

Chapter 1

Reality Bytes

The young boy, small for his age but flexible, smart and fast, squatted on the edge of a fire escape, focused his attention on his breathing and worked to consciously slow his heart rate. From this point, he could see for several blocks, while the sign reading, “Nude Dancers” kept anyone else from seeing him.

He took a deep breath and grinned. Even the smells seemed real.

He suddenly spotted movement a block over: five large teens in baggy pants and yellow and black bandannas systematically tearing the alley apart, looking for him. The boy smiled as his adrenaline surged, and the muscles in his calves tensed the nearer the group drew to him. He watched as they passed just underneath him, moving in the opposite direction. Then he sprang down like a street-wise cat, hitting the ground at full speed.

Pain jolted up his legs from his ankles, but he only had a moment to wonder why before the closest thug whirled around with a baseball bat and smashed a window where his head had been a few moments before.

The gang leader began cursing the boy and yelling, “Come here, pretty little rich boy. We’re gonna teach you some manners.”

The boy was fast, but so was the gang behind him. He rounded another corner and sprinted down an alley to find himself walled in on all sides. A door to his right proved locked. He could hear the sounds of taunting and running feet coming closer.

He eyed the glass window in the locked door. With a fist, he punched through the window at what he hoped was its weakest point. The cheap glass shattered in jagged shards as his clenched hand tore through; blood spilled from his arm and hit the ground along with thousands of pieces...

Eyes widening in surprise, he instinctively jerked his arm back to his chest, cradling it like a small baby. Pain unlike any he’d felt before in his life jolted him into a place where he couldn’t think straight.

The gang had now caught up to him and were forming a tight circle around him, laughing as blood ran from his mangled fist and forearm. Pieces of glass were embedded in his flesh, and the boy could only stare in shock. Something was terribly wrong.

“That’s nothing!” the ringleader shouted. “Wait until you see what we do to your head. Even your mother won’t recognize you.”

They began to move in closer, and the boy just stared at them. Terror began to creep up his back like a poisonous spider. He should have been back in Tre’s room by now. The safety protocols should have kicked in when his bio-system monitors first began to register that his body was going into shock.

He looked into the cold, lifeless eyes of the gang leader and knew he possessed no pity or mercy; it wasn’t in his programming. Alley Fighter was a brutal M-rated game,

and only the best survived. The boy looked around at the angry young men bearing down on him and saw an assortment of switchblades, chains and broken bottles.

“End game!” he commanded forcefully.

Nothing happened.

“Poor little rich boy,” one of the thugs taunted. “Mother can’t save you now.”

“End game!” the boy said again, his tone rising in panic.

“Reality sucks, huh?” screeched another thug. “You shouldn’t have come here. You don’t belong here, pretty boy.”

“End game! End game! End Game!” the boy shrieked in terror, desperate to wake up from this cyber-nightmare. He concentrated hard, willing things to go his way. The game began to warp and twist until he could no longer focus on any one aspect.

Suddenly, time slowed, and he noticed every detail. He squinted at the gang leader, noticing a gaudy golden “R” around his neck. He stared in fascination at a yellow and black snake tattoo wound around the leader’s arm. It began to move and wriggle, and as the boy continued to stare, hiss menacingly.

Then, he saw the sun glint off a gold tooth as the smiling leader’s sweaty body stepped up, as if about to take a fastball in a major league game. The next sound he heard was a bat whizzing toward his head.

Chapter 2

The Academy of Technology for Exceptional Young Men

“How did the safety protocols become disengaged?” the principal queried.

“I don’t know,” Tre replied slowly through clenched teeth for what seemed like the hundredth time. He glared at the director from behind his long hair and wondered how much longer this would go on; not that he didn’t feel like he deserved it. Flip had been one of his best friends, even though he was several years younger. Feeling like a protective older brother, Tre had always looked out for Flip in the common room.

“Tell me one more time how you found Phillip,” the principal demanded, “and then you’ll wait in solitary until the FORGE agent is ready for you.”

Tre sighed and looked out of the picture window. A storm was raging around the school and visibility was only about 10 feet. He watched the snow swirl and fall as the wind howled and pounded angrily at the trees and buildings. Tre stared into the fireplace, but he couldn’t feel the warmth of the flames as they consumed the logs.

With a sigh, he began recounting the events. “I came into my room after dinner. I went to my study area and found Flip unconscious. My Alley Fighter game was loaded

into the sim and Flip was in Full-Immersion Mode. I tried the disengage code, but it wouldn't override, so I had to enter the sim and close it manually."

"By manually, you mean you had to finish the level?"

Tre heard the principal talking, but refused to look at him. He continued to stare into the fire, losing himself in the dancing flames. He jumped when the principal cleared his throat. Tre shook his head a bit and simply replied, "Yes."

"And you did this without the safety protocols engaged?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"You know why!" Tre muttered, finally meeting the man's eyes.

"I want to hear you say it for the official school record," the principal said coolly and officially.

Tre noticed beads of sweat forming on the man's broad forehead, which was turning redder by the minute. He could sense the tension mounting. Tre wondered why this man, who seemed to hate teenage boys, would want to run a boarding school.

He continued. "I had to finish the level manually because if you shut down a sim without the proper safety protocols, your brain will fry." He intoned the last part clearly and slowly, as if he were speaking to a complete idiot. He knew the director's knowledge of cyber space was limited. He had always loved the irony that he was attending the Academy of Technology for Exceptional Young Men, and his principal could barely find a power switch.

"Once you shut down Alley Fighters you immediately contacted the proper authorities?" quizzed the principal. The man was the size and density of a large boulder.

Tre imagined he could feel the ground shaking as the principal lumbered towards him. The man was notoriously proud of his physique, but Tre and his friends joked about his obvious addiction to altering his muscle mass. Tre squirmed as the nearing principal engulfed him in shadow. The air seemed thicker, harder to breathe in, but he took a deep breath and continued.

“No. First I disengaged Flip from the system and tried to snap him out of it.” Tre could still see his friend’s catatonic eyes staring into his, the trickle of blood escaping from Flip’s nose and ears. He slouched lower into his chair and dug his fingers into the soft leather.

He startled a bit as he felt the director put his hands on either side of him, resting them on the arms of the oversized chair. He could feel the man leaning in closer and closer, until he could smell the coffee on his breath.

“So, you think you are better equipped to deal with a life-threatening situation than the institution’s nurse?” The principal was so angry that he had slipped and called the school what Tre had already suspected it was: a very expensive mental institution in the guise of an exclusive all-boys boarding school. Tre didn’t even try to hide his grin as it took the principal a moment to realize his mistake.

He looked up into the man’s eyes as he leaned in even closer. The principal looked back and forth from one eye to the next, and Tre could feel the pressure coming off him in waves. He knew the principal was trying to bully him into submission.

Tre watched as the principal’s thick and beefy hands began to move slowly toward his neck, flexing slightly. Tre could imagine them around his neck, squeezing and squeezing until it snapped like a toothpick.

It took all of Tre's willpower not to flinch and back down. He reached deep inside of himself and found a small reserve. He knew if he showed any fear, this man would win. He forced himself to stare straight into the man's eyes and refused to look afraid. After a very long time, the principal stood up quickly and let out an exasperated sigh. He stomped around his desk and then buzzed for a security guard.

Tre started to relax, thinking the confrontation was finally over. He watched the principal and then suddenly felt the tension rising again. The principal paused and stared out of the window, a far-away look settling on his features. He seemed to be concentrating intensely, and the pained look on his face let Tre know this wasn't a common activity for him. Tre watched in fascinated horror as the principal grunted and his forehead turned several shades of deep red. After what seemed like forever, an ugly sneer of triumph slowly spread across his face as he placed both of his hands firmly on his desk and leaned into one of his most intimidating power postures. The desk groaned and sagged under his weight.

"Explain to me how Phillip had your personal access code?" the principal asked slowly with a wicked grin.

Tre looked down at the floor, feeling himself grow smaller as he hunched over in his chair.

"I gave it to him," he finally mumbled. He felt the shame wash over him, smothering him. That old familiar feeling came over him; the hopelessness of not being enough to protect the people he loved the most.

"I'm sorry Mr. Heinze; I thought I just heard you say you gave it to him?" The principal stood up and placed one hand on his chest in mock surprise and horror.

Tre felt himself spiraling down into a whirlpool of self-loathing. The principal was right. This was his entire fault. He should have been more careful. He should have realized that Flip couldn't handle that game. He should have been there to protect him.

Just before Tre hit bottom, he glanced up. The principal's face was glowing with an evil joy. The man was enjoying Tre's pain and humiliation! Suddenly, defiance and pure hatred began to well up inside him. He knew he could never back down in front of this brainless oaf who liked kids as much as he liked exercising. It occurred to him that the principal probably didn't even know Flip's name before tonight, and he suddenly realized that this was personal. This man hated him and was enjoying his pain.

Tre felt something switch inside his brain. He shook his head a bit, and realized he felt nothing but the desire to make this man's life a living hell.

"You heard me," Tre spat at him, standing up quickly and leaning across the desk in an exact mimic of the principal's power stance. He smiled slowly as the principal jumped back a bit, caught off guard. He could feel the game changing, the balance of power shifting.

The principal recovered his composure, and Tre could see he was angry at being caught off guard. He could sense the man weighing his options, grasping for a way to frighten Tre into submission.

Tre began strategizing quickly. He knew full well that allowing someone else to use a personal access code was grounds for expulsion. Tre also knew something that gave him an advantage, something the principal would never expect him to know. He had accessed the entire historical database of all known students and had hacked all records of

discipline proceedings. No one in the history of the Academy of Technology for Exceptional Young Men had ever been expelled.

Tre had learned that the Academy was a pet project of a non-profit organization, called Humanics. Humanics touted the school a mission for helping children who had been caught in the crossfire of the genetic revolution. The only way out of this “school” was to graduate or die.

The principal leaned back in towards Tre. He could feel the pressure again to back down. Tre hardened his resolve and glared directly into the principal’s eyes.

Tre could see red creeping up the director’s neck and crossing his face at a rapid rate. He eyes narrowed, and Tre could see the internal struggle for control being waged as it played out across his features.

“Come on! Hit me!” Tre wanted to scream. He wanted this man to lose control, to be exposed for the violent hypocrite he really was.

Then, as if a curtain fell, the principal’s eyes went dull and passive. Tre watched as he straightened slowly, took a deep breath, and smiled like a politician.

“You’ll conduct the rest of your lessons via virtual connections and remain in solitary until we can clear this up, possibly even until the end of the term. We can’t have someone as dangerous as you mixing with the rest of the general population.” As he said this, he opened his arms toward Tre and spread his hands wide, palms upturned.

Tre likened him to a therapist counseling with an unreasonable patient, trying to imply that he meant no harm and only had Tre’s best interest at heart. Tre knew it was a lie.

A long, awkward pause followed, and then the guard arrived.

Chapter 3

Virtual Relationships

Tre closed the door on the guard, flopped on his bed and buried his head under his pillow. As he replayed the entire conversation he had just had with the principal in his mind, he was glad to realize that no one had noticed that the VR Immersion Biopad Flip had used was virtually brand new. The principal hadn't bothered to question how Tre had managed to immerse without a second Biopad.

He began to sense the familiar presence that had been with him for as long as he could remember. He knew Nonni was near, absorbing his thought processes and following his logic.

"We'll deal with those questions as soon as someone with an ounce of intelligence bothers to notice," Nonni said haughtily in his ear.

When Tre didn't bite, Nonni's voice changed to a softer, more motherly tone.

"Listen, Ducky, it wasn't your fault. I know your Mum sent you here with the hope of rehabilitating you, but she doesn't understand the big picture."

"Have you found out about the safety protocols yet?" Tre thought dully.

“I’m still working on it,” Nonni replied. “The trail is a tangled web of mismatched protocols and systems from around the world. Whoever did this didn’t intend to be caught, and they had the resources to make sure it was nearly impossible to trace them. They obviously wanted you dead.”

“Is this your way of comforting me?” Tre moaned.

“It’s like I’ve always told you, confronting the brutal realities of your life is eventually more therapeutic than shielding you with false hopes and comfort.”

“This is one night I’d like a little false comfort,” Tre thought.

“I heard you,” Nonni said reprovably. “If you want sympathy, you have Sims for that. I can’t waste precious processing time trying to snap you out of your own self-pity. I’m too busy trying to keep you alive!”

Tre smiled into his sheets in spite of himself, soothed to have Nonni’s omnipresence right there, steady and sure as always, and more comforting than any human touch had ever been.

With nothing else to do, and not wanting to see the image of Flip over and over in his mind’s eye, Tre rolled over and stared up at the ceiling while connecting wirelessly into the school’s system to check his personal messages. He knew he had a small window of opportunity before his privileges were revoked.

He noticed a message from Torri, and immediately tried to control his autoimmune system so Nonni wouldn’t detect that his heart rate and breathing had just increased.

“Relax,” Nonni stated matter-of-factly. “I’m programmed to understand the physiological changes that happen when you are in love.”

“There is a big difference,” Tre began back at her, a bit too forcefully, “between being intellectually stimulated and very curious about someone and being in love with them. Are you also programmed to have enough tact to mind your own business and give me a little privacy once in a while?”

Tre heard a chuckle inside his mind and then felt Nonni retreat to a deeper level of his subconscious. He gave a sigh of relief and then opened his message. He enjoyed the semblance of privacy, even if it was only an illusion.

Tre,
There are all kinds of rumors flying around that someone got fried and you were involved? Are you okay? I’ve tried every way I know to tap into the security systems to get some kind of update, but they have really locked all of the Admin systems down. It’s a total blackout, which is really scaring me. If you can, please write back and let me know that you’re okay.

BTW – someone has been snooping our chat rooms and email. I hate to be paranoid and give you any more reason to think I’m any crazier than we both know I am, but watch what you say. Maybe we need to go through an anonymous server for a while, or up our encryption levels. Let me know.
Torri

Tre was amazed at the speed with which information traveled in a small town. Torri seemed to have a second sense for keeping tabs on him at times, although she tried to hide it from him. He knew it wasn’t being done through the nets, because Nonni would have let him know if she was tracing or snooping him. Torri simply had an uncanny ability to sense him and his emotional state. She seemed able to read between the lines and figure out what Tre was saying by what he didn’t say. Although he acted irritated, not always having to explain in detail what he was feeling partly pleased him. It generated curiosity about her and fear at the same time. Very few people were able to elicit much of a response from him.

He was still amazed at the fact that they met by chance in a chat room he had accidentally stumbled into, only to find out after several sessions of private virtual chats that they both lived in the same small town. To Tre, however, it might as well have been across the globe. The institution had very strict policies about contact with anyone from off the grounds, and he had yet to see Torri in person. She was always plugging in through very ancient and antiquated systems, so his idea of what she looked like was limited to still shots and the cartoon-like renderings that represented her in virtual. Her systems were so limited that she had also only seen Tre in the same manner. Everyone looked like a cartoon when she plugged in, but it was better than not being virtual at all.

Tre pondered for a few moments before responding to her message.

Torri,

Can't really go into detail right now. I'm okay. Thanks for the tip. Let's lay low for a while. I'll contact you again as soon as I figure out a way to keep our communication secure. It may take me a while to get back to you. I'm in lock-down until further notice, which includes all of my electronic communication.

Tre

He hated being short with Torri, but until he knew more about the situation, he didn't want to put her in danger by letting her know too much.

"I have to protect her from myself!" he thought, as a dark vision of Flip reappeared in his mind's eye.

Tre's in-house communiqué system buzzed, and the Director's voice invaded his room like a plague.

"Someone will be at your door first thing in the morning to escort you to my office. The FORGE agent will be here at 8:00 AM sharp. Please remember you are not

just representing yourself, but your school and your country. Try to muster up a little respect and self-control.”

Tre shut down the cloud of anger he felt invading his mind and asked Nonni to tap into the security systems and find out what he was in for.

Chapter 4

Torri

Torri wound a strand of long dark hair around her finger as she read Tre's reply on her handheld. Perched in an old yellow rocking recliner stained with things better left in the past, she lay sideways with her head on one armrest and her legs dangling over the other. Her feet were near the wood burning stove that provided the sole source of heat for the ranch house. Her family all in bed, she enjoyed the privacy and solitude she only found at night. No one was yelling at her, no football games blaring in the background. She could finally sit and think. She was still amazed at finding such an interesting relationship with Tre by chance, and that both lived in the same small mountain village. Tre could've been plugging in from anywhere in the world, but there he was, just down the road at that weird and expensive school. The odds of that actually happening were more remote than winning the lottery, but Tre was one of the few bright spots in her life, and she wasn't about to jeopardize it by trying too hard to figure it out.

"Sometimes the wizard is better left behind the curtain," she said out loud. The small dog lying near her picked up his ears and looked at her quizzically. She laughed

and reached down to scratch his head, right in his favorite spot. She suddenly became aware that she should worry about Tre. She closed her eyes and emptied her mind. She reached out beyond the walls of her house and tried to picture the grounds of the boarding school. She let the emotions come and wash over her as she sorted through them and tried to categorize the feelings as quickly as possible. Most she discarded and let blend into the “background noise” of the over-all emotional tone of the school. She searched for Tre, reaching out with an invisible thread of intuition, searching for that familiar emotional imprint she had come to know well over the last year. It was very hard to find him tonight. The tone of the school was dark with fear and suspicion. Anger and disbelief kept popping up left and right, and many other negative emotions that Torri didn’t care to name.

She finally settled on the emotional cloud that she was sure belonged to Tre. She sighed at the weight of guilt and self-contempt that settled on her. He was so familiar and yet so foreign. She could still sense the underlying theme of self-reliance and fierce determination that colored Tre’s inner emotional world, but it was weak tonight. He was not in a good place. Isolation and loneliness bombarded her, and that sense of uniqueness that was so bittersweet and familiar to Torri, was consuming Tre. She could not find one bright thread running through the theme of Tre’s emotions, and it concerned her.

Although he was always a bit moody and artistically bent, tonight was different. Torri was suddenly jolted back into the yellow chair as the battery indicator on her hand-held flashed a warning. This always happened when she emo-surfed. She still didn’t understand this strange gift she had, but she did know that it drained power and battery

sources at an annoying rate. She longed for more sophisticated technology, but tried not to be ungrateful for what she did have.

She was lucky to have any connection to the nets at all. She had received a scholarship from the local Town Council that paid for her family's house to be wired so she wouldn't fall behind in her studies at school. Graduating high school was nearly impossible for anyone not connected to the world's online resources. The scholarship had been based on genetic potential and financial need, both of which she possessed. It was a strange combination, almost unheard of in today's society. Almost all genetically superior kids came from wealthy and powerful families. Her genetic abilities still baffled the geneticist and case assistant who had been assigned to her mother and biological father.

Most middle to lower class families could only afford a few of the genetic enhancement alterations available from among the vast array of choices offered to potential parents. The government had begun financing and supplementing basic alterations to protect children from basic diseases and medical problems. Health Care in the United States had changed drastically in the last two to three decades, with a focus switch from treatment to prevention. Medicaid had basically been on the brink of total bankruptcy when genetic medical technology made some amazing breakthroughs. The government had changed some of their hard-line policies against genetic engineering to allow for medically necessary procedures. The result was that the next generations of children were born disease free and with the fewest number of health problems in the history of the United States. As people got used to genetic alteration for medical use, the political climate warmed for many procedures considered purely to be enhancements.

Torri's generation was not only disease free, but they were beautiful, all resembling super models or athletic elite. Obesity had been linked to so many diseases that a slim and fit child was considered a basic alteration. The government had saved billions of dollars in health care costs from allowing scientists to use the genetic cures they had discovered for obesity.

The fact that at the time of Torri's birth, her mother was only 24, and that her father was already on his second marriage by the age of 29 was pretty shocking to most people. Since the disease of aging was slowly but surely being beaten back, most people were waiting longer to partner up or start a family. Torri's mother, Maddie, came from a modest but solid family. They had scraped the funds together, and with moderate government assistance were able to make sure that their first granddaughter would be free of the basic genetic "mutations" that plagued humans for years. Things like near-sightedness, high blood pressure and diabetes were unheard of in most of civilized society. The family couldn't afford many upgrades, but at least made sure little Torri would be healthy. The story of how little Torri got so smart had become legendary in her family.

When Torri was tested, just after the first trimester of Maddie's pregnancy, the tech reading the results was sure of an equipment malfunction. Based upon her parents' IQ and genetic potential, she should be a bright, possibly gifted child, but no advanced genetic potential markers should've been visible in her DNA profiling. Maddie was called back for another round of tests; anxious and frightened, but very compliant. Again, the results baffled the tech, who then sent them to the geneticist who had preformed the alterations. A genetic marker of unknown origin was showing up in little Torri's profile,

and her IQ potential was much higher than it should be. The geneticist had no explanation, as his data showed only standard manipulation had been performed. The geneticist feared for his job and reputation. By law, he should report her genetic oddity. If this were some strange new disease or mutation and they could trace it to him, his career as he knew it would be over.

The Agency for Federal Oversight and Regulation of Genetic Engineering, or FORGE, had been on a witch-hunt for any and all unauthorized mutations. They were very zealous and passionate about enforcing swift and sure justice on anyone who violated the myriad of regulations that had sprung up as more and more horrifying genetic “accidents” devastated expecting parents. The results of Torri’s tests were doctored, and the tech who’d spotted them requested vacation time to enjoy his sudden windfall of an all-expenses paid trip to an exotic island. Torri’s family, much to their delight, were told that they would receive a IQ upgrade, compliments of the company as a way of compensating them for the hassle of re-testing.

And so it was that Torri had genetic gifting and an IQ that rivaled that of the world’s elite. Whether this was a curse or a gift, she hadn’t decided yet, but she rapidly leaned towards having a bulls-eye tattooed on her forehead...

“What the hell are you doing up?”

A loud, angry voice startled her, and she swung around in the chair quickly, trying to hide her hand-held.

“Darn!” she thought. She had been so lost in thought that she hadn’t heard her stepfather stomping down the stairs like an old bear awakened in the middle of winter. She was going to catch hell.

He looked furious. “I thought I told you that we had to be up early to dig out the feed truck. No wonder you can never get your butt out of bed. If you don’t get your head out of your ass and stop playing around with that damn machine, you’re never going to make it in life. And don’t think you’re going to hang around here mooching off me while you play around with your little video games. The minute you graduate I’ll be packing your bags and throwing a party. Your mother may think you hung the moon, but being smart don’t make up for being lazy and keeping your room like a pig-sty.”

His eyes were going buggy and a demented kind of zeal was taking over him. Torri knew that if she didn’t move quickly, he might decide to punctuate his sentences with a few sharp blows to her cheek, just to make sure his point hit home. She swallowed the indignation and anger welling up like bile in her throat, but no matter how hard she tried, she could never stop the tears. Her face grew hot and her eyes welled up, betraying her. On cue, he started the next mantra which she new by heart.

“Oh, now here comes the drama,” he growled. “Poor little Torri. Get your sorry ass to bed before I decide to give you something to cry about. And if you’re not up and outside digging before I get up, I’ll knock you into next week. I’ll kick your ass so hard your great-grandfather will have a black-eye!” He smirked at this comment, as if he’d been waiting for just the right moment to use it. Torri jumped up and hunkered like a beaten puppy. She scurried to her room, hating him for making her cower this way. No matter how many times he had done this, she could never resign herself to the shame and self-loathing she felt when she gave in for the sake of self-preservation. Someday she would make him pay. She had taken that vow years ago, and it had proved to be the only available comfort when she got this angry.

She quickly shut her door, fighting an overpowering urge to slam it, and slunk into bed. She listened quietly and prayed that he wouldn't follow her into the dark room to continue the tirade. She heard the loud sounds of him urinating and farting in the small bathroom. He never did bother to close the door. Disgusted, she rolled over and pulled the pillow over her head to silence the sound of the sobbing as her whole body shook. With relief, she heard the creaking of the old stairs as he made his way back up to climb into bed with her mother, who was no doubt sleeping in peaceful ignorance.

“I will find a way out of here,” she promised herself, “and when I do, I will never come back.”

Chapter 5

Angie

Angie Millhouse sat in the small coffee shop and stared disconsolately at the menu. The waitress stomped up and snapped her gum for the third time. “So, sweetheart, are you ready yet?” She smiled, but her eyes told Angie that she didn’t like city folk who asked for things that weren’t on the menu.

“I’ll take a number two and a glass of orange juice,” said Angie. “Do you know if it’s fresh squeezed?”

The waitress laughed and snatched the menu out of Angie’s hand. She walked over to a window in the wall and yelled, “Hey Billy! You got any fresh squeezed orange juice hiding back there?”

“Yeah,” the cook replied, “just let me shovel a path out to the orange tree and I’ll get that for you.”

They both laughed like crazy, along with several very ancient looking men perched on tattered stools at the counter, hunched over chipped white mugs full of what Angie had learned passed for coffee at Sandy’s Diner. She looked at the waitress’s caked blue eye shadow and spider-leg eye lashes and wondered for the 10th time if she was

Sandy. The men at the counter all called her Honey, but Angie couldn't imagine that was her real name.

She looked out the window and cursed the snowstorm again. She had been so excited to learn that she'd be the lead investigator on a new case, and she was determined to impress her superiors at FORGE. Who knew that in the middle of nowhere, Mother Nature still called the shots? She was stranded here until a break in the weather, and there was no day spa within a hundred miles.

She placed her hand on her portable BioTouch pad, and felt the familiar feeling of the biogel squirming and making connection with her nerve endings. The gel had been customized to Angie's DNA, so it made incredibly small fibers that could penetrate her skin painlessly and connect to her nervous system through her palm and finger tips. This allowed her to have almost complete immersion anywhere in the world, as the biogel used her body as a conduit and large battery. Her grandmother had loved the fact that using this type of bioware caused the body to burn more calories, but for Angie, it was more of a nuisance. She had been genetically altered to have a faster metabolism, and her cells had been altered to be less sensitive to insulin. She never needed to worry about caloric intake, except to make sure that she ate enough. She had also been given an extra gene to help her body produce more ATP naturally. The result was that she had 15% more muscle than a woman born at the turn of the millennium without ever exercising or lifting a finger.

The sensation of the miniscule filaments connecting to the body was slightly disconcerting to first-time users, but Angie had been using bioware technology for as

long as it had been available to her. It was as natural to her as feeling the wind blow through her hair.

Angie made a mental connection with her digital assistant and began reviewing her case notes. She was sure that such a distraction would help her keep her from wondering when the last time the floor had been mopped and whether the big black thing in the corner was a cockroach. She instructed her assistant to read back the case notes to her in her own voice.

“At approximately 7:20 PM,” the assistant began, “I received an urgent voice message from the assistant deputy director of FORGE that I should contact him immediately through his personal access point. Upon contacting him, I was informed that I was to be the lead investigator on a new case involving a small private institution in the Colorado Rockies. I received an encoded download of all available files regarding the involved individuals, and was told I would be booked on the next flight out. A young boy at the Academy of Technology for Exceptional Young Men had been air-lifted to Denver, and was currently in ICU after playing an M rated cyber immersion game with the safety protocols disengaged.”

Angie paused and stared at the cook, thinking about how this news was almost unheard of. The boy had been playing through the school’s system, which meant he had not only hacked the game’s protocols, but also the school’s. Such a feat was nearly impossible for all but the most advanced programmers who had actually written the code for the game. Normally the only other possibility was one of the few cyber terrorist groups who preyed upon net dwellers to gain press coverage and further their cause. But this was not a normal situation, and why Angie had been called in. The Academy of

Technology for Exceptional Young Men was actually an expensive institution to help control and rehabilitate underage boys who were genetically enhanced, but showing signs of mental illness or Mutation Syndrome. Almost all were genetically superior, with IQs off the charts, but with some unfortunate side effects. They were casualties of the genetic revolution, and most of their families wanted them kept out of sight and out of trouble. The school was actually affiliated with Humanics, the non-profit organization working closely with the FORGE agency to help stay on the cutting edge of genetic therapy. Humanics provided most of the data and recommendations used to set the alteration regulations the world followed.

All signs pointed to the fact that someone inside the institution had disengaged the advanced safety protocols, and Angie needed to find out who and how. If one of these boys had the gift, they'd be considered a threat, and needed to be tagged and documented before anyone else got hurt, or before someone outside the country found out. Much of the country's economy depended on people feeling safe in cyber space. A story like this could do some serious damage. This genetic mutation needed to be found and logged, so they could scan all the DNA banks and make sure no one else had this undiscovered "talent" lurking in their genes.

Angie came to herself and realized the big greasy cook was grinning at her and doing tricks with his cooking utensils. She didn't realize she had been staring at him, but he obviously had, along with all the wizened old men, all probably pushing 120, smirking and cackling at the counter. To see old people who actually looked old was becoming more and more unusual. Angie guessed they had already been old when the anti-aging technology became available. They were probably taking life-prolonging drugs, but had

been born too late to benefit from the designer drugs keeping everyone else looking young and healthy. She blushed and looked down at the cracked tabletop.

“You’d better get her phone number before I beat you to it!” teased one of the old men at the counter.

“If he was as good looking as you, I’d give it to him!” Angie shot back, finally recovering herself. She buried herself back in her report to the sound of good-natured laughter and the cook swearing as he dropped his spatula with a clang to the floor. She hoped he would wash it, but not having much confidence that he would, she refused to look. She did still want to enjoy her breakfast. Mentally, she signaled her assistant to continue.

“Once in Denver, I went to examine Phillip. I found the subject to be in a non-responsive state. He is being closely monitored in the Cyber injuries ward, and a team of specialists, led by Dave Bennett, are currently working with the latest in virtual healing treatments to rehabilitate his brain.”

Angie smiled as she mentally pictured Dave, a brilliant young biotech healer with a passion for both technology and medicine. Feeling sentimental, she asked her digital assistant to pause the report and play back the memory of her first encounter with Dave.

She had been sitting at Phillip’s bedside, reviewing his medical file, when a good-natured voice from real-time said, “Excuse me, miss, but this is a restricted area.”

Angie blinked, broke her bio connection by removing her hand from the gel, and turned to focus on a pair of warm brown eyes. A handsome man smiled at her. She smiled back, stood up, and held out her hand. “Angie Millhouse, lead investigator from FORGE.”

Dave started to shake her hand, but then stopped and looked at it pointedly. Angie looked down at her outstretched hand and realized she still had the biogel remnants clinging to her skin. The biogel looked like a thin layer of glue with tiny, transparent microfilaments hanging from it like spider webs. She quickly pulled her hand back, apologizing as she quickly peeled off the congealed gel and dropped it hastily back into the biopad. As she did, Dave glanced at her hospital issued security badge and his eyes stopped smiling. "This is a bio-tech healing ward. We don't perform any genetics here."

Angie took a deep breath, tucked a stray piece of hair behind her ear and smiled as disarmingly as she could. "Dr. Bennett, is it?" she remarked.

Dave gave her a curt nod, but refused to make eye contact. He was staring at Phillip. Angie ducked her head and moved into his line of vision.

"I'm not here on a witch-hunt," she told him. "Contrary to popular belief, FORGE is not against Genetic Engineering. As you may have noticed from Phillip's chart, he has some unusual gifting. He was genetically manipulated outside of the country, and we aren't even sure what the extents of his abilities are, or how they will manifest as he matures. The issue here is that he was damaged in a game with the very latest in safety protocols. Somehow those protocols were disengaged. If Phillip disengaged them, we need to know so we can locate the genetic mutation responsible, and make sure that we can find anyone else with the same ability, before another young person winds up here in your ward. I can assure you that I have Phillip's best interest at heart." She stepped closer to Phillip, picked up his hand and began to stroke it. "If Phillip did this, then he will never be safe again in virtual, unless we can locate the genetic anomaly and disengage it." She looked deep into Dave's eyes, meaning every

word she said, willing him to believe her. He glanced back and forth from her to Phillip several times. She could see that he was attracted to her, and sensed he really didn't have it in him to be at odds with other people. She decided to press on while she had the advantage.

"You have my word that while I am here I am only investigating Phillip's case. I am not interested in anything but making sure this young boy and anyone like him are safe. Any other information I come across is irrelevant."

"Is that an official statement of amnesty?" Dave queried.

Angie paused, wondering why he wanted an official statement, but she knew that without this man's cooperation, finding what she was looking for would take weeks. She also had to admit to herself she was hoping they would have to work closely together. She turned towards Phillip, but scrutinized Dave out of the corner of her eye. He was of medium build and very athletic. His golden brown eyes conveyed warmth and intelligence while his demeanor exuded confidence. His hair was darkly thick and disheveled. His skin tone had a beautiful, deep, glowing tan, and she assumed he received genetic altering to darken his melatonin as a form of sun protection. Although many people did it merely for the aesthetic effect, she got the feeling Dave was a serious outdoorsman.

She turned towards him and said, "Consider it official."

Angie knew that both of their digital assistants would record and log the conversation, in case of any future legal action.

He smiled cautiously, and said, "I have to finish my rounds, but would you like to meet for coffee in about thirty minutes?"

Angie nodded and sat back down. "That will give me time to get up to speed on the rest of Phillip's file." She immediately turned, placed her hand onto her biogel pad and immersed back into virtual, though she wanted to watch Dave's exit.

Angie paused her memory as the waitress arrived with her food. She smiled at the woman, who popped her gum and said, "If you need anything else, just holler."

Angie nodded and, not inspecting the food too closely, resumed her replay. She really loved the ability to step right back into the memory.

Forty-five minutes later, Dr. Bennett had taken Angie's elbow and steered her through the maze of hospital corridors and elevators to the cafeteria. They found a seat in a quieter spot, and settled down with their coffee.

"Phillip's case has been very unusual," Dave began. "Let me show you." He gestured to the touch pads at the edge of the table.

They both took out small bottles and placed a few drops of bio-encoding liquid into the public biopads. Public pads automatically replaced the biogel after every user. For the system to work, the user had to place drops of DNA inside to make the gel compatible with his or her body. If not, the user was sure to have some sort of allergic response or immune system flare-up. Dave and Angie then placed their palms and fingertips into the gel and made connection.

Angie suddenly stood in a dim and grungy alley next to Dave, who said, "This is Alley Fighter. As you know, it is an M-rated game, which Phillip shouldn't have had access to in the first place. How much do you know about virtual brain damage?"

Angie squinted and looked off into the distance. "I know that if the mind believes it is damaged, the body can manifest the symptoms."

Dave smiled at her, his eyes crinkling warmly at the corners. “Correct. Pain is actually the brain’s interpretation of the signals sent from various parts of the body. If you block the signals, then you don’t feel the pain. So, if you create a pain signal in the brain, even if the origination is from outside the body, your body will feel the pain as if it actually happened and set in motion the chain of events as if it were actual. What we see in some of these virtual accidents is patients manifesting actual physical symptoms to an event they believe happened.”

Dave motioned for her to follow him follow him down an alley to a dead-end. They came upon a door with shattered glass scattered on the ground and large amounts of blood splattered everywhere.

“Is this the site of Phillip’s accident?” she asked.

“Yes,” Dave replied. “Part of my job is to investigate inside the virtual reality that the patient was experiencing at the time of the injury. I have to find a way to help Phillip understand that what happened to him wasn’t real, and help his brain move on from the trauma he experienced here. It requires me to go into the game with him and help him relive the events, except this time the protocols will be in place and I will help him regain control of the game. It is very precarious and time intensive. I have to monitor his physical and emotional state very carefully, so that I don’t inflict more damage on his shattered psyche. Sometimes we’ll only relive very brief moments repeatedly until he truly believes he’s safe. I have to spend time building his trust and confidence, so he’ll follow me back through the traumatic event. So far, Phillip and I have made some pretty good progress. He’s really bonding with me, and I think we should see a breakthrough within the next three sessions.”

“Wow!” Angie retorted. “This is a really gruesome crime scene. I can’t believe that people write games that can do this to kids.” She walked around cautiously, taking in the details and listening to the glass crunching under her feet.

“Look, I’m not defending the violence,” replied Dave, “but you have to remember that there are massive safety protocols in place. Phillip wasn’t supposed to feel much more than an adrenaline rush. The minute his bio-monitors registered any type of distress, the game should have ended or paused immediately. The safety protocols used in this game are state of the art--the same protocols in place all over the virtual landscape of today’s net. According to all known research and testing, they are un-hackable.”

“Yes, but we have a little boy lying upstairs in a coma who tells us that either they are hackable or else they have a major glitch,” said Angie firmly.

“Absolutely right,” said Dave. “That’s why part of my job also includes working with programming analysts and experts to try and find out where the system glitched, if that is the case.” He bent down and sorted through the glass with a scrap piece of cardboard.

Angie glanced quickly at Dave with a surprised look. “You don’t think this was a glitch?”

Dave paused and stared hard at the dirty asphalt. Angie could see he still wasn’t sure how far to trust her. She waited, giving him the emotional space he needed to process. In the distance she could hear the sounds of a cat-fight, then the howl of police sirens. She felt edgy and unsafe. Whoever designed this highly believable virtual reality knew the streets of the inner city very well.

“Look, I have a few more things I need to take care of here, but I would love it if you would join me for dinner.” Dave glanced up at her, and then stood with a very sincere and intense look on his face.

Angie smiled to herself, positive that with a few more hours, she could persuade the good doctor to trust her. This was going to be fun.

“I would love to,” she answered, giving Dave what she knew to be one of her most seductive smiles. She watched as he caught his breath quickly. This poor guy won’t even know what hit him, she thought. He was definitely out of his league. She almost felt sorry for him.

Again, Angie paused her memory, this time to thank the waitress and ask her digital assistant to settle the bill. “Honey” continued to stand and stare at her, as her digital assistant told her they didn’t have an e-commerce interface.

Of course not, thought Angie grumpily to herself. She reached for her purse and desperately hoped she had enough cash. She didn’t relish the idea of washing dishes with that cook.

Relieved to find her emergency cash stash, she asked for a cup of coffee, and then paid the waitress.

As she fixed her coffee, she wrinkled her nose a bit at the fake creamer, then sat back and asked her assistant to continue the memory from the French restaurant.

Angie smiled at Dave as they lingered over dessert. She felt warm, relaxed, and very comfortable with this man. This made her uneasy. She tried to lose herself in the soothing sounds of the dinner music and the light buzz of conversation surrounding them, but the magic of the moment was gone.

“What is it?” asked Dave with genuine concern.

“Hmm?” she responded distractedly.

“Well, you were sitting there with a very happy look on your face, and then suddenly you started scowling and looking very pouty.”

“I was just worried about Phillip,” Angie lied.

“What would it take for you to trust me?” asked Dave sincerely.

“What?” asked Angie, a bit taken aback by his stark honesty.

“You know what I’m talking about. You just shut me out with a big ‘No Trespassing’ sign in bold letters. What would you need from me to feel safe sharing what’s really going on inside your head?”

His intensity and sincerity caught her off guard, as she’d been waiting all night for him to start playing one of the myriad games she was so used to with the opposite sex. She stared at him hard, and then, uncharacteristically, decided to take a leap of faith.

“You really want to know?” she demanded.

“Would I have asked if I didn’t?” he countered.

“Yes. A lot of guys have tried to get inside my head. Why are you any different?”

“Because I can honestly tell you I don’t have any motives other than having a genuine and enjoyable connection with another person on a deeper level.”

“Then let me have unrestricted access to your emotional neural interface with no strings attached and no promise that I’ll reciprocate. Show me three of your childhood memories, ones that impacted who you are today as a man.” She smiled at him mischievously, knowing he would back down fast. What she asked of him was technically inappropriate for a first date, bordering more on long-term relationship criteria. Most

men with any type of commitment issues would run from her demanding request to reveal such an intimate piece of himself.

Dave paused and stared at her for a long moment, weighing the situation. Just when Angie was sure he was going to refuse her, he sat forward swiftly and smiled. She gasped as the first memory hit her neural net. She hadn't done this very often, as she was a very private person, so the clarity and intimacy of the connection always impacted her. Having a memory of something that one had never actually done or experienced tended to be quite surreal.

She noticed herself in a kitchen, feeling that she must be about eight or nine years old.

"I was nine," Dave clarified.

She looked around and saw two people who seemed larger than life and very safe. There was a woman in pajamas cooking pancakes. Her hair was ruffled, and she looked sleepy, but happy. A man was helping her. His only resemblance to Dave seemed to be his intense eyes.

"My parents," Dave chimed in.

She could see he took after his mother. Angie felt warm, safe, happy and much loved. She was excited to taste the pancakes. The recipe for the whole-wheat pancakes had been passed down from a grandmother and was a family favorite.

"It was a tradition in our house to have a home cooked breakfast on Saturday mornings," Dave recounted.

Angie watched as Dave's mom and dad interacted playfully with each other as they made breakfast for the family. Dave's mom flipped a pancake with a spatula then

popped Dave's dad playfully on his bottom. He responded by grabbing her and tickling her on her neck with his chin whiskers. She squealed and punched him playfully. Then Dave's father turned her around and kissed her very passionately. Angie felt embarrassed, but happy to see her parents so in love and enjoying each other. She could feel Dave's resolve to find that kind of a love for himself someday. The moment was so sweet, touching, and outside of Angie's reality that she felt bewildered and moved all at the same time. She felt her eyes fill with tears.

Suddenly, she was the quarterback in a football game with a tied score, coming down to the final seconds. Pain from a badly hurt knee distracted her from trying to decide what to do; what call to make. The team looked to her for leadership, and she knew this was a pivotal moment in her life. She also knew no one could really blame her if she signaled the coach to take her out of the game with a legitimate injury excuse. But, she thought to herself, I would know that I was really scared to make the wrong decision and lead my entire team to a devastating loss. She felt Dave reach deep within himself to find strength of character he didn't know he had, as he chose to lead and face the consequences of shouldering that mantle. He pushed the pain of his knee to the back of his mind, barking his orders to his teammates. They broke the huddle and lined up for the last play. Then the memory stopped.

"Wait!" cried Angie indignantly. "That's so unfair! You can't stop there. What happened? Did you win? How was your knee?" She was so caught up in the experience that she didn't even blush when several people at nearby tables turned to give her disapproving and annoyed glances.

Dave laughed and reached across the table to grab her hand. Angie was shocked at the warmth that began to tingle from her hand, up her arm, and across her body. She knew she should stop, pull away, and resurrect her walls. Only problem was, she didn't want to. She squeezed his hand in return, urging him to continue.

"We lost," Dave muttered.

Angie groaned and shot him a mean look.

"But that wasn't what impacted me," Dave said meaningfully. "I wanted you to see one of the times I first felt like a man. I spent a few weeks receiving nano and physical therapy for a torn ligament."

Angie let out a long breath and laughed a little self-consciously. She let go of his hand and took a drink of her tea. Finally ready again, she breathed in deeply, smiled at Dave, and reached for his hand