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KLINGLER

Mash Up

A KANDY & QIGIQ NOVEL

Published by
Cartosi LLC

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DEDICATED TO ROBERT J.

Bending stainless steel was never so much fun

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~ 1 ~

Five inches of duct tape stilled the air. This hadn't been the plan—but the softness of her bare body flopping on the deck like fresh flounder had insisted. And why not? Why not use it before it was gone?

The Velcro strap of the headband opened with a quick tear and closed to affix a tiny camera to forehead. Both hands in front, rotated palms up, showed off smooth supple rubber gloves like a player in Blue Man Group. Tap the keys of a laptop, adjust camera position, and wait for the exact moment. Closer now, her flopping stopped, gazes met. Her wide blue-crystal eyes screamed a fear that didn't seem so different from desire.

Kneeling; smiling; nakedness lowered towards nakedness.

The rocking of ocean waves superimposed on the floating softness of her belly felt like bathing in heroin. This should happen more often—escape drudgery, follow the calling. Closed eyes and long slow breaths, holding back like the dam built by Hoover. Holding. Holding.

Crashing in a long, long spasm. Again, again...fading.

Sweating face dropped to bare chest. She had stopped moving, but the soft warmth of her breast caressed a cheek. Eyes closed and mind drifting in the aftermath of a simple biological function. Yet the effect was beyond description.

And anything but simple.

Resting now. Resting. It was time. There was work to do.

~ 2 ~

Qigiq woke to the rumble of a V-twin. He dragged the phone to his face and touched the *Answer Call* button to his nose.

“Qigiq here.”

“Morning, Qu. We have fingers,” Kandy said.

“Hi, partner. McDonald's for breakfast?”

“Nope. From a hand.”

Qigiq rolled to his back and sat up. He blinked hard.

“Go ahead, Kandy. I'm awake.”

“We have the middle finger and thumb of a left hand. Nail length and purple polish says female. A guess from the skin puts the age at sixteen to twenty-two. No lab work yet.”

“Uh-huh.”

“One thing.”

“Only one?” Qigiq said.

“Yeah. There’s no hand. The base of the finger has been stitched to the thumb to make one long digit. Looks like a pale Cuban cigar.”

“And?” He waited for the punch line.

“And...the fingers showed up in a bag. At least that’s what Robina is telling us.”

Robina.

“Came in a cardboard Amazon box bigger than a book. Inside she found a Ziploc. And the fingers.”

“Was there a packing slip, Kandy? Amazon always sends a packing slip.” He tried to laugh but failed.

“I’m humorless before seven. There’s a sticker on the outside of the baggie.”

A pause. She was going to make him ask.

“And the sticker says...”

“Under a crude Apple logo there’s lawyer mumbo: ‘This device is for legal or rights-holder copying only.’ Then it says in big letters, ‘Don’t Steal Music.’”

“Don’t steal music. On the sticker.”

“Right.”

“Is the baggie special?”

He heard crumpling plastic. “Not that I can see.”

“Would you check if that’s an official Apple sticker, and if they ship products in a baggie like the one you’re crumpling even though it’s evidence in—” he hesitated. In what?

“Got it,” she said.

His new partner was quick. He was lucky.

“I’m on my way,” he said.

“I’ll start checking...if anyone’s awake down in Cupertino. And I’ll locate some real Amazon boxes.”

He swung his feet to the hardwood floor and padded barefoot to the head. A tiny window over the sink let him see the sun’s warm red rays reflect from the water of San Francisco Bay. Kandy had been right, living on a houseboat in Marin County was indeed a new experience for a man from Alaska.

He dressed quickly.

As he ducked out the main door from the cabin—a small rectangular house that covered almost the entire hull beneath it—he noticed tall buildings across the bay protruding through floating gray mist. For a brief

moment he imagined the piano harmonies of Debussy's *Sunken Cathedral*, wondering if he could ever grow accustomed to blue water, fog and concrete after decades of snow?

He crossed a weathered wooden dock supported by pillars the size of telephone poles. Ten steps up a bank brought him to a white and green Moto Guzzi motorcycle, police edition, missing its protective plastic fairing. He strapped on a helmet, swung a leg over the machine and instantly felt at home, though Fairbanks was three thousand miles to the north.

On the third try the sensual rumble of the Italian twin greeted the bay. Traffic on the Golden Gate was barely keeping up with tourists strolling the sidewalk, but California law allowed him to ride over the white Botts' dots embedded in the pavement between lanes. Eighteen and a half minutes later he circled to the back of an eighty-year-old brick building. His parking spot between a green trash bin and the steel railing for the basement stairs was empty, except for a wrapper from a Mucho Grande burrito.

"About time," Kandy said to his reflection in the two-way mirror where she stood watching a girl alone in the interrogation room sip from a big beige mug, her shoulders rolling in giant sobs.

He stopped beside her. "Traffic. Even with a bike and those fancy FasTrak toll booths you have down here."

She turned to face him.

"Her name's Robina. Came in less than an hour ago with the package. She was in hysterics then, swears she knows whose fingers they are. Want to see them?"

"Before breakfast?"

She twisted her right cheek into a smile and cocked her head. "This way."

Kandy led him to a cubbyhole makeshift kitchen: drip machine, microwave, fridge. The fridge had yellow strips of "Crime Scene Do Not Cross" tape wrapped across the door. She started to peel them off.

"Lab's on the way over, but I thought you would want to see this."

"Thanks."

She slipped on rubber gloves, withdrew an SFPD evidence bag from the top shelf, and tilted her head up to face him. Her auburn hair dropped left.

"Robina says this was in her mail yesterday, that would be Wednesday in case you're not paying attention. Like I said on the phone, Amazon.com box, packed with dry ice, and this."

Without opening the evidence bag she held back the flap of the box with the fingertip of her right hand. Qiqiq peeked in at another plastic bag half covered with a white sticker. Protruding from behind the sticker he could see a fingertip with metallic purple polish. The polish was chipped. He

wondered if they might be able to find that chip someplace. He sighed. Someplace in a city of over half a million if he didn't count the sprawl. The finger looked like a very real mannequin pointing him in the right direction for good pancakes.

He visualized a girl's hand missing two digits. Turned his eyes away from the mannequin, but it didn't help. He swallowed hard, unclenched his jaw, pointed at the bag.

"Robina thinks she knows this person?"

"Yeah. Swears it's a girl named Sally Bellwi. They play...um, played in a string quartet together. Call themselves Fourtunate: F-O-U-R."

Qigiq glanced at Kandy's face. No grin.

"Dusted?"

"First pass. We've only been touching it with these." She produced a set of forceps about as long as his hand.

He clamped on the edge of the bag and lifted it from the box. He twisted his wrist so he could see the digits from the other side of the baggie. They were indeed stitched together base to base, creating an alien looking object that a humanoid robot might use as a gripping tool. Blood that had oozed through the stitching before freezing formed a rusty red glue where the two digits were joined. He noticed the same purple polish on the thumb, this time no chips, just a smooth shiny finish like a hot rod at a car show.

He took a deep breath, tried to detach himself, think objectively, but his chest stayed tight.

"What's that on the side of the thumb?" he asked.

"The lump? Yeah, we noticed that, too. It looks like a skin eruption of some sort. Robina says it's called a cellist's callus, apparently an occupational hazard. If she's right, that's the left thumb. Sally bowed right-handed."

"Motive?"

"Nothing."

"Leads?"

"Robina says Sally was dating a couple of guys: an angry rock musician studying composition at the San Francisco Conservatory, and..."

Qigiq looked up. Kandy's eyes were searching the room.

"It's just a rumor."

"Robina said it's a rumor?" he asked.

"No. She claims to know."

"Know what?"

"Sally is having an affair with a college professor."

"Ground breaking. I've never heard of that happening before." He managed a wry smile.

“He’s married.”

“I’m so shocked,” he said. “Anything else?”

“Not really. Figured you might want to talk with our new friend Robina.”

Qigiq glanced at Kandy’s deep blue sleeveless shirt stretched tight across her breasts: no markings—not even a designer logo pressed into the cloth. Black jeans and black leather boots that he would be comfortable riding around the world in implied business.

“You think I look less intimidating?”

“Nope. I figured you could try the father-figure thing.” She laughed, returned the evidence to its makeshift locker, and replaced the Do-Not-Cross tape.

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Qigiq turned the doorknob to the interrogation room slowly with only his fingertips, so as not to startle the young girl. She was sitting with her back to him, still holding the ceramic coffee mug with both hands. He walked in, tapping the floor with his riding boots. She didn’t move. He stepped around the table, pulled out a scratched wooden chair, and sat down to face her.

She watched him from behind strands of pale yellow hair.

“Hello. I’m Detective Qigiq.”

Her deep brown eyes were wet under an eye shadow that looked like gray ash from a fireplace.

“Could we talk about the package you brought in?”

She lowered the mug. Looked up.

“Ki-jeek? Sort of weird. Where’s the woman detective?”

He met her gaze. “Taking a break. I’m from Alaska.”

“You mean you’re not a European import like the rest of us?” She tried to smile.

“Never been to Europe.”

“How do you spell it?”

He figured she could spell Europe.

“Q-i-g-i-q. Like kickstart, soft g, eke...as in eking out a living as a detective.”

“Retrograde,” she said, lifting the index finger of her left hand and wiggling it back and forth like a human metronome.

He raised his eyebrows.

“The retrograde is the same as the theme. You know, the same forward and backwards. There’s a word for it.”

He smiled. “Palindrome.”

“Yeah...yeah, that’s it. Funny.”

At least she was talking. She looked thin inside a loose black T-shirt that bore a musical score. She wore blue jeans cut off mid-thigh and soft fur-lined boots that rose to mid-calf, the knee between looking like it couldn't support a small grasshopper. He wondered if she was one of those anorexic college girls who starved themselves trying to be attractive. He glanced at his wrist, almost eight.

"I know you've been through this, I've seen the report." He fibbed, he had only heard Kandy's summary. "Do you think you could go through it once more so I can hear you tell it?"

She squeezed the mug. Her eyes weren't focused.

He guessed where her mind was. Had an idea. "Have you had breakfast?"

Her response was instantaneous.

"God no, I'm starving. Do you have anything decent in this place? Your coffee is the worst."

Qiqiq straightened. Surprise number one.

"No, there's nothing decent here, but Peggy's Pancakes has good food. Would that be okay?"

"Sure." A hesitation. "If you're buying. Music students don't have much in the way of discretionary funds." She looked up. "Is it close? I don't have a car."

Qiqiq stood. "Sure, on me. About a mile, we can get there fast."

~ 3 ~

Eddy Blake looked past the board members on either side of the polished ash conference table and out through the plate glass fourth-floor window. His eyes landed briefly on his black SL550 Mercedes in the far corner of the lot, parked diagonally in two spaces to prevent door dings, then beyond the car and across the boulevard to the building that housed Apple's headquarters.

He suppressed a smile.

Everyone had insisted he couldn't run a music company in northern California. He had insisted music was now a technology business about distribution at a profit, not making records in the City of Angels. Hell, anyone could record a hit song in their bedroom with a Korean guitar and a smartphone. And the best technology and the money to fund it was up north—in Silicon Valley.

He had been right.

It was easy to find funding up here, and he liked being across the street

from the big shiny music machine of Apple Inc that sold songs the way McDonald's sells hamburgers: billions every year. His eyes dropped back to the black shine of the SL. What a fantastic vehicle, and only six months old. He would hate to have to give it back because the people around this table didn't have the cranium power to see his vision.

The other three men in the room were still all talking at the same time.

"Wait, wait, wait!" Eddy shouted. "Please guys. One at a time."

They grumbled into silence, slowly deferring to the CEO. They didn't work for him, he worked for them. But if he failed, it was their money that would vaporize.

"Yes, there is a problem in the media business, especially the music business," he said.

Terry McTyme, a tall wiry guy who ran marathons for fun, said, "Yeah, customers have decided stealing product is the American Way." With his right hand he pushed back loose more salt than pepper hair that had fallen forward during the shouting match.

Terry's firm, ALL-CAPS Partners, had provided the first round of funding for Eddy's start-up: Silver Platter LLC. Eddy owed him.

"Correct, Terry. Music, movies, e-books; anything digital is at risk. Which is precisely the problem that Silver Platter has set for itself. You've seen the specification for our Full Disclosure project?"

"But when does it release?" Terry said.

"And is it legal?" Greg Simmons asked.

In Eddy's experience, the lawyers were always the worst. And Greg had minored in math, which gave him a weird quiet demeanor that Eddy found hard to predict. But at least he didn't waste hours exercising like crazy Terry.

"We're trying to stop theft here," Eddy said.

"Yes, but your Disclosure technology invades computers like a virus," Roberts offered.

Eddy sighed. He didn't like an investor saying *your* instead of *our*. Hugh Roberts had followed Terry's lead on investing, but Roberts was short, probably rated as obese by his doctor's BMI chart, and hated to take risks. Eddy wondered how he had ever made big money.

"More of a worm than virus. And it does no harm."

"Invasion of privacy," Simmons interjected.

"That has yet to be proven. And second, it removes itself after sending us the information."

"Reaching into a customer's computer and analyzing their music files? Sounds like invasion to me," said Roberts.

"And it isn't ready anyway," Terry added.

Eddy held up both hands like he was giving himself up. "It'll be ready this month. We're beta testing right now. Results are positive."

"Eddy, utter real facts will you please?" asked Roberts.

Eddy tried not to glare at him, since the guy had an eight figure investment on the line.

"I'll bring our young expert in shortly to go through details, but here's what we have. Our farm has two hundred computers working day and night to substitute our music files for ones circulating on the Internet from the peer-to-peer sites that use BitTorrent and similar technology. We've already infiltrated several popular download sites and more than one digital vault."

"Could you please not say infiltrated?" Simmons said.

Eddy watched Simmons scribble on a long legal pad without looking at his hand, knowing the man was recording like a court stenographer. Claimed he learned to do it in law school so he could stare at coeds without missing anything in the lecture.

"OK, we've *contacted* music sites." Eddy studied Simmons' smile for signs of sarcasm but couldn't find any. Lawyers were only helpful in takeovers. "Which means, when someone steals a song over the Internet, they get our tagged music file instead of the original. Ours sound identical to most people and contain the exact number of bytes as the originals. But we can recognize them wherever we find them."

"This is in place and working?" asked Terry.

"Yes. How well it's working will be part of the demonstration."

The room grew quiet for the first time in almost an hour. Eddy sipped cold coffee from a ceramic mug with a silver logo, biting the edge, admiring his reflection in the big glass behind his colleagues. George Clooney should play me in a movie, he thought. Hmm, too old? Maybe DiCaprio, he did a good job with Howard Hughes.

Roberts said, "Then?"

"Then," Eddy echoed, "we say go, Full Disclosure starts roaming and feeding back to us the location of offenders. We work with the RIAA to go after them in court, confiscating machines to analyze whenever possible."

"The court system has been tried," Simmons added.

"Yeah," Eddy replied. "But only twenty, maybe thirty thousand lawsuits. Wimpy. That's not enough to get on everyone's radar. I'm hoping for ten times that, once we know we have the worst offenders so the Recording Industry Association is likely to win. We need all these kids to hear about friends paying huge fines, or better yet, going to jail. Hell, they steal ten thousand songs worth ten thousand dollars and don't even get their fingers smacked. If they stole a ten thousand dollar car it'd be grand theft auto and they'd do time. We need fear instilled in enough people so they return to

buying product like they should have been all along.”

“What if the courts turn against us?” Simmons asked.

“Good question,” Eddy said. “If the courts won’t help us enforce justice, then we have a decision to make.”

Terry sipped water from a metal bottle containing a special filter and a blue light that was supposed to kill bacteria. Simmons looked down at his yellow legal pad, causing hair to flop across his forehead, and scribbled small blue circles with a Mont Blanc fountain pen. Roberts glanced around the room as if looking for a fly.

“If the courts won’t bring thieves to justice we have several options. We could sell the technology or the company to someone who is in a position to make it widely available. Say a Microsoft or Google who might want to use our delivery method to remove illicit material from computers. Imagine parents who want to ensure that they don’t see an RIAA lawsuit, so they run software on all of their computers that automatically removes offending files. Microsoft delivers the software, licensed from us, and we stay in business tagging files, since they change every time new music is released. Much better than a digital watermark, more like a watermark factory.”

“At least Microsoft would get sued along with us,” Simmons said, without looking up.

“But that depends on cutting a deal with a big gorilla. Those are hard to make happen,” Roberts said. “Other options?”

Eddy looked to Roberts directly. “Yes. We let Disclosure remove files and report back to us. Or maybe not. We might just want it to run and then remove itself and not have any connection to us.”

“And that would?”

“That, Hugh, would scare the bejesus out of anyone downloading files because their music would keep disappearing. And the more they download to replace it, the more likely they would get the virus, I mean Disclosure, again.”

“There would be public outcry.”

“True. But people who steal can’t call too much attention to themselves,” Eddy replied. “Especially if the courts are working even a little bit.”

The room fell silent. Eddy guessed they were considering how much risk they wanted to take to protect their money. Maybe even make a little more.

“There are two keys and we have to turn one,” Eddy said. “Either people have to be afraid to download stolen music because they believe something bad will happen to them.” He looked around the room. “Or stealing has to be so damn annoying that we exceed their tolerance level and they start buying just to end the hassle. Either of these can work.”

“Fear?” Terry said. “I like that. Fear keeps people in line.”

Simmons stopped scribbling. His eyes danced, but didn't land on anyone.

Eddy waited, he knew Simmons was thinking. Even a lawyer had a good idea once in awhile. He rubbed his upper lip with his lower teeth and forced himself not to talk.

"Eddy," Simmons finally said, eyes still darting around the room, "How come you don't speed in your flashy car?"

"What do you mean, Greg, I speed all the time? Well, not *all* the time. There are too many cops."

"Exactly," Simmons said. "This is game theory. Non-cooperative opponents who know each others strategy. I bet there's even a Nash equilibrium."

Eddy waited. Roberts and Terry looked from Eddy to Greg and back.

"You don't speed because you could get a ticket," Greg said. "Enough tickets and you lose your license. There goes your right to use the highway."

"You're saying we should give people tickets for stealing music?" Eddy asked. He didn't get where Greg was headed, but he hadn't thought of this angle before.

"Not us. We're going to be the traffic-light camera company."

Hugh Roberts leaned far back in his chair. "What the hell are you guys talking about?"

"Yeah," Terry said. "Those companies install camera equipment and take a percentage of—" Terry stopped. He looked from Eddy to Greg to Hugh and back to Greg. "You think we could pull it off?"

"It's the Information Superhighway, right? Al Gore said so." Greg smiled, his pen now scratching across the writing pad. "We tag people who harbor illegal files, the local cops send a ticket. Too many tickets, you lose your right to drive." Greg took a deep breath and dragged a finger across his throat. "The local ISP cuts them off." He looked down as his hand-scribbled numbers. "We take a couple percent off the top for installing the virtual red-light cameras."

Eddy dropped his chin into his hand for three full seconds before speaking.

"We run this just like the traffic cameras. Hide under the same surveillance legislation, same local laws. Maybe even get the same percentage of ticket revenue."

Hugh leaned forward. Terry nodded. Greg's hand stopped moving.

"We have some good options. Let's take a break," Eddy said. "I'll call Engineering."

He pushed away from the table and tapped digits that were special to him. It unlocked.

Harold Zeto placed bare elbows on his black desk and stared at two flat displays that blocked his view out the window. The office door was behind him, but a mirror from the door of a candy-apple red '69 Mustang clamped to the right monitor gave him a view into the hall by moving only his eyes.

His chair creaked as he leaned back, studying the rows of symbols that were hieroglyphics to most people, but precise instructions to a computer. He yawned. A stupid demo. Why did execs insist on having board meetings before noon?

Besides, he was behind schedule.

He rocked the chair with one foot and thought hard. If his audio driver was properly identifying the tags as it played music, why wasn't it also lighting up the warning? There was a bug...and he had written it. He had written most of Full Disclosure—including a few hidden bits he never talked about. He worked like a dog so the company could get to an initial public offering, the sacred IPO, and make the worthless paper options Blake had given him over two years ago magically become life-changing money: a mountain of lead turned instantly to gold.

There. He was incorrectly accessing the screen handler. His hands reached for the keyboard as soft tapping drew his eyes to the rearview mirror. The tiny reflected image was Lili wearing a maroon blouse and tight blue jeans, open toe heels, long dark hair flowing free to her shoulders. And those square gold-rimmed glasses sliding down her nose no matter how many times he told her to go to the optometrist to have them adjusted.

"C'mon in, Lili," he said.

"Sorry to bother you, Harold, I know how you hate interruptions. I was just so surprised to see you here early." She stepped through the open doorway. "I brought you a donut."

He spun his chair to face her as she walked in with two cups of coffee and two donuts stacked on a napkin balanced atop the cup in her right hand. He'd bet she was stuck again.

"Thanks Lil," he motioned for her to sit. "What's up?"

She sat in his guest chair, a chunk of woven green cloth and a few steel bars, and pulled her knees together so she could place a napkin and donut on her lap. She sipped at her paper cup; the company having abandoned Styrofoam for employees as not green enough, even though the paper leaked.

She leaned forward to hand him a coffee with a donut on top and grinned. "Harold are you sunburned? I didn't know you ever went outside."

He rubbed the back of his neck. “I don’t normally. But my last physical showed elevated cholesterol even though I’m in the normal weight range on the BMI tables. Doc says I should exercise, so I tried hiking.”

She shook her head. “My my, Harold Zeto, super-geek, actually goes outdoors.”

“You want me to help you, right?” he said.

“Okay, Okay. I’m working on the module that will auto-post to blogs. You remember, we talked a few weeks ago. Give it a list of blogs and some text, and it does the entry for you. So the user doesn’t have to post the same thing manually over and over, which would be...well, kind of a yucky job.”

“I remember,” he said. “Why would anyone want to do this? Blogs are unique and the postings more like a conversation.”

“True. But imagine you want to get information out fast. Why not post it a bunch of times: blogs, forums, comments on YouTube, everywhere?”

He watched her take a bite from a chocolate-covered chocolate donut and marveled that she could maintain her slender five-foot-five frame while eating the way he liked to eat.

“Why not just build a website?”

He knew the answer, but wanted to know if she did.

“If you build a website, you have to wait for Google to index it, and then it’s only in one place. You would have to build many websites, and host them all, and wait for them all to be indexed.”

“Yes...”

She licked the middle finger of her left hand.

“But if you post to a hundred blogs, people who regularly read those blogs will see it right away, and they’ll comment, creating more entries to be indexed.”

He smiled.

“It’s a much faster way to get the word out,” she concluded, and took another bite.

“Correct. And it’s something else too.”

Her perfectly plucked eyebrows frowned beneath a smooth, tanned forehead. “I give, what?”

“Who hosts those blogs?”

“Uh, lots of people,” she said through a gooey mess of chocolate.

“Right. Lots of people. Meaning, *not us*. So if your program runs from an anonymous location—”

“Oh. Oh,” she brought her hand up to cover her mouth. “They can’t find us. Um, I mean, the postings couldn’t easily be traced. At least not as easy as looking up a website.”

“Bingo, Lili. How’s your donut?”

“Great. Aren’t you going to eat yours?”

“Sure am. While you tell me what your problem is.”

Halfway through her explanation of how she was looping the blog list and mapping her generic blog posting procedure to the vagaries of each individual blog his phone vibrated. He held up a finger to pause her in mid-sentence.

“Hello Mr. Blake...Yes sir, I’m ready.” He looked at the floor to concentrate. “I’ll tell Lili...Thank you.”

He ended the call and met Lili’s round blue eyes. “They’re ready for the demo, will you bring them to the lab?”

She vibrated off her chair. “Oh yes, for sure.” She washed the donut down with coffee. “When do you want them?”

He turned around to face his code. He really wanted to fix this while it was fresh in his head. “Give me ten minutes.”

She stood and walked over behind him, admiring the hieroglyphics on his screen. “They’re going to love it, Harold, I just know it.”

“Hope you’re right, Lili.”

He watched the denim stretched across her bottom disappear in the rearview mirror then turned his attention to the troublesome line of code. He had nine minutes to finish a donut and get this thing running.

~ 5 ~

The dark lab hummed with the steady sound of four hundred cooling fans inside two hundred computing machines stacked like small black skyscrapers with beady green eyes. Harold pressed the projector button and waited for it to light a screen on the side wall so he could align the image, then dragged the three chairs in the room into a theater viewing row. Though he hadn’t presented a live demo to the board before, he had confidence in his software. Less than sixty seconds later Lili walked in leading Blake and three other men.

“It’s cold in here,” one of them said.

“Helps keep the processors at operating temperature,” Harold answered, even though it hadn’t been a question.

Blake motioned for the men to be seated. He and Lili stood behind them.

“What have we got today, Mr. Zeto?”

Harold touched the laptop driving the projector. The screen changed from the shiny circle logo of Silver Platter LLC to the desktop of his Windows machine.

“You’re familiar with the architecture of Silver Platter technology so I’ll

skip the diagrams that everyone ignores anyway and show you how it works.”

No one moved, but the guy he knew as Terry had his arms wrapped around his body like he was in a meat locker. Harold glanced at Lili to see if she was cold too, but nothing showed under her maroon blouse.

“Our goal is to sell digital assets, beginning with music. The Internet has made the old empire of paper and plastic obsolete, and a new world order is evolving. Toward that end we want to identify people who are stealing assets, though few call it that. Terms like file-sharing and the fair-use clause of copyright law are generally bantered about. But essentially, people are deriving the benefit of listening to the work of an artist without compensating that artist according to the laws of the land.”

He started a music player on the screen and let punk-rap rattle the room, then lowered the volume.

“As you know, the free market can only operate if there is competition between suppliers, with the market making its choice when consumers purchase the products they feel provide good value, and rejecting those they feel are overpriced. They reject it by not buying it, thus depriving themselves of its benefit, and its maker the benefit of their dollars. Those suppliers—musicians, record companies, distributors—who cannot provide benefit at the desired price will, therefore, perish economically and cease being suppliers.”

Harold watched the older men nod, and Blake smile.

“However. When a high percentage of product is stolen, the portion of the market that is paying for product must bear the cost of all creation and distribution. If theft is rampant, as it is now on the Internet, the free market cannot operate.”

“Why is that exactly?” asked Simmons, who was watching the screen carefully while taking notes on a large pad on his lap.

“Because prices aren’t set by consumers paying for the merchandise they prefer to listen to. Stealing forces the price to zero, so the means of production will struggle and eventually collapse. Musicians provide benefit, the joy of listening to music, but receive no financial benefit for having done so.”

He turned and faced the screen. “This software player is an example of how a customer might listen to their music. They might also copy it to a mobile device like an iPod or an Android phone. The principles I am about to demonstrate apply whenever digital audio passes through this computer, and therefore through the low-level portion of Full Disclosure. We can, of course, eventually build versions for devices other than Windows and the Mac OS, though each one is a new technical challenge.”

All eyes were focused on the screen.

“I have set up this machine to be ninety-nine percent complete by letting it play music over several weeks. Naturally, most of this music has been tagged with our dynamic digital watermark technology we call Ink Stain.”

They nodded.

Simmons muttered, “Ink Stain?” as he wrote.

Blake looked like a proud papa about to pass out cigars. Lili stood motionless.

“As the music plays, the tags are removed and assembled into a program, like puzzle pieces being locked together. The individual pieces are scattered around the hard disk, so if anyone finds a file, they only have a tiny portion of the whole. Once all the pieces have passed through our driver, a complete copy of the Invisible Hand will exist on the machine. The driver randomizes a delay so we can’t be traced to a particular song, then runs IH. Once it starts, we can have it do anything we want.”

“Such as,” Terry asked, visibly shivering.

A new window popped up on the projector.

“Such as open a window to warn that this machine contains pirated copies of music and is at risk of a lawsuit by the RIAA. Maybe not the scariest thing it could do, but an example.”

He saw Blake’s lips twitch toward a smile.

Roberts asked, “But what about the argument that all recorded music should be free and artists can make their living by performing live and selling merchandise like T-shirts?”

Harold looked at Blake, wondering if he wanted to take the question. Blake nodded ever so slightly.

Harold said, “My first reaction is simple, bullshit. Artists should be able to benefit from their creations however they wish. If they want to operate under a business model of free recordings and charging for their concerts, that’s fine, the technology of the distribution channel should be able to support that. But what if they want to give free concerts and charge for recordings of their music? Why shouldn’t they have the freedom to operate under that business model as well?”

“No one uses that model,” said Simmons.

“Not yet,” Harold said. “But if so-called ‘file sharing’ were to cease, then some bands might choose to operate that way. Or anywhere in between, adjusting the prices of their concerts and recordings in whatever way works best for them. Perhaps an artist would choose not to tour at all, like Janik down in Texas who prefers to remain obscure, and only make records. Others might only tour, and not make recordings so people would be drawn to their live shows as the only way to hear their music. The options are

many, but Silver Platter's position is that the choice should be made by the creators, the artists—not dishonest listeners who have no clue why copyright laws even exist—because it is the artists who are in competition with each other for the listening dollar.”

Roberts's cleared his throat.

“You're talking about the artist who records, but doesn't have the health to travel. Why shouldn't that artist be able to sell her work? And symphony orchestras that are fading to museum pieces. Why should a recording by an eighty-piece orchestra using violins that cost five million dollars sell for the same price as something done in the garage by a couple of tone-deaf teenagers? In my opinion, it shouldn't. Each should be able to sell their work for what they choose and let the market decide who profits.”

Harold smiled for the first time. “Exactly. And our Full Disclosure suite of technology will help make that possible. Remember, pirates raided the high seas for decades, and Jesse James robbed trains? Whenever assets move, someone tries to go in and grab them. The Internet makes digital grabbing easy. But these people remain pirates and outlaws, and if we want to profit from selling digital assets, we have to stop them.”

He tapped keys on his laptop. “Notice that as the Invisible Hand runs it deletes from storage all pirated copies of music, which in this demo is over ninety percent of the library.”

Heads nodded all around the room.

“And if we wish,” he let the program continue, “the Hand will transmit back to the machines behind you the Internet address of the customer, the number of pirated files it identified, the names of those files, and...the date they were downloaded.”

“Bravo,” Terry said.

“And.” Harold paused to be sure he had their attention. “Now the Hand does it's magic trick. It removes any record of itself from the machine registry including the fact that it ever ran, then securely overwrites itself in memory so it can't be identified from what it leaves behind. No footprints. Gone without a trace. It will even replace our driver, that we insert via a mock software update, with the original one from Microsoft or Apple.”

Harold smiled a second time.

Terry stood and stomped his feet in an effort to warm up.

“Looks good Mr. Zeto; very good. Eddy, can we get out of this igloo and discuss how to use this?”