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**Minther
& Sklar**

“Democracy must be something more than two wolves and a sheep voting on what to have for dinner.”

-- James Bovard

Chapter 3 | THE INTERVIEW

We ride in silence on the big Harley-Davidson motorcycle. I'm feeling a little more comfortable so my grip on "Red" loosens. Now, I consider my predicament. I am riding with a stranger, lovely as she might be, to who-knows-where, for no apparent reason. It's dark and I think my leg is on fire. Things just seem to be getting more and more complicated.

"What is the answer to the question 'Profit or loss?'" I ask, but my future wife doesn't reply.

"Where are we going?" No answer.

"Are those real?" I ask in frustration.

Her laughter fills my ears. Well, at least I know she is alive. Her laugh is contagious and genuine. If I had a ring I'd be popping the question.

"How long before we get where we are going?"

"Soon."

"Who will be there?"

"An important person."

"Why me?"

"Dawn likes you."

"Will Dawn be there?"

"No."

We ride on surface roads to the city limits of Charlotte, North Carolina. Up ahead is a sign that reads, "Official vehicles only. No private vehicles." We pass the sign without slowing down and head downtown on South Tryon Street alongside the trolley tracks. As it is late in the evening few workers are around to notice us.

"Do you work for the government?"

"No"

"The sign said official vehicles only. Private vehicles aren't allowed downtown."

"Yes, that's what it said."

“Are we an official vehicle?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

“Then we’ll get arrested.”

“You worry too much.”

Red makes a few turns and we enter a private driveway under a tall building. She drives up to an entrance door and stops.

“Twelfth floor. Elevators are on the right.”

“Then what?”

“Your future is in your hands.” She holds out her hand and I start to take off the gloves. “Keep the gloves on. Leave the helmet.”

On the twelfth floor there are large glass double doors leading to a business named STUS Corporation. There is no one in the reception area. As a matter-of-fact there is no reception area. Two nicely upholstered, comfortable-looking, chairs face a large video screen on which are fleeting images of various products. Of greatest interest to me are the missiles launched from submarines and from under the wings of fighter aircraft. Rather than sit, I stand and watch the screen. Farm equipment, computers, medical devices, flooring materials, clothing, and other products that I don’t recognize dance across the screen. There is no sound with the video which makes the room seem even more silent. I’m lost in the digital images when a voice explodes in the room.

“Mr. Clymer—welcome to FVF.”

I look around because the voice seems to come from every direction.

“Please, enter the door to your right.”

An indirect light glows above the indicated door that until that moment was not visible. As I approach the door it opens on its own. Inside is a corridor lit in various shades of blue from undetectable light sources. The walls could be glowing but somehow that isn’t exactly what is generating the light. The whole thing seems surrealistic. What have I gotten myself into? Wait a minute. I was walking down a rural road minding my own business. Dawn got me into this.

At the end of the corridor another door opens and before me is a large, plush, high-tech, office that is hard to describe. Let me try. It begins with ceiling to floor windows that make up one side of the room. Outside the lights of the city create a perfect cityscape of light, shadows, shapes, and movement. Centered in front of the window wall is a large standing desk made of metal and glass. To the left is a large, round, glass table surrounded by six metal and leather chairs. Behind it the wall is a waterfall that resembles a rainforest. If I didn’t know I was inside a building I would swear that I was looking at the real thing. On the right there is a smoked glass and metal cabinet on top of which are a number of objects that I cannot identify. Above the cabinet the wall appears to be a large monitor with numerous pictures in picture displays. There are different scenes, rows of numbers, product shots, and security shots of the building. The room is lit with

indirect lighting whose source I cannot determine. The floor is a dark blue rug with a gold STUS logo in the middle. The air has an aroma that I can't place but it is quite pleasing.

"Is that how you dress for an interview?" a man's voice says from behind me.

"I didn't know I was going to an interview," I respond as I turn around. I become self-conscious of my tee-shirt and jeans. That is until the man who entered from another door walks up to me wearing a golf shirt and shorts.

"I'm David Trufire. Welcome to STUS Corporation." He holds up his hand palm out in a sign of greeting. I've heard that people used to shake hands in the past. Dirty habit—glad that went away. My host motions for me to sit in one of the chairs around the glass table. I sit and he walks over to the cabinet. "Would you like a drink?"

"I, uh . . ."

"Decisive son-of-a-bitch, aren't you?"

"I'm not old enough to legally drink alcohol," I explain.

"I'm not a cop."

"I better not."

"Good. Keep a clear head. Soda, coffee, tea, water?"

"Water will be fine."

Mr. Trufire appears to be in his fifties. He is fit without any flab that I can see. His hair is brown with just a hint of grey on the temples. He moves with the confidence of someone who is successful and has money. I think I hate him. He sits across the table from me. We both sit in silence while he sizes me up and I feel like a ten year old.

"Take off those ridiculous gloves," he finally says.

"They're supposed to hide my IIDC signal."

"Nothing escapes from this room unless I want it to."

I'm not sure how to take that, however, I remove the gloves and once more we sit in silence. He sips the scotch, or bourbon, or cream soda that's in his glass.

"You need a job," he states rather than asks.

"How do you know that?" I ask.

"You have a friend."

"Dawn?"

"Yes. She likes you."

"So, I've heard," I say and then add, "I've never met her."

"Neither have I, but I value her opinion and insight. She is an uncanny judge of character."

"And, she told you about me?"

"You're on the SCL—congratulations. You are interested in history. Just graduated from NYU. Have a sense of humor. And, just got reclassified. Do I have correct information?"

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“Why unfortunately?”

“Well, I seem to have put an end to my career before it has even started.”

“Quite the contrary, you’ve taken the first step away from slavery. You were about to embark on a journey that would enslave you to the state. Do what those in power tell you to do and they will allow you to nibble from the trough but only the amount they deem acceptable.”

“I’ve got to eat—have a life. I need a career.”

“That’s not a career. It’s a life sentence to slavery.”

“What else can I do?”

“What can you do?”

“I don’t understand.”

“What are you good at?”

“Nothing, really.”

“Oh, you are great at selling yourself.” He sips his drink and we once again sit in silence. I know that I’m blowing the interview but I didn’t even know I was going to an interview. Thanks Dawn!

“How are you at public speaking? Can you talk to a crowd?”

“I really haven’t done much unless you count presenting on YouView on the globalnet. I had to present my final exam.”

“Impressive,” he says sarcastically.

Once more, I retreat into silence. This interview is going nowhere and so am I. Hell, I didn’t ask for it. Why the heck should I feel so defensive? I start to consider how to get out of there and how to beg my way back into the good graces of The Social Compensation Board. If I’m humble and apologize maybe they would classify me as an 8. Trufire sits there with his burning stare. Hey, that’s good. I’ll have to use that sometime.

“What are you thinking?” he asks.

“I’m thinking that I am wasting your time. I wasn’t told I was going to an interview. In fact, I was shanghaied. All I was doing was walking down a road and, bam, next thing I know I’m here.”

“Can’t handle surprises? Not quick on your feet? Unable to take advantage of opportunities? I was told you were a thinker. Yet, I haven’t gotten a clear thought from you so far.”

I stand. I’m going down in flames as a result of Trufire. I’ll have to use that one someday, as well. So, I have nothing to lose. “Mr. Trufire, you are obviously a successful and powerful man. I believe you were misled about me. I’m not a genius and I haven’t done anything of note. That doesn’t mean that I am incapable of being a value to society or enjoying my own success. Right now, it seems like everything is lining up against me. OK, I’m a nine, probably starve, but it won’t stop me. I won’t sit under a tree and collect my checks and amount to nothing.

Somehow I'm going to make my life count for something. I'm on the SCL. I don't have any experience. So, maybe I'm out in the cold in a hostile land like the Pilgrims. They made it—so will I." I turn to leave but don't see any door.

"Where are you going?"

"Uh, I was going to leave."

"Nothing escapes from this room unless I want it to."

"I'm a prisoner?"

"You are invited to stay—leave it at that. Please, sit down."

I sit and again we duel in silence. Finally, he waves his hand over the glass top table and screens appear in the glass in front of each chair. The STUS logo glows in front of me. Then a short video outlining the many qualities and successes of STUS Corporation plays on the screen. It's well done and impressive.

When it finishes David Trufire asks me, "What do you think?"

"It's impressive."

"What were the key messages?"

"Key messages?"

"What points about STUS Corporation did it make?"

"Well. STUS Corporation is involved in a lot a different areas. You have on staff very creative and innovative people who are shaping the future. STUS is a global company. There's something else, but I'm not sure how to express it."

"Try."

"It's a feeling, or idea . . ."

"Go on."

I stand and walk around the room. The logo in the carpet reaches out to me. STUS, I wonder what the letters stand for. Stick that underwear there—that can't be it. Skunks that use stink—no. See the useless situation—naw. Stop that up start—exactly. Sarcasm takes unusual strength—that makes me think. I turn to Mr. Trufire and say, "Strength. I get the feeling that STUS is a powerful force with a vision or direction. That it stands for something."

"Are you sucking up?"

"Huh? No. You asked and I gave you my opinion."

"Good." Trufire puts his drink down on the glass tabletop. He rises and walks over to where I am standing. "What's your interest in history?"

"I found . . ." I stop myself before revealing my treasure. I try to recover by saying, "I found the early pilgrim experience interesting but can't seem to get much information about them."

"You're lying," Trufire says but not in an accusing tone-of-voice.

"What?"

"George, there is one thing that I expect from my employees—honesty. You found something but you don't want to tell me what it is. I can live with that. Just be honest. Tell me you found something but you don't wish to reveal what it

is. You live out on an old farm. Maybe you found an arrowhead, or a musket, or a button—it doesn't matter. It's about trust."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize—it's a sign of weakness; John Wayne."

"Who?"

"A movie actor back in the twentieth century. His movies have been banned by the government. We have a complete collection in our library."

"Wow."

"Back to your interest in history. Have you learned anything new that you weren't taught through government lessons?"

"I haven't been at it long. The one thing that I've found interesting is the experiment that Governor Bradford did with capitalism. It seems to have worked but then the whole idea of capitalism is based on stealing from the poor."

"I see." He motions for me to sit at the table once more which I do. "Allow me to tell you a hypothetical story. Then you draw your own conclusion."

I nod.

"Say there is an island and three sailors end up marooned there. They have no tools, no food, no water. One sailor sits on the beach and looks out at the ocean hoping to see a ship that will save them. We'll call him Beachcomer Bob. The second sailor walks around looking at the trees and flora. He is Lost Lou. The third sailor, who I will call Evil Ed, goes inland and finds a waterfall. He saves some water in a coconut shell and brings it back to his friends. They all drink."

Next, Evil Ed finds a flat clearing not far from the waterfall and he builds a hut. Beachcomer Bob remains on the shoreline watching. Lost Lou becomes fascinated with a butterfly. Evil Ed finds a way to fashion a net from vines and catches some fish. He's cooking the fish over a fire that he started when Lost Lou arrives. They chat and Evil Ed says he will give the sailor some fish in return for Lost Lou bringing water from the waterfall and filling a container that he fashioned out of large leaves. That done—they both eat. Later, they visit the sailor on the beach. They invite him to join them and build a camp. He refuses and says he will wait for a ship.

Evil Ed then finds berries and other food sources on the island. Lost Lou wanders around looking at birds. Evil Ed shows Lost Lou how to make rope out of vines and puts him to a task. In return he feeds his friend. It starts to rain. Evil Ed and Lost Lou find shelter in the hut. While comfortable in the hut Evil Ed tells Lost Lou that he will pay him with food if he would do different tasks that he assigns him. They agree. Finally, Beachcomer Bob comes to the hut wet and hungry. They invite him in. He asks for some food. Evil Ed describes the agreement that he has with Lost Lou and offers the same to Beachcomer Bob. The man refuses asking what right Evil Ed has to all the food. It's not fair he cries. Evil Ed tells Beachcomer Bob to go out and get his own food and build his own shelter."

David Trufire takes a sip of his drink then asks me, "What has Evil Ed stolen from the other two sailors?"

I'm caught off guard by his question. After a few moments I reply, "Nothing. He found the water, gathered the food, and built the shelter."

"Exactly, he didn't take anything from the others. He created wealth in the form of food. They could have done the same."

"But, what about his civic responsibility to help others?" I ask.

Trufire frowns and continues, "Over time they devise a system whereby Evil Ed keeps track of the hours of labor that Lost Lou puts in and creates a value number that he calls coins. He then charges a certain number of coins for the food that Lost Lou consumes. Because there are coins left over Evil Ed agrees to build Lost Lou a hut for that amount. Now, Lost Lou lives in a hut and has food as long as he does tasks for Evil Ed."

"What about Sailor One, Beachcomer Bob?" I ask.

"The two sailors are not heartless so they agree that they will give Beachcomer Bob a small amount of food out of charity. They also build a small lean-to so that he can get out of the rain. Next, Evil Ed builds a house out of bamboo that Lost Lou helps him harvest. Evil Ed pays Lost Lou a certain number of coins in return. As a result they both have plenty of food and water and shelter. One day Beachcomer Bob comes by and complains that his lean-to fell down and he is hungry. Evil Ed tells him that if he will help gather rocks for a fireplace he is building that he will pay him in coins that can be used to buy food. Beachcomer Bob gets angry and asks why Evil Ed should live in a nice house and have plenty of food while he is near starvation. It isn't fair. Then he points out that Evil Ed is exploiting Lost Lou by making him work for food and on Evil Ed's big house. This strikes home with Lost Lou who points out that Evil Ed has far more than either of them even though he is working very hard. Evil Ed responds by telling the two sailors to catch their own fish, gather their own berries, and build their own houses. He shuts the door of his house. Here is my question. Does Evil Ed have a right to greater wealth than the other two?"

I find myself in a quandary and say, "Evil Ed did create the wealth that he has. However, I wonder if he took advantage of Lost Lou by not paying him a fair amount for his labor. Then I have to consider the fact that Beachcomer Bob has done nothing to take care of himself. Lost Lou has worked for what he gets but isn't capable of catching fish on his own or he wouldn't need Evil Ed. In fact, if it wasn't for Evil Ed neither of the other sailors would have survived. Yes, he deserves his wealth."

"If a man's talent, drive, and labor create wealth which in-turn helps those less capable enjoy a lifestyle they could not have achieved on their own, why is he considered evil?"

"He isn't."

“Every class you took in school defined wealthy people as evil because they stole from those who are weaker. Is that not what you believe?”

“It was. However, that’s part of my confusion and corresponding interest in history.”

David Trufire waves his hand over the table and the monitors in the glass top come alive once more. The STUS logo glows before me. In seconds it is replaced with the image of a parchment on which is written “We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union . . .” It disappears and is replaced by a map of the world.

“We’re a large global organization. Opportunities are limitless,” Trufire says. He then states, “I’d like you to start in our research facility located on Morehead Street. We’ll see how you do and determine if there are other areas of expertise where you might be a value.”

“A job?” I ask in disbelief.

“You came here for an interview, didn’t you?”

“I was brought here, yes,” I stop myself and ask, “When do I start?”

“Start Monday. That will give us time to check your background and provide you with all of the employment requirements. You’re not on the SCL or anything like that, are you?” His smile indicates that he doesn’t care.

I like this man.

“Don’t you want to know how much you will be paid?”

“I’m curious but anything on top of Level 9 will be an improvement.”

“Well, that’s a bit of a problem,” Trufire begins. “You do realize that the Social Compensation Program is voluntary. That fact is rarely mentioned.”

I sit in silence, but can’t help but wonder why anyone in their right mind would turn down free money.

“One of the prerequisites for employment at STUS is non-participation in the Social Compensation Program.” He stared directly at me and waited for my reaction.

“What if I can’t survive on what STUS pays alone?”

In a serious tone that I can’t really get a read on he states, “The choice is yours. Sign up to be a slave of the state. Or, like the Pilgrims, risk everything to have the freedom to determine your own destiny.”

We sit in silence. It seems my life has become inundated in games. Profit or loss. What the hell does that mean? Where are we going? You’ll see. What’s your name? Who is Dawn? Do I take the sure thing? Albeit a crappy level of compensation. Then it hits me. It is far better to make my own decisions than to live in a manner that some faceless entity decides for me. “I’m in,” I say with conviction.

“Good.”

“May I ask what my salary will be?” I ask in a more timid voice than I like.

“Not only may you ask—you should.”

“OK, what will you pay me?”

“I’m going to pay you what you are worth,” Trufire makes some motions on his monitor and before me a number appears.

OK, I should be mature enough to act professionally, but the number is comparable to level 5 which is what my parents are at so I spout, “Shit!”

“It’s not shit,” he replies.

“I’m sorry. It just caught me by surprise. That’s very generous.”

“George, I’m not giving you anything. We will work your ass off and expect a great deal from you.” He stands and walks over to where I sit and puts his hand on my shoulder. “After spending a lifetime of being told what to think, how to act, and what you are capable of, you now are in an unfamiliar wilderness completely on your own. Don’t worry. You are going to do fine.” He went back over to the cabinet and refilled his drink, then added, “If not—I’ll fire your ass.”

For the first time in a very long time I find my testosterone and reply, “That’s not going to happen. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity that will not be squandered. Now, how the hell do I get home?”

David Trufire laughs and says, “Virginia will take you home.” He then adds something that I’m not sure how to interpret, “You are going to learn the true meaning of profit and loss.”

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