



Computing Love

Allan Ramsay

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This is a work of fiction. Characters, corporations, institutions and organizations in this novel are either the product of the author's imagination or, if real, are used fictitiously without any intent to describe their actual conduct.

Part I - The Curriculum

During the 1960s, while hippies roamed the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco with free music and freer love diffusing through the nation; while the Age of Aquarius held the promise of peace and love for all mankind—literally, a 20th century Renaissance—a New Age seemed ready to blossom upon the planet; one that might become a near-nirvana where people everywhere not only got along, but actually cooperated for their mutual benefit and loved one another, without the boundaries of neighborhoods or nations diminishing peoples’ love and respect for one another. Yet the unfortunate predilections of the human race dashed those lofty dreams as the decades ground on, leaving a wake of conflict, war, destruction, misery and the unending promise of eventual death for everyone on the planet.

During that same period of the 60’s, an Ivy League university psychology professor was thrust, unwillingly at first, into what became a seven year long project. Amid much questioning and wondering and bewilderment, she sat as words and ideas entered her mind, seemingly from out of nowhere. Those words began with clear instructions: “This is a course in miracles. Please takes notes.”

She transcribed words from that other-worldly source for seven years. She understood she was being given a training course, or even more. In fact, its twelve hundred pages formed an extraordinary and complete *curriculum* that gave humanity new guidance designed to help people choose a better way to live amid the strife of wars and fears of war, genocide, pestilence, anger, hatred, murders, crime and poverty that had guaranteed hell on earth since cavemen began fighting over territory and food. It promised far more than any Aquarian new age could imagine: It promised an escape from hell.

Those who eventually chose to study the curriculum, ordinary people—some might have been called “seekers,” others who suffered after having hit the lowest points of their lives, and yet others who chose to test the curriculum to see if it held any answers that made sense—the curriculum cautioned each of them to understand a basic concept:

“You have learning handicaps in a very literal sense. There are areas in your learning skills that are so impaired that you can progress only under constant, clear-cut direction, provided by a Teacher Who can transcend your limited resources. He becomes your Resource because by yourself, you cannot learn. The learning situation in which you placed yourself is impossible, and in this situation you clearly require a special Teacher and a special curriculum.

“You do not know the meaning of love, and that is your handicap. Do not attempt to teach yourself what you do not understand, and do not try to set up curriculum goals where yours have clearly failed. Your learning goal has been not to learn, and this cannot lead to successful learning.”

Kyle Williams was born in the closing minutes of December 31, 1999, nearly two

decades after the psychology professor's death.

Now, in 2032, working as a physicist and computer expert, he is about to learn of the curriculum. It is about to thrust itself into his life with consequences that could change his most fundamental beliefs, even the definition of life itself. Perhaps the beliefs of all mankind.

CHAPTER 1

Dreaming

Kyle Williams leaned back in his chair and frowned at the computer screen. Frustration and a sense of defeat filled him as they had every evening lately. He had been struggling for months to write the software he needed to build the world's first quantum super computer.

He studied a page of software code for what seemed to be the twentieth time. *Why can't I get this right?* He turned off the screen. *Screw it. That's enough for today.*

The small warehouse behind the office area beckoned. He'd installed a few pieces of exercise equipment in a corner of the warehouse months ago. Those machines gave him an outlet for his frustration, but he didn't think of them that way. Instead, he'd often heard the traditional wisdom about sedentary jobs: Sitting will kill you; sedentary jobs are deadly. And what could be more sedentary and lethargic than sitting and hammering away at a keyboard for ten or twelve hours every day? Kyle chose to keep his belly flat, his arms muscled, his six foot body healthy. With all the premature death he'd already seen in his family, he took responsibility for his own health. With a vengeance.

He sat down on a rowing machine, strapped his sneakers into the foot pedals and dialed the resistance to mid-range. As he pulled on the hand grips, the machine's counter began tallying the calories he burned as he warmed up his body. Five minutes into the session he broke sweat, then dialed the machine's resistance to maximum.

A personal trainer had once emphasized the importance of a gentle stretch and warm up before working out. Tonight, and every night, Kyle ignored that advice and dove right into a strenuous workout. My body is tough; I don't need to coddle it. I don't need to warm up, he believed. What is a body? It's a neutral thing with no mind of its own. It's a vehicle that carries a mind, an intellect, around with it. Push it. Press it. Make it perform. Keep it healthy. Yeah, take care of it. But no need to indulge it.

After twenty minutes of heavy exertion, he moved from the rowing machine to the chin-up bar. *Twenty six. Twenty seven. Twenty eight.* Then, with arms trembling, he pulled just once more, barely reaching the bar with his chin. *I should be able to do thirty.* He stood for a minute to catch his breath, then knocked out a hundred jumping jacks flailing his arms and legs as fast as he could. H-I-T. High intensity training. Push everything to the max. Blow it out. His heart pounded so fast he could hear his pulse inside his ears. He could almost feel new neurons growing in his hippocampus. From the jumping jacks he went to push ups and knocked out forty. Finally, he strode to the break room and chugged a bottle of water.

Same damn ritual every day lately. Write software that doesn't work, then exercise to avoid death by sitting. My whole project. My life. Everything's stalled. Dammit!

The challenge Kyle had set himself, that of building a quantum super computer, had become his life's purpose. Quantum computers would run trillions of times faster than conventional machines and would be able to solve massive problems that had plagued mankind for centuries. But they could also be used to amass power. Having access to a machine that could solve any problem in almost no time would give its owners incredible power over others. Governments and industry had been working on quantum computing for years. After much study Kyle had become convinced the release of such machines into the world would lead to terrible outcomes. He believed they would plunge the world into a living nightmare, a meltdown, an apocalypse that would lead the world to its final annihilation. He became almost obsessed with worries about the irreparable damage quantum computing machines could do.

But like any issue that polarized people, two camps arose around quantum computing. One, which included commercial, academic and governmental organizations, evangelized the benefits such machines would bring to mankind. The other foretold an unending avalanche of doom that would bring global catastrophe. To Kyle, it was undeniable that catastrophe was the guaranteed outcome. For Kyle it had become critically important to launch his quantum super computing project *first* so he could dominate the market before others could do the damage he so clearly foresaw.

He left the break room and walked through the office turning off lights. Security lights glowed dimly and the sign pointing to the lobby shone red with the word EXIT. Kyle's small company, eZo Systems, occupied about two thousand square feet in a single story office building. Its lobby faced the parking lot, which, at nine o'clock, was dark.

Get home. Get some sleep. Start over tomorrow. Kyle locked the front door to eZo Systems and set the security alarm. He pulled out of the parking lot, weary after another solitary day of failure and drove north on I-95 from West Palm Beach. His mind ran in circles as he worried about finding a solution to the software code that wouldn't work. He had missed every deadline he'd set for himself during the last few months of this year, 2032. The demons of self-doubt crept over him, asking him the same tired questions yet again this evening: Are you up to this? Smart enough? You ever going to finish this project? What ever made you think you could invent a quantum computer? No one else has ever been able to...

He glanced in the rear view mirror and saw no cars behind him. Only darkness on a moonless night. His headlights pierced the black for only a couple hundred feet ahead. *I can drive like this all night even if I see only a short distance ahead. I can get to my destination no matter how far away it is.* What's it going to take to get this software running, he wondered. *I can't see the end. Is it like driving in the dark? Knowing I'll get it working even if I can't see the whole path?*

At Exit 77 he pulled off and drove to his tiny condo in suburban Palm Beach Gardens. Kyle pulled into his garage, ate a sandwich, drank a Michelob, then got ready to sleep. The Murphy bed squeaked as he pulled it down from wall. Kyle fell into it, exhausted. After a few twists and turns, he fell asleep.

He dreamed. He's walking on a beach, but fear consumes him. He's gasping for breath and he knows he is about to die. Someone is going to kill him for what he did to that woman. Marci is dead. He knows, without knowing how he knows, that Marci died at his hand.

There. Marci's broken body lies in the sand. Just off to the right palms are swaying while gulls and pelicans coast over the surf to the left.

Her body is out of place in this paradise. He looks down at her twisted frame. Long brunette hair festooned around her face with seaweed inextricably entwined. It's as if someone had braided it, like hair extensions, into her coif. Her right arm and leg are twisted into impossible positions as bones and ligaments were torn free from their sockets. Her face, though, is almost beatific. A slight smile graces her blue lips with no sign of pain, no scrunched up lines in her forehead. No clenched jaws on her cold, hard face. Her eyes, mercifully, are closed. Kyle stand transfixed in his dream, standing above her, staring, trying to understand what had happened. How it happened.

And for God sakes, *why?*

Suddenly, out of nowhere, someone screams at him, bellowing his name. *You! Kyle Williams!* A man begins running toward Kyle with a weapon. It's got dials and knobs on it. It's no ordinary gun. Somehow, Kyle knows it inflicts indescribable pain before it finally brings a lingering, horrific death. It shoots strange energy bundles—some kind of pulsating corpuscles. They're made of soul-searing, unimaginable *fear*. They paralyze and drive a man far beyond any fear a mortal can imagine.

Kyle turns away from Marci's cold body and, having no weapon, runs from his assailant. The sun shining on the sandy beach casts miraculous orbs of brilliant color everywhere. The old high school mnemonic that abbreviates all the colors of the rainbow flashes through his mind: ROY.G.B.I.V. As he runs, he discovers he can run faster by stepping on the indigo and violet colors splashing on the ground. He lurches forward and literally *glides* over the sand. He gains ground almost effortlessly with inhuman speed, but knows there's no place to hide. He stops to face his attacker and somehow take him down.

A blast of fear rockets past his right shoulder and almost knocks him to the ground. Kyle's legs tremble in the aftermath of that near miss and become like Jell-O. He zigs and zags, tripping and falling as he runs, searching for each indigo or violet splotch. Another globby fear corpuscle shoots past him, this time screaming with insane terror through the summer air. It veers past him like a bolt of lightning, then spins off into the surf. The water boils where it lands. Just a few steps more and another fear blast launches from the weapon. Kyle hears it wailing through the air. It hits him squarely at the base of his neck, driving him to the ground like a sack of rocks, helpless but fully conscious. In a moment his assailant stands over him. He takes aim at Kyle's mid-section and bastes his entire body with pure, alien terror, pouring wave after wave of horror and unrelenting fear into his inert flesh.

The sun above goes dark and an avalanche of blackness smashes down on Kyle's dream body. His eyes stop working. His mind watches in horror as life leaks out of him.

There's no point in calling out to God. God's never helped with anything. Kyle's lungs, liver, his stomach, all his internal organs convulse. The attacker slathers him again. Now his feet and legs. Groin. Head. Mere agony would be a welcome relief from this horror. Kyle's heart howls in pain and explodes inside his chest. Every cell of his body shrieks. His arms and legs thrash. A grand mal seizure escorts Kyle out of life, into eternal death.

Then, with a spasmodic jerk, he wakes up in his bed, panting. He gulps for air and grabs his chest. The veins in his scalp pulse at each erratic heartbeat. The sheets, wet and cold and clammy, are stuck to his skin.

My GOD! Chills run up and down his body. They burst forth at the center of his back, then migrate with a frigid chill down his arms and legs and up to his neck. The hairs on his arms are standing on end and his flesh is covered in goosebumps. He trembles at his imagined death at the hands of someone who wanted to settle the score for what he'd done to that woman. He peels the soggy sheets off his naked body and lies there, trembling at the deadly chasm of fear that still floods through him.

He crawls out of his Murphy bed and hobbles to the bathroom. His hazel eyes stare back at him from the mirror, but his eyelids are stretched wide open like some kind of insane maniac. So much for trying to ground himself with his body's reflection in the mirror. He covers his face with his hands. His body wants to turn and sprint to a place of safety. But where?

Fear gun? Who was chasing me? He slaps his face. Hard. Then again. His light brown hair flies out with each jerk of his head. *Who was that woman Marci?* He recalls her death face, so peaceful in spite of her poor, broken body. How her hair was interwoven with seaweed, how it splayed out making a gorgeous border around her face, like an ornate frame enclosing a work of art, as she lay dead on the sand.

His mind races as the memory of that unimaginable fear confronts him again. *For God's sake, pull yourself together, man. Enough of this crap! Get real. Get normal. Do something.* He looks away from the mirror. *Coffee. I need coffee.*

He takes a few steps into the kitchen. There, with his back to the entrance, facing the stove, stands a man stirring something in a pot. Hearing Kyle's approach the man turns to face him and says, "Good morning Kyle. How about some breakfast? I've made oatmeal."

What? He knows my name! A new flood of chills erupts from the middle of Kyle's back and he sucks in a huge gulp of air. The man turns to face him, but the man's face won't come into focus. Kyle steps toward the faceless man, challenging him. He shouts: "How'd you get into my condo? Who are you? What are you doing in my kitchen?"

No answer. The man just stands there, holding a long-handled wooden spoon, watching Kyle. He puts out the energy of a rather gentle guy. Kind. Friendly. Harmless. So instead of throwing this home invader out the door, Kyle asks him again in a quieter tone of voice: "Who are you?"

"I'm a friend." The man smiles and now his face comes into focus. He seems at ease in another man's house. "I'm here to help you understand that dream you had."

He knows about my dream? "What about my dream?"

“Dreams are hard to understand. They seem real when they're happening, don't they?”

Kyle flashed back to the final death throes of his nightmare, then to the vision of that woman lying dead on the sand. “Yes! I killed someone in that dream. A woman. Marci.” Standing in the kitchen doorway, he realizes he’s naked. He looks hard into the man's face. Something scary is going on.

“Who are you?” he demands. “What are you doing in my house?”

The man pauses as if trying to decide how to say something important so there could be no chance of misunderstanding.

“Kyle,” he says, “You might not realize it and you probably won't believe it, but you're still *dreaming*, my friend. You’re dreaming you had an unpleasant dream and now it's over.” He paused again. “But as you look at me right now, you're unable to remember who I am.”

Maybe if I rattle my brain this will all go away. This can't be real. Kyle shakes his head, maybe hard enough to rattle his brain. He searches his mind for the man's name that seems to be hiding in some lost and forgotten memory, but comes up empty.

The man lays the spoon aside and turns the burner down to simmer. He comes closer and puts a hand on Kyle’s shoulder. His hand is warm, comforting. Even loving. “You *perceive* some things Kyle, but you don't have real *vision* while you're dreaming. You're dreaming you're looking at me. You're dreaming you're trying to remember my name. None of that works, although you don't yet understand why.”

The front door handle of the condo turns and the hinges squeak as the door opens. The dead woman from the nightmare walks in, obviously alive and healthy. Kyle freezes in place, his eyes glued to Marci as she walks toward him.

She smiles. “Hello Kyle, glad to see you again.”

Kyle stands transfixed, frozen in place, as if his feet have sprouted permanent roots into the floor. His mind’s eye conjures a vision of her dead on the beach: *I killed her. She supposed to be dead.* She smiles at him kindly and cradles his face in her hands. In an instant, an overpowering sensation of tranquility floods through Kyle. All feelings of confusion and fear vanish and Kyle regains the use of his legs. *No, wait! I love her.* He grabs Marci and wraps his arms around her, looks deeply into her eyes, then kisses her lips.

She seems mildly amused, but meets his kiss with hers. He lingers for a moment enjoying her lips until she backs away. “You might want to get some pants on, cowboy.”

He goes to his bedroom, slips into a pair of shorts and a T-shirt. When he returns to the kitchen, Marci and the man are sitting down at the table for breakfast as if they’re old friends. A bowl of oatmeal is set for Kyle and coffee steams from his cup. Kyle sits down.

The man and Marci eat as if nothing in the universe could be more important than paying full attention to the food and the process of eating. Each of them in their own time picks up a bite solemnly with closed eyes, swallows and takes another bite, sometimes with a sip of coffee. They might each be taking a bite about twice each minute. Their eating seems to be a holy ritual or a meditation. It would be offensive—maybe even a sin—to speak while eating is underway.

Kyle looks at the man sitting across from him. He's of indeterminate age, maybe in his fifties or sixties. Even seventies. But equally possible that he's in his late thirties or early forties. His skin is clear and his eyes sparkle with some kind of inner light. "Who are you? Is this real?" Kyle asks.

The man replies, then continues eating. "None of this is Real."

Kyle turns to Marci. "I dreamed about you. How can you be here? In my kitchen?"

She stops with a spoonful of oatmeal half way to her mouth and smiles like a Cheshire cat. "It's a miracle." She puts the spoon into her mouth and returns her attention to the bowl in front of her.

Kyle glances at the clock on the microwave oven but can't read the time. The clock display is flickering in and out of focus. *What the hell?* It's still dark outside.

Eventually the nameless man pushes his plate aside, giving Kyle his full attention. He says, "Don't worry Kyle. We're here to show you some amazing things. The first step is helping you realize you're dreaming even when you would swear by all you know you're wide awake."

I'm awake. My belly is full. That makes no sense. "Listen," Kyle says. "It's the middle of the night. We just ate breakfast. I don't know who you are." He turns his eyes to the woman. "I dreamed I killed you on the beach. Someone almost killed me to get even. I don't know you, Marci. But it feels like I know both of you, somehow..."

"Kyle, you didn't kill me. It was only a dream. It wasn't real. I don't have any broken bones or any limbs out of joint. I appreciate how you wove that green seaweed into my hair, but it's not there now. It wasn't real. It never happened. You were dreaming. And what you're experiencing right now is just another sort of dream."

"I'm awake. What day is it anyway? What time is it? What's going on?"

"The day and time are meaningless. What's going on? It's your dream. You're still dreaming, as Aimer told you."

"Aimer? Is that your name?" *Finally, at least one answer.*

"Yes Kyle, that's as good a name as any. But here's what's important for you to know. Once again: You are still asleep in a manner of speaking. Marci and I are here to walk with you through this dream, to help you wake up and learn what is Real. It's going to be one of the hardest things you've ever done and it might take you what seems to be a long time to truly awaken. But that's okay too. Time is a slippery thing in a dream. What seems to last for hours might actually be only a split second...or no time at all."

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The clock radio app on the screen in Kyle's bedroom pierced the air with the 6AM news and traffic report intermixed with the earsplitting sound of the buzzer as it did every morning. "Just a minute," Kyle said to the two mysterious strangers. He jumped up from the kitchen table, raced to the bedroom and silenced the alarm. Stillness closed in on him; no sound anywhere. The entire universe went silent.

He looked back into the kitchen. No one there. No dishes on the table. No pot on the stove. It's as if those two were never here. Another epidemic of goosebumps erupted over his body. *Am I still dreaming? Going nuts?*

He went to the bedroom and stared at the clock as it rolled over to 6:01, then 6:02—as

if verifying the passage of time could somehow cancel out this bizarre morning. He slapped himself in the face again and searched his mind to find anything to drive the weirdness out of his head. *I need to get out of here. Go to the grocery store; talk to a cashier. To anybody. Get normal again.*

He stripped a tangle of sweaty sheets off the bed and tossed them into the washer, then sat down on a deck chair in his screened-in lanai. The sun, still not visible past the palm trees that seemed to cover most all of his native Florida, cast a small brightening into the waning night sky.

Aimer? Marci? Dreaming? What the hell's happening to me? Kyle's eyes gazed into the middle distance as he tried to make sense of what he'd experienced. He couldn't connect the appearance of those strangers nor the nightmare with anything even half-way reasonable. He considered seeing a doctor in case he was on the verge of a breakdown brought on by too much stress on the job. *No. It's not a breakdown. Don't need a doctor.*

He had founded eZo Systems so he could win the race to build a quantum super computer. But he was losing the race with each day his software refused to work. Could that stress have brought on these visions, these hallucinations, this nightmare, he wondered.

Kyle's mind was accustomed to thinking logically. He earned a Master's Degree in Computer Science and another in Physics, then a Ph.D in Physics, followed by post-doctoral work studying the phenomena known as weak and ultra-weak photons. He'd solved most of the theoretical and practical problems that challenged quantum computing researchers. Only the software he struggled with now stood in the way.

Screw the nightmare. The hallucinations, too. Got to get this software running. Kyle leaned his head back and closed his eyes. *But I'm stuck. I can't keep hammering away at this software. There's got to be a better way.* He sat with that thought. *A better way. A better way.* His breathing became regular as he dozed into a light sleep.

The high-pitched beep-beep-beep of a garbage truck backing up roused him a while later. The clock on the wall showed eight-thirty. Kyle shook his head and sat up straight. As he did, an image of his long-time friend leaped into his mind.

Rick Huggins. Freckled face and red hair. Maybe he can help. Rick had been Kyle's constant companion beginning in middle school and continuing all the way through their respective doctoral programs. As middle and high school students, both of them loved science and math. The other kids called them Frick and Frack; two nerds.

But when Rick got a motorcycle in eleventh grade everything changed. They bought matching black leather jackets and let their hair and fledgling beards grow, hoping they could look more like real men. Rick and Kyle went everywhere together, the motorcycle giving them mobility and a "look" the girls began to notice. On Saturday nights they cruised through the local teenage hangouts together, always pretending they didn't care about the girls who began to see them differently.

Their friendship deepened. Rick was Kyle's rock, Kyle was his. After high school their respect and regard for one another matured. In college they played and chased girls for their freshman and sophomore years, then buckled down as they focused on physics and computer science in their junior and senior years. From there, they both qualified for

Masters programs and, finally, Ph.D's. They were tight. Roomies. Best friends forever.

Kyle sat, recalling their lifetimes together. No matter how bad things got at either of their homes, they always found something to take the pain away. *Where is he now? Last we talked he was in Miami teaching college.*

The two hadn't kept in touch except on birthdays and holidays during the last few years, but only because life and jobs had led them in different directions.

Kyle looked at his CoFone, surprised to see how much time had slipped by. He pulled out his CoFone and called Rick. *Need to catch up. See if he can help. Get him involved.* The call went to voicemail. Over the next hour he called twice again, but each call went to voicemail. Kyle drove back to his eZo Systems office, sat down before the computer screen and brought up the code he'd been working on for the last few weeks. *Damn this code!*

CHAPTER 2

Rick

Rick Huggins had few habits. But an early morning swim with his spear gun started most days. He waded into the water, rinsed his mask in the surf and put it on, clamping the snorkel between his teeth. He swam out past the sand bar, toward the coral reef, and dropped his diver-down flag. A bend at the waist and a few kicks powered him toward the bottom.

Fifty feet away a stingray glided toward the reef. Rick followed it, kicking hard to catch up. Good. Rays are like a kid banging a drum. They scare other fish. Flush them out of hiding.

As he closed in on the ray, a dark brown fish with a white belly darted from its cover. Damn! He's got to be three feet long. It's a crab eater. A cobia.

The cobia swam diagonally across Rick's path away from the reef. He aimed his spear gun and waited for the fish to pass directly in front of him. His breath was getting short; he'd have to surface in the next ten or fifteen seconds.

The cobia approached. Thirty feet. Twenty. Rick fired. The gun's triple power bands launched the spear at ninety feet per second. It passed through the cobia. The fish dove toward the bottom in a death struggle to break free. Rick grabbed the line in one hand, held his gun in the other and kicked toward the surface. His face broke into morning air. He pulled the fish to the surface, admiring its continued fight, then grabbed it by the gills and plunged a knife into its head, ending the struggle.

Great catch. This'll be dinner. Love cobia. He waded ashore then bagged the dead fish and dropped it and his gear into the saddlebag on his Harley. He strapped the spear gun to the side of the bike and drove back to his KOA campsite.

"Hey, Rick. Whaddya got there?" a neighbor at the adjacent campsite called out.

"Cobia. Too much for me to eat. You want some?"

"Sure. Thanks, neighbor."

"No problem. I'll bring some over soon as I clean it."

He went to work, scraping off its small scales, gutting it and cutting the fish into man-sized steaks. He was done by nine-thirty.

"Hey Walt, here's that fish."

His neighbor stepped out of his RV. "Thanks, Rick. This'll feed the whole family tonight. Sally said she's gonna grill it. She wants you to join us for dinner. You can put

yours in our fridge if you want. Eat it tomorrow or whenever you like.”

Rick nodded and put his hand on Walt’s shoulder. “Thanks, man. Count me in.”

“Good deal. Oh, by the way, I heard a CoFone ringing earlier. It was coming from your pop-up. Someone must called two or three times in a half hour. I hope everything’s okay.”

Rick’s raised his brows and shrugged his shoulders. “Can’t imagine. But thanks. I’ll go see.” He climbed into his pop-up camper and found his CoFone. Caller ID showed Kyle’s name. Three voicemails waited to be heard. He listened to the first.

“Rick, this is Kyle. Would you give me a call? It’s urgent. Need to talk with you ASAP.”

The second. “Kyle again. Ring me when you can, okay?”

The third. “Me again. Hopin’ I could catch you.”

Rick deleted all three and dialed his oldest friend.

• • •

“Kyle, you all right? I got your voicemails.”

“Hey, thanks. Sorry about the repeat calls. Yeah, I’m okay. Just had a rough morning. I need to talk with you.”

“What happened?”

“Look. I’m sorry to about the repeat calls. But I had this freakin’ nightmare last night. I thought I was going to die in that dream. I mean really die for God’s sake. For real. Then this morning I started thinking about you.”

“What? You kidding me? What are you sayin’?”

“No. Sorry. That didn’t come out right. That damn nightmare had me all messed up this morning. I was trying to get my head on straight and—I don’t know why—you came to mind. I started thinking about all the times we had together. How we could always talk about anything. I felt like I needed to talk with you to get grounded again.”

Rick snorted. “I guess that’s a little better.” He paused, staring blankly at his Harley Davidson parked nearby. “Yeah, we got through a lot of shit, didn’t we, partner?”

“Sure did. So what are you doing these days? Where are you?” Kyle asked.

“Havin’ fun. I’m down in Cudjoe Key. Got a little pop-up camper at the KOA. It’s my fun house.” Rick laughed.

“Yeah, I’ll bet. Any women in your life?”

“None that matter. You?”

“No. So what’ve you been up to?”

Rick grinned at Kyle’s face displayed on his CoFone. “Whatever I damn well please. I do some fishing. Some scuba. Chase a few women. Simple stuff. Fun stuff. But I’ve got a big ride planned.”

“Ride?”

“Yeah. Bike ride. Motorcycle. There’s this Ass of Steel group that gives awards for extreme rides. I’m running low on cash so I thought I’d go for it. See if I can win a few thousand bucks.”

“Ass of Steel?”

“Yeah. I’m gonna ride from Key West to Alaska and back in thirty days. Eight

thousand miles. A third of the way around the freakin' world. The Ass of Steel guys pay five grand to anyone who does it. It'll be fun."

Kyle stared at Rick's face displayed on his CoFone and shook his head. "You're as crazy as ever."

"Maybe. So what's going on? Why'd you call?"

"Like I said. That nightmare really messed with my head. Did you ever have a dream, then wake up from it and find the dream characters in your real life? That's what happened. It was like a dream within a dream, and weird as hell. I started thinking I might be losing it."

"What do you mean the dream characters were in your real life?" Rick asked.

Kyle explained the strange man in his kitchen, Marci and their disappearance when the alarm clock went off.

"At first I needed to talk to you to get grounded and away from that damn nightmare. Old friends are the best friends, right? But now, in the light of day, and hearing your voice, I want to talk with you about a project I'm working on. I think there's some good money in it. I could really use your help, Rick. I'm thinking we could work together to bring it to life."

Rick's raised his eyebrows with interest. "Tell me more."

"You got time now? I could come down to Cudjoe. Or you could come up here. It'll take a while to go through it."

"What's the bottom line? What's it about?"

"I'm building a quantum super computer. I need your help."

"Oh, I thought it was something simple. I don't know. Maybe building a faster than light spacecraft. Or a time machine. Something like that. Something easy." Rick sat down on a deck chair next to his camper and watched Kyle's face grimace on his CoFone display.

"No, smart ass. This quantum thing is real," Kyle said.

"Yeah, I'm just messin' with ya. I've got time to talk. Fire away."

"Good. Did you know I worked for Corning for a while?"

"Yeah, I heard that."

"The company makes fiber optic cable. They wanted to find a better manufacturing process. It was about increasing the reflectivity of the fiber so weak light photons could pass through without being attenuated."

"Okay."

"Well, the more I looked at the problem, the more I got intrigued with some bizarre things about weak photons. I lost interest in the project with Corning and got sidetracked. So I quit. I started my own company to do more research on how those weak photons could be entangled. You know, quantum entanglement. I thought it could be the basis of a quantum computing system."

Rick shook his head. "You serious?"

"Dead serious. I put the money from my parents' life insurance policies in the bank and sold the family house. I started with four hundred thousand in the bank. My company's called eZo Systems. It's in West Palm. I'm making progress on a quantum

system, but I need your help.”

“So you wanna get Frick and Frack back on track?”

Kyle frowned. “C’mon. This is no joke. But yeah, I do. This thing needs some deep programming expertise. And I’d love for us to work on it together. I’m stumped. I can’t figure it out on my own.”

Rick turned his CoFone away from his face and panned it around the campsite, taking in the entire vista. “So you want me to give up this fun house? Look at this place. It’s got everything a man could want.”

Kyle watched as images of the pop-up camper, tropical vegetation and the surf rolling onto the sand played across his screen. “Yeah, I see that. But your little paradise could be destroyed if I can’t bring this computer to life.”

“Destroyed? What are you talkin’ about?”

“Have you heard of the Doppelganger project?”

“No.”

“It’s a secret project run by the government. Some details leaked out a few months ago. They’re trying to build a quantum computer that can crack Internet cryptography and—in their words—‘penetrate hard targets.’ And ‘own the Net.’ If they get their system running OmegaNet and the entire Internet could come crashing down. Banks could go under. Worldwide. Everything could change. I don’t trust the Feds with that kind of power. I need to get there first. *Need to.*”

“So what if you do? It won’t stop them.”

“Maybe I can. There’s more I’ve got to tell you. Lots more. I don’t want to do it over the phone. Can’t. It’s too risky.” Kyle paused for a moment. “If we could work together on this I think we could do something great.”

Rick gazed off into the middle distance, looking at nothing in particular, remembering his life with his best friend Kyle that had lasted...how many years? Twenty? “Okay, man. Tell you what. How ‘bout I come over to your place. It’d be good to see you again. I’d like to hear more about your quantum computer. I’m not doing anything much this week. I can batten down the hatches here at KOA and be there I a few hours. Get some wind in my hair.”

“Great. I love you, man.”

“Love you too. But you better lay in some supplies. I’m not ridin’ over for the hell of it.”

“Name your poison.”

“A case of Heineken, a bottle of Jack and a couple pizzas. That oughta be a good start.”

“You’re on, steel ass.”

CHAPTER 3

The Black Hole

Rick pulled into Kyle's driveway six hours later. Kyle grabbed Rick and pulled him into a bear hug.

"Hey! Great to see you, you beach bum. What are you thinking? You gonna let all your education wash away with the tide?" Kyle asked with a laugh.

"I don't know. I haven't been making any plans lately. Just been livin' life."

"You ready for a beer?" Kyle asked as opened the door to his condo and let Rick enter.

"Damn! This place is tiny. You live here?" Rick asked.

"Yeah. It's all I need. Four hundred square feet. I'm renting it. I'll give you the grand tour. This is the living room and that's the kitchen." Kyle pointed to the stove, sink and refrigerator lined up against one wall and a few cabinets above them. A narrow hallway led to the bedroom and bath.

"I've seen bigger hotel rooms," Rick said. "This place work for you?"

"For six hundred bucks a month it's perfect. I don't spend a lot of time here anyway; I'm mostly at the office. Since I setup eZo Systems I'm living on the cheap. The work I'm doing costs a lot. I'm spending money out the ying yang on computing gear. That four hundred grand I mentioned is down to around three hundred already."

Kyle popped open two Heinekens and sat in the lone chair in his living room. He motioned to the sofa. "That's a sofa bed. I'll put some sheets on it tonight. You can sleep here. I've got a lot to show you. It'll take a few days. Maybe more."

Rick sat down and pulled off his shoes. "Yeah, so what's goin' on with you and this quantum super computer?"

Kyle launched into an explanation of his research. "I've got a quantum system working. But I need a software front end for it. You can't just load a program into a quantum computer like you do with an ordinary machine. It needs software that translates the problem you're trying to solve into something the quantum system can work with."

Rick nodded. "So that's the programming expertise you said you need? You want me to work on it?"

Kyle leaned his head against the back of his chair and nodded. "Yes. And I want to give you half the company. We can make this thing happen if we work on it together."

Rick swigged his beer and set the bottle on the white tile floor. "Fifty-fifty? What's

that mean?”

“It means you and I share as equal partners in everything we build and sell. You can be the Chief Technology Officer...or whatever you want to call yourself. You can take over the programming we need to get this thing online.”

“So you’re offering me a J-O-B? Maybe you don’t get it. I was in paradise before you called me.”

Kyle fixed Rick with a stare. “So what have you been doing? I know you worked down in Miami for a while. But it seems like you’re just letting your PhD fritter away. Living at a KOA for God’s sake? Riding your bike across country? Where’s your head at? You spent a ton of money getting your PhD.”

“Yeah, I worked in Miami for a while. At the university. But academia isn’t for me. Too much bullshit. I took the job there to do research, but that didn’t pan out. So I said screw it and decided to take a break. I always wanted to see what the Keys are like, so I went down to Cudjoe Key. It’s been great. No schedule. No demands. I do what I want. When I want. If I want.”

Kyle nodded. “All right. But listen, Rick. I’m not offering you a freakin’ job. I’m asking if you’d like to help me change the world. Nobody’s been able to build a quantum computer. I’m close. Real close. I could hire someone from the outside to work on the software. But I’d have to show him too much of the proprietary work I’ve done. I can’t risk that with a person I don’t know. I want to work with you. We’ve been together forever. We know how each other thinks. We trust one another. We can do this and get rich in the process.”

Rick twisted his head from side to side, like a prize fighter cracking the bones in his neck, limbering up before going into the ring. “So what’s this J-O-B gonna pay me?”

Kyle smiled, knowing it didn’t really matter what number he named. He and Rick had been welded together at the hips for decades. “I’m giving myself a couple grand each month; more if I need it. It’s not much, but it keeps me going. You can have the same.”

Rick looked around the tiny room as if he were searching for someone to give him advice. “Ya know, we worked together all through college and grad school. It was fun. We got disconnected in the last couple of years.” Rick paused for a minute, recalling those college days. “Yeah, I guess I can cut my vacation in Cudjoe short. Actually, it’ll be good to have something to work on again. Writin’ code for the front end to a quantum system sounds like a real challenge. To be honest, the KOA was getting a little old. All right. I’m in. Sign me up.”

• • •

Rick rode back to Cudjoe Key and retrieved his pop-up camper, then the two plunged into Kyle’s research for the next week. By the end of the week the condo had become a fast food war zone with pizza boxes, burger wrappers and empty beer bottles stacked everywhere.

As they took a break from their work, Kyle sat with a half-finished beer in one hand and a carton of order-in Thai food balanced on his knee. “You know, once we get this quantum system running we’ll have to be damn careful about how it’s used. It’ll be able to solve almost anything. It won’t care if it’s solving a problem that helps people or hurts

them.”

“Yeah, like that Doppelganger project.”

“Right. But it’s more than that. It’s more than the government having a quantum system.”

“Why?”

“All right. Just sit and listen for a minute, okay? The world is a mess. It always has been. There’s been attack, conflict and war since man walked the earth. It’s about duality. Light and dark. Black and white. Right or wrong. Good or bad. Help or hurt. Us or them.

“Where you gettin’ this from, man?”

“C’mon, Rick. How many nights did we sit in our dorm room talking about this kind of stuff? You said once you were going to change your major to philosophy. Remember?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t mean it.”

“I know. But look at what we’ve done with computers in the last seventy years. How we’ve used them. To build better weapons. To plan wars. To optimize marketing and commerce so banks and businesses can rip more money out of consumers’ pockets. Look at the difference between the rich and the poor. Less than one percent of the world population owns or controls more than ninety-nine percent of the world’s wealth. Do you think it’s a coincidence that disparity has paralleled the advancements and use of computers? I’ve looked at it. It’s no coincidence.”

“Never thought about it.”

“Then think about this. What happens when quantum computing is everywhere? When everyone in power has access to that kind of power? People have a propensity for attack, partisanship, power grabs, blaming and war. For getting an advantage over their competition and their enemies. Just imagine how people would use a quantum system that can solve almost anything in no time flat. When someone finally comes up with one, people will use it for everything. They’ll want time on it the same way they used to bargain for time on the Hubble Space Telescope or the CERN particle accelerator. Everyone will want it. What if a dictator and his military gets hold of a quantum system? Or an international crime syndicate? Or even a presidential candidate? They’d all use its power to serve their own interests. I think it could spell the end of life on Earth,” Kyle said.

Rick cast a quizzical look at Kyle. “What’s going on with you? You think you’re gonna save the world by being the first to build a quantum computer? Look, I get what you’re saying. People are too wrapped up in grubbing around for money and power.”

“That’s what I’m talking about. They could use a quantum system to do dangerous things. In fact, the way people in power behave, I think a quantum system is more likely to lead to bad results than to good. I’ve *got* to get there first so I can control how it’s used. If I can do that, it will become the most powerful system anywhere. It will be able to ‘out-think’ any other quantum systems that might come along,” Kyle said.

Rick scoffed. “Ha! *Out think?* That’s ridiculous.”

“You know what I mean. Researchers today are still trying to entangle a few dozen particles. I’m talking about entangling thousands of qubits. Tens of thousands. Millions.

They won't be able to compete. We'll blow all the others out of the water.”

Rick leaned back in his chair. It was nearly ten o'clock and a half moon hung high in the sky. An occasional breeze wafted through the lanai. “So that's why you hung out your eZo Systems sign? So you can get there first?” Rick asked.

“Right. I want to bring a quantum super system to market, but I need to control how it's used. It has to be used for beneficial purposes. To solve problems that help rather than hurt. No weapons research. No war planning. I can only let it be used for things that help people. Medical research to cure disease. Maybe economics, social science, engineering.” Kyle paused for a minute and stared at the clouds drifting past the moon. A deep sigh escaped his mouth.

“You remember my little sister? My mom and dad? Sometimes I can't get over that they're all dead. None of them deserved it. Life doesn't seem fair. God, if there even is a God, didn't give a shit about them. The cards are all stacked against us. I don't want to bring anything into the world that's going to make the game even worse for people.”

Rick stood up from his chair.

Kyle stretched his arms and yawned, then stood up. “Heard enough of me for one night?”

“No. Come here.” Rick faced Kyle and pulled him into a hug. “I'm with you, man. I get you. Let's get this frikkin' computer up and running.” A smile spread itself across Rick's face. The two stepped back into the condo.

“But I gotta tell you, this sofa bed isn't for crap. It's breakin' my back. I'm gonna have to get a room somewhere.”

Kyle chuckled. “Yeah, sorry about that. We can go out tomorrow and find one. I'll front some money if you need it. Then, let's drop by the office. It's about time you see eZo Systems with your own eyes.”

“Sounds good. But I've been thinking about something else. We need a name for this project. One we can use that'll hide what we're doing. We need to keep it under wraps. I'm thinking ‘the black hole in the Internet.’ That oughta keep people wondering.” Rick laughed.

Kyle snorted. “Ha! Where you get that stuff.” He punched Rick on the shoulder. “Sure. Okay. So be it. We're building a black hole in the Internet.”

“Yeah. And if what you're saying is true, it oughta have about the same power as a real black hole. Let's hope we don't get sucked down into it.”

“We won't. Not if we can find some lawyers to write up the licensing agreements so it can only be used the way we want,” Kyle said.

“Beneficial purposes. That sounds like such a simple idea. So benign. But I think we're going to pay hell to find someone who can do it,” Rick said.

“Yeah, but we've got to try.”

• • •

The next morning the two paid a visit to the eZo Systems office. It was filled with racks of blade computers. The leased office space had a lobby, a conference room and an office for each of them. A loading dock at the back of the building opened into a warehouse crammed with equipment.

“What’s all this stuff?” Rick asked.

“It’s a mini-Internet. A simulation. I bought a few hundred kilometers of fiber optic cable just like the cable that connects everyone on the Internet. I’m using it to simulate the actual Internet.”

Kyle described how the mini Internet served as a proof-of-concept for his quantum system. They spent half a day going through the details, then went on the hunt for a place Rick could live.

They worked together for the next few weeks. Rick cobbled together software he hoped would serve as the API—the “front end” to the quantum system. His first efforts were plagued with software bugs. He scrapped his work and began anew, this time using a different programming language. When Rick finally broke from a coding session, usually after sitting in front of a screen for ten or twelve hours, they talked about how they could validate the quantum system.

“We gotta find some kind of problem we can submit to the system that shows if it’s workin’ or not,” Rick said.

“Yeah. I’ve been thinking about weather forecasting. No one can forecast with any accuracy for more than a week or so. If our system forecasts for, I don’t know, let’s say a year...well, I’d say that would be all the proof we need.”

“Sounds like a tall order,” Rick said.

“Yeah, but think about it. If we can make forecasts for a year at a time, we can have a real impact on agriculture. Not to mention, we can give people advance notice of storms, hurricanes, tornadoes. Those super computers at the National Weather Service cost millions. They use tankers full of water to cool their CPU’s and thousands of kilowatts to keep them running. But none of them give us anything better than a fifteen-day forecast. And they only run forty to ninety percent accurate.”

“Yeah, that’s because they’re using brute force computing and they’re running up against its limits.”

Kyle gazed out the window for a moment. “You know what year-long forecasting could mean? Third-world countries where food is in short supply would be the big winners. Our forecasting could let farmers plant with knowledge of the entire growing season months ahead of time. They could plant crops where nothing had grown before. They could shoehorn plots into specific geographies based on the forecast for each area. During the next season, people could plant in other geographies that weren’t viable before. Eventually, we could give them the info they need to feed everyone on the planet.”

Rick nodded. “Yeah. That fits right into your ‘beneficial use’ and ‘good of mankind’ idea.”

“Right. So I’ve been looking into forecasting and have some code we can test once you get the API up and running. But I think there’s something easier we can do to test the system.”

“Like what?”

“Another kind of forecasting. Sports. Let’s see if we can forecast the outcome of some games. If we can do that it’ll be a validation anyone can understand.”

The two resumed their work and, over the next few months, Rick completed the software API. The two submitted dozens of sporting events into the system. The quantum computer predicted every contest accurately.

“We need to find a bookie in Vegas who’ll take our bets,” Rick said with a half grin. “We could be millionaires by Christmas.”

Kyle nodded. “Yeah, but we’d attract too much attention. I’d hate to get on the wrong side of the Vegas bosses, or start showing up in the news. You know: ‘Two Florida Scientists Win Millions.’ We don’t need that kind of headline. We’ve got to keep our work under wraps.”

CHAPTER 4

Ego Box

Sunday evening. Kyle and Rick had worked all day. Kyle watched Rick drive away on his Harley. Just when he was out of sight Kyle's CoFone rang but showed no Caller ID.

"You might have a hard time with this," the voice said.

A flush of annoyance ran through his mind. "Who's this?"

"Marci. And like Aimer said, it might take a long time and some hard work. But this is a good time to begin. Are you ready?"

When he realized who he was talking to, a rash of chills broke out across his body.

They're back!

"Begin *what*?" he asked. He might be talking to a ghost.

"Don't worry. I want to show you some things. It's part of your curriculum. Your learning curve. Why don't you come home now so we can begin?"

Kyle realized he had been holding his breath. His shoulders were drawn tight. He breathed a long sigh but the tension didn't abate. "Where are you?" he asked Marci. "You and that guy just disappeared from my condo that morning."

"I'm where I always am, my friend. Just come home, Kyle. You're still *dreaming*."

His shoulders raised up even higher and he gripped his CoFone tighter to his ear. A twinge of anxiety rushed through him as he recalled that horrendous nightmare where he'd killed Marci. He looked around the office once again, then noticed the time. Eight o'clock. "Yeah, sure. I was coming home anyway."

"See you soon," Marci answered.

He drove from the eZo office to his condo. He found Marci sitting cross-legged on his living room sofa with a large cardboard box on the floor in front of her. It was a cube about three feet on a side. He stood at the entry from his one-car garage, staring at her.

"You're here again!" he said.

Marci sat there, smiling at him. "Hi cowboy. Good to see you again."

He didn't move from the doorway. "What *are* you? How'd you get into my condo?"

Marci's smile left her face. "What am I? Now that's a great question." She stood up and faced him. "I can help you answer that question. And so much more. Because I'm your teacher. Your mentor. Your helper."

Kyle shook his head. "What?"

“Don’t worry about all that now. I’ve got something special to show you tonight.” She pointed to the box. “Come here. Sit down with me.”

She sat down cross-legged on the sofa and patted the cushion next to her, inviting Kyle to sit.

He looked at her. She looked hot, sexy, sitting there cross-legged. He turned his eyes away and looked at the box. “What’s in the box?”

“Come here. I want you to see this. It’s a *special* box. Let’s call it an ‘ego box.’ It holds something you’ll understand right away. In fact, it’s yours. Your personal ego box.”

“What?” Kyle sighed and took a seat next to Marci, part of him thinking about who or what she was, another part wondering what was in the box. She slit the box open. He gasped as he looked inside. It was filled with brightly lit holographic images, layer after three-dimensional layer of images with everything in motion like waves in the ocean. Each image appeared to be a miniature living scene, a live 3-D movie. They were so complete and rich it seemed each image might contain a segment of a real person’s actual life. Kyle’s eyes landed first on a miniature scene and saw Marci lying dead on the Florida beach. He realized those scenes were from *his* life.

“That’s your dream. Remember? This box holds all of it from start to finish. If you lean over a little to your left you’ll see it from another angle.”

Kyle changed his viewpoint and saw himself running down the beach searching for the indigo and violet splotches of sunlight as he ran. He leaned to the right and saw a part of the dream he didn’t remember. He was standing under a palm tree talking to Marci’s friend, Aimer. He heard the conversation from his dream: “Marci is here to help you, as I am. But you won’t want her help at first; maybe not for quite a while. In fact, you might try to get rid of her, to push Marci out of the picture.”

Marci lifted another moving image from the box. “And look over here: Those are your recollections of your family before your dad was hurt in that traffic accident.”

Kyle winced as he saw his father, young and vital, before he was paralyzed in a car crash. *Oh shit! I don’t want to see this.*

It wasn’t his dad’s fault. He had been driving on the interstate when congestion forced everyone to slam on their brakes and slow down to about twenty miles per hour. A semi tractor-trailer plowed into the back of his dad’s car, crushing him against the air bag, with the steering wheel and the dashboard and the engine compartment crumbling as they were designed to do...but still taking his dad’s legs out of service. Ambulances arrived on the scene in due time, but Kyle’s father eventually left the hospital without serviceable legs, a useless right arm and permanent paralysis below the waist. Kyle was only ten years old. His father was reduced to living on disability checks from the government, but they weren’t enough to support the family. Kyle’s mother had to get a job. Thankfully, her weekly paycheck and the disability check kept food on the table and, occasionally, new clothes in the closet.

Kyle tore his gaze away from the box, but as he did he caught a glimpse of another scene inside the box. There, in their front yard, he watched his little sister, Julia, playing catch with him. *Julia! I’m so sorry!*

Kyle’s young life had taken a big turn when his mother began working each

weeknight. It became his job to care for Julia while his father did the best he could to help out from his wheel chair with his one serviceable arm. Kyle made her meals, washed her clothes, helped her get ready for school and put her to bed at night. Julia was two years younger than Kyle. He never questioned the care-taking chores that were thrust upon him. Kyle watched over and attended to Julia with a maturity and sense of responsibility well beyond his tender age. Of course all that changed.

Shifting his gaze again, Kyle saw his family in a funeral home standing before a small, closed casket. *Oh God!* Kyle struggled as he tried to avoid seeing the scene again—the one that had burned indelibly into his memory years ago on a perfect summer's day turned deadly.

He saw himself playing catch with Julia in the front yard. He threw the ball to her, but tossed it a bit too high, just above her reach. She shrieked, "I'll get it" and ran, chasing it into the street. She was killed almost instantly by a speeding car.

Kyle jerked his head away from that awful 3-D image and let out an angry shout. He jumped up from the sofa and glared at Marci. "Stop this! I don't want to see any more of this. Get rid of this goddamn box."

Marci stood and put her arms around Kyle to comfort him. She held him close. "God didn't damn this box. He doesn't even know about it." She squeezed him tighter. "I can assure you, God has nothing to do with it. It's *yours*." She placed her hand on his chest and, presently, a sense of peace spread through him. Marci sat again on the sofa, guiding Kyle to sit next to her.

She spread her arms over the box. "This box is your entire thought system, Kyle. It holds everything you have ever experienced, touched, tasted, smelled, heard, seen, perceived, believed, imagined, dreamed or thought. You can see it's very busy, always in motion. It's like your mind that runs constantly from one thought to another without you even noticing."

Kyle propped his elbows on his knees, leaned over and put his head in his hands. He covered his face as if the box and its horrors would disappear. Finally he spoke. "Thought system?"

Marci answered, speaking slowly. "Sometimes people refer to it as your 'ego' thought system. It's the part of your mind that knows you are Kyle and that certain things are true while others are not. Your thought system is everything you think you are, my friend. Your entire perception of life and the world around you, your memories of the past, worries about the future—all of that's in this box. Here, look at this."

Kyle peered again into the box and saw his mother returning from her night-shift job, opening the kitchen door and sitting down at the table. He saw his father join her in his wheel chair at the kitchen table with the checkered plastic cloth. Only the light over the stove was lit, leaving the kitchen in semi-darkness. *My God, all that drinking. I hated it.*

He heard his father speak: "How'd it go at work?"

"Same as always," his mother said. "My boss is still an idiot. He's always sending me off on some fool's mission to straighten the shelves. Sweep the floor. Last night he had me pull stray shopping carts in from the parking lot. In the rain. I hate my job. For fifteen bucks an hour I feel like a slave. A robot doing brainless work. And those trucks roll in

every day with a couple thousand boxes of stuff that have to be put up on the shelves. Unpacking face cream and eyeliner and lipstick. Putting them on the shelves. Zoning every shelf so the labels always point out toward the customer. It's stupid, brain-killing work. I hate it."

"I'm sorry, honey. I wish to God there was something we could do. Something *I* could do. A better job for you. I don't know..."

Kyle saw his mom open a black plastic bag. She returned home from her night shift around eight-thirty each morning. Her bag usually held a bottle of sherry wine. She and her husband would sit at the kitchen table drinking wine instead of eating breakfast, sometimes crying, while Kyle poured a bowl of Cheerios and ate before running off to school—or, in the summer time, skipping breakfast altogether so he could escape the house as quickly as possible.

As months dragged on, his mother graduated to a fortified, sweet port wine. That led to port mixed with vodka. And finally, to 750 milliliter bottles of cheap vodka, gin or tequila. Each morning, as Kyle's parents drank, their crying became more obscene. Julia, their beloved little daughter, was gone. The pain. The misery. The loss. It was more than mom and dad could bear to think about, much less have to live with. Kyle's dad was permanently disabled and couldn't do much around the house. It all fell to mom and Kyle. Their parental tears flowed as fast as the alcohol and eventually turned into arguments that made no sense and had no end. Mercifully, when Kyle was sixteen years old, his mother filed for divorce and took Kyle with her. Kyle's dad was left to the care of impersonal government programs from which he eventually passed, leaving Kyle fatherless. *What the hell was that idiot judge thinking—putting me in her custody? Mom was a drunk. She didn't do anything for me. And dad didn't deserve to be left alone like that.*

Kyle shifted his gaze again and saw an image of the apartment where he and his mom had lived after the divorce. He saw his best friend, Rick Huggins, knock on the door and watched the scene as he and Rick climbed onto Rick's motorcycle, then drove off to their part-time jobs.

He heard Rick say, "My step father's a son of a bitch. He hates me and is always telling me what to do. What not to do. I don't know what my mom sees in him. I've got to get out of that freakin' house."

Kyle heard himself answer Rick's complaint. "I know he treats you like crap. We should try to get into college. We'd both be able to get away from home. You know. Live in a dorm and leave all this crap behind."

"That takes money. I don't have it. You don't either."

"Yeah, but we've got jobs. I was thinking. If we hunker down and save our money—open bank accounts instead of spending our money on music and games and OmegaNet and stuff—we could save a lot in two years."

At Kyle's urging they each opened bank accounts and began saving money for college. Their after-school and summer jobs gave them modest bank balances that grew. With respectable scores on the SAT and ACT, both got into college with the help of financial aid and small scholarships.

• • •

Marci interrupted Kyle's intent focus on the images in the box. "You're like everyone else on the planet, my friend. Your mind runs on and on, thinking thoughts and jumping from one idea to another. If you understood you might laugh and say 'Hey, that's a problem, a disability!'

"It's where your mind rambles on with no conscious control. Aimer and I are here to teach you control so you no longer have to be a victim to all that rambling. To all that remembering. And to letting what's happened in the dead past affect your present. And eventually, we'll show you another completely different box. A new way of thinking that will bring more into your life than you can begin to imagine."

Coming out of what almost felt like a trance induced by the visions and memories of his family and childhood, Kyle said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"That's why Aimer and I are here, Kyle. We're teachers. You're on a learning curve. Taking a course. Learning a new curriculum for your life. What I'm showing you today is a beginning. I'm showing you the thought system you live with is entirely enclosed in a box like this one here on the floor. It's your dream. Sure, it's scary. Much of who you think you are is tied up in all those memories; things that are over and done. What you hate about yourself is in this box, too. But you're like everyone else. You don't let them go. Most of your sadness comes from remembering the past. And much of what you worry about for the future is influenced by what you've experienced in the past. That's how this thought system works for everyone.

"I don't hate myself," Kyle said.

"Sure you do. You just don't acknowledge it yet. But there's another thought system that's separate from all this." Marci looked deeply into Kyle's eyes as if she were searching for something special. "It's over there to your right, but you can't see it yet. It's one you can *choose* to pay attention to and find a different, better way to live. The Right way. And to awaken from this dream." Marci closed the box and pushed it to the corner of the living room. She sat down in the chair directly across from Kyle.

He wiped his hand across his face and frowned. "You keep telling me I'm dreaming. What dream? I'm living my life!" He cast an angry look at Marci. "I'm *fine* with my life. Sure, it was hell growing up. But when I license my technology I'll be able to..."

"To *what*?" Marci interrupted.

Kyle paused, angry and confused. "To bring quantum computing to market. To start making a difference!" Kyle's eyes drilled into hers.

"Kyle, there's no doubt; it's certain. You *will* make a difference," Marci said.

She stood up from the sofa and took Kyle's hands, trying to pull him into a standing position. He ignored her efforts and pulled his hands away. She smiled, then reached out and took his hands again. "Stand up Kyle. Don't be angry. Don't be afraid." He stood up and glared at her. She wrapped her arms around him, feeling the tension in his body. She held him close and whispered in his ear. "Kyle, you're doing just wonderfully. I want you to know that."

Kyle let Marci hold him for a moment. He couldn't help but smell the sweetness of her hair. He felt her warmth and her body pressed against his.

Marci stepped away and gently pushed Kyle back onto the sofa. She touched his forehead and he immediately fell asleep. He dreamed of Julia and of his mom and dad. Then his dreaming morphed into a scene where he killed Marci on the beach once again.

CHAPTER 5

Prototype

6:00 AM. Still seated and sleeping on the sofa, Kyle awoke to the blaring of his alarm. He turned off the noise and walked through the condo. Marci was gone. The cardboard box in the corner was gone. He looked in the garage. No box. *Was I dreaming again? I'm losin' it.* He went to the shower and turned the water from hot to cold several times. The scalding water scorched him. The cold water soothed him for a moment, then felt like a stream of ice water. Three cycles of hot, cold, hot, cold, hot, cold. He got out of the shower and scrubbed the steam off the mirror. He stared at himself. Six feet tall. Brown hair. Hazel eyes. About 185 pounds, well built. He rubbed his face. *C'mon man. Get real.* He forced himself to focus on the work that had become his obsession, then dressed and drove to the office.

Cary's car was in its usual spot in the parking lot and the lights in the office were on. He went to the break room and poured a cup of coffee.

Cary, his office manager and secretary, greeted him with a smile as she did every morning: "Good morning. How are you?"

"Um ... okay." He paused. "So what's on the agenda today?"

"I hope you didn't forget. The legal team from Palo Alto. They're due in at ten o'clock."

Kyle stood silent for a moment. "Right. Did we get the non-disclosure agreements?"

"The NDA's are on your desk. Anything I can do for you?"

"Yes. See if you can order some snacks to go with the coffee."

Kyle went to his office and checked the non-disclosure agreements to be sure the lawyers had signed them. Before eZo Systems' technology could be described in even the smallest detail, Kyle and Rick agreed they had to throw a veil of absolute secrecy around their research and their quantum computing concept. The first step was to bind the attorneys with non-disclosure agreements. Then, as eZo approached their first-tier target companies—Google, Amazon, Apple and Zigma—to talk about licensing, perpetual royalties and other aspects of the deal, they'd lock each of those companies into inviolate non-disclosure agreements with penalties for illegal disclosure that could tie even the biggest of them up in court for years.

The intercom buzzed at ten o'clock. "Kyle, the attorneys are here," Cary said.

A rental car pulled into the space near the front door. Two men in pinstriped suits,

power ties and wingtips climbed out.

“Hello. I’m Kyle Williams.”

“Harmon Hughes. And this is my associate, Miles Bogan.”

Harmon Hughes, a tall but slightly built man in his late fifties presented himself warmly. Miles Bogan wore glasses with thick, black frames and Coke bottle lenses. He had a swarthy complexion and thinning hair with a comb-over. His still-developing hair transplant plugs hadn't yet reached the fullness they someday might. Their ugliness drew Kyle's eyes to Bogan's head even as he realized he was staring. The three exchanged handshakes. Cary offered coffee and snacks. The three men retired to the conference room just as Rick drove up on his Harley and joined them.

Kyle began. “Gentlemen, I appreciate your trip from Palo Alto to meet with us today. Like many entrepreneurs you've probably worked with, we believe our technology has value. Enormous value. But in our case...I don't know how to estimate the revenue we can produce. Let's say multi-billions are not out of range.”

Miles Bogan looked away from Kyle and coughed into his hand.

Kyle continued. “So today we want to outline our road map for licensing our technology to any one of four target companies. Amazon, Apple, Google ... and maybe, Zigma Corporation. We need one of them to help us roll our tech out across the Internet. Worldwide. In the process they'll boost their own bottom lines and ours beyond measure.”

Rick picked up the conversation. “Right. We know you guys work with plenty of tech firms. You might have some ideas about other companies who could use our tech. But you need to know we want to keep focus on those four Kyle mentioned. They're the only ones positioned well enough to do what we need.”

Harmon Hughes, attorney at law and well read on many forms of technology, replied. “Of course. We're glad to work with you. Our firm works exclusively with companies in the high tech space. We limit our engagements to firms that work toward solving social issues with their technology.” He paused, glanced at Miles Bogan then fixed Kyle with a stare. “But I have to say, I get worried when I hear you talking about multi-billions of dollars. If you hadn't explained how your discoveries could be used in weather forecasting, I'm not sure you'd have caught our attention. So let's get down to brass tacks. You said you're making progress on quantum computing. We're well aware of the work underway: the resources and research outlined at qubit.org—the Center for Quantum Computing at Oxford in the U.K. as well as Hayden's group, the ICN, California Institute of Technology, D-Wave, the work in Switzerland and other places.”

Miles Bogan chimed in. “Progress is slow and difficult for everyone working in the field. None of them are making billions.”

Kyle nodded. “It is slow. But in our case we've come upon this technology from a totally unexplored direction. Researchers at those organizations are going down different paths than ours. Let's get into a bit more detail.”

Kyle explained that in the early days of quantum computer research, companies like D-Wave led the field. Google and NASA partnered with D-Wave to investigate how quantum computing could provide answers to questions about artificial intelligence and

gaining a better understanding of the universe. Conventional computers couldn't handle those jobs.

“Let me give you a little background,” Rick said. “Ordinary computers use bits that carry the value of either zero or one. The CPU executes program instructions and processes those bits in a step-by-step fashion. No matter how fast the computer runs, it still has to follow instructions in sequential order. One step at a time.”

Miles Bogan looked bored. “Yes, that's fundamental, Dr. Huggins. I think we all understand that. Let's not waste time.”

Rick grimaced, but continued. “Okay. In a quantum computer those bits are known as quantum bits. Qubits. What's weird is they can take on the value of zero and one, but they can be both zero and one at the same time. That sounds impossible, but it's true. And it leads to gigantic computing power. A quantum computer with only twenty qubits can work with over a million pieces of data simultaneously. It's like trying over a million keys all at one time to open a lock, while a conventional computer has to chug along trying one at a time.”

Harmon Hughes listened while Miles Bogan doodled on his notepad.

Rick continued. “Our quantum system entangles weak photons that pass through the Internet to create qubits. You know there's trillions and trillions of 'em flowin' through every second. If you can entangle just a thousand qubits across the whole Internet you could work on so much data it would take a number 300 digits long to describe it. You know what that means?” Rick paused and looked at both attorneys, “If you could count the total number of elementary particles in the entire universe, it would 'only' come to a number that had fewer than 200 digits. So we're talking about unlimited computing power.”

“All right, I think we understand those basics as well,” Bogan said. “But how can you do that? Can't we move along?”

Rick paused a moment, shot a glance at Kyle, then continued. “Sure. But there's more you may not know. About fifteen years ago Google and NASA started working on quantum computing. They discovered that posing a problem to a quantum computer was a hell of a lot more complicated than writing a program in C++ or Java. Those guys couldn't figure out *how* to ask questions of those early systems. But what was even more unexpected? They had to figure out what *kind* of problems a quantum computer could solve. They ran up against all kinds of brick walls. But we solved all that.”

“Yes,” Kyle continued. “Rick has developed an API—an application programming interface—that allows our quantum system to accept problems from external programs. We've written it in the Haskell programming language. Our API works with our Quantum Operating System. This architecture simplifies the issue of how to ask questions and what kind of questions to ask. We'd like you to help us protect our API, our operating system and other components with patents and licensing agreements.”

• • •

The meeting broke for lunch, then resumed and continued until late afternoon. Kyle and Rick took turns at the white board. They drew diagrams to give the lawyers a sense of how eZo was building their 'black hole' quantum computer. At the center of the

diagram Rick labeled one of the boxes “Quantum O/S Server.” He connected other boxes with lines indicating network and software interface connections. One box was replicated over and over again throughout the cloud drawing he used to signify the Internet.

Rick explained that particular component was the workhorse for the entire system. “This here...it’s a hardware device we install inside the optical amplifiers that keep the Internet running...”

Bogan interrupted. “You put this inside an optical amplifier?”

“Yeah. It’s the piece that converts photons to qubits. It grabs weak photons flowing through the Internet’s fiber optics and entangles them. The more of these devices we put in place the more qubits we have to work with.” Rick looked at Miles Bogan. “You get this, Mr. Bogan? It’s all about numbers. We want to put our device in every optical amplifier on the planet. We’ll have access to more qubits than you can count.”

Hughes spoke. “All right. This is impressive. Have you developed any kind of prototype?”

Kyle synced his CoFone to the video projector and projected a slide show onto the screen.

“We have a working quantum computer,” Kyle said. “Let me explain. We ran a few hundred kilometers of fiber optic cable back in our warehouse area. Most of it’s still rolled up on the spools is was delivered on, but it simulates a small-scale version of the Internet. We placed optical amplifiers in strategic locations and installed our technology in them. Then we began flooding the fiber with traffic—that is, with light photons carrying information from point to point. We’ve implemented our Quantum O/S and have a working quantum computer. It’s using entangled weak photons flowing through our mini-Internet. Would you like to see some of the problems we’ve already solved?”

Hughes dropped both hands on the table and leaned back in his chair, clearly surprised. “Of course!”

Kyle started a slide show and narrated.

“Rick and I never paid much attention to professional sports. But we wondered whether we could pose a problem to forecast who would win the World Series. We didn’t want to wait until fall to see who actually won. Time is of the essence, right? So we decided to see if our system could predict the outcome of games that had already been played. We started many years back with the 2012 World Series. San Francisco against Detroit. We fed in data from MLB.com, sources that gave us information on the teams’ management history and other factors. Here’s the slide that shows the answer our system delivered.”

The screen showed:

Proprietary and Confidential Under Terms of Non-Disclosure Agreements:
San Francisco wins first 4 games of 7.

“We checked and found that’s exactly what happened. So we ran the same problem for a few more World Series. And some NBA championships. And some Super Bowl games. And some World Cups. Our system forecast each one accurately,” Rick

continued. He changed to the next slide to show those results, then clicked again to another slide.

“Then we decided to see what we could do with weather forecasting. We seeded the system with real-time weather data from the National Weather Service. We added mathematics derived from chaos theory—Lorenz strange attractors, topological mixing and so forth. In a few hours our system began printing a twelve-month weather forecast for cities across the U.S. Here's what our system predicted, compared with actual conditions.”

The slide showed a column of dates followed with quantum computer predictions versus actual weather for several cities. The right-most column of the table showed error percentages on each meteorological factor. Predicted and actual precipitation, temperatures, cloud cover, wind speeds and wind directions over the past several months all matched with less than five percent error.

Kyle paused his presentation to bring up the current weather for West Palm Beach. It matched closely on all counts with the quantum system's prediction for today. He closed the slide show.

“Our prototype works. Better than we expected,” Kyle announced as he leaned forward to meet the attorneys eye to eye. “Our mini-Internet only gives us a modest number of qubits, so it took a many computing hours to work out these problems. But these are results from our proof-of-concept computer. When we're able to tap into the entire Internet and entangle weak photons around the globe, computations like these we've shown you will be done in seconds ... or even fractions of a second.”

Hughes smiled as if he was without words to express what he was feeling. Miles Bogan stared at the white board as if transfixed.

Kyle added: “We'd like you to work up a patent submission and a licensing agreement. The agreement needs to spell out how the licensee will pay eZo Systems for the use of our technology. We want a royalty every time the computer is used to solve a problem. But the agreement needs to specify the system can only be used for peaceful purposes. Things that advance the welfare of humanity.”

Bogan squinted. “How can you put restrictions on this? That doesn't make sense.”

“Yes, it does. And that's key to the licensing agreement. Imagine gamblers trying to outguess Las Vegas odds makers. Or special interest groups, banksters, Wall Street operators, politicians, military forces. They'd all want to use the quantum computer to advance their own agendas. You know how people are. They'd want to use our technology to get what *they* want instead of working on problems that advance peace and goodwill.”

Bogan snorted. “Pardon me, but what you're saying sounds like pie in the sky. You've got a piece of technology here. You need to commercialize it so you can start making money. You don't need to worry about how it'll be used.”

Hughes turned to his partner. “Hold on, Miles. I see their point. They don't want people using their tech to build better bombs.”

“Exactly,” Kyle said. He stared at Bogan. “You ever study world history? People have been at war since history began. Crime is part of life. Slavery. Crooked politicians and

business people. Too many people in power are out for their own interests.”

Kyle stood and gestured at the diagrams on the white board. “This technology will give people the power to solve *anything*! We don't want to be known as the guys who unleashed a computer on the world that does harm or kills people.”

Bogan leaned back in his chair. “Yes, but there's no way to put your stipulation into a licensing agreement. Much less a patent submission. It's impossible.”

Kyle scoffed. His eyes drilled into Bogan's. “Mr. Bogan, you've got to look outside the box. Do we need to find a different law firm? Someone who can work with us?”

Bogan's eyes narrowed. “I'm telling you, there's no way to put your 'good of mankind, peaceful purposes' caveat into the legal documents you want ...”

Hughes interrupted. “Miles, these two men are right. They can't allow their technology to be used to do harm.” He turned to Kyle and Rick. “You two seem to have done what no one else has been able to do. I'm impressed. Let us think about the 'good of mankind' issue. Our firm will work with you. We can get it done.”

“All right. But it seems like Mr. Bogan here isn't convinced,” Kyle said, fixing Bogan with a stare.

Bogan bristled. “Look, I'm sorry if I came off too strong. Harmon here is in charge.”

“All right. Is there anything else we need to discuss?” Kyle asked.

“No. You've given us what we need,” Hughes said.

Kyle and Rick shook hands with the attorneys. The attorneys drove away.

“Bogan is a smart ass,” Rick said.

“Yeah. But Hughes seems like a straight shooter. He asked all the right questions. We need that licensing agreement ASAP. I think they'll come through.”

Rick looked up at the white board. It was covered with diagrams that summarized their entire quantum system design. “Did you notice how Bogan kept staring at the white board? I thought he was trying to memorize it.”

“Yeah. He's a strange bird. He seemed preoccupied,” Kyle said.

Cary entered the conference room. “Well guys, how did it go?”

“Good,” Kyle said. “I think we've done all we can do here today. Let's go home. We've got plenty to do starting tomorrow.”

The phone rang just as Rick and Cary left. “Kyle, this is Marci. I think it's time we get together again. I'll be waiting.”

Kyle sat in silence for a full ten seconds. *Oh shit! Now what?* “Marci, I have too much going on. You need to quit harassing me.”

“We'll talk and I'll explain. See you soon.” Marci ended the call.

CHAPTER 6

Sin, Guilt & Fear

Kyle returned to his condo and found Marci sitting on the couch. The big ego box was on the floor once again.

"Hi cowboy! I guess you had a good day at the office with the attorneys. I can tell you now, they're going to work hard for you, up to a point. But you're going to have some ugly speed bumps along the way. Let's see if we can figure out how you can get over those bumps."

"What do you know about the attorneys?"

She laughed. "It's all here, Kyle. In your ego box. Sit down. I'll show you."

He sat next to Marci and peered into the box.

"Look over here." Marci poked her arm deep into the box, through many layers of three-dimensional holographic moving images and somehow grabbed one, lifting it up so Kyle could see it clearly. "That's your meeting today, see? You and Rick and Hughes and his partner, Bogan. Look to the left and you'll see them at their hotel right now, eating dinner and talking. Now, look over here." She twisted the image as if she were turning it inside out. "These are the attorneys at their office in Palo Alto next week working on your documents."

Kyle threw his hands in the air, palms open to Marci, as if he wanted to push her away. "So now I can see the future? C'mon!"

"Sure. Because time is an illusion that's part of the dream you're dreaming. What's *Real* is eternity. Some of your philosophers and thinkers say there is only *now*. But even that isn't right. There is only eternity. There is no such thing as time. It's something you constructed as part of your dream. So looking at these images and twisting them around a bit can show you what appears to be the past and the future as well as what you call the present."

Marci smiled at him and touched his hand. "When you understand what's *Real* and end this dream it'll all make sense."

"Listen. I had long day. You're telling me again I'm dreaming my life."

"Yes. Everyone is."

"So what happens when I wake up?"

"You'll come to the end of dreaming," she said.

Kyle scoffed. "Listen, I'm wide awake. You're starting to piss me off with all this talk

of dreaming."

"Kyle, you *think* you're awake. Remember! I told you this box represents your thought system. It's everything you think is true. That includes your concepts of time. Of the world around you. Of the quantum computer. Of Rick and Cary. And Hughes and Bogan. And who and what you think you are. There's nothing in your human existence and experience that's *not* in this box. So of course you believe you're awake. This world is dense. It's hard to ignore or even to imagine that it's all an illusion. I'm showing you those illusions here in your ego box so you can see them with your body's eyes and begin to understand."

"Look, I'm on the verge of something wonderful at work. If we're going to go anywhere with this stuff of yours, I need to know who you are. Why you keep talking about some kind of *thought system*, for God's sake. Telling me everything I do is a dream..."

"Fair enough, Kyle. Get comfortable, sit back and relax." Marci put her hand on his chest and touched lightly, pushing him against the sofa. "Take your shoes off, undo your tie. Lose the suit coat. Let me start by telling you you're an incredible friend I care about very much. More than you can know. You're a wonderful person. You have the potential to change the world. And you will, one way or another."

Kyle snorted. "C'mon. Answer my questions. What are you? Some kind of spirit woman who comes into my dreams? Into my house in the middle of the night? You say you care about me. That I can change the world." Kyle paused for a few seconds, thinking. "On top of all that Marci, in that dream I had about you, I loved you. Now, with you sitting next to me, I don't know where that comes from. And part of me is terrified of you."

"Kyle, I'll tell you again. You're doing wonderfully. You're asking me all the right questions. So let me explain.

"When you dreamed of me that night, Aimer warned you that even though he and I are here to help you, you wouldn't want to accept my help at first. You'd be terrified at my appearance in your life. That you might even try to get rid of me. That's what happened in your dream. You killed me. And that person with the fear gun? That assailant was your *guilt* for having killed me. Sin, guilt and fear run rampant in your dream world. Want to know how that works?" She looked at him expectantly.

Kyle shrugged. His mind wandered. He noticed her nose wrinkle and the smile lines at the corners of her mouth. She looked gorgeous and desirable, like his physics professor, the one who had sponsored him as he worked on his doctorate. She had a cool and professional demeanor, but a hot body. Kyle had imagined bedding her on countless occasions, but never risked it because she was his sponsor as he worked toward his PhD. Marci was hot too; nothing cool or standoffish about her.

Marci smiled. "Pay attention! Here's a crash course in the unholy trinity: sin, guilt and fear. If you want to take notes just write a big headline at the top of the page: S-G-F. Because everything you *think* is real comes from those three things. They control everything in your ego box and your life."

Kyle collected himself. "Take notes?"

She chuckled. “No. I'm kidding. But burn this into your brain. Sin. Guilt. Fear. S-G-F.” Marci paused, waiting, as if she expected Kyle to somehow make a permanent memory of those three letters. “Now, think of a time when you did something you thought was sinful, wrong or illegal or unethical or immoral. You don't have to tell me what it is. But answer this: Did you, or do you now, feel guilty about having committed that sin?”

Kyle looked toward the ceiling, thinking of the day he tossed a ball to Julia. “Yes.”

“Okay. And when you did something wrong and felt guilty, did you feel you deserved to be punished?”

He shrugged. “Yeah. But anytime I did something wrong I always hoped I wouldn't get blamed. You know ...”

“Right. And that 'hoping you wouldn't get blamed' feeling? Would you say you were afraid you might get caught and punished?”

“Sure. No one wants to be punished.”

“That's the unholy trinity. You feel you've done something wrong. That's sin. Then you feel guilty. And then you fear punishment. Sin, guilt and fear,” Marci said.

She looked at Kyle, scanning his body, inspecting him from his face to his feet.

“Fear is a powerful force in this dream world. You're worried about how your black hole project might be misused and you've got good reason to worry. This illusory world you live in, this dream world, is a place of duality. Your dream of killing me was all about fear that you carry deep down inside this box, inside your thought system; in this world where everything is two-sided, where fear seems to be the opposite of love. You and everyone else dream of fear. And on some rare occasions, you dream of love. Now, sitting here, you're trying to figure out how part of you feels it loves me while another part is terrified. Let me tell you again: This, what you and I are doing *right now*, is a dream.”

Marci laughed and then smiled kindly. “Except that no one is going to accost you with a fear gun here. You can already find all the fear you'll ever need, whether it's fear of not licensing your black hole...fear that plans for your life won't work out...fear that your quantum computer will be stolen or misused. Fear goes on and on in this dream.”

Kyle sat quietly. Marci gazed at him, waiting.

He choked back a nervous half laugh. “I don't like this.” He looked around the room and his gaze fell back on the ego box. He took a deep breath, recalling all the horrendous things it held. “Look. I'm a physicist. A scientist. What you're telling me doesn't make sense. But let's just say I get that I'm dreaming. And the world's all about fear. It makes no sense. But for the sake of our talk...” he cocked his head and stared at her. “Let's say I get it. How can I wake up from the dream? And if I did wake up, what would I be waking into? Can you answer that?” He returned Marci's gaze expectantly.

“Good question, my friend. Here's the answer. Ready for this?”

Kyle shrugged and laid his head against the cushion. “Sure, go ahead.”

“Okay Kyle. There *is* something you can do to wake up. It's what Aimer and I have come to teach you. As he told you in the kitchen that morning we met, it will take time, as you measure it, and you'll need to do some serious work to wake up.”

"I remember that."

"Second, when you wake up you'll be waking up into a completely different thought system. A different box. It's called by many names but for now let's call it the Right Mind box. It's the one where you gain *Vision* and *Knowledge* and learn to see what is *Real*. It's one where there is no duality. No fear. Only love. No time. No space. It's eternal. It's infinite even beyond what the word 'infinite' can possibly mean.

"It's a box where you have no wants because *everything* you could ever imagine wanting is already provided in a richness that is beyond words and human understanding. And here's the best part, Kyle. You already have this box, this Right Mind. But you don't know it. Aimer and I are here to help you find it so when you do awaken from this 'life' you think you're living, you'll see your *true function* here in this world. Moreover, you'll get more help than you could ever imagine in taking on that function and operating out of that new box."

"That's too weird. You're talking like I would disappear, like my life would end and I'd be sent on some kind of—I don't know—some kind of *mission* that has nothing to do with what I'm all about. You're describing some kind of nirvana or utopia. I've got work to do here and a life to live. I think you should leave. And take Aimer with you."

Marci laughed and touched his hand. "Well, my friend, don't send us on our way just yet. No one gets this the first time around. But this will help: You aren't going to disappear or lose your life or make some mystical transit into nirvana. You'll still be the CEO of your company working on licensing your black hole. But every morning when you wake up you'll spend time in your Right Mind; and again, before going to sleep. Eventually, you'll begin spending a lot of time in your Right Mind, and that will bring you many wonderful changes. And what's absolutely the most important: You'll learn about an amazing power that comes directly from your Right Mind box. It's the power of forgiveness.

Kyle snorted. "This is starting to sound like a Sunday school lesson. I'm not much on all that God stuff."

"I know."

"Then you'll understand why I can't see any point in thinking about God. He didn't do squat for my family. They're all dead. None of them deserved it," Kyle said.

"I understand how you feel. But let me give you the real scoop on forgiveness. Almost no one here understands what it is. Most people say, 'Oh, he did so and so and it was wrong, but I forgive him.' That's not forgiveness at all. It's what we call judging and projecting. Here's what really happens.

"Let's say a guy named Jack is walking down the street when a truck drives by and splashes water all over his business suit. Imagine that you could read Jack's mind. What would he be thinking?

"Really? Now we're playing what-if games?"

"Sure. And you'll learn something."

"Yeah, right. Well, Jack would be pissed. He'd cuss out the truck driver and blame him for ruining his suit. If the driver stopped, Jack would probably give him a piece of his mind, call him names, punch him out. Whatever."

"Right. That's how it looks. But here's how Jack's mind *really* works; it's how his ego thought system works. Jack gets splashed. Of course he feels that shouldn't have happened to *him*. He's Jack, after all! He's someone special. So he *projects* his anger on the truck driver. It happens almost instantly, at the speed of thought. Anger is always waiting in the background ready to be expressed or, as we say, projected. We're quick to dump it on other people, events and all kinds of situations. Now that Jack has projected his anger, he *perceives* the truck driver as some kind of bad person. Maybe Jack shouts out and calls him an idiot. The act of seeing the driver as an idiot, or an enemy is what *perception* is all about.

"You might need to think about this Kyle: Projection always precedes perception. In other words, what you see, hear and feel about things in your life don't really exist in their own right until you project an emotion or thought energy on them. Once you do that, you perceive the person or event colored by the emotion or belief that you've projected."

"Yeah, that sort of makes sense. It's psychology."

"Sure. And even philosophy. Emmanuel Kant was one of your 18th century philosophers. He proposed a theory in his day he called idealism. Let me quote him. Kant said 'Our perceptions are not the results of a physiological process by which our eyes somehow transmit an image of the world into our brains. Rather, they are the result of a psychological process that combines what our eyes see with what we already think, feel, know, want and believe. Then we use this combination of sensory information and preexisting knowledge to construct our perception of reality.'"

"Yeah, I read something like that in one of my undergrad classes. I guess it's as good a theory as any."

"It is. Now let's get back to the issue of forgiveness. This time Jack gets splashed. Instead of projecting anything, he simply *looks past it*. He doesn't judge the driver or the event. It's just something that happened. Okay?"

"Yeah, I suppose. But it probably ruined his day."

"So it seems. But there's something amazing going on here when he chooses to not-judge the event. When there is no judgment there can be no need to forgive the driver, the puddle in the road, or the overall event. So, Kyle, forgiveness begins with not-judging the people and events in your life. Let's imagine another scenario. You're in a boat floating down a river and you have no oars. It's taking you to a place you don't want to go. You want to either get out of the boat or stop the river. You sure can't stop the river. It makes no sense to blame the river or the boat. You simply choose to not-judge what's going on and see how you can best work out your little dilemma. Maybe you'd jump out of the boat and swim to shore. Same thing with Jack and the truck driver. Just work out the dilemma without judgment. Take a moment to realize you are honored to be witnessing this moment in the unfolding of creation. Even a splash from a passing truck. *That* is what true forgiveness really is."

"Unfolding of creation?"

"Yes. Part of what you hold in your ego box and believe to be real is time. In the *Real* world there is no time; only eternity. But here, it seems that events unfold on their own. People can choose to pay more attention to that unfolding. It happens continuously

throughout your physical universe. Some of your fellow physicists even say the entire universe is computing itself. No matter. If you were to see the unfolding as something that happens naturally, you'd be able to avoid getting emotionally involved in events as they unfold. You'd learn forgiveness."

"So you're saying projecting our thoughts causes us to perceive the world around us? But by not judging what happens we can avoid those projections ... and that's what forgiveness is? So what's the point? What if Jack were walking down the street and a mugger shot him or stabbed him and took his wallet? How can Jack just 'look past' that?"

"You're asking the perfect questions. If Jack were shot or stabbed he might be really challenged to not-judge the mugger or the event. But—and this is a gigantic 'but'—over in the other box, your Right Mind box, you have a Teacher whose job is to give you everything you need to look past *anything*. Even being mugged, stabbed or shot. Your Teacher is there to show you how to wake up from this dream. Learning forgiveness is the first step in awakening from this dream."

"The Right Mind box. A teacher. Forgiveness." Kyle again laid his head back and stared again at the ceiling. After a moment he stood up and grabbed a beer from the refrigerator. "Want one?" he asked Marci.

"No thanks. Let's stay with this for another minute, okay?"

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Kyle sat down and gulped a deep swallow. Marci continued. "We've covered a lot of ground here tonight. Let's go climb into that fold-down bed of yours and I'll show you how you can begin to find that Right Mind box and your Teacher."

Kyle took in Marci's shapely body. *Climb in bed?* A warmth crept over him. He rearranged himself on the sofa in anticipation. Marci watched him scrutinize her body, then took both his hands in hers. Instantly, a powerful sensation of peace pervaded his body and mind. He felt loved, cared for and worry free as he hadn't since, as a young child, he'd climbed into bed between his mom and dad to escape the memory of a bad dream. "Sure Marci. I'll go to bed with you."

"Let's go, Kyle." They slid under the sheets. Kyle laid on his back and reached over to touch her. "Marci, I don't know what you're doing but I want to hold you and make love with you."

"What I'm doing Kyle is helping you get ready for your first trip into the Right Mind box." Marci slid over and put her head on Kyle's shoulder, pressing up against him and putting her hand on his chest. She spoke softly into his ear. "I know you like my body Kyle, and I'm enjoying the feeling of having one and being close to you. Now we're going to merge together, but in a different way than you expect. Together we're going to talk with your Teacher and see what He has to say to you. So close your eyes Kyle."

Marci began humming a sweet, soft melody, her voice a murmur in the darkness. Kyle closed his eyes and felt he was being bathed in a potion of love that wrapped and filled him at the same time.

Kyle's ever-rambling mind quieted down, almost as if someone had turned down the volume control of an always-on radio. With his eyes closed he noticed a tiny lightening and darkening through his eyelids. Gradually the brightening took precedence until his

field of view was illuminated with a warm glow.

A series of gentle thoughts entered his awareness. First: *"I am here with you at every moment. I am closer than your hand or your heart."*

In his relaxed state Kyle simply basked in and meditated on that revelation. Another thought grew into his consciousness: *"I have always been here. You haven't noticed me. And so I waited for this moment. As your Teacher I would ask only for your little bit of willingness to call upon me when you make decisions."*

Fully and blissfully relaxed, Kyle understood those thoughts that flowed into awareness, letting them be whatever they seemed to be: unspoken ideas given him by a loving entity he could not begin to comprehend.

Every moment presents you with a choice to turn to me or to rely on your ego box filled with fear, danger, disappointment and all the dualities of the ego. As you awaken in the morning, turn to me. As you fall asleep at night, turn to me. I am your Teacher and I speak from your Right Mind.

Kyle reveled in the feelings of love and comfort. Everything felt loving, peaceful and sweet. He received those ideas in amazement as they filled his mind. It was simple, he thought. Offer a little willingness to seek help from this unearthly teacher who, somehow, seemed to be within him. One who promised to answer his every question; to help with every decision. How unlike anything he'd experienced. Ever. With the warmth of Marci next to him, her hand on his chest and her head on his shoulder, Kyle drifted off to sleep.

He dreamed, once again on a sandy beach. Kyle found himself seated before a small bonfire as the late afternoon sun moved slowly toward the horizon. Next to him sat Aimer and Marci, the three forming a triangle around the fire. The heavenly music Marci had been humming filled the air with rich harmonies, just noticeable above the sound of ocean waves rolling gently onto shore.

Aimer pointed toward the water. "See that couple walking their dog along the water's edge?"

Kyle looked to his right and watched as a couple approached with a black lab on a leash.

"The woman feels her husband doesn't pay enough attention to her; that he works too many hours. That he cares more about his work than about her. She's been talking with her female friends about it. The man feels it's his job to be a provider and make money. But he spends a lot more time thinking about work than he does about her. He's gone missing from their marriage. He knows it, but doesn't know how to change things. She blames him, and he feels guilty but justified at the same time. It sounds complicated but it's one of the most ordinary situations couples struggle with," Aimer said.

As the trio approached, Kyle overheard the woman's words to her husband.

"I know your job is to make money! I know you love your work. But I'm home alone every night. I'm lonely. It feels like your work is more important than our marriage. And what about kids? You always say we need to save more before we can even think about children. My clock is ticking! I don't think you care about our marriage. I'm coming to the end of my rope."

Their voices faded as they passed by.

Aimer spoke. "Did you hear the emotion in her voice? Her ego mind was completely driven by emotions. They began forming in her childhood as she had thoughts and feelings triggered by people and the world around her. As they were repeated over and over again, some of them coalesced into core beliefs. That woman had some reasonable thoughts about what a marriage should be. But underneath, her core belief told her 'I am not enough!' As a child she might have been part of a big family with many children and never felt she got enough attention. Or she might have been berated, bullied, criticized or abused for some reason. No matter.

"She believes she 'is not enough.' If she were enough, her husband would pay more attention to her and what's important to her. Not being 'enough' is her 'sin.' So she feels guilty for not being enough for her husband to love. And that guilt brings on the fear. Fear of being left alone, undervalued and perhaps even losing her marriage and having to start over again. In turn, her fear generates anger that she *projects* onto her husband. Did you hear his reply? He said, 'Well, if you were more caring when I'm around maybe I'd be around more often.' He attacked her verbally."

"Yeah, I see that. It's what happens on a dozen soap operas every day," Kyle said.

Marci smiled. "Yes, but there's another way those two could be working things out. It comes straight out of their Right Mind. Can you guess what it is?"

"I don't know. Something about forgiveness?" he asked.

"Yes. But before that, it's about not-judging. Each of them *could* choose to stop judging one another. That simple step would defuse almost everything that's happening between them. Not-judging would give them the space they need to communicate honestly with one another. They might even be able to uncover those old childhood core beliefs that give them so much trouble relating. It might even be possible they'd find something like love."

Aimer chimed in. "The man's response was a direct attack on his wife. He said, in essence, 'It's your fault!' He blamed her. Blaming and attack are never warranted when a person wants to learn forgiveness. They both came directly out of their ego boxes where everything that brings pain into a person's life actually thrives."

"I see that," Kyle answered.

The three sat in silence for several minutes, gazing into the fire as the sun retired from the sky casting blends of pink, orange and violet across the high clouds. Kyle felt at ease with nothing pressing on his mind; relaxed and comfortable in the company of these two strange friends sitting with such camaraderie on the beach. As the fire waned into glowing embers Aimer and Marci began speaking. Marci to Kyle's right, and Aimer to his left, each speaking with different messages. As Kyle listened to the cadence of their voices, they began to merge:

"Every time you choose to look past something...*the easiest way to not-judging...* forgiveness happens...*is thinking from your Right Mind...* you can choose to ask for my help at any time...*where little errors you make along the way can be corrected without judgment...* my answers to you will always lead you to a Right action...*and you begin to change the world...* helping and teaching all of mankind."

As Marci and Aimer spoke, another voice joined, creating a spoken symphony of

words in Kyle's mind.

Learning to forgive is simple because it only asks that you choose to talk with me. Make that choice throughout each day whenever you feel uncertainty about the best course of action. But it may not be easy. Your ego wants to answer your questions and make your decisions. It is your responsibility to choose—either your Right Mind where I can help you, or your ego mind where fear, trouble and pain are in charge. Your choosing decides the course of the rest of your life.

The three sat in silence while the harmonies merged with the sound of surf landing gently on the beach.

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6:00 AM. A sudden buzz followed by radio babble reporting traffic and weather. Kyle awoke and turned to see Marci lying next to him.

"Good morning, my friend. Did you sleep well?" she asked. "Do you remember a dream?"

Kyle gazed at the ceiling. "Yes. You and Aimer were in my dream last night. But I think you already know that."

Marci smiled. "And so I do. What do you remember about your dream?"

"Everything. The couple on the beach, you and Aimer talking to me. And a voice that spoke to me about making decisions. Was that the teacher you told me about?"

She nodded. "Now, let's take a moment to connect with your Teacher. It's a useful way to begin your day. You can talk to your Teacher just as you would to me. If you're troubled you can talk to Him as if He were your adviser, your friend or even your therapist. Or you could talk with Him as if you were talking to your Creator, to God Himself."

Marci paused and placed her hand on Kyle's chest once again. "Now close your eyes. Think these words to your Teacher as I say them."

"Thank you for this new morning and the happiness of starting my day by talking with you. I would like to hear your thoughts so you can guide me through the day in my Right Mind.

"Thank you for your Love and showing me your wisdom in dealing with situations gracefully, so my words and actions are pleasant to all. I am happy your plans for me are good. I trust your guidance in all things I encounter today. Thank you too for helping me hear you speak to me from my Right Mind. For helping me choose to judge nothing, to forgive everything and to share what you teach me with others I meet throughout the day."

Kyle lay quietly in bed, eyes closed. "Marci, say that again, slowly."

Marci repeated that morning prayer as Kyle's lips moved in sync with her words.

"Giving thanks. That's the true nature of prayer. It's not about asking for things. It's about giving thanks. Your Teacher will help you, just as I am." With those words Marci disappeared from the room.

Kyle lay quietly, listening to the sound of his breath. A sliver of morning sunlight shined through an opening in the curtain. It reflected off the beveled edge of the mirror above his dresser and cast a tiny rainbow across the ceiling. *I'm cared for. Watched over.*

Loved. How can that be?

END OF SAMPLE CHAPTERS

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