a camera on him when we make the arrest. We’ll also give you exclusive access to the president while the story’s hot. Get Barker and Cecilia off screen and we’ll make it all happen.”

“Have you seen their numbers?” Rindell said. “You’re asking a lot.”

“Think about it,” Briter said. “Right now you’ve got a messy story about a complex government conspiracy that doesn’t even make sense. Why would the president sabotage her most visible and popular program? If you have to explain it, you can’t sell it. And think of how bad it’s going to make people feel when they hear that their president is responsible for the death of sixteen American heroes. Your network will be associated with some very disturbing news. With our story you’ll get the live capture of Black Goat, the terrorist villain paid by foreign devils to kill American heroes. You help us fight America’s enemies and you’ll give your brand a huge boost. Patriotism is popularity.”

“Bird in the hand, Briter,” Rindell said.

“All right, here’s part two,” Briter said. “We’ve got a crew of trigger-happy commandoes on their way to take out Barker and Cecilia. Not one of those guys has a conscience and they don’t miss. And just between you and me, Mars Girl isn’t going to be around much longer. Do it my way or you won’t even have a show.”

Rindell sat down at his desk and drummed his fingers. “Where’s Black Goat?”

“Houston,” Briter said. “NASA headquarters.”

“We need to give him a jump or it’ll be over too fast,” Rindell said. “Don’t call in the dogs until he’s onscreen. People love a good chase.”

“I thought you’d see it our way,” Briter said.

100. Malfunction

Mirellen’s breathing became heavy and labored. She stood at the control panel and pushed buttons with her finger, at first purposefully then randomly. She shook her head then looked up into one of the cameras. “It’s not working!” she yelled.

She walked to where she left her space suit over a chair and pulled it on. She slipped her helmet over her head, latched it and took several deep breaths.

101. Run!

Black Goat sat in his impeccable twelve by twelve cubicle on the mostly empty second floor of NASA’s Houston headquarters. The bindings of his books covering one wall were all perfectly in line and images of Mars – sunsets, dramatic landscapes and future terraformed subdivisions – were all neatly arranged on the fabric wall opposite his desk.

A small man with coarse brown hair and a neatly trimmed beard, Black Goat sat in front of his desk screen with his hands folded over the beginnings of a potbelly and watched Mirellen breathe the last of the oxygen in the only tank left from her trek.

Normally it would be possible for her to connect her helmet to one of the O₂ outlets spaced every several feet around the module, but Black Goat’s latest proggie had deflated the pressure throughout the entire system.

NASA techs scrambled to repair the damage but Black Goat knew there was no way they could isolate the problem fast enough. Once Mirellen had drawn her last breath, all traces of his treachery would be lost forever and the permanent Martian settlements he had dreamed about since he was a boy would be one giant leap closer to reality.

His optimism turned to panic when Mirellen, lying on the bed in her space suit, was pushed into a lower right pip and Sally filled the screen. Above her right shoulder Black Goat saw a picture of himself on top of the words “MarsDestiny Saboteur Troy Romane.” His hair appeared black and his eyes were stretched to make them almond-shaped. “Secret White House inquiry reveals MarsDestiny sabotaged by NASA tech with Chinese connections” crawled across the bottom of the screen.

Romane ordered the volume up.

“MASSnews just learned that a secret White House task force has determined that Romane, a NASA flight engineer, sabotaged the Mars colony mission and is responsible for the death of sixteen colonials. Despite our hopes and prayers, the number may soon reach seventeen because he has rendered the oxygen system inoperable at the Gemini Cricket Family Restaurants Station. Every available technician at NASA is working on the problem but it may take days or weeks to undo the damage. Mars Girl may only have minutes to live.”

Romane stared in disbelief, then bolted from his desk and ran through a maze of cubicles to the stairway, skipped down a flight of steps and out an emergency exit, sending an alarm wailing through the stairwell. Outside he sprinted through the humid evening to the parking lot and his sleek two-seater with an airfoil above the front bumper. He threw the car into reverse, peeled out of his parking space, squealed through two turns and roared out the exit gate before the arm lifted, leaving splintered plastic on the pavement.

As Romane roared onto Challenger Memorial Boulevard, a MASSnews floater rose from behind some bushes next to the gate and flew after him.

102. Pickup

Hey, sailor boy,” the sheriff barked at Lyte as he pulled the dinghy alongside the chopper. “Put your cap on right and tuck in that shirt. Show some respect for the uniform.”

“It’s casual Friday, sir,” Lyte said as he checked his assistant. “You’ve got two passengers for me. Names are Ray Barker and Cecilia Westraek.”

“You better watch this one,” the sheriff said, pointing at Barker. “If you Feds hadn’t horned in on my territory, I’d throw his ass in jail.”

Cecilia stepped into the dinghy and sat on the bench at the boat’s stern. Pretending that he needed Lyte’s shoulder to steady himself, Barker stuck a tiny microphone on the seaman’s collar as he followed Cecilia to the bench.

Lyte sat in the swivel chair behind the wheel and pushed forward on the throttle, spinning the little boat toward the cutter’s running lights twinkling in the distance.

103. That Goat guy

The MASS floater followed Black Goat’s small white car as it sped toward I-45.

Up ahead, Romane saw the flashing lights of three patrol cars parked across the road. He did a U-turn into traffic, nearly clipping a delivery van, and raced past cars as he tried to think of another way to get to the highway, then south to Mexico.

The floater flew out to the side of Romane's car for a profile shot but when he saw the camera, Romane swung the car's sun visor around to block its view. The floater flew out front for a look through the windscreen and Romane threw the visor to the front to block it again.

Preoccupied with shielding his identity, Romane hadn't noticed that a roadblock had caused traffic to back up halfway across Apollo Bridge, which carried six lanes of traffic over a muddy reservoir called Clear Lake. He slammed on the brakes but his car bumped into the rear of a brand new cherry red SpeedWagon convertible, still sporting a temporary license plate.

The driver's door on the SpeedWagon flung open and out stepped a man wearing dark sunglasses, a graying fu Manchu and a tight muscle shirt showing off his bulked-up torso that was out of proportion to his skinny legs.

"You can't see there's two hundred cars stopped?" the man yelled at Romane as he walked to the back of his SpeedWagon to survey the damage. The plastic bumper was cracked along its entire length and both light panels were broken.

"Are you blind or what?" the man yelled at Romane.

"Hey, honey, I think he's the guy onscreen," said the man's girlfriend from the passenger seat of the SpeedWagon. "You know, that Goat guy. He's on right now. So are you! Look!"

"What Goat guy?" the man said, annoyed.

"The one that killed the colonials," the woman said.

The man in the muscle shirt looked into the little white car but couldn't see Romane's face because he had turned away, eyeing the bicycle path along the bridge's rail as a possible escape route.

"It's on MASSnews, honey," said the woman in the convertible. "Check your wrist."

The man looked at his wrist screen, pushed a couple buttons on the side, and saw himself from above standing next to Romane's car.

He looked up into the sky and spotted the floater. "Hi, mom!"

104. Only the first twenty will hurt

As the dinghy gained speed and left the sheriff's helicopter behind, Lyte turned to face Barker and Cecilia, still wrapped in the sheriff's wool blankets.

"My name's Lyte," he said over his shoulder. "I'm real happy you two aren't dead. This should be a quick, quiet trip because nothing's up."

"I talked to you this morning, didn't I?" Barker said.

Lyte turned to face forward. "Shit," he muttered to himself. He turned back toward Barker. "No hard feelings, eh?"

"You weren't much help when I called," Barker said.

"Just following orders, sir" Lyte said.

"You can be court martialed for ignoring a distress call," Barker said. "And something definitely *is* up, Lyte. Whether you like it or not, you're in the middle of it."

"Oh, I know something's up," Lyte said, turning back again. "They told me."

"I don't think you know how big it is," Cecilia said.

"I know it's big," Lyte said. "It goes all the way to the top. The peak. Higher than the peak. Stratospheric."

"You know about the sabotage?" Cecilia said.

Lyte hesitated. "I'm not clear on the details. What the hell is that?" he said when he turned back toward the cutter. "That wasn't there when I left."

They were close enough to see the WarClub assault helicopter sitting on the cutter's brightly lit deck. Lyte fumbled for his binoculars hanging over the steering column and watched a dozen heavily armed soldiers in black uniforms descend from the chopper and take up positions along the cutter's rail.

Barker pointed toward the cutter. "You see what's waiting for us? We'll all be dead if we go to the ship."

Lyte scanned the railing where the soldiers held their rifles across their chests.

"They want me and Cecilia dead and they couldn't care less about you," Barker said.

Two of the cutter's spotlights shot at the dinghy making it difficult to see the ship.

"When we're in range they're going to put a hundred bullets into each one of us," Barker said.

"Only the first twenty will hurt," Cecilia said.

"You're messing with me, right?" Lyte said over his shoulder.

"You got another explanation?" Barker said.

Lyte looked at the ship through his binoculars again, then reached up to straighten his cap.

105. Mob justice

The man in the muscle shirt climbed onto Romane's car and jumped up and down on its roof, creasing the metal. "Hey! Everybody!" the man yelled to the others stuck on the bridge. "It's that Goat guy from the news!"

Romane put the car in reverse and hit the pedal to jump it over the curb and onto the bike path, but his rear bumper caught the front of the car behind him, sending the man in the muscle

shirt sprawling onto the bike path behind the car. Romane pulled his car forward a few feet then threw it in reverse and gunned the engine again. This time the rear tires bounced over the curb. One tire just missed the man's head and the other rolled onto his gut, where it stayed because the car's front tires couldn't climb the curb.

Several people gathered around Romane's car, pounding on it and yelling for him to pull forward. Despite their pleas, Romane kept trying to back up, spinning the front tires against the curb and sending a cloud of white, noxious smoke into the air.

Some from the growing mob gathered at the back of the car and lifted the rear bumper so two men could crawl under and rescue the muscle-shirt man. But with the rear of the car off the ground, the front tires were able to climb the curb and the car shot backward, rolling over everyone in its way until it crashed into the bridge's heavy metal railing. Agonized howls came from under the car.

The mob grew as people trapped in the traffic jam saw what was happening and ran to help.

"Tip him over!" yelled a young man, and those on the driver's side tilted the car so that its roof lay against the metal railing, its front tires still spinning. Others dragged the casualties down the bike path and out of the way.

Romane's legs were pinned under the steering wheel but when he worked them free he fell on his head against the passenger side window. He reached for his assistant in his breast pocket but it had fallen out so he searched desperately to find it.

A man who had stepped out of a gold Mercedes called for some organization. "On my count, we all lift together. One, two, three, NOW!"

The mob lifted but the car only traveled a foot up the rail. The man counted again and this time they were able to lift the car farther but still not to the top of the rail.

Romane found his assistant and, with terror in his eyes, held it to his mouth to speak his final, panicked words.

More people gathered around the car and a woman at the front of the car yelled, “Send him over before he kills Mars Girl! Look he’s doing it right now!”

People around the car peered into the windows and saw Romane speaking into his assistant. “Send him over!” the woman cried again as Romane continued speaking into his assistant.

The man from the gold Mercedes counted down again. “One! Two! Three!”

The car balanced unsteadily on the rail before one last push sent it over. The car bounced against the edge of the bridge, then fell away in a tight spin toward the water. It splashed into the muddy lake, bobbed upside down a few times, then slowly slipped below the surface.

106. The Goat’s last words

One of seven assistant managers for oxygen supply on the MarsDestiny Project, Pyotr Heath was already ten minutes late for a meeting when he hit the print button on his keyboard, grabbed his suit coat off the back of his chair and stepped outside his cubicle to the printer he shared with Troy Romane. As he waited for the printer to churn out the last of the O₂ charts, he watched the tops of four Secret Service agents’ heads as they tore apart Romane’s cubicle. Pyotr, just three years out of MIT’s Space Settlement Institute, was often called “kid” by the NASA old-timers because of his boyish face, rolls of baby fat and curly dark hair. He was late

for his meeting because he had just spent thirty minutes enduring two agents' aggressive questions.

When the printer finished, Pyotr grabbed a fistful of pages off its tray and trotted between cubicles toward the conference room. As he rounded a corner, he almost ran over a young woman he had admired from a distance in the cafeteria. He was buoyed by her pleasant smile, and then quickly regained his speed in a couple strides and felt even better when he saw that the conference room door was still open.

As Pyotr swung through the door he started to explain why he was late but Jill Wikomman, O₂ Supply Team Manager, cut him off and told him to have a seat. Pyotr took his usual place at the table, made from slabs of cut and polished moon rock, and laid the pages from the printer upside down in front of him. Pyotr looked at some of the seven others around the table, intending to nod a greeting, but all eyes were on Wikomman.

"How's it looking, Pyotr?" said Wikomman, a small, slender woman with a flat face and high forehead. She was respected by everyone but liked by few.

"I haven't had a chance to ..."

When Pyotr flipped over the stack of pages he was surprised to see that the top few were filled with text, not the colorful charts and graphs he expected. "Sorry, this must have been in the printer already," Pyotr said, setting the text pages aside and sliding pages of data across the table for each of his colleagues. After the charts were distributed, Pyotr began to read to himself from the pages he had inadvertently taken off the printer. The type on the top page was green, indicating that someone's voice was the source.

"They're going to kill me. I don't deserve this. We were doing the right thing. We had a plan. The president was doing the right thing. And Jaspers too. They had the guts to do it. That asshole Briter ruined everything. The human race doesn't stand a chance unless we colonize

Mars. Sacrificing a few astronauts was the only way. It would've worked. Oh, God. They're going to kill me. I'm sending code to fix the O₂. Install it and Mars Girl will be okay. Oh, God. They're killing me ..."

108. Make peace with your maker

"Toze wouldn't do this to me," Lyte said, looking through his binoculars at the Milliken, its rail lined by soldiers. He had pulled back on the throttle but kept the dinghy creeping toward the cutter. "Toze wouldn't send me on a suicide mission," Lyte said.

Wyndela had notMASS up and running and had wrested control of Bocelli's floater. The screen was split between the floater, which kept an eye on the ship, and Barker's Upix, which was focused on Lyte. "White House sends soldiers to stop Barker and Cecilia from telling truth about MarsDestiny," read the crawl at the bottom of the screen.

"The president of the United States murdered sixteen of America's best and brightest," Cecilia said to Lyte, "and they're trying to do the same to the seventeenth. You think anyone's worried about you?"

"I don't even have a gun on me," Lyte said, pleading for reason.

"Once we're dead they'll plant weapons on us and tell the world we shot first," Barker said.

"I know someone who lives just around the point," Cecilia said. "We can hide at his place or take his car. That's our only chance right now."

Lyte felt his assistant buzzing and pulled it out of his breast pocket. "Toze, what's happening?" he said.

“Run Lyte, run,” Tozo whispered, his voice barely audible. “You’re a dead man if you come back to the ship.”

Through his binoculars Lyte could see Tozo with his assistant to his ear skipping down the metal stairway toward the deck. “Toze, tell me what the hell is going on!”

Lyte saw Tozo crumble and fall face first down the steps. When he heard the gun shot a second later, he switched off the dinghy’s running lights and threw the boat into a tight U-turn. He still held his assistant in his hand and he could hear someone speaking.

“Seaman Lyte, this is SA Howzer. My bird’s got enough firepower to turn you and your comrades into hamburger. You’ve got five seconds to make significant progress toward the ship or you better make peace with your maker and kiss your ass goodbye.”

Lyte’s assistant vibrated in his hand again and he saw that there was a one-line message from his wife. The message, “Be careful!!!! We love you!!!!” was accompanied by a short vid she took that day of herself giving their baby girl gentle pushes in the swing set Lyte built for her. Lyte watched the vid play a second time, pulled off his boots, then dove overboard and swam toward the beach at Big Rock Point.

108. The fix

“Pyotr! Are you listening?” Wikommen said.

“Sorry, Jill. I was reading this and ...”

“I shouldn’t have to remind you that we’re fighting time so please pay attention. One of our own is responsible for this tragedy and these charts are very discouraging. We’ve already lost sixteen people. Let’s not lose another one.”

“I think I’ve got the fix right here,” Pyotr said. He held up the two pages of code that Romane had sent before the crowd pushed his car off the bridge. Pyotr left the voiceprint message on the table.

“What are you talking about?” Wikommen said.

“Romane and I share a printer,” Pyotr said. “When I printed the charts, these pages were with them. Romane gives us the fix right here.”

Pyotr handed the pages of code to Wikomman. She glanced at the first few lines, then slid them across the table to Benton Hellincourt, a twenty-three-year-old proggie prodigy who was cleaning his ear with a pencil eraser.

“Does it make sense?” Wikomman asked him.

Hellincourt scanned the lines of code with his assistant and read its interpretation in the display window. “It would’ve taken us months to figure this out.”

“Can you make it work?” Wikomman said.

“If Romane was serious about fixing what he broke, it should work like a charm,” Hellincourt said, still scanning the pages.

“Then get moving,” Wikomman said.

109. Dangerous times

“Welcome once again, Madame President,” Sally said. “You’re almost becoming a regular here at MASSnews.”

“Thank you, Sally,” the president said from her Oval Office desk. She wore a red blouse under a black suit coat with an ochre ribbon pinned to her lapel. “With so much misinformation swirling around, it’s important that I help people understand what’s really happening.”

Pipped into the lower right, two helicopters hovered above Clear Lake where divers searched for Black Goat's car.

"I understand you have some news about the MarsDestiny crash," Sally said.

"That's right, Sally. Immediately following the crash I launched a secret inquiry to piece together the plot and identify the conspirators."

"Who was involved in the investigation?" Sally asked.

"I can't reveal their names," the president said. "These are dangerous times and we must protect our people."

"Of course," Sally said. "Sorry I asked."

"But I *can* tell you that the investigation has determined that the Chinese financed these operations with money laundered through a Moldovan separatist group closely allied with Beijing. We've also identified those involved, including the saboteur who wrote the code that killed the Martyrs for Mankind."

"You're talking about NASA flight engineer Troy Romane, also known as Black Goat."

"That's right, Sally," the president said. "And the more we look into today's events the more connections we find between the Mars Destiny tragedy, the Denver Death Plane plot and the subversive terrorists working for your news network."

Sally closed her eyes and shook her head. "I speak for all of us here at MASSnews when I say I'm horrified that two MASSnews casters – Ray Barker and Cecilia Westraek – used their positions as trusted voices of this network to aid and abet terrorists."

"It should turn the stomachs of all decent Americans to think that these two subversive terrorists pretended to show concern for Mars Girl when they were in fact part of the conspiracy," the president said. "I think we can all see the importance of Congress immediately

approving my Public Accountability Program, a law that would require all casters and news directors to receive Secret Service clearance before they are able to use public airwaves.”

“Madame President, let me be the first to voluntarily submit to a background check,” Sally said. “It’s obvious that the credibility of the media is at stake, and what better way to show that we are deserving of public trust than to have the government prove it?”

“Thank you, Sally,” the president said. “Let’s hope others follow your example. But right now we must shut down the terrorists as quickly as possible. We’ve learned that there are sleeper cells waiting for orders to come through their screens from the illegal terrorist network. I can assure the American people we will do everything within our powers and use whatever means necessary to protect Americans and our way of life.”

110. One more federal offense

Barker was at the dinghy’s wheel and kept its nose speeding toward the tip of Big Rock Point. Facing backward on the middle bench, Cecilia held the fluttering blanket around her shoulders with one hand and Lyte’s binoculars with the other. She watched the WarClub lift off the Milliken’s deck and tilt its nose toward the dinghy.

“Wyn?” Barker said. “Cut the notMASS audio please.”

“I’ll cut your audio feed and put your talk with Jaspers on repeat,” Wyndela said. “Okay ... done.”

“I’ve got an idea,” Barker said. “You need to patch us through to the White House right away.”

“Hell, what’s one more federal offense?” Wyndela said. “I set up a direct between Jaspers and Briter a week ago. I can use that.”

“Great,” Barker said. “We’ll talk live with the White House as soon as you get them.”

111. They’re everywhere

“I just can’t believe it,” Amber said. She was on the couch watching divers pull Romane’s limp body from his car at the bottom of Clear Lake. “I just can’t believe Ceci would get mixed up in something like this.”

“We got terrorists all around us,” London said, an empty beer in one hand and a full one in the other. “Maybe even in this room. They’re like rats. Where you got one, you got a thousand.”

“You’re saying one of us is a terrorist?” Molly said, sitting on the easy chair’s armrest with her arm around Ted.

“I’m saying you never know what you gotta deal with,” London said. “Look at your sister. I thought she was the sweetest girl in the world until she stabbed me in the back.”

“Ellie’s a terrorist?” Fred said.

London shot Fred a look of disgust. “I’m saying there was outside influences to the situation. People with no business messing with my business. Just like this here.” London pointed his full beer at the screen. “You gotta root out the evil, like the president said.”

“I thought you hated Flanagan,” Fred said.

“When foreigners are bitin’ us in the ass, you stand with the commander. Just like I did in Iran, where I got this bum leg.”

“I think you got a bum head,” Amber said.

“Fred, you best get this flag burner under control,” London said, without taking his eyes off the screen. “I’ve about reached my limit.”

At the bottom of the screen in blinking yellow letters, was a message that Wyndela managed to sneak past the MASSnews watchdogs for a few seconds.

“MASSnews lies about MarsDestiny ... Watch notMASS for truth.”

“See?” London said. “Goddamn terrorists are everywhere.”

112. Who is this?

Briter was sitting on the Oval Office couch working on talking points for the president’s next appearance onscreen when he heard his head hum the Mars Girl theme. “Let’s make this the last time we talk, Jaspers,” he said.

“Hey, it worked,” Cecilia said, holding tight to the dinghy’s gunwale as Barker swept the boat through a turn around the tip of Big Rock Point.

“Who is this?” Briter said.

“Cecilia Westraek. I’m here with Ray Barker and we’re onscreen trying to explain to millions of people why MASS and the president conspired to crash MarsDestiny.”

“Who is this, really?” Briter said.

“I told you,” Cecilia said. “We know the story. We’ve got a recording of Jaspers confessing the whole thing. You and the president are mentioned.”

Briter turned to look at the president’s wall screen, which showed Romane’s body on a gurney being reeled in by a rescue chopper hovering over Clear Lake.

Mirellen was in the lower right pip, wearing her space suit and lying still on her bed.

“I know you’re not who you say you are,” Briter said. “How’d you get on my direct?”

The president was at her desk talking on her assistant about Mars Girl's eulogy with her chief speechwriter. Detecting the anxiety in Briter's voice, she looked up and told her speechwriter she'd get back to her.

"We're on a new network, Briter," Cecilia said. "Take a look at notMASS."

"Briter, what's up?" the president said.

"notMASS-Now," Briter said. "Volume-Six-Now."

The screen changed to a view of the dinghy from Barker's FloatPix. Wyndela took the floater up high for a look at the approaching WarClub on the other side of Big Rock Point. The crawl at the top of the screen, "MASS CEO John J. Jaspers Admits Conspiracy with White House," changed to "Government Assassins Closing in on Barker and Cecilia to Stop Truth about MarsDestiny."

"Whoever this is, you're violating federal ..." Briter stopped speaking when he heard his words echoed by the screen. "Oh, shit. Over-Now."

113. Let's do it

"Stinzy, you got 'em?" Howzer said to his gunnery sergeant.

"They're squirming but we got 'em locked," Stinzy said.

Barker threw the wheel one way and then the other to skid the dinghy over the lake's gentle chop.

"Let's do it," Howzer said.

"Howzer, this is General Shelton. Hold your fire. The White House wants you to take out the floater that's watching you. Go to notMASS to find its location. No shooting until the camera's destroyed. You read me?"

‘Loud and clear,” Howzer said. “You hear that, Stinzy?”

“Roger,” Stinzy said. “Checking notMASS now.”

114. Thank you, Jesus

The WarClub swung around to face the FloatPix.

“I think they’re going after the floater,” Wyndela said. “I’ll take ‘em for a ride and see if I can buy you some time.”

“We’ll be at Cecilia’s friend’s house soon,” Barker said. “We just need a minute.”

“Ray, your audio feed is on so be careful what you say,” Wyndela said.

Wyndela shut down the floater’s vid feed and gave its jets full power, skimming it across the lake toward Block Island. She switched the vid feed to Barker’s Upix. “Your eyes are on, Ray.”

Barker turned and noticed that Cecilia, sitting on the dinghy’s middle bench, had closed her eyes. She had a calm, almost blissful look on her face. Her lips were just short of a smile.

“Is it Jesus or Buddha this time?” Barker said.

Cecilia opened her eyes and smiled. “Jesus,” she said, and closed her eyes again.

Barker looked behind the dinghy and saw the chopper bank to follow the floater toward Block Island.

“Thank you, Jesus,” Barker said.

115. Visitors

Greg Molson was out of breath as he stood on the dock behind his house. He wore a faded red T-shirt he bought a couple years before at a ReRolled Stones tribute concert featuring the original 1965 line-up in living holos at the new hockey arena in Grayling.

It hadn't been a good day for Molson and it was getting worse. His speedboat – the signature rental at his shop – had been smashed to bits with his friend in it. And now Cecilia and her terrorist comrade, pursued by a team of commandos, were headed for the house he shared with his wife and seven-year-old daughter.

When Molson heard Barker say they were headed to Cecilia's friend's house, he knew they were talking about him, so he sprinted from his living room easy chair to the end of his dock. He could hear the dinghy's buzzing motor and could just make out its dark outline against the moon-glistened waves.

Molson turned toward his house to see if his wife and daughter had arrived from their Girl Scout meeting but Suni's car still wasn't in the driveway. He turned back toward the lake and saw Cecilia waving to him with her arms above her head.

At the top of his voice, Molson yelled "Stay Away!"

116. They got me

Wyndela sent the floater through a series of chaotic twists, turns and loops causing a rocket sent from the WarClub's nose to miss and explode against the huge boulder on Block Island. A teenage couple darted from behind the rock, adjusting their clothes as they picked their way across the rocks toward the small island's interior. Another rocket just missed the floater low and exploded when it hit the water.

Wyndela ducked the floater behind the big rock, now missing one of its corners, and settled it on a bed of gravel under an outcropping at the rock's base.

A moment later the chopper hovered over the boulder and its two spotlights converged on the floater's hiding place.

"We're almost to my friend's place," Cecilia said. "We can see him on his dock."

"I should've gone into the trees," Wyndela said. "I think they've got me."

She gave the floater full power and sent it around the island toward a cluster of smaller rocks but the WarClub's tail gunner locked on and his aim was true.

"Damn," Wyndela said, as the screen in front of her went black. She switched her main screen's feed to Barker's Upix and saw Molson standing at the end of his dock frantically waving the dinghy away.

117. Trust

Briter paced back and forth in front of the wall screen holding his hand to his forehead.

The president sat at her desk watching Briter. "You're loosing it, aren't you?" she said.

"NASA thinks they know how to fix the oxygen supply," Briter said, without looking up.

"How?"

"Just before the Goat was thrown off the bridge he sent some code and they found it."

He gestured at the screen and then looked at the president. "And now we find out Barker's got a camera in his eye. We've been making decisions in the dark."

"The great Briter iceberg is melting," the president said.

"I'm just thinking fast," Briter said. "Trying to keep up with things."

“Bullshit,” the president said. “You’re scared out of your wits. Pull yourself together. You got us into this, you’ll get us out.”

“I got us into this?” Briter said, squinting at the president. “This wasn’t *my* idea. You were so desperate for a grand gesture to prove you’re not just a backward-thinking caretaker that you put your entire legacy in jeopardy. I had no choice but to go along with you.”

“I don’t remember putting a gun to your head.”

“Oh, come on,” Briter said. “I’ve got the top political job in the country. What choice did I have? Quit just because you want to kill some astronauts? Turn you in? I’d never work in this town again. Who’d trust me?”

118. Help

The explosions on Block Island sent Molson’s anxiety to new highs. As the dinghy neared the dock, he fumbled in his pocket for his relaxer pills but the only one he had with him squirted from between his fingers. A bluegill sucked it off the surface after it plopped into the lake.

Barker pulled the throttle all the way back and threw a rope to Molson, standing on the edge of his dock. Molson caught the rope and threw it back, draping it over Barker’s shoulders.

“You can’t stop here, Ceci,” Moslon said, looking down from his dock into the dinghy.

“Greg, we need your help,” Cecilia said.

“Do you know what they’re saying about you?” Molson said, tapping his wristscreen.

“All we need is a place to set up,” Barker said.

“*Not here,*” Molson said. “Suni will freak if the army shows up.” He looked toward Block Island. He couldn’t see the WarClub but he could hear it.

“Then let us use your car,” Barker said.

“No!” Molson said. “Listen, I don’t know what’s going on and right now I don’t care. I just want both of you out of here.”

All three turned their heads when the WarClub cleared the tall pines along Big Rock Point and its gentle thrumming changed to deafening clatter.

Barker threw the throttle forward and sent the dinghy toward the beach where it slid several feet onto the sand in front of Molson’s cozy three-bedroom bungalow. The two fugitives jumped out and ran toward the screened-in porch, just beating Molson to the door. Barker stayed in the porch and Molson followed Cecilia into the house, pleading with her to leave.

Barker, looking out through the porch door, kept his eyes on the chopper and Wyndela zoomed in the Upix, filling the screen with Howzer and his pilot. When both of the chopper’s spotlights hit him, Barker slipped inside the house and found Cecilia crouched on the kitchen floor. Molson saw his wife’s car come down the driveway and ran out into the front yard.

Barker kept his eyes on Cecilia and Wyndela zoomed in on her face.

“America, we need your help,” Cecilia said. “MASS and the president have already killed sixteen astronauts, and they want to kill Mars Girl. Don’t let them murder any more innocent people. President Flanagan wants to kill Barker and me because we know the truth.”

“The messages are ready,” Wyndela said in their heads. Cecilia glanced at her wristscreen and saw them, each with a ‘send’ button below: “Don’t murder the casters!” and “Call off the assassins!”

“Tell the president she can’t get away with this,” Cecilia said. “Send one of the messages on your screen to the White House right now. Don’t wait! We need ...”

An explosion by the road rocked the house and sent Barker and Cecilia to the floor. Barker looked up and saw Molson's wife carry her screaming daughter in the front door.

119. A matter of time

Marvin turned off Highway 9 at Poughkeepsie and headed west across the wide Hudson River toward the Catskills. On the bridge, he adjusted his rearview so he could see Wyndela in the back of the van. Her arms were folded on top of one of the switch boxes and her forehead rested on her forearms.

"You all right, Wyn?" Marvin said. She raised her head and he could see that she wasn't.

"Marv, I want you to know that if things go bad I'll be the sorriest person in the world."

"What are you talking about?" Marvin said. "We're doing the right thing. Can't be anything wrong with that."

"They're spinning us into terrorists," Wyndela said. "They're saying we helped Black Goat." Wyndela turned up the volume on MASSnews and Sally Timmsley's voice filled the van.

"... Secret Service investigators now know that Romane's plot involved more than just the MarsDestiny sabotage. The two former MASSnews casters, Ray Barker and Cecilia Westraek, operating out of the same terrorist cell as Black Goat, have set up an illegal news network and continue to repeat the ludicrous story that the Flanagan administration purposefully sabotaged MarsDestiny. A special anti-terrorism unit is in pursuit of Barker and Cecilia and another unit is pursuing the illegal network's transmission point. We're told that it's simply a matter of time until the network is shut down."

Wyndela turned off the speaker. “Everything’s a lie except the last bit.” She looked into Marvin’s eyes in the rearview. “They’ll get us eventually.”

“Just keep doing what you’re doing, Wyn,” Marvin said. “You’re the best in the biz, baby. How’d the messages go?”

Wyndela shook her head. “Bad,” she said. “After we did ours, MASS did a couple of their own. ‘No mercy for the saboteurs’ beat ‘Let them speak’ by thirty-seven million votes.”

“How many sent our messages?” Marvin said.

“Not even two hundred thousand.”

“The truth will come out, Wyn,” Marvin said, looking in the rearview again. “Just keep believing.”

120. Works every time

In Ted and Molly’s living room the ReadWrite showed the underbelly of the WarClub as seen by Barker’s Upix.

“Fucking terrorist network,” London said. “This is what happens when no one’s afraid of us. Now we gotta go flatten another country over there.”

“Over where?” Fred said.

“Like I give a shit,” London said. “Just scare the hell out of everybody so they quit fucking with us. Works every time.” London gestured with his empty beer at Fred. “People gotta realize we need a man in the White House.”

“I thought you were backing the Commander in Chief,” Molly said.

“Only in principal,” London said. “Anybody need a beer?”

“Yeah, I’m dry,” Ted said, holding up his empty can.

“Then get me one while you’re up,” London said.

121. Justice

Jaspers, wearing a fedora, sunglasses and a trench coat sat at the end of the bar in the Thirst Amendment, a dark and cozy tavern kitty corner from Manhattan’s federal courthouse. He sat sideways on his stool so he could see the two wall screens at the end of the bar. One showed MASSnews and the other notMASS. A small screen next to the larger ones displayed the current Betcom odds for the night’s baseball games, soccer matches and news shows.

At the moment, the odds on Barker and Cecilia surviving until midnight were four to one against. The Odds on Mars Girl holding on until a rescue ship arrived fluctuated wildly but were currently at nineteen to one. Men and women in business clothes were scattered throughout the bar and some used their assistants to make offshore bets. Conversations in the bar intensified every time new odds were posted.

“Ready for another Scotch?” said the bartender, a clean-cut man in his mid-twenties. Probably a law student, Jaspers thought.

Jaspers nodded.

“You think they’ll catch ‘em?” the bartender said as he measured Jaspers’ drink.

“Does it matter?” Jaspers said.

The bartender turned to look at the notMASS screen. Soldiers, with rifles in hand, dropped from Molson’s roof and rolled onto the lawn. “Sure it matters. Justice is good. You kill someone, you go to prison. You try to destroy our government and our way of life, you go to prison.”

“How do you know who’s guilty?” Jaspers said.

The bartender looked at the notMASS screen. “If they’re innocent, they’re trying awfully hard to look guilty.”

122. Sixty seconds

Barker expected the soldiers who dropped from the roof to come in the porch door so he went into the house. But the soldiers simply stood sentry outside the door. As he moved toward the kitchen Barker saw Suni, Molson’s wife, wearing a gray sweatshirt and jeans, open the front door and march across the lawn toward Howzer, who directed his men from the front yard. The WarClub still hovered above the house.

Barker pulled the front door open enough to throw a marble-sized metal microphone toward Howzer, standing next to a tree holding his rifle across his chest and watching Suni as she approached. The powerful wind coming off the chopper’s blades made Suni’s long black hair shudder.

“I hope you’re proud of yourself,” Suni yelled above the WarClub’s thumping. She was nearly standing on Howzer’s toes. “My little girl’s so freakin’ terrified she locked herself in her room and won’t come out. You need to pack up your toys and get the hell out of here!”

Howzer looked up at the roof where three of his men stood awaiting his orders.

“Ma’am, please step aside.” Howzer said. “I don’t want to any innocents getting hurt.”

“Then get out of here!” Suni said, punctuating her words by pounding on Howzer’s bulletproof vest with her fist.

“Ma’am, I’ll make you a deal,” Howzer said. “I could get one hell of a reprimand for this, but I have two kids of my own. You’ve got one minute. Either bring out the terrorists or bring out your daughter. In sixty seconds, we’ll do what we need to do.”

Suni hit Howzer on the chest with her fist one more time, then turned and walked toward her house. She picked up a large, flat rock from the flower garden at the front of the house, and continued toward her daughter’s window. She peered inside, then used the rock to break a hole in the glass. She reached in to unlatch the window, then slid it up and carefully crawled in. A few seconds later she threw a couple blankets over the sill and helped her crying daughter out the window and onto the damp grass, glinting in the glare of the WarClub’s spotlights.

123. Ten thousand messages

Barker, bent low in the kitchen, could hear Molson pleading with his daughter to unlock the door.

“She’s gone!” Barker said, shouting down the hall so Molson could hear him over the chopper. “Your wife took her out the window!”

Molson looked at Barker, wondering if he could trust him.

“Look!” Barker said, pointing toward the living room window.

Molson ran to the living room and looked out the window to see the taillights of his wife’s car disappear around the driveway’s bend. Molson threw open the front door and ran after the car but a soldier dropped from the roof, caught up to him in a few strides and used his rifle butt to take out his legs. Howzer shouted for the soldier to let him go and Molson limped up the driveway as Suni’s car pulled onto M-23.

“Cecilia, where are you?” Barker said, crouched behind a chair in the living room.

“In the basement,” Cecilia said. “First door on the left past the kitchen.”

“Ray, I’ve got someone who says he’s from NASA and he wants to talk to you,”

Wyndela said in Barker and Cecilia’s heads.

“What’s he want?” Barker said, easing his way down the basement steps in the dark.

“I don’t know,” Wyndela said. “He’ll only talk to you.”

“Cut the audio,” Barker said.

“Done,” Wyndela said. “I’ll play your chat with Jaspers again while we talk.”

“How’d the NASA guy find us?”

“I set up a connect to collect messages to the White House for people who wanted to write their own instead of using ours. This guy sent ten thousand messages with identical headers.”

“What was the header?”

“Conspirator Names.”

“Are you sure he’s from NASA?” Barker said as he reached the bottom of the steps.

“No, but I traced his connects and they check out,” Wyndela said.

“Cecilia, I’m in the basement,” Barker said. Where now?”

“The furnace room,” Cecilia said. “To the left and through another door.”

Barker felt his way along the stone wall until he came to a door. He searched for the knob and Cecilia flicked on a flashlight when he stepped inside. Barker locked the door behind him.

They both looked up when they heard boots thudding into the house above them.

“Let’s put him on live,” Barker said to Wyndela. He slid a metal milk crate against the furnace room door and sat on it. “We need a break. Let’s hope this is it.”

124. Imminent rain and garbage

Jaspers swallowed the last of his Scotch and felt the urge to crush the empty glass in his hand.

“Refill?” The bartender said, holding up the bottle for Jaspers to see.

Jaspers shook his head, threw a hundred dollar bill on the bar and walked out into the cool evening. The air smelled of imminent rain and garbage. A few blocks away, the MASSworld Building’s spiral gleamed like a beacon against the night sky.

125. Nobody knows

“Okay, Ray, I’ll connect you with the NASA guy,” Wyndela said after she replayed the Barker-Jaspers recording a second time. She replayed vid of the WarClub closing on the dinghy. “Audio is back on ... now.”

“Hello, anyone there?” Barker said, sitting on the milk crate against the furnace room door.

“Yes,” Pyotr Heath said. “I’m here.”

“This is Ray Barker.”

“Hello, Ray. Listen, I know some things about MarsDestiny.”

At the bottom of the screen Wyndela flashed the text: “NASA Tech to Name Conspirators.”

“Like what?” Barker said.

“I know who caused the crash and the O₂ problems at the station. It goes all the way up.”

“Does anyone else know what you know?” Barker said.

“No.”

“Why didn’t you tell your boss?”

“I don’t want anyone thinking I’m part of it. People are going to wonder how I know.”

“Tell me your name.”

“I can’t,” Pyotr said. “I don’t want to end up like Romane.”

“You mean you two worked together on the sabotage?”

“No! See, that’s what I’m talking about. Listen, if this is going to get me fired or killed ...”

“Hold on,” Barker said. “I’m just trying to understand. So you had nothing to do with the crash or the oxygen problems.”

“Absolutely not,” Pyotr said. “I’ve been working thirty hours straight trying to get the O₂ back up.”

“I just want to make sure you’re on the level. All I need is your name.”

Pyotr hesitated. “All right, but you *gotta* keep me out of this. My name is Pyotr. Pyotr Heath.”

“And you work for NASA?”

“Yeah, I’m at work right now. I’m in my car in the parking lot so nobody knows I’m doing this.”

Cecilia gasped.

“You don’t need to tell me where you are,” Barker said, looking at Cecilia and shaking his head. “How’d you get the information?”

“Is someone else listening?” Pyotr said.

“That was Cecilia,” Barker said.

“Oh, hi Cecilia,” Pyotr said. “Loved your show.”

“Hi, Pyotr,” Cecilia sighed.

Howzer was on a loudspeaker upstairs in Molson’s house. “There’s no escape. Just throw down your weapons and come out with your hands in the air.”

“How’d you get the information?” Barker said.

“Troy Romane and I ...”

“You mean Black Goat.”

“Yeah, that’s what they’re calling him,” Pyotr said. “He and I share a printer. I printed some charts and O₂ schedules and when I pulled them off the printer I found some extra pages.”

“You found something he wrote?”

“He gave us two pages of code to fix the O₂ and there was also a voiceprint. I gave the code to my boss and the systems are back up so I think Romane was telling the truth. Some Secret Service goons ripped up his office but they never checked the printer. He must’ve printed it remotely, before they threw him off the bridge.”

“Read it.”

“Read Romane’s message?”

“Yes. Do it now.”

““They’re killing me.”” Pyotr read in an expressionless monotone. ““I don’t deserve this.””

Boots clumped down the basement steps.

“Faster,” Barker said.

“All right,” Pyotr said. ““The president was doing the right thing. And Jaspers too ...””

One of the soldiers kicked at the furnace room door. With each kick Barker could feel the shock of the door against the crate under him.

“Pyotr,” Barker said. “You might not hear from us for a while, but keep reading. Read it three more times.”

Another kick pushed Barker’s crate a few inches from the door and cracked the doorjamb.

“After you read it three times, get the hell out of there,” Barker said.

The soldier kicked at the door again and this time it flew open and knocked Barker face first onto the cement floor.

126. Just die

The president and Briter stood in front of the Oval Office wall screen watching live vid from above the NASA parking lot in Houston. The MASSnews floater followed an armored black van as it raced through the lot toward Pyotr’s car where he continued to read Romane’s message.

“I want to show every lie Barker ever told onscreen,” the president said to Briter, standing next to her and chewing his thumbnail. “MASS will help put it together. Show the lie, then explain the truth. Funnel it through one of our news service fronts and send it to every network on the planet.”

“I like it,” Briter said, and wandered a few steps away to make the calls.

“notMASS-Now,” the president said.

Mirellen, wearing her space suit, stood at the module’s control panel. She stepped away from the panel and lifted the helmet off her head and breathed in deeply, exhaled, and took

another breath. The tension dropped from her shoulders and she smiled into a camera attached to the ceiling.

“Why can’t she just die?” the president said.

127. What’re you, simple?

On the wall screen at Ted and Mollie’s, the armored black van screeched to a halt directly behind Pyotr’s car, locking him into his parking space. A squad of Secret Service agents wearing black jumpsuits trooped out of the van and surrounded the car. One of them smashed a metal battering ram through the driver’s side window just as Pyotr reached to lower it.

“You’re watching the arrest of the second NASA conspirator, caught in the parking lot of the agency’s Houston headquarters,” Sally Timmsley said.

“Kick his ass,” London said, rising to his feet. “Goddamn terrorists.”

“If he’s a terrorist, how come the oxygen’s working?” Fred said.

“Because they caught the bastards,” London said. “What’re you, simple?”

“Allegedly,” Timmsley continued, “this terrorist – Pyotr Heath, a close associate of Troy Romane – was to take over if Black Goat was captured. Heath’s job as MarsDestiny deputy assistant for oxygen supply positioned him perfectly to disable the O₂ supply and suffocate Mars Girl.”

Pyotr was dragged from the car, cuffed and flung face first to the pavement. Two agents picked him up by his shoulders to drag him to the van and the floater dropped to ground level to show his face. Blood oozed from gashes in his cheek and bits of asphalt clung to his face.

“They didn’t have to beat him up like that,” Amber said. “I mean he wasn’t even trying to get away.”

“He’s a goddamn terrorist!” London said. “They should just shoot him right now.”

128. Authority

FBI Director Silwin Spilzer knocked twice and then stuck his narrow, delicate face past the door.

“Come in, Silwin,” the president said with a pleasant smile from where she and Briter stood in front of the wall screen.

Spilzer, six-foot-five with pale flesh clinging to his lanky frame, wore a dark, four-button suit with widely spaced pinstripes. He took long strides into the room as Briter walked toward him with his hand out.

“Good to see you, director,” Briter said.

Spilzer wrapped his long, bony fingers around Briter’s hand and nodded his long, narrow face.

The president was all smiles as she followed Briter across the room to shake Spilzer’s hand and gave him a sincere, “Thanks for coming,” with her eyes half closed and a little bow for added effect. The president motioned toward the two chairs in front of her desk. “Please, Silwin. Have a seat.”

Spilzer gave her the same silent nod he gave Briter. His legs were so long that his knees were several inches higher than his waist when he sat down and the shape of his knobby knees showed through his pants.

Briter sat in the other chair and the president sat behind her desk. She leaned forward and folded her hands in front of her. “Silwin, I’m sure you understand the gravity of the situation. When the integrity of this office is questioned, the entire nation is at risk. For the government to

function properly, I need to have the respect and authority I deserve, especially in these dangerous times. Wild allegations thrown around by even the most unreliable sources tend to gain traction among segments of our population who have learned to distrust the government while giving credence to the most irrational conspiracy theories. I want you to go onscreen with me and help me explain to the good people of this great nation that I had nothing to do with the crash on Mars or the O₂ problems at the station. We're on in a few minutes and Briter has already drafted some talking points for you."

Briter handed Spilzer a sheet with four bullet points. The director hesitated, then took the sheet but didn't look at it.

"I'm sure I don't have to remind you of your delicate position," the president said. "The entire nation is wondering how America's top law enforcement official failed so miserably to prevent all this from happening. It's a big black cloud that will always hang over your head. I could fire you right now, but I'm willing to forgive this lapse and give you another chance."

129. Played for a chump

Piper walked into Rindell's office without knocking. She carried a bulging canvas bag and wore her unbuttoned coat. Rindell sat in the chair next to his desk and stared at his wall screen, watching Mirellen pick at her dinner with a pair of chopsticks.

"Here's my letter of resignation," Piper said, dropping a sheet of paper on his desk. "I don't want any part of this."

"We might be done anyway," Rindell said, handing her his assistant. "The courts are meddling."

Piper put down her bag and read a District Judge's order halting all contact with the Gemini Cricket Restaurants Mars Station unrelated to Mirellen's immediate survival.

"The administration is saying that the 'landing phase' is over and now Mars Girl is in the 'residency phase,'" Rindell said. "The judge said we don't have the exclusive on the new phase so we have to bid on the rights again. They won't even let NASA download her head until the rights are sold. Briter played me for a chump."

"Serves you right," Piper said, tossing Rindell's assistant to him. She picked up her bag and walked out.

130. The country will be fine

Spilzer looked at Briter, whose face jumped into a smile, and then at the president, who raised her eyebrows expectantly.

"My agents have been completely shut out of the investigative process," Spilzer said. "Our attempts to gain access to individuals, records and data have been stymied by your people at every turn. The only information available to me has come through the Secret Service and the media." He reached out and put the talking points on the president's desk. "I don't trust either."

"Silwin, apparently you don't appreciate the seriousness of the situation," the president said.

"While I'm concerned about recent events," Spilzer said, "and I respect the newly enacted rights of the Secret Service to investigate immediate threats posed by terrorism, treason and subversion, I will not serve as your mouthpiece. I have the right and the responsibility to investigate criminal activity. Given the time and resources to do so, I would be glad to go

onscreen and say what I know. But I will not read something prepared by your lackey and pretend that it reflects my opinion.”

The president stared at Spilzer for a moment. “Nice speech, Silwin.” She picked up her moon rock paperweight, examined its features, then slammed it down hard, making Briter wince. “But this is no time for you to finally grow some balls,” the president said through clenched teeth. “So be a good puppy and bark when I tell you or I’ll fire your ass this minute.”

“Loyalty to my country takes precedence over my relationship with you,” Spilzer said.

The president rose from her chair with the moon rock still in hand. “I am this country and I’ll ruin you.”

“Working for a president bent on flouting the law is an untenable position for an FBI director,” Spilzer said. “Either give my agents free investigative reign or I will resign immediately and tell the nation that you’ve done your best to obstruct all efforts to uncover the truth.”

“I think we all need to catch our breaths here,” Briter said, sliding forward to the edge of his chair.

“Briter, shut the hell up,” the president said, keeping her eyes on Spilzer.

Briter scooted back in his chair.

“Silwin, darling,” the president crooned. “I’m onscreen in three minutes and you will be at my side telling our fellow Americans that I am not a murderer. The well-being of this nation depends on it.”

Spilzer pulled a pen from his breast pocket and leaned forward to flip over the sheet Briter had given him. With his long, slender fingers he began to write out his resignation.

“The country will be fine,” Spilzer said. “But you’re fucked.”

The president raised the moon rock with both hands and smashed Spilzer's fingers as he wrote.

131. Traitor to the end

"All right, let's do this the easy way," Howzer said, as he pulled Barker off the basement floor. "Open your eyes."

Barker's hands were cuffed behind him and his face pressed against the basement's stone wall. A rock's jagged edge stuck out just above his nose. He scraped the scab above his right eye against the rock until he could feel blood running down his cheek.

Howzer spun him around but Barker kept his eyes closed.

"A traitor to the end, huh?" Howzer said.

Barker turned his head to make sure the media officer's handheld had a good view of the blood gathering at his jaw.

132. You're under arrest

Light-headed from the shock of broken metacarpals, he stood unsteadily in front of the president's desk clutching his bloody right hand to his chest. With his left hand he pulled his assistant from his suit coat pocket and reached for one of the presets with his thumb.

"Briter!" the president shouted.

Briter grabbed Spilzer's assistant from his hand and slid it across the desk toward the president.

"Give it back," Spilzer said to the president.

The president picked up the assistant and looked at it. “Now why do you want to call your office? We can work this out, Silwin.”

“Give it to me,” Spilzer said. Sweat beaded his brow.

“Quid pro quo,” the president said.

With his left hand, Spilzer pulled a handkerchief from his back pocket and wrapped the fingers of his bloody right hand. “You’re under arrest for assault and battery,” he said to the president. “You can go quietly or I will order my agents to take you by force.” He held out his left hand. “Give me my assistant. You have no option but to surrender.”

The president stood up, picked up the moon rock, dropped Spilzer’s assistant onto her desk and raised the rock to smash it. Spilzer tried to rescue the device, his only connection to the outside world, but the rock came down just as he reached for it, breaking the middle three fingers on his left hand and putting the device beyond use. The pain made Spilzer howl and he shrank to his knees in front of the president’s desk.

Briter took a few steps toward Spilzer. “Shari, we can explain one broken hand but I’m not sure we can explain two.”

The president kicked off her shoes, hiked up her skirt and slid off her pantyhose. She pulled a pair of scissors from her desk, cut the hose in two and walked to where Spilzer knelt in front of her desk.

“Briter get over here,” the president said, giving Spilzer’s shoulder a shove and knocking him onto his side. She used one of the lengths of hose to bind his ankles, pulling it tight and tying it off. “Briter, *come here!*” she yelled without looking up. She picked up Spilzer’s blood-soaked handkerchief from the floor and walked on her knees to his head. She stuffed the bloody

fabric into his mouth and used the other leg of her hose as a gag. Spilzer tried to pull at the gag but his hands were useless. “Briter! I need your tie!”

133. We all right?

The MO stood at the top of the stairs with his handheld as Barker and Cecilia were led up the steps. Barker’s Upix was useless because one of the soldiers put a Mickey Mouse pillowcase over his head. A growing bloodstain above his right eye showed through the fabric.

“Wyn, we all right?” Barker whispered.

A soldier pushed Barker in the back. “No talking!” he said.

“I shut things down for half a minute when I saw a drone coming at us but we’re back up and running,” Wyndela said. “MASS can’t show Mars Girl anymore so I’ve got her onscreen through NASA’s connects and that’s giving our numbers a big boost. She’s saying that she wants to go back to the ship to bury her family and but I think NASA techs have talked her out of it. At least for now. I’m crawling Black Goat’s confession and your talk with Jaspers.

Cecilia, you all right?”

“Yes,” Cecilia said.

“Quiet!” said the soldier behind her, knocking the back of her head with his open palm.

“Hey, take it easy,” Barker said, reacting to the sounds behind him.

The soldier behind Barker gave him another shove and Barker stumbled over the last step and went head first into the hallway wall. He hit his head just above his right eye, opening the cut even further.

There were more soldiers waiting in the kitchen and they ushered Barker and Cecilia out the front door and toward the WarClub, idling on Molson’s lawn, its blades sweeping above their

heads. There were two more WarClubs hovering nearby, one over M-23 and the other just offshore. An armada of pleasure boats full of gawkers had gathered along the north side of Big Rock Point and the captain of one of the choppers was on his loudspeaker demanding that they disperse. When that didn't work, he fired a rocket over top the boats and it exploded in shallow water near Block Island. After the warning shot, some of the boats drifted away but most stayed where they were.

134. Bound and gagged

"Once again," Sally said, "we're honored to welcome a special guest. Madame President, thanks for joining us."

"My pleasure, Sally." The president, trying to appear relaxed, sat at an angle on the edge of her desk with her ankles crossed.

Out of the camera's view, Spilzer, bound and gagged, began squirming his way from the center of the room toward the president. He made little headway so he tried rolling, which worked better, but as he rolled over his broken hands the pain made him howl into the bloody handkerchief.

"We're looking at live vid of Barker and Cecilia," Sally said. "They were both captured just moments ago by a team of special agents."

The view from the handheld onboard the chopper appeared in the lower right pip. Howzer's MO stood over Barker and Cecilia shooting down onto them as they sat on the metal bench attached to the WarClub's fuselage. Barker still wore the bloodstained pillowcase over his head and the camera's bright light forced Cecilia to avert her eyes.

“The agents’ quick action prevented even more deaths,” the president said. “We’ve discovered that the terrorist cell led by Ray Barker planned to execute a string of attacks designed to kill innocent people.”

Spilzer had rolled to the chairs in front of the desk. The president watched his progress out of the corner of her eye. Briter, seated in front of the wall screen and watching his boss’s performance, was oblivious to Spilzer’s advance.

When Spilzer was within a few feet of the president she slipped off one of her shoes and kicked it toward Briter to get his attention. It landed silently on the carpet behind him.

Nearly at the president’s feet, Spilzer attempted to thrust his legs at her but she stepped outside his reach and walked unevenly to the other side of her desk and remained standing. Mayvee, controlling the camera from the MASS Building studio, tightened the zoom to compensate for the added distance.

“Are you satisfied that all the guilty parties have been apprehended?” Sally said.

“Be assured that we will not rest until we are certain that everyone who had anything to do with the plot has been caught and punished.”

Spilzer had worked his way to the side of the president’s desk. With great effort he leaned against it to push himself up and onto his knees.

“You’ve been consistent all along in your opinion that MarsDestiny missions will continue, despite this tragedy,” Sally said. “Is that still your intention?”

“Absolutely,” the president said. “Not only will missions continue, but we will accelerate their pace. The Martyrs for Mankind did not die in vain. We will show the evil-doers of this world that nothing will deter us from our destiny.”

“And a rescue for Mars Girl?”

“Already being planned,” the president said, with one eye on Spilzer, who inched around the desk on his knees, making slow progress because of his bound ankles. “She’ll be home by Independence Day, and we’ve already begun planning the biggest Fourth of July celebration ever. Of course, all this will be done without any expense to taxpayers. Sometimes good can come from tragedy and I appreciate all that MASSnews ...”

The president was startled by blood that splashed across her face when Spilzer snapped his bloody hands upward. The second salvo missed her face but splattered her white blouse. Spilzer continued moving toward her.

“I’m sorry, Sally,” the president said, looking down at her blouse as several more drops of blood sprinkled her cheek.

Spilzer fell onto his side and swung his legs as hard as he could, catching the president in the ankle with the toes of his shoes. Her knees buckled as if she were about to faint.

“President Flanagan, are you all right?” Sally asked.

The president straightened and Spilzer kicked her again.

“Sally, I’m sure we’ll be talking again soon.”

135. What happened

When Mayvee heard the phrase “I’m sure we’ll be talking again soon” she cut the White House feed, as the exclusive interview contract stated she must. Sally’s bewildered face filled the screen, except for the lower left pip, occupied by Barker and Cecilia, seated in the WarClub’s cargo hold, handcuffed and guarded by armed men.

Uncertain of what had just occurred, Sally struggled for something to say.

“Live from the White House ... that was President Shari Flanagan.” Sally’s eyes unfocused and she turned her head slightly away from the camera. “I’m getting word now that ... the president had to excuse herself because ... she has her dog with her at work today ... and he’s a playful pup and he was ... jumping on her, or, biting her ankles. We’re not really sure.” Sally hesitated again. “The president also developed a bloody nose as we were talking.”

The screen split in two and Jill Wikkoman shared the screen with Sally. Barker and Cecilia, inside the WarClub, slid to the bottom center of the screen. The soldiers around them grabbed handholds as the chopper lifted off.

Sally regained her composure. “Joining us now from Houston is Jill Wikkoman, team leader for MarsDestiny’s oxygen supply systems. Ms. Wikkoman, I trust there are no dogs biting at your ankles.”

Wikkoman’s confusion softened her face. “Dogs?”

136. Whatever we want

Rindell burst into the MASSnews studio and skidded to a halt in front of Mayvee’s portable station, fifteen feet from Sally’s anchor desk

“Get the White House back,” Rindell whispered to Mayvee as Sally continued her interview with Wikkoman. “Get it back *now*.”

“The president signed off,” Mayvee whispered back. “She said, ‘I’m sure we’ll be talking again soon.’ You heard her. The contract says we cut when she says that.”

“Get it back!”

“I’m pretty damn sure that’s illegal,” Mayvee said.

“I’m pretty damn sure we have a constitutionally protected right to inform the American people,” Rindell said.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Mayvee said. “I saw the contract. We can’t just do whatever we want.”

“Mayvee, get the White House,” Rindell said, pointing at her array of screens. “*Now!*”

Mayvee crossed her arms. “They’re supposed to cut the link when we sign off anyway.”

“Something’s going on at the White House and I’m sure they aren’t thinking about standard procedures,” Rindell said. “Just try it.”

“I’m not doing it,” Mayvee said.

“Damn it, just tell me what to do and *I’ll* do it.” Rindell stepped up to Mayvee’s station and looked at the confusing array of screens, buttons and displays with ever-changing graphs and scales. On the center screen Wikommen expressed her dismay that Pyotr Heath was involved in the sabotage.

“That’s the same as doing it,” Mayvee said, her arms still crossed.

“Tell me how to do it and I’ll give you an extra twenty thousand on your next check.”

“Twenty-five thousand and promise that I had nothing to do with this,” Mayvee said.

“Fine. Just *tell* me.”

137. Pull yourself together

Spilzer lay on the floor bound and gagged and the president was on all fours next to him, facing away from the tiny camera that protruded from the ceiling.

“Silwin, darling, I’m just asking for a little cooperation,” the president said. She grabbed one of Spilzer’s hands and gave it a squeeze. Spilzer screamed into the handkerchief. Sweat covered his face.

“I’ll keep it up until your attitude improves,” the president said. She gave his other hand a squeeze and Spilzer screamed again

“Which one hurts more, the right or the left?” the president said. She squeezed both hands at the same time. Blood drained from Spilzer’s face and his eyes rolled back in his head.

“Oh, shit,” Briter said.

“I think he passed out,” the president said.

“Oh, shit!” Briter said, pointing at the wall screen.

“The back-stabbing son of a bitch deserved every bit of it,” the president said. “You need to come up with something to explain this so get to work.”

“Oh, *shit*,” Briter said.

“Briter, pull yourself together,” the president said. She noticed that he was pointing at the wall screen so she turned to look and saw herself kneeling next to Spilzer.

Briter yanked his assistant from his pocket and punched in the code to cut the MASSnews link.

138. Roadblock

The WarClub was two thousand feet in the air and headed toward its base in Grayling when Barker and Cecilia heard Wyndela in their heads.

“There’s a roadblock. And cops behind us too. They’ve got us. We might get a few more min...” Wyndela’s voice was cut off.

“Damn,” Barker said through the pillowcase. He pushed his thigh against Cecilia’s. “We did what we could.”

“We can’t give up,” Cecilia said.

“No talking!” one of the soldiers shouted, jabbing his rifle butt into Barker’s gut.

139. Right out of Beijing

Jaspers, pushing his way into the tightly packed Times Square crowd, stopped to look at the huge screen that had drawn the throng and saw Barker and Cecilia sitting next to each other on the WarClub’s bench.

The crowd was nearly silent as people tried to process what they’d just seen in the Oval Office. Jaspers asked a tall woman next to him what was happening.

“The president’s got someone tied up in the White House,” she said. “People are saying it’s Spilzer, the FBI director.”

“You saw him?” Jaspers asked the woman.

“Yeah, it was right there,” the woman said, pointing at the giant screen. “The president was making him scream but he’s got a rag or something stuffed in his mouth. On some pirate network they said the president planned the whole crash.” The tall woman held up her blank wristscreen for Jaspers to see. “But they shut it down.”

“Of course they shut it down,” said a man behind them. “Probably coming right out of Beijing.”

The tall woman and the man behind her began arguing and Jaspers continued working his way through the crowd.

Despite the efforts of several security guards to clear the area in front of the MASSworld Building, the crowd covered the sidewalk, forcing Jaspers to push his way to the large metal doors.

140. It'll stick

Briter picked up his briefcase and walked toward the Oval Office door.

"Where the hell are you going?" the president said.

"I'm walking out of here and I'm going to keep walking until someone stops me."

"You walk out that door and I'll have you shot," the president said, marching across the room toward him. As Briter reached for the door handle, the president grabbed his shoulder and spun him around. "We keep repeating our story and it'll stick. It always works."

"Shari, darling," Briter said. "You've gone too far." He pointed at Spilzer, barely conscious on the floor. "I've got nothing for that."

The president slapped Briter across his face. "Don't try blaming this on me. He attacked me. I had to defend myself. He was afraid I'd blame him for letting the sabotage happen. He tried to strangle me so I broke his hands."

Briter leaned back against the door and slid down all the way to the floor. The president grabbed him by the lapels and tried lifting him back to his feet but gave up after a second try.

"I'm going back onscreen," the president said. "I'll get the people behind us again."

141. Through the black doors

Jaspers stepped off the elevator and walked toward Studio A. A security guard stepped forward to intercept him outside the studio door, but Jaspers took off his fedora and sunglasses and the guard nodded and backed off.

Jaspers walked through the black doors and wondered how his wife was doing.

142. Standoff

Vice President Villejo swaggered his large frame confidently down the center of Pennsylvania Avenue with his chin held high and his dark hair billowing in the breeze. He was flanked by leaders of both parties, and followed by a phalanx of armed FBI agents. The scene was captured on a handheld operated by a young man walking backward at the front of the procession and wearing a bright orange DisneyNews headband.

Police officers held the growing crowd away from the wrought iron fence surrounding the White House. Several of the FBI agents in Villejo's entourage ran ahead to open the gate, only to come face to face with an armed Secret Service detachment waiting on the other side.

At the bottom of the screen, scrolling text read: "President refuses to surrender to FBI ... Secret Service will fight to the death ... Veep vows 'justice will be done' ..."

143. Jaspers takes charge

"We're backing the wrong horse," Rindell said, standing in front of the anchor desk talking with Sally and watching poll numbers on his assistant. "The eighteen-to-thirty-nines are running away from the president and DisneyNews will ride them all the way to the finish line unless we rough up Flanagan."

Sally shook her head. “You know that’s not my style.”

“Sally, I’m not asking you, I’m telling you,” Rindell said. “Give her hell.”

“That’s way out of character for me,” Sally said. “You hired me because I’m cuddly, remember?”

“She’s got the FBI director tied up and bleeding on the Oval Office floor. Eighty percent think she’s a liar, so call her one.”

“My fans don’t want me getting nasty with the president or anyone else,” Sally said. “It would be a disaster for my career.”

Sally, looking past Rindell, saw Jaspers make his way across the studio toward the anchor desk. Rindell turned and watched Jaspers slough off his trench coat and let it drop to the floor as he approached. He handed his hat to Rindell when he reached the desk.

“Sally, you’re done for the night,” Jaspers said. “I’ll take it from here.”

143. Touchdown

“How about the fifty yard line?” The WarClub pilot pointed toward a high school football field in the distance and looked at Howzer.

“That’ll do,” Howzer said, nodding. “Shelton just wants us to sit tight for a little while. He said the VP’s claiming to be in charge and Flanagan’s holed up at the White House. When we got people like that running things it’s no wonder we can’t win wars anymore.”

Howzer climbed out of the co-pilot’s seat and squeezed through the opening to the cargo hold and faced his men. “Uncuff the casters and take off the hood.”

Uncuff them?” said a soldier with target rings tattooed around one eye, his pupil the bull’s eye. “They’re terrorists!”

“Sergeant, I gave you an order,” Howzer said, jabbing a finger at the tattooed soldier.

“Listen up, everybody. We’re dropping on a football field. I want you four to stay onboard and the rest of you secure the perimeter. We’ll keep the other two birds in the air for cover.”

As the pilot took the WarClub over top a rickety press box, with “Home of the Waymin Warriors” painted in large block letters across its back, the tattooed soldier yanked the pillowcase from Barker’s head. He checked to see that Howzer had returned to the co-pilot’s chair, then leaned between Barker and Cecilia to release their cuffs by waving a metal disk past their wrists.

“I forgot that we always uncuff terrorists before we shoot them,” the soldier said just loud enough for Barker and Cecilia to hear.

Barker, rubbing his wrists, looked at Cecilia. Her head was bowed and her eyes were closed. She felt his eyes and looked at him.

“Buddha?” Barker said.

“Keep talking and I’ll do you both right here,” the tattooed soldier said.

“Let’s change our connects back to MASSnews,” Barker said. “That might be our last chance.”

“Shut it!” The soldier jabbed the butt of his rifle into Barker’s face, slicing open his lip.

144. Now or never

“I’m John J. Jaspers, CEO of MASScorp and we’re back live with President Flanagan.”

The screen was split between Jaspers and the president, whose face sank when she heard Jaspers’ voice.

“I thought I’d be talking with Sally,” she said with a nervous smile.

“As you know, Madame President, I’ve got a personal connection to the story,” Jaspers said.

“Yes, I was saddened to hear about your wife,” the president said. “I’m sure it was a shock to learn that your wife tried to murder a plane full of innocent people.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” Jaspers said. “I’m talking about the fact that you ordered the MarsDestiny sabotage and tricked me into a kickback scheme.”

“What barbarous nonsense,” the president said, rising in her chair. “You’ve obviously lost your mind.”

Rindell rotated the Oval Office camera to have a look around the room and saw Briter sitting against the door with his hands over his head. He rotated the camera farther and saw Spilzer, lying on the floor bound and gagged. His legs were tied to a couch with electrical cord.

“President Flanagan, the jig’s up,” Jaspers said. He glanced down at the screen imbedded in the anchor desk. “The latest numbers show that only nineteen percent believe you’re telling the truth about MarsDestiny.”

“This from a man who allows, no, *encourages* subversives and liars to spread their degrading filth throughout the world and calls it news just to make a buck.”

“You’re a murderer, Madame President,” Jaspers said. “I know you are and I’ll testify in court.”

Mayvee tapped Rindell on his shoulder and pointed at her assistant. Listed on its small screen were two live connects, one was Barker’s and the other Cecilia’s. “We’ve got them back,” she whispered.

“Put them on!” Rindell said.

“I am *not* a murderer,” the president said, “and I will not stand for this.”

Jaspers ignored the president and listened to Rindell, who whispered to him from off camera.

“We’ve got Barker and Cecilia live?” Jaspers said. “Cecilia? Barker? Can you hear me?”

Barker and Cecilia, as seen by the MO’s handheld, replaced Jaspers onscreen.

“Yes,” Barker said.

“Quiet!” The tattooed soldier jabbed at Barker’s face again with his rifle butt.

“You’re on live,” Jaspers said, “and I want both of you to tell us what you’ve ...”

Barker jumped up off the bench, pushed the tattooed soldier away, grabbed the handheld from the MO and leapt out the open cargo door to the football field. He stumbled and fell when he landed, but quickly regained his feet and sprinted toward the goal post with the handheld pointed at his face.

Barker, bloody-lipped, yelled into the handheld. “The president killed the colonists and she’s trying to kill Mars Girl! We need a million people to storm the White ...”

The bull’s eye soldier opened fire from the chopper door. Barker’s back arched and he seemed to float through the air until he crumpled to the ground.

Epilogue

Cecilia saw that Barker was trying to pry open his eyes. She slid off her chair and onto the hospital bed where his right leg used to be.

Bouquets of flowers filled the room. On the wall screen opposite the bed the TractorPix dragged a sleeping pod across the dusty Martian surface toward a shallow grave next to two others already mounded with rusty soil and topped with black stones in the shape of crosses. Mirellen had used a magnet to mount a handheld to the hull of the lander so her relatives on earth could see her family's funeral.

Barker, blinking slowly and surveying the room, looked like he wondered where he was, but didn't seem too concerned about the answer.

"Welcome back," Cecilia said, smiling and rubbing his chest through the pale green hospital gown. "Feel all right?"

Barker covered her hand with his. "My leg really hurts," he said.

"Which one?" Cecilia said.

Barker closed his eyes to sort out right from left. "Right."

"You don't have a right leg, but you're getting a new one tomorrow," Cecilia said. "Some German guy died of a brain aneurysm and his leg fits you. They said he was a great soccer player."

Barker noticed a uniformed guard sitting by the door, playing a game on his assistant. "What kind of prison is this?" he said.

“We’re in a hospital,” Cecilia said, “Bethesda.” She brushed a lock of hair off his forehead. “The new president is telling everyone we’re heroes. Ania’s at her sister’s in Montana, and Pyotr and Wyndela have been on all the talk shows.”

Barker started to laugh, but coughed instead. He looked at the wall screen and saw Mirellen guiding her brother’s pod into his grave.

“She’s quite a girl, huh?” Cecilia said, looking at the screen. “The space sail should be there in a month.”

Stretched between the twin peaks in the distance was an ad for Made You Look! Update Clinics, featuring Coki Peps dancing across the banner followed by a herd of lusty young men.

The hospital room door flew open. Two men wearing dark suits and grim expressions walked in. They looked in the bathroom, under the bed and in the closet, waving metal wands as they searched. They nodded at each other and one yelled, “Clear!”

The other one looked at the security guard and said, “Let’s go, pal.” The security guard held up a finger to give himself a moment to finish his game. The men grabbed his arms and hauled him out of the room.

Before the door closed, President Villejo, with his assistant to his ear, walked in and smiled a greeting to Cecilia and Barker. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” the president said. “She’ll have plenty of time to answer the charges in court. I don’t like the idea of putting her onscreen right now. All right, all right. We’ll talk later.”

The president slipped his assistant into his pocket.

“How you doing, Barker?” Villejo said, pulling a chair up to the far side of the bed opposite Cecilia.

“I’m thinking about taking up soccer,” Barker said weakly.

“Good for you,” Villejo said. “I played sweeper in my day. Toughest place on the field. You all right Cecilia?”

“Just a little bitter,” she said.

“Bitter?” The president smiled. “I know how you feel. I’ve dreamed of being president but this is closer to a nightmare. Nobody trusts me. It’s all anger and suspicion out there.”

The door opened and an anxious young woman wearing an orange jump suit and a DisneyNews headband stuck her head inside the room. “One minute,” she said, then closed the door.

“MarsDestiny has been a disaster for this country,” the president said. “I’ve canceled the program. The space sail rescue will be the last mission to Mars as long as I’m president.”

“You’re abandoning the colony?” Barker said.

“The sponsorship program was a cancer. But that’s not what I wanted to talk to you about. My opponents are accusing me of being part of the conspiracy. The Chinese are using the situation to drive a wedge between us and the few allies we’ve got left in the Middle East, which is going to make it even harder to end the war. I’ve got to find a way to get the country through this. People need to believe in their government again.” The president looked at Cecilia and then Barker. “I need your help.”

Barker tried to scoot backwards to prop himself against the headboard but couldn’t manage it. Villejo pushed a button to raise the head of the bed.

“The three of us are going onscreen in a couple minutes,” the president said. “It would be extremely helpful if you’d show me some love. You two are identified with the good side. Because I was Flanagan’s VP, I’m identified with the bad side. I need you to tell the world that I had nothing to do with the sabotage.”

“Sounds like you’re already campaigning for reelection,” Barker said.

“I’ve declared that I’m not running,” Villejo said. “Getting the country out of trouble is going to take everything I’ve got. I don’t want to be distracted by a reelection campaign. All I’m asking is that you help give me the credibility I need.”

Cecilia and Barker looked at each other but neither spoke.

The woman in the orange jumpsuit walked in carrying a handheld. “Twenty seconds, Mr. President.” She looked around the room for a place to set up and used her foot to slide a spray of flowers out of her way.

“We don’t know anything about what went on in Washington,” Cecilia said.

“Politics is about compromise,” the president said. “I’d be happy if you at least say that you have no reason to believe I was involved.” He turned toward the camera. “How’s my hair?”

Busy with camera adjustments, the woman with the handheld said “Fine” without looking up. “Watch the screen and you’ll see when we’re on,” she said. “Here we go. Five, four, three, two ...”

The wall screen split between Zinc Spender and the president.

“We’re live with President Villejo who is visiting two very special guests at Bethesda Naval Hospital,” Spender said. “Mr. President?”

Spender disappeared from the screen and the view of the hospital room widened to include Barker and Cecilia, with Mirellen in the lower right pip shoveling rusty soil into her brother’s grave.

“Zinc, I’m here with Ray Barker and Cecilia Westraek, two people this nation owes a great debt of gratitude,” the president said. “Their courage makes this old Marine proud to be an American.” He slapped Barker’s thigh, making him wince.

“Mr. Barker, I understand you lost a leg,” Spender said.

Barker closed his eyes and nodded. “I prefer to view it as getting a leg upgrade.”

The president forced a laugh and slapped Barker’s thigh again. “I’ve always liked his sense of humor,” he said.

“Cecilia, you seem to have come through all this just fine,” Spender said.

“Fortunately, I don’t have Ray’s flair for the dramatic,” Cecilia said with a smile.

Villejo laughed again.

“Mr. President, they tell me your bedside visit isn’t just to say hello.”

“That’s right, Zinc,” Villejo said, turning to face Barker and Cecilia. “I want to invite both of you to the White House as honored guests to watch Mars Girl’s return to earth. The day after Mars Girl returns, you two will join her before a joint session of Congress to receive a little award.”

“And, of course,” Spender said, “we’ll cover everything live here on DisneyNews. It’s going to be quite a show.”

“But before we look too far ahead,” the president said, “there’s something I’d like to talk about. Some in this great nation of ours are uncertain about the role I played in the MarsDestiny disaster. I don’t think there’s anyone more expert than these two folks right here. I’d like ...”

Spender interrupted before the president could finish. “Excuse me Mr. President, but we have some urgent breaking news.”

The screen filled with an animated image of an asteroid streaking through space. President Flanagan, behind a thick glass panel and wearing an orange jumpsuit, was pipped into the lower right.

“We’re joined by former President Shari Flanagan, speaking to us live from a secret location where she’s being held while she awaits trial. Madame President, I understand you have some disturbing news for us. I think we’re all wondering why you waited until now.”

“Zinc, can you imagine the panic and chaos if I had told the world that an asteroid was heading toward earth and will likely end life as we know it when it hits in three months?”

“Panic or not, don’t we have a right to know?”

“I swore to protect the American people, and that’s what I did. It would’ve been impossible to solve such a monumental problem in the midst of the inevitable riots and looting and the acrimony about who’d be chosen to go to Mars. I’d like to remind everyone that what seemed like excess on the part of my administration in recent days is completely understandable given the situation. My behavior pales in comparison to the martial law and strong arm tactics that would have been necessary had I announced to the world that even those who survived the DeathRoid’s impact would eventually die through violence or starvation.”

“You’ve lied repeatedly to the American people, and you were seen torturing the FBI director. Madame President, why should anyone believe what you’re saying now?”

“I did what I needed to do,” the president said. “And our plan would have worked without all the media meddling. Now I understand my successor has cancelled MarsDestiny and SponsorAmerica. These programs must be reinstated immediately if the human race is to survive.”

On the screen, the animated asteroid grew larger and the earth came into view.

“Let me tell our viewers,” Zinc said, “that you’re looking at animation of an asteroid the size the president claims to be heading toward earth. Madame President I understand that you’ve said this DeathRoid escaped detection until recently because it was hiding behind another

asteroid traveling a similar path. I've just been told that NASA knows nothing about the DeathRoid."

"Black Goat discovered the asteroid and came directly to the White House with the information. He must have left records somewhere."

"Black Goat, also known as Troy Romane, didn't tell anyone else? Not even his superiors at NASA."

"Of course not. That kind of information is incredibly sensitive. If we can't find Mr. Goat's records, we need to start searching the skies again right away. Most important, we need to keep MarsDestiny alive! I'm requesting an immediate and unconditional pardon from President Villejo so I can resume my duties managing the only program that will prevent the extinction of the human race. We don't have time to waste!"

The animation showed the DeathRoid slamming into central Kansas. A huge black cloud slowly enveloped the planet.

THE END
