

No Hiding Place

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Extract

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Part One

SECURITY

1

The office of the chief executive officer of the Stratton Corporation wasn't really an office at all. At a quick glance you'd call it a cubicle, but at the Stratton Corporation – which *made* the elegant silver-mesh fabric panels that served as the walls around the CEO's brushed-steel Stratton Ergon desk – 'cubicle' was a dirty word. You didn't work in a cubicle in the middle of a cube farm; you multitasked at your 'home base' in an 'open-plan system.'

Nicholas Conover, Stratton's CEO, leaned back in his top-of-the-line leather Stratton Symbiosis chair, trying to concentrate on the stream of figures spewing from the mouth of his chief financial officer, Scott McNally, a small, nerdy, self-deprecating guy who had a spooky affinity for numbers. Scott was sardonic and quick-witted, in a dark, sharp-edged way. He was also one of the smartest men Nick had ever met. But there was nothing Nick hated more than budget meetings.

'Am I boring you, Nick?'

'You gotta ask?'

Scott was standing by the giant plasma screen, touching it with the stylus to advance the PowerPoint slides. He was not much more than five feet tall, over a foot shorter than Nick. He was prone to nervous twitches, anxious shrugs, and his fingernails were all bitten to the quick. He was also rapidly going bald,

though he wasn't even out of his thirties; his dome was fringed with wild curly hair. He had plenty of money, but he always seemed to wear the same blue button-down Oxford shirt, fraying at the collar, that he'd worn since Wharton. His brown eyes darted around as he spoke, sunken in deep lilac hollows.

As he rattled on about the layoffs and how much they were going to cost this year versus how much they'd save the next, he fidgeted, with his free hand, with what remained of his straggly hair.

Nick's desk was kept fastidiously clear by his terrific assistant, Marjorie Dykstra. The only things on it were his computer (wireless keyboard and mouse, no pesky rat's nest of wires, a flat-panel screen), a red model truck with the Stratton logo painted on the side, and framed pictures of his kids. He kept sneaking glances at the photos, hoping Scott would think he was just staring into space and concentrating on the interminable presentation.

What's the bottom line, dude? he wanted to say. *Are the guys in Boston going to be happy or not?*

But Scott kept droning on and on about cost savings, about outplacement costs, about metrics, about employees as 'units,' as bar graphs on a PowerPoint slide. 'Current average employee age is 47.789 years, with a standard deviation of 6.92,' Scott said. He noticed Nick's glazed expression as he touched the screen with the aluminum stylus, and a half smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. 'But hey, age is just a number, right?'

'Is there any good news here?'

'Ahh, it's only money.' Scott paused. 'That was a joke.'

Nick stared at the little display of silver frames. Since Laura's death last year he cared about two things only: his job and his kids. Julia was ten, and she beamed with her thousand-watt smile in her school picture, her curly

chestnut hair unruly, her enormous, liquid brown eyes sparkling, her big new teeth a little crooked, a smile so unself-conscious and dazzling she seemed to be bursting out of the photo. Lucas was sixteen, dark-haired like his little sister, and unnervingly handsome; he had his mother's cornflower-blue eyes, an angular jawline. A high school heartthrob. Lucas smiled for the camera, a smile that Nick hadn't actually seen in person since the accident.

There was just one photo of all four of them, sitting on the porch of the old house, Laura seated in the middle, everyone touching her, hands on her shoulder or her waist, the center of the family. The gaping hole, now. Her amused, twinkling blue eyes looked right at the camera, her expression frank and poised, seemingly tickled by some private joke. And of course Barney, their overweight, lumbering Golden/Lab mix, sat on his haunches in front of everyone, smiling his dog smile. Barney was in all the family pictures, even in last Christmas's family photo, the one with Lucas glowering like Charles Manson.

'Todd Muldaur's going to have a shit fit,' Nick said, lifting his eyes to meet Scott's. Muldaur was a general partner in Fairfield Equity Partners in Boston, the private-equity firm that now owned the Stratton Corporation. Todd, not to put too fine a point on it, was Nick's boss.

'That's about the size of it,' Scott agreed. He turned his head suddenly, and a second later Nick heard the shouts too.

'What the hell -?' Scott said. A deep male voice, somewhere nearby, yelling. A woman's voice, sounded like Marge's.

'You don't have an *appointment*, sir!' Marge was shouting, her voice high and frightened. An answering rumble, the words indistinct. 'He isn't here, anyway, and

if you don't leave right this *instant*, sir, I'm going to have to call Security.'

A hulking figure crashed into one of the silver panels that outlined Nick's workstation, almost tipping it over. A bearded giant in his late thirties wearing a checked flannel shirt, unbuttoned, over a black Harley-Davidson T-shirt: barrel-chested, powerful-looking. The guy looked vaguely familiar. A factory worker? Someone who'd recently been laid off?

Immediately behind him followed Marge, her arms flailing. 'You *cannot* come in here!' she shrielled. 'Get out of here immediately, or I'll call Security.'

The giant's foghorn voice boomed: 'Well, whaddaya know, there he is. Boss man himself. The slasher is in.'

Nick felt a cold fear wash over him as he realized that the budget meeting might turn out to be the high point of his day.

The guy, probably a worker just laid off in the most recent round of cuts, was staring, wild-eyed.

Nick flashed on news stories he'd read about crazed employees – 'disgruntled workers,' they were always called – who'd been let go, and then showed up at work and started picking people off.

'I just remembered a phone conference I'm late for,' Scott McNally muttered as he squeezed past the intruder. 'If you'll excuse me.'

Nick got up slowly, raised himself to his full six-two. The crazy bearded guy was considerably bigger.

'What can I do for you?' Nick asked politely, calmly, the way you might try to lull a rabid Doberman pinscher.

'What can you do for me? That's fucking hilarious. There's nothing more you can do for me, or *to* me, asshole.'

Marge, hovering directly behind him, her hands flailing, said: 'Nick, I'll call Security.'

Nick put up his hand to tell her to hold off. ‘I’m sure there’s no need,’ he said.

Marge squinted at him to indicate her strong disagreement, but she nodded, backed away warily.

The bearded man took a step forward, puffing up his massive chest, but Nick didn’t budge. There was something primal going on here: the interloper was a baboon baring his canines, screaming and strutting to scare off a predator. He smelled of rancid sweat and cigar smoke.

Nick fought the strong temptation to deck the guy but reminded himself that, as CEO of Stratton, he couldn’t exactly do stuff like that. Plus, if this was one of the five thousand Stratton workers who’d been laid off within the last two years, he had a right to be angry. The thing to do was to talk the guy down, let him vent, let the air out of the balloon slowly.

Nick pointed to an empty chair, but the bearded man refused to sit. ‘What’s your name?’ Nick said, softening his voice a bit.

‘Old Man Devries woulda never had to ask,’ the man retorted. ‘He knew everyone’s name.’

Nick shrugged. That was the myth, anyway. Folksy, paternal Milton Devries – Nick’s predecessor – had been CEO of Stratton for almost four decades. The old man had been beloved, but there was no way he knew ten thousand names.

‘I’m not as good with names as the old man was,’ Nick said. ‘So help me out here.’

‘Louis Goss.’

Nick extended his hand to shake, but Goss didn’t take it. Instead, Goss pointed a stubby forefinger at him. ‘When you sat down at your fancy computer at your fancy desk and made the decision to fire half the guys in the chair factory, did you even fucking *think* about who these people are?’

‘More than you know,’ Nick said. ‘Listen, I’m sorry you lost your job –’

‘I’m not here because I lost my job – see, I got seniority. I’m here to tell you that you deserve to lose yours. You think just because you waltz through this plant once a month that you know anything about these guys? These are human beings, buddy. Four hundred and fifty men and women who get up at four in the morning to do the early shift so they can feed their families and pay their rent or their mortgages and take care of their sick kids or their dying parents, okay? Do you realize that because of you some of these guys are going to lose their *houses*?’

Nick closed his eyes briefly. ‘Louis, are you just going to talk at me, or do you want to hear me out?’

‘I’m here to give you a little free advice, Nick.’

‘I find you get what you pay for.’

The man ignored him. ‘You better think seriously about whether you really want to go through with these layoffs. Because if you don’t call them off by tomorrow morning, this place is going to grind to a halt.’

‘What are you trying to say?’

‘I got half, maybe three-quarters of the factory floor with me on this. More, once we start. We’re all sicking out tomorrow, Nick. And we’re staying sick until my buddies get their jobs back.’ Goss was smiling with tobacco-darkened teeth, enjoying his moment. ‘You do the right thing, we do the right thing. Everyone’s happy.’

Nick stared at Goss. How much of this was bluster, how much on the level? A wildcat strike could paralyze the company, especially if it spread to the other plants.

‘Why don’t you think this over when you’re driving home tonight in your Mercedes to your gated community?’ Goss went on. ‘Ask yourself if you feel like taking your company down with you.’

It's a Chevy Suburban, not a Mercedes, Nick wanted to say, but then he was struck by that phrase, 'gated community.' How did Goss know where he lived? There'd been nothing in the newspaper about that, though of course people talked . . . Was this a veiled threat?

Goss smiled, a mirthless, leering grin, saw the reaction on Nick's face. 'Yeah, that's right. I know where you live.'

Nick felt his rage flare up like a lit match tossed into a pool of gasoline. He sprang out of his seat, lunged forward, his face a few inches from Louis Goss's face. 'What the hell are you trying to say?' It took all his self-restraint to keep from grabbing the collar of the guy's flannel shirt and twisting it tight around his fat neck. Up close he realized that Goss's bulk was all flab, not muscle.

Goss flinched, seemed to shrink back a bit, intimidated.

'You think everyone doesn't know you live in a fucking huge mansion in a gated community?' Goss said. 'You think anyone else in this company can afford to live like that?'

Nick's anger subsided as quickly as it had surged. He felt a damp sort of relief; he'd misunderstood. The threat that Louis had actually made seemed suddenly tame by comparison. He leaned even closer, poked a finger against Goss's chest, jabbing the little white hyphen between 'Harley' and 'Davidson.'

'Let me ask *you* something, Louis. Do you remember the "town meeting" at the chair plant two years ago? When I told you guys the company was in a shitload of trouble and layoffs seemed likely but I wanted to avoid them if possible? You weren't sick that day, were you?'

'I was there,' Goss muttered.

'Remember I asked if you'd all be willing to cut

your hours back so everyone could stay on the job? Remember what everyone said?’

Goss was silent, looking off to one side, avoiding Nick’s direct stare.

‘You all said no, you couldn’t do that. A pay cut was out of the question.’

‘Easy for you to –’

‘And I asked whether you’d all be willing to cut back on your health plan, with your daycare and your health-club memberships. Now, how many people raised their hands to say yeah, okay, we’ll cut back? Any recollection?’

Goss shook his head slowly, resentfully.

‘Zero. Not a single goddamned hand went up. Nobody wanted to lose a goddamned hour of work; nobody wanted to lose a single perk.’ He could hear the blood rushing through his ears, felt a flush of indignation. ‘You think I slashed five thousand jobs, buddy? Well, the reality is, I *saved* five thousand jobs. Because the boys in Boston who own this company now don’t fuck around. They’re looking at our biggest competitor and seeing that the other guys aren’t bending metal, they’re not making their furniture in Michigan anymore. Everything’s made in China now, Louis. *That’s* why they can undercut us on price. You think the boys in Boston don’t remind me of that every single goddamned chance they get?’

‘I got no idea,’ Louis Goss muttered, shuffling his feet. It was all he could muster.

‘So go right ahead, Louis. Have your strike. And they’ll bring in a new CEO who’ll make me look like Mister Rogers. Someone who’ll shut down all of our plants the second he walks in this building. Then you wanna keep your job, Louis? I suggest you learn fucking *Mandarin*.’

Louis was silent for a few seconds, and when he

spoke, it was in a small, sullen voice. ‘You’re going to fire me, aren’t you?’

‘You?’ Nick snorted. ‘You’re not worth the severance package. Now, get the fuck back on the line and get the hell out of my . . . work space.’

A few seconds after Louis Goss had lumbered away, Marge appeared again. ‘You need to go home, Nick,’ she said. ‘Now.’

‘Home?’

‘It’s the police. There’s a problem.’