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**Minther
& Sklar**

*“The inherent vice of capitalism is the unequal sharing of the blessings.
The inherent blessing of socialism is the equal sharing of misery.”*

-- Winston Churchill

Chapter 4 | THE PLEDGE

I exit the STUS building and find “Red,” uh, Virginia waiting for me perched on her Harley Davidson. “Welcome aboard,” she says in a non-committal voice.

“I feel like everyone around me knows more about what is going on than I do,” I reply.

“We do,” she smiles and orders, “Take off those ridiculous gloves.”

“Don’t I need them to remain invisible?” I innocently ask. That’s when she gives me the finger. No—not that finger. It’s a sort of thumb glove. By the way do you know that the original use of the “middle finger” gesture originated in 423BC in Aristophanes’ play, “The Clouds?” Thought you should know. That’s history my friend.

“You don’t need gloves to interrupt the signal from your thumb,” Red smiles, “That doesn’t make sense.”

I nod acknowledging the fact that I have been the butt of a joke. Red laughs.

“Many don’t understand the physics of super low-frequency technology. They try to block the signal with aluminum foil, lead, rubber, you name it. It doesn’t work. The power is in the tracking device and on satellites. They locate and interpret low-frequency emissions. This thumb cover doesn’t block the signal it changes the identification code. You’re now a thirty-five year old female named Karen,” she laughs once more.

OK, high tech is not my forte. But, hey, I have a job! The ride back to the farm house just seems so much more pleasant. I have to admit having my arms wrapped around Virginia stirs something inside of me. What do I mean by something? You know what is stirring and the vibration from the motorcycle isn’t helping.

“You start Monday,” Red’s voice enters my ears within the helmet. “I’ll pick you up at eight.”

“You’re giving me a ride to work?”

“How else are you going to get there, Chief?”

"Quite honestly, I haven't gotten that far yet," I admit. "My head is still spinning from getting a real job. A job I didn't know I was interviewing for, by the way."

"Sometimes it happens that way," Red says. She adds, "It won't be the last surprise."

"What does that mean?"

Silence. Here we go again—games. I'm excited. OK, stop that. I'm full of anticipation about having a job and money and a future—all because I got interested in the past. How about that! However, there is so much mystery and intrigue about it all a part of me wonders what I have gotten into.

I arrive home pretty late. When I walk into the house I find my parents waiting up with lots of questions. True to form my father asks, "Have you done something that we need to know about?"

Before I can answer my mother adds, "Was that a motorcycle that I heard?" My father pounces, "Did you ever think of calling?"

"That would have been nice," my mother mumbles.

I look toward my father in anticipation of his next installment. He doesn't let me down, "Well, what have you been doing and are the police far behind?"

"Interviewing," I answer with a smile.

"interviewing? Who? Why?" mother Clymer asks.

I sit down and state, "Interviewing for a job."

"A job?" they both say in perfect harmony.

"Yes, a job."

"What kind of job?" my mother asks.

"Do they know you are on the Subversive Citizen List?" my ever-supportive father asks.

I realize that I cannot tell all of the events that took place without revealing facts about Dawn, Aunt Peggy, Red, the book I still possess, the finger, and more. So, I lie. "I was told about an opportunity and jumped at it. The motorcycle that you heard was a friend who gave me a ride to the interview."

"You went to an interview dressed like that?" my mother asks in disbelief.

"Well, at least it taught you a valuable lesson," my father comments.

"It sure did," I reply. Then in a calm nonchalant voice I state, "I start Monday." I leave the two of them in the living room in stunned silence.

As fast as I can I start my tablet and get on the globalnet. Without giving it a second thought I go to www.AuntPeggy1776.per and navigate to Peggy's back room. Then I wait. In a few seconds I receive a message.

DAWN: I was waiting for you.

GEORGE: I knew you would be.

DAWN: Yes, I guess so.

GEORGE: I don't know how to thank you.

DAWN: In time things will become more clear. You are about to enter a

world that you didn't have any idea exists. Keep an open mind, learn, and use your intellect. That's when you will show your gratitude.

GEORGE: I don't understand.

DAWN: Exactly.

GEORGE: Why me?

DAWN: That will become clear in time.

GEORGE: How did you know that I would get the job?

DAWN: I didn't. That was up to you.

I'm not getting anywhere with my questions, so I change the subject.

GEORGE: Who is Virginia?

DAWN: The person who got you to the interview.

GEORGE: So, more evasive answers. When am I going to get anything of substance from you?

There is a long pause. I assume Dawn is deciding what she can tell me. Then she responds.

DAWN: They are real. LMAO.

GEORGE: Thanks. Now I know I won't sleep tonight.

DAWN: George, you have been given an opportunity that is going to take you in directions that you never imagined. There will be times when you will face challenges and have doubts.

GEORGE: It all sounds so ominous.

DAWN: The world is not what it seems. America is not what you think it is. There are forces at play that will impact the lives of every human being on Earth. And, like it or not, you will play a role.

GEORGE: What if I don't want to play a role?

DAWN: It's not in your nature. You possess a rare spirit that will not permit you to remain on the sidelines.

GEORGE: I guess you think you have me all figured out!

DAWN: If you came upon a burning house with a child screaming inside would you run in?

GEORGE: Of course, wouldn't anybody?

DAWN: America is burning.

GEORGE: I don't buy that.

DAWN: That's because you don't hear the screams.

GEORGE: How come I always end our conversations more confused than when I started?

DAWN: Be patient. It won't always be the case.

GEORGE: I start my job Monday.

DAWN: I know.

GEORGE: Somehow I figured you did.

DAWN: Get some rest, George.

Red, uh Virginia, arrives at our farm house at precisely 8:00 a.m. Monday morning. Only this time she isn't riding a black Harley Davidson motorcycle. She's driving a black 2075 Chevrolet Impala. I've been ready for half an hour. There's no way I'm going to blow this opportunity. I'm wearing my best, OK my only suit. It's dark blue. From photos I've seen and old movies suits used to have lapels and men wore ties—a waste of resources. I'm glad the style changed to where suits neither have lapels nor buttons. Jackets simply hang straight down without any material folding over to form a lapel. And, who needs buttons? They're not meant to be buttoned. Underneath my jacket I wear a cream colored dress shirt. Here again, I'm glad that collars went out of style. Who needs them? Finally, I've seen that men used to wear a belt to keep up their pants. How silly is that? I guess elastic memory cloth in the waistband hadn't been developed yet. Well, here I am in my sartorial splendor and my ride awaits.

When I enter the automobile I'm struck by the plush comfortable interior. I've never been in a new car before. Now, don't laugh, do you realize people used to strap themselves in when they drove or rode in a car. No kidding! They did. It was before the Contact Avoidance Total Encasement Cushioning (CATEC) safety system. Electronic body sensors in modern cars analyze and provide appropriate protection. It's kind of scary to think of being strapped into a vehicle.

Virginia looks at me and says in a monotone, "You should have worn that to the interview."

I reply sarcastically, "I would have if I knew that I was going to an interview."
"Oh, yeah, that's right."

"In spite of that fact, I do appreciate you helping me get this job," I say sincerely.
"My pleasure."

Impulsively, I ask, "Have you met Dawn?"
"Why do you ask?"

"Because Mr. Surefire said he has never met her. Yet, the two of you, because of her, arranged for the interview that led to me getting this job."

With a tone of admiration Virginia says, "Dawn is a very special lady." She pauses and then adds, "If she likes you, that my friend, goes a long way."

"What I don't understand is why she likes me. I haven't done anything noteworthy or anything that would impress her."

"You must have done something because she is on your side."
"I'm glad that she is, but I have no idea who she is."

Red maneuvers the Chevrolet onto a highway that is more congested than one might expect. With all the talk about driverless cars years ago, even though the technology exists, people simply don't want it. There is something seductive about being in control of all that power, as well as having the capability of impulsively changing direction. Speaking of being impulsive, I ask Red, "What do you do at STUS besides chauffeuring new employees?"

"I handle problems," she replies with a hint of a smile.

"Am I a problem?" I ask.

"Not at the moment," she responds, "keep it that way."

Well, I guess I told her.

As we continue to ride I consider the events of the weekend. I received a large number of forms from STUS that had to be completed. Some were basic informational documents, however, others were somewhat concerning. For example, one form was a formal request to be released from participation in the Social Compensation Program. It had to be signed using the IIDC chip in my thumb. While I know that I will be paid far more than I ever could get from the SCP it left me feeling vulnerable. In essence, I gave away my safety net. That single document left me out on my own much like the pilgrims in the New World. Only, in truth, I have it a lot better.

When I told my parents about my action my mother was horrified. She screamed at me that I was becoming anti-social and gotten involved with criminals.

My father sat at the kitchen table shaking his head repeating, "What have you done?"

I learned something that isn't made public. When you participate in the SCP and also have a job, 80% of your income is forfeited as taxes. If you do not participate in the SCP your tax burden is only 40%. The average worker doesn't know this and the government doesn't tell them. Of course, in most cases, salaries are so low workers have to participate in the SCP just to survive. It makes me understand just how lucky I am. Once more I am grateful to Dawn.

Something else happened over the weekend. I was in my room working on all the forms when my sister entered. By the way her name is Darsey which is Irish for dark one. I call her Dee. She sat on my bed and watched as I filled in the multiple forms.

"So, you have a job?"

"I start Monday."

"That's great. What do you do?"

A good question. I'm not actually sure. It is a little disconcerting. What if it's something I can't stand or I'm not good at? I'm stepping out into the world without a net not knowing exactly what I'm going to be doing. Talk about a leap of faith. How nuts is that? Dee sat patiently waiting for my answer. Finally, I told her, "I will be doing research."

"What kind of research?"

"I'm not really sure," I have to admit. Then I add, "Probably looking for information about products, or people, or events."

"Oh," she says, then surprises me with, "Where's the book?"

"Shhhhh," I motion with my hands for her to remain quiet. I get up and close my door. "I told you not to mention the book. Mom and dad think I got rid

of it." I walk over to the bed and sit next to Dee, "We could get into a lot of trouble if anyone knew about the book."

"Why?"

"It's hard to explain, but people are not allowed to own certain books."

"Why?"

"I don't know. It's just the way it is."

"What we read was interesting. Do you think it is true?"

"Yes, I do."

"Why don't we learn about things like that in school?"

"We learn what they want us to learn," I say as I see Dawn's email in my mind telling me the same thing.

"Don't we have a right to know the truth?" Dee asks.

I guess my sister is not as shallow as I thought. We do have a right to the truth. But, from where do we get that right? From the government? "He who controls the present—shades the past." Again, Dawn enters my subconscious. If the government decides to teach children that the sky is red, in time, it would change the meaning of the word red. The color of the sky remains constant. Each generation is a product of its particular education. I realize that I am a product of government supervised education, or is it indoctrination? A part of me is angry. I feel like a Guinea Pig that has been carefully shaped into "a good citizen." Shut-up Dawn!

"Why are you mad?" Dee asks. "Is it something I said?"

I look directly into the innocent eyes of my little sister. It strikes me that some evil force has a hold of her—of her mind. She is being molded and conditioned into what some bureaucrat decides, in order to keep her in check. "How free do you feel now?" Dawn won't let up in my mind. My imagination takes me back to the pilgrims. Dee and I could be among those souls who simply want to think for ourselves, live our lives the way we wish to live, to shed the shackles of those who seek to control us, to be, dare I say it, free. Dee is looking back at me with a look of concern. For some reason I reach over and pull her toward me and hug her. Trust me I don't often, or ever, hug my sister. She deserves the truth. I say in a low voice, "Darcy, you didn't do anything wrong. In fact, you did something very right." Just call me Dawn. I add, "You seek the truth. There is nothing wrong with that." Dee looks up at me but doesn't say anything. "Unfortunately, when we don't follow the rules we are considered bad or dangerous."

"Like when mom yelled at you?"

"Yes, she thinks I shouldn't break the rules. Even rules that don't make sense."

"But you kept the book."

"Yes, and I plan to continue to read it."

"Can I read it with you?"

So, here we are at a crossroads. I have to make a decision. It is not my intent to put my sister in danger, however, she has a right to know the truth. I either throw her back in with the masses who do what they are told or let her decide for herself what is fact. There really isn't any question what I have to do. So, I say to her, "Dee, you and I have to make a pledge to each other. We have to promise to never reveal to anybody the existence of the book. We also have to promise to be honest with each other, no matter what. I don't mean with little things—only the important things. So, here's what we will do. If I give you my word then you know whatever I say is true. Also, if I give you my word that I will do something, I absolutely will." I wait for her to comprehend what I said. Then I explain, "Your word has to also be sacred. If you give me your word, no matter what you tell me I will believe that it is true."

"What if it's something that I don't want to tell you?"

"Then don't give your word. It's not meant to force the truth out of you. It's meant to confirm the truth when you want to. If you tell me something and I'm having a hard time believing you and you say I give you my word then I know it's true. If we never break our word then it will always possess a special power."

So, we both make a pledge and agree to keep the book a secret.

Back to the book. On February 10, 1763 The Treaty of Paris ended the French & Indian War. This gave the colonists a lot to celebrate as they saw the land to the west ceded by France as a tremendous opportunity for growth. Unfortunately, The Royal Proclamation of 1763 put an end to the celebration. After the war the British found that they had to continually put down rebellion by the Indians. In an effort to calm the unrest the King declared all of the territory west of the Appalachian Mountains as Indian Territory and forbade any settlement by colonists. In addition, any land occupied by Englishmen within that territory was to be abandoned. Understandably, the colonists felt betrayed. Finally, Parliament called for construction of British royal posts along the proclamation boundary to keep settlers from ignoring the Proclamation. Building and manning these posts was a costly undertaking and England was broke.

The First Lord of the Treasury and Chancellor of the Exchequer, Lord George Grenville got Parliament to pass The American Revenue Act of 1764. There were all types of provisions that, quite frankly, were boring. Bottom line they placed taxes on many products and regulated the export of lumber and iron. To make sure the colonists paid he increased Navy presence and instructed them to become more active in customs enforcement. The effect on the economy of the colonies was felt immediately as trade with other countries was hampered and purchase of goods from England became unaffordable.

The Pilgrims faced hardships to have freedom in America, built colonies, fought wars, remained loyal to the crown, and then were treated as lesser citizens than those who lived in England. When Parliament passed the Stamp Act rebellion

soon followed. The Stamp Act required a tax be paid on all printed materials, such as newspapers, legal documents, playing cards, etc. As a result of this tax in early summer of 1765 a group of Boston shopkeepers and artisans who called themselves The Loyal Nine got together to agitate against the Stamp Act. As the group grew they became known as the Sons of Liberty. Their motto became "No Taxation without Representation" because there were no colonial representatives in Parliament.

So, Dee and I made a pact over the weekend. I hope she understands the importance of keeping our secret.

When Virginia and I arrive at the STUS offices on Morehead Street I snap out of my reverie. Before me is a three story brick building across the street from a seedy-looking diner. It is a far cry from the modern office building downtown where I interviewed. Red pulls into the parking lot and tells me to have a nice day.

I reply, "Thank you, dear." A punch so quick that I didn't see it connects with my upper arm causing it to momentarily go numb.

"Call me when you need a ride home," Virginia states flatly.

If you ever started a new job you know how out-of-place one feels and how crazy it can get. That's nothing compared to how crazy my first day gets. I enter the office of Celine Smith per my instructions. She's on the phone. Upon seeing me she motions to a chair. I sit. Celine continues her conversation of which I hear only one side. "There's got to be a trend buried in there somewhere. . . I know. . . No one said it would be easy. . . Take a step back you're getting too close to it. . . OK. . . Let me go, I've got the new kid in my office. . . Yeah, Surefire. . . Kid won't last a week." She ends the conversation and turns her attention to me. "Clymer, right?"

"Yes."

"We are the research arm of STUS Corporation. Data search, primary research, secondary research, investigations, analysis, we deal in facts. Who said 'knowledge is power?'"

"Uh."

"Wrong," she stands and informs me, "It was Sir Francis Bacon."

I nod. What else can I do?

"How much is Apple trading for on the New York Stock Exchange?"

"I don't know."

"You're of no value to me. An empty can. Why are you here?"

"To make money. To learn from the best," I reply.

"Sucking up, huh."

"Better than giving up."

She stops on the spot and thinks about my comment. Then she looks at me appraisingly and comments, "We'll see."

I won't bore you with endless details about my day like Aunt Sally is apt to

do whenever I visit. However, let me hit the high points. I am given a really nice tablet that is programmed for my use only. Are you ready for this? No thumb slot—a password. How long ago did they go out-of-style? So, I choose as my password . . . yeah, wouldn't you like to know? The whole thing folds into a small package that I can carry in my pocket. And, best of all, it has unlimited clearance. I can go anywhere!

By the way Apple is trading at 327 IMUs.

I meet a lot of people whose names escape me. The one name I do remember is Walter Tize who is my direct boss. We hit it off immediately. He calls me an asshole, throws me out of his office, and asks for my resignation. All this before lunch. I'm really good at making first impressions. At least he doesn't call me an anarchist or traitor. That will be tomorrow.

Before you jump to any conclusions, let me explain why Mr. Tize is so inclined. I report to his office as instructed. When I enter he looks up and asks, "What do you want, asshole?"

Even though caught off-guard—that has been happening a lot lately—I am able to react appropriately. I say nothing.

He asks, once more, "What do you want?"

This time I respond, "I'm sorry. I thought you were talking to yourself."

The result, an icy stare followed with intense laughter. It is as though no one has ever fought back before. I think he likes me.

We spend the next hour talking. He wants to know a great deal about me. What I've done, experience that I have, my opinion on different subjects—what is this another interview? I do find out the letters STUS stand for Strategic Technologies Universal Systems—whatever the hell that means. The corporation was founded in the year 2015 and seems to be everywhere. STUS is a privately held company. At around 11:30 a.m. Walter suddenly stops looks directly at me and says, "Get the hell out of my office, go across the street to Candy's Café and get me a Tize Special. Get yourself something, too. I want either my lunch or your resignation on my desk before noon!" His smile tells me all I need to know.

Day one under my belt, I'm heading home. Virginia and I ride in silence. She rarely speaks anyway. I am pondering the final thing that Walter Tize said to me, "Tomorrow you're going to learn about STUS and the gang of cutthroats you've gotten involved with."

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