

Robert Slocum casually tossed down a shot of whiskey, pursed his lips at the bite, and followed it with a swallow of cold beer. He didn't drink much, and he hadn't today. The single shot with its beer chaser was simply part of a routine he always followed before meeting a client. Throwing a few bills on the counter, he nodded at the bartender and walked towards the exit.

It was late, well after midnight, and a mix of drizzle and sleet had just started to fall. No matter, his car was only half a block away. He stepped onto the poorly lit sidewalk, and had gone no more than ten paces when something struck him a savage blow to the back of the head.

He felt himself falling, slowly corkscrewing towards the concrete walkway, as if in slow motion. Powerless to stop himself, he crashed to the ground as darkness slowly engulfed him. The faint perception of something tugging at his clothes, and distant voices, were among his last memories as he slowly lapsed into unconsciousness. Two pairs of practiced hands went through his pockets.

One of the two muggers stood up and beckoned for his partner to follow. "Let's go, let's go!"

"Wait a minute, there's something else here. Got it!" He tightly gripped a flat, rectangular object as he dashed towards their car, jumping in the passenger side as his partner slid behind the wheel. The doors slammed and the beat-up Buick pulled away from the curb with a roar. Five minutes later they were well away from the scene of the crime.

"How much we get?" The driver alternated between watching the road and glancing at his partner.

"Mucho. Looks like over seven hundred. And this thing." The Latino sitting in the passenger seat examined the device he had taken off their victim.

"What is it?"

"I don't know. Something electronic. A calculator." The Buick hit a pothole as they passed a local strip mall. "You're gonna bust your car. Hey, Chico, we got credit cards, too!"

"Bueno. Let's head over to the projects and hook up with the guys. With that much cash we can all get off."

"What about the rest of the stuff?"

"Keep the credit cards. Dump the calculator. We won't be doing no math."

The two laughed hilariously as the electronic device was tossed from the car. It flipped end over end, described an arc through the night sky, and buried itself in a snow bank on the side of the road. The car disappeared into the night.

It sat there for a whole day, covered by dirty gray snow, until finally the temperature hit the mid-fifties. As the day warmed, the corner of the dull black device was slowly revealed. Cars raced past on the nearby highway, oblivious to the electronic marvel slowly emerging from the dingy ice. But the marvel was less in the electronics than in the information contained in the unit. To the boy who reached down and plucked it from its frozen grave it was simply a treasure, and he ran gleefully home with his new toy.

Stanley Whipple was perched in front of his computer screen watching lines of code scroll past when his rosy-cheeked son darted through the back door.

"Wait just a minute," Stanley yelled, his eyes never leaving the screen. "Get your boots off."

The boy fidgeted for a moment in the doorway, kicking his boots off so hard that they flew against the wall. He didn't wait for a second reprimand. He was up the stairs in a flash, slamming his bedroom door and sitting on his bed. He reached for his bathrobe and used it to dry off his newfound toy.

Once it was wiped off the device was even more appealing, though the silver lettering on the front was partially scraped off, and the sturdy black unit was scratched and marred. The boy turned it over in his hands, examining it from every angle, and it wasn't long before he noticed the small lever on the front edge. He worked it with his thumb, gently pressing it until the lid popped open, revealing a slate-gray menu screen. A flashing icon invited the user to make a selection, but the boy ignored this, not knowing what it wanted. He was attracted by the shininess though, and continued to turn it this way and that, admiring the reflection of light from various angles. After several minutes of this he put it aside and went to wash up, knowing that his father would soon call him for dinner. As if on cue, his father's voice echoed up the narrow staircase.

"Bobby, dinner's ready. Make sure you wash your hands good."

"Okay, Dad. Be right down."

Bobby walked down the hall to the second floor bathroom and quickly ran some water over his grimy hands, wiping most of the dirt off on a clean towel. As he started to leave, he noticed the filthy gray stains he had left on the white fabric. A twinge of guilt plucked at his conscience, so he carefully removed the towel, folded it so the dirt wasn't showing, and replaced it on the rack. He pulled the hanging ends even, centered it, and with his conscience clear, ran downstairs to eat.

Stanley Whipple was not a complicated man; at least, not on the surface. He had two priorities in life—his son and his work. Both demanded his full attention, and both got it. It was a tough balancing act, with his wife dead for two years now, and the computer firm that relied on him always pressing for him to work more hours. Deadlines for software fixes always loomed, and conscientious man that he was, Stanley never disappointed. But the time at work was beginning to have an impact on the boy, and Stanley knew something had to be done to even things out. As he placed a set of dishes on the table, Stanley eyed his ten-year-old son.

“Hey Bobby, how'd you like to go up to the lake and do some fishing this year?”

“Sure Dad; sounds great. What's for dinner?”

“Well, we've got chicken—a roaster from the market—mashed potatoes, peas...”

“Yuck.”

“Peas are good. We like to eat our peas.”

“Dad...”

“Okay, okay. You don't like peas. But you will eat them. They're good for you.”

Stanley finished placing the plates and food on the table, and gestured for Bobby to sit down at his place across from him. The boy closed his eyes, clasped his hands together, and lowered his head.

“God, we thank you for the food, for our house, and for Dad's job. Thank you for taking care of Mommy up in Heaven, and God bless all our stuff. Amen. Oh yeah, and thanks for the neat electronic thing. Amen.”

“Amen.” Stanley looked up at his son. “Bobby, what was that about an ‘electronic thing’?”

The boy was already reaching for the chicken.

“Oh, I found it in the snow.” He hesitated a moment, then added, “near the parking lot.”

“You're sure it wasn't near the road? You know what I told you about that.”

Bobby shook his head, but continued to look down, chewing on a piece of bread. Stanley decided not to press the road issue.

“So what was it you found?”

“I don't know. It has buttons, and a screen.”

“You can show me after dinner.”

Bobby nodded and gulped down some milk. After this brief exchange, the two ate largely in silence. Stanley wanted the boy to open up more, to let out some of the hurt that he knew must be smoldering inside. The suddenness of his mother's death had been a shock, but Bobby had taken it like a man. The problem was, he wasn't a man. Two years was a long time, but the healing really hadn't started yet. Stanley, too, had issues—mainly with how his wife's murder investigation had been handled. His own incarceration for three days had left him with a deep bitterness towards the police, especially since they never caught the real killer.

“You can have more chicken if you want.”

“No thanks,” said Bobby. “May I be excused?”

“Sure. Put your dish in the sink. Got much homework?”

“Nah—just some math. I did most of it in school.”

“Then why do they call it homework?”

“You bring work home.” Bobby smiled at his own cleverness.

“Good one. You better get to it before it gets late. Oh, why don't you show me what you found?”

“I'll go get it.” Bobby ran to his room to retrieve the device, and Stanley started putting the leftovers away. The boy returned within thirty seconds.

“That was quick. Let's see what you've got.” Stanley took the proffered black unit. “Well, how about that. It's a palmtop.”

“What's that?”

“A palm-sized computer. People use them for storing addresses, phone numbers, even computer programs, depending on how sophisticated the model is. You can even use them to get on the Internet.”

“What about this one? Can I play games on it?”

“I don’t know what it can do, but Bobby, I’m afraid you can’t keep this.”

“Why not?” The expression of pain on the boy’s face was genuine.

“It belongs to someone, and it probably has information in it that’s very important to its owner. If you lost something important to you, you’d want it returned if someone found it, wouldn’t you?”

Bobby stared at the floor, not wanting to acknowledge the truth in his father’s words, but knowing he was right. His new toy was history. “I guess so.”

“Well then, don’t be sad about it. Think of it as a mystery. There are probably lots of great clues in here.” Stanley held up the device. “It will be our job to find out who the owner is and to return this to him. It will be our quest.” He was hoping for a hint of enthusiasm, but was disappointed by the sullen ‘okay’ that followed.

“Do you want to start the search after you finish your homework?”

“All right.” Bobby had started to leave the kitchen, and now slowly turned back. “Actually, you can just do it.”

“If that’s what you want, son. I just thought it would be fun to do together.”

“I don’t feel like it.” He slowly walked up the steps to his room. Stanley let him go, quickly finished cleaning up the kitchen, and turned his attention to the palmtop.

“Well, now. Let’s see who you belong to.”

It was dark, and the room was spinning. No, that wasn’t it—his eyes were closed. He slowly opened them, light flooded in, and the spinning gradually subsided. The bed he was in was not what he expected, nor were the smells familiar. Lifting his head to look around, he realized that he was in a hospital, but the effort set the room spinning again, and with a grimace of pain he put his head back down. A nurse walked into the room.

“Morning, sir. Good to see you’re awake.”

“Ah...where am I?”

“This is Saint John’s Hospital. I’m nurse Shaddock. And who might you be?”

Robert Slocum looked at the large black woman standing over him. For some reason, he didn’t think he should tell her his name. He couldn’t remember why.

“I don’t remember. Why am I here?”

“You took quite a blow to the head. We don’t know, really. Probably you were mugged. You’ve been unconscious for over twenty hours, you know. Can’t you remember anything?”

“No, it just hurts. I’d like to sleep some more.” He watched as the corpulent nurse wrote something on his chart.

“Okay, sir. You get some rest. The doctor will be in shortly.” With a smile, she put his chart back and left the room.

When she had gone, Slocum checked out his surroundings more carefully, noting that no one was in the bed next to him. Carefully, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up, the pounding in his head still present, but tolerable. There was a stand next to his bed with some drawers in it, and he opened one. His clothes were inside, so he pulled everything out and laid it on the bed, dressing quickly while he considered how he might get out of the hospital without attracting attention. As his mind started working out the details of what he would have to do, the events of the previous evening slowly came back to him.

He remembered finishing his drink at the bar, and leaving, and then there was the awful crack to the back of his head. He stood looking at the garment in his hands as he recalled what had happened. Slowly, methodically, he put his sports coat on and by instinct reached for the inside pocket. It was empty. That wasn’t right, something should be there. A puzzled look crossed his face. What was it? His wallet? No, that was missing, but there was something else, more important. He looked down as he tried to remember. If only the pounding in his head would stop. Then it hit him; his handheld computer was gone.

He frantically searched through the pockets of all his clothes, twice, but there was nothing. The palmtop had been in the inside pocket of his sports coat, he was sure, but it wasn’t there now. After he left the bar, someone had hit him on the back of the head. They must have taken his wallet and the palm unit. This was bad. He realized then that he had missed his appointment as well. The agency was not going to be pleased.

He walked to the foot of the bed, picked up his chart, and tore out all the pages with any writing on them, stuffing them into his pockets. Then, gathering up the rest of his meager belongings, Robert Slocum simply walked out of the hospital.

“It doesn’t add up.”

“You keep saying that, but I think the evidence proves otherwise.”

The pair of psychologists had been at it for an hour. The slim, forty-year-old Japanese woman had been with the agency nearly since its inception fifteen years earlier. She knew they were moving ahead too fast, but her opinion was a minority view. Her adversary, a staunch proponent of societal profiling, seemed cocksure, unwavering in his belief in his own theories.

“You want to know why it doesn’t add up?” Kayoko was soft-spoken, but firm. Her accent could be both charming and infuriating at the same time.

“I suppose you’re going to tell me.” Tom Snelling stood with his arms crossed, towering over the diminutive Kayoko.

“Yes, I’ll tell you. It’s because you can’t extend individual psychological precepts to the societal level. At least not with the degree of certainty you claim.”

“That’s not what we’re doing. SP is an entirely new science, that...”

“Eh, new science. What you call societal profiling is no science at all. And what you are doing is irresponsible.” She glared at him. To her, psychology was a thing to be used for helping individuals, using tried and proven techniques. She accepted the theoretical basis for monitoring societal patterns, up to a point, but Snelling seemed intent on labeling theories as facts. That, as she said, was not science.

“Listen, Kayoko. I know we have our differences. But the fact is, this project is going ahead whether you like it or not.”

That much, she knew, was true. Before the advent of the Internet the project had languished, prone to failure as one effort after another ran into the same brick wall—insufficient data. Oh, they had a lot of data, but it was out of date almost as soon as it was ready for analysis, and it was the wrong type of data, anyway. Now things were different, and while Kayoko believed in what the agency was trying to do, and supported moving forward, the scientist in her demanded that the approach be validated. She couldn’t help but think that she herself was becoming one of the few remaining controls.

“Tom, I just don’t have time for these silly games. You’ll have your report in the morning, and the numbers will speak for themselves.”

“Good. Just remember, we’re on the same team, right?”

“Yeah, right.” She turned and left his office.

When she had gone, Snelling picked up his phone and dialed a four-digit extension. Charles Mason, the agency’s stern, fifty-year-old Director, answered immediately. Mason was the sort who loved to play the role of benevolent overseer, viewing himself as more of a father figure than a corporate leader. This self-assessment was mostly delusional, however. There were few under his authority that didn’t outright fear him.

“Good morning, Snelling,” said Mason. “What’s up?”

Snelling hated the little displays on the phone that showed the identity of the caller. He felt it degraded what little control he had.

“Hello, Mr. Mason. I just wanted to let you know that I spoke with Kayoko, and the preliminary calculations for the new quotient indicators will be ready tomorrow.”

“Anything else?”

“No, that’s it. Well, maybe one other thing. Kayoko’s not happy. I think she has a problem with how fast things are moving.”

Mason paused for a moment, weighing his words carefully. “Nothing has changed as far as our basic mission is concerned. Only the tools have improved.”

“I know, I know. It’s just that, well, she’s an integral part of the team, and...”

“At this point just let her do her job. Numbers are numbers, right?”

“She is good at what she does,” said Snelling.

“And as long as she gets results that move the project forward, I’m happy.” The way that Mason said ‘I’m’ left little doubt that the issue had been settled.

Snelling quickly changed the subject. “Have you heard anything from the computer department about the raw data?”

“They say we’re close,” replied Mason. “Internet traffic hasn’t shown any sign of leveling off, but the overall percentages aren’t what we’d like to see yet. It’s your formula, what do you think?”

Snelling was noncommittal. “The amount of input from the Net seems satisfactory, but it takes time to sift through the volumes we’re dealing with. A lot of what we get is unusable.”

“The geek unit tells me the same thing.” Mason derided anyone who knew more than he did, and his computer people were eons ahead of him “I tried explaining that...hold on, my secretary’s buzzing me on the other line.”

“That’s okay, I have to go,” said Snelling. “See you at the meeting Tuesday.”

Mason pressed a button on his telephone’s control panel. “Yes, what is it?”

“You have a call from Mr. Pampas,” said his secretary. “He says it’s urgent.”

“I’ll take it.” The line briefly went dead, and a moment later George Pampas, the barrel-chested head of security, was put through.

“I’m sorry to bother you, Mr. Mason, but we have a situation with one of the implementers—Robert Slocum. Apparently he was mugged.”

“Where is he now, is he okay?”

“He’s fine. He’s in a phone booth near a burger joint.” Pampas paused for a moment. “He missed his appointment Thursday night.”

Mason let a silent moment pass. “That’s not good, George. We pay him to keep appointments, not miss them.” He paused again. “We’ll just have to reschedule. Get him some money and whatever else he needs to replace what was lost. When can he meet with the client?”

“Well, sir, that brings up another dilemma.” The grimace on Pampas’s face was almost audible.

“Which is?”

“It’s his palmtop. It’s missing.”

A cold silence followed. When Mason responded, his voice was icy.

“That’s not acceptable.”

“Whoever cracked him over the head must have taken it. But don’t worry, it’s locked down in full secure mode.”

“Don’t tell me what to worry about.” Mason could feel his neck getting hot with anger. “I don’t have the people available to clean up after him, so he’s going to have to do it himself. There will be no further appointments for Mr. Slocum for the time being. As of now, his only mission is to recover his palm unit. Do so, and he’s back on the team. Fail, and he’ll become someone else’s client. Do we understand each other?”

“Yes, sir. Perfectly,” said Pampas.

“Is he still on the other line?”

“Yes.”

“Have him stay on while we back trace his location. Tell him a car will arrive within the hour.”

It was Saturday morning. Stanley Whipple looked curiously at the palmtop. He had spent the better part of an hour trying to figure it out the night before, with no success. It didn’t seem to be broken, yet he was unable to access any data, or even get past the menu system. He only wanted a clue as to the owner’s identity so he could return the device, but the exercise was becoming intriguingly annoying. He turned it over yet again and examined the electronic interface on the back of the unit. Not a standard connection.

“Hey Bobby.” He yelled loud enough for his son to hear him in his room. Within moments the sound of running feet echoed downstairs.

“Yeah, Dad?”

“Wanna go to the mall? I have to buy a cable.”

“Sure. Right now?”

“I think so. On the way back we’ll stop for take out. Sound good?”

“Yeah!”

The two grabbed their jackets and piled into the Chevy. It was typical Stanley—functional, but not ostentatious, the perfect blend of dependability and obscurity. Before leaving, Stanley grabbed the palmtop and put it in his coat pocket. He wanted to make sure he got the right cable. Twenty minutes later they arrived at the

mall and were walking towards the electronics boutique, situated in an alcove at the far end of a long corridor. Stanley thought he detected the faint sound of music.

“You hear something?”

“Yeah,” said Bobby. “Sounds like it’s coming from up ahead.” As they drew closer, the music grew louder. It was a bagpipe concert, one of the many functions put on by mall management to attract shoppers.

“Let’s watch for a while,” suggested Stanley. He loved the pipes.

They moved up close to the platform in the central pavilion where a group of eleven pipers in full Highland garb stood in a circle, belting out a series of Celtic tunes. Stanley was lost in the memories that came flooding back, of a different time, another place, when he and his future wife were in college. The school had boasted a large contingent of bagpipe players, and there had been frequent performances. The music was a bittersweet reminder. After several songs, Stanley motioned to Bobby, and the two continued on to the electronics store, the sound of the pipers fading behind them.

The store was crowded, mostly with customers interested in cell phones. Stanley knew the store manager and showed him what he needed. It was a custom job, but the manager assured him that his technician could have a cable ready in about an hour, so Stanley left the palmtop at the store, and poked around the mall with Bobby. They returned a short while later and picked up the cable and palmtop. As they pulled out from the mall parking lot Stanley glanced at his son.

“Shall we stick with burgers, or are tacos more to your liking this afternoon?”

“Burgers.”

“Drive thru okay with you?”

“Sure, Dad.”

Five minutes later they pulled into a nearby fast food restaurant. Several cars waited at the drive thru ahead of them.

“What’ll it be?” asked Stanley.

“Cheeseburger, fries, chocolate shake.”

“Same as always, huh?”

“Yep.” Bobby smiled. He liked spending time with his dad, and the burgers were a bonus. The car moved as the line inched forward, and at last they paid for their order and pulled up to the pick up window. The familiar smell of fast food permeated the interior of the Chevy as they pulled out of the parking lot and turned right.

Perhaps it was the smell of the food that distracted him, or the riddle of the palmtop that occupied his mind. In any event, Stanley nearly pulled out in front of a car, causing its brakes to squeal and its driver to salute him with a most unkind gesture.

Across the street, next to a phone booth, Robert Slocum saw the entire incident. Bony-nosed Stanley Whipple, with his dark-rimmed glasses, would stand out in any crowd. To a man who prided himself on his ability to recall detail, it was a photograph. Without thinking about it, Slocum took a mental snapshot. Then both cars were gone, and one more small drama in a world filled with big events had passed.