

***REAP THE WHIRLWIND***

Robert Sells

## PROLOGUE

The man played a war game on the computer while he listened to the bouncing melodies of Vivaldi. The game, vividly displayed on a large screen mounted on the wall, would not be found in any store for many years, if ever; it was presently used by the military to train their upper echelon officers. As such, it was the best strategy game available and he always acquired the best no matter the cost or, in this case, the risk.

In the silence between two symphonies, the faint, dissonance screech of the Barrow doors in the basement raised his eyebrows. Heart pumping, his ears became his world. Another noise downstairs: something dropped to the floor.

The chubby little man checked the video feeds from his infrared security cameras in the basement. No sign of intruders. Nothing unusual. Except footfalls on the basement steps. He wiggled out of the chair and waddled to the main monitor in the kitchen. Odd. The perpetrators of the sounds were somehow invisible. *Could he trust his ears or a million-dollar security system? Play it safe.*

He scurried through the bedroom, picking up a bathrobe, a few candy bars and an iPad. Within seconds, he stepped into a nearly empty garage. Scanning the large enclosure right and left and right again, he assured himself the sole occupant was a large, black Mercedes. On his iPad he checked the camera showing the driveway outside. Bright security lights illuminated no car or person. He slipped into the driver's side seat, and in a moment the engine purred awake. The great car screeched out just beneath the rising garage door. Traveling sixty miles per hour down the long driveway the car swerved onto the road. Moments later, his speedometer read eighty. He talked to the car. "Call 911." Blue lights on the dashboard came to life and registered the call.

"Yes, may I help you?"

It was a woman, and he was a bit chagrined. He didn't like to deal with the opposite sex. They made him feel uncomfortable and the man had little confidence in how they might handle his present problems.

"My house was broken into. 32 Cranbury Street, Watertown. Get the police there and get some police to me."

"Where are you, sir?"

"Traveling down County Road 78 toward Danbury."

"You're in a car?"

"No, you fucking moron, I'm in a goddamn rickshaw! Of course I'm in a car. Get me some help. They may be following me."

Silence for a moment. Shit, I shouldn't have pissed her off. No telling what she might do.

"Sir, do you have a GPS?"

"Yes. Look, I'm sorry. I'm confused and scared."

"I understand. Put this address into your GPS..."

Ten minutes later the billionaire computer expert pulled into a vacant parking lot just outside the busy city. The police station was a few miles away, but he knew city traffic would have slowed him down. The operator assured him the police would meet him in a few minutes. Besides, his pursuers would never guess he would travel down this rarely used road. A single, dim light high on a pole flickered in one corner of the potholed parking lot. The buildings surrounding the parking lot were dark with most of their windows broken.

A line of headlights came down the lonely road toward him. He finally relaxed. The cavalry was on the way. He wondered again about the intrusion. First, how did they know where he lived? No one knew where he lived except a handyman, John, who commanded a six-figure salary. The pair had evolved a comfortable relationship. But who knew? You couldn't trust anyone these days.

Of course, it might have been some druggies looking for a score. More likely, though, it was someone sent to kidnap him. Who had he pissed off? As far as the man knew he was on good terms with all his recent contacts on the web. What did I do differently these last few weeks? Only some minor research into the Event, but the Event was yesterday's story...it happened nine years before, for Christ's sake! Who would care now?

The headlights morphed into four cars which screeched into the lot, surrounding his car. Now that they were closer, he could see they weren't police cars.

Six gaunt, young men with long, leather trench coats flying behind them, brandished shotguns in their hands. Grim expressions fixed on their faces except for the one who was closest. Laughing wildly, he leveled the gun at the cowering computer expert.

## CHAPTER ONE

*The keys to heaven also open the gates of hell.*  
Buddhist Proverb

Whit Emerson looked out his wide living room window at Lake Ontario. The small waves in the foreground smoothed out into a light blue sheet which, in the past, he found both relaxing and uplifting. Not today, though. His eyes were pulled back to banking records and once again his stomach was clenched by some unseen cold hand.

Whit viewed the offending screen which highlighted a bill for nine thousand dollars. ClassyGirls.com? Porn site most likely. An automatic withdrawal from his checking account. *How?*

Whit googled the company and found their phone number. His eyes popped wide open when his call was answered with a silky voice on the second ring. *How often does that happen so fast?*

After identifying the transaction, he spoke sharply into the phone. “Look, I don’t know anything about your company. I never had any transactions with you guys. There’s an error somewhere and it has to be rectified before I go to the police.”

“Sir, we can discontinue service. But I’m afraid we can’t give you back money for the months already purchased.”

“Months? This is the first time I’ve seen any bill from you guys. And, I–didn’t–buy–it! Silence. He nodded his head, a smile slowly forming on his face. She finally listened. A different voice jolted him from his reverie.

“This is the manager. Sir, we have orders from you for the last three months.”

“Not me!”

“Definitely from your computer, sir.”

“Not me!”

“Well, someone.”

Whit thought for a moment. Maybe someone else came into his house when he was gone.

“Do you have a record of exactly when I tapped into your site?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Okay, when was the last time?”

While the manager paused for a few seconds, Whit smiled. Had to be someone else.

“Ahh, the last time was last Wednesday night between 6 PM and 9 PM.

Whit checked back on his Google calendar and his heart dropped. Liz had gone out with her friends that night and he had been catching up on some episodes from his favorite detective series on TV.

“Sir?”

“Yeah, I’m still here. I’ll get back to you,” he said absent-mindedly. Then screamed at the phone, “Or my lawyer will get back to you assholes!”

He returned to his computer and checked his apps. Sure enough, in plain sight, was the button for Classy.Girls.com, a young girl smiling at him. *Damn it! How long has that been there?*

He grabbed his phone and thumbed to his apps. The one most used with the same come-hither face appeared! *What the...*

“Honey, I’m home.”

He reached over to his computer and tapped into an article he had been working on and shoved his cell phone into his pocket.

His girlfriend, a slim woman with short, well-coiffed blonde hair, click-clacked across the tiles into the study. She leaned down and kissed him on the neck. “Missed you.”

He smiled up at her.

“You getting some work done?” She pointed at the computer screen.

“Yeah. About to write a bit.”

She gave an exaggerated frown. “You work too much, dear.” Liz jiggled a Victoria Secret’s bag. “Got a surprise for you. Don’t go away.”

She kicked off her high heels, smiled over her shoulder and sashayed into the adjacent bedroom.

Whit looked out the window again. Storm clouds had blocked the sun and the water had turned into a choppy, angry froth. Though comfortably warm in the condominium, he shivered. *Someone getting into my computer and cell phone. That was on me. But someone somehow got into my bank account. Gotta check tomorrow with the bank. That was on them!*

He heard the bedroom door open and turned toward the hallway. Liz softly padded into his study and leaned against the door frame. Clad in a diaphanous blue nightgown barely reaching to mid-thigh, she watched him for a moment, her eyes looking like black coals in the dark hallway.

“Working *hard*, honey?” she asked in a husky voice.

Though still distracted, he smiled at her and rose from the chair. “Not working anymore, Liz.”

Ten minutes later, their bed a wreck of tangled sheets and blankets, Liz rolled off of Whit. Breathing hard, she lay beside him. He turned to stroke her gently, an offering of affection. Elizabeth did not return his soft caresses. She never did. After controlling her breathing, she spoke intelligible words contrasting with her grunts a few seconds before.

“I was at my hairdresser’s this morning and opened up Vogue. I saw an article on how to choose *a computer just for you*.” She glanced sideways at him.

He winced. A free-lance writer, he recently wrote an article titled *A Computer Just for You*. He didn’t think it would ever get published and he had not told her about it.

“You got into Vogue, and didn’t tell me!”

Though she smiled as she playfully rubbed his tousled brown hair, he detected irritation. Whit knew the subject did not interest her, but she liked to paint herself as his intellectual confidant. Even to her hairdresser apparently.

“It wasn’t an article I was really proud of. But I did mention it to you a few weeks ago.” He looked at her nervously, hoping she would accept the excuse.

“No, dear, whenever you talk about computers you always complain about not getting *it* into print.”

Whit knew full well which article she was referring to. *It* was a thought-provoking essay on the world’s, the country’s, even his own, over-reliance on computers. Especially artificial intelligence. If *it* could just get published, he knew it would be a centerpiece article. Whit had submitted it to the New York Times magazine section. Their editors loved it, but for some reason did not pick it up. Even with his own paper, the article was shuttled all the way to the CEO and

he received a flattering note from that worthy man. But it never made its way to the pages of the newspaper.

“Yeah, well, I do talk a bit about that one, but I meant when I discussed with you about how you might pick a computer.”

Elizabeth rose without speaking and walked to the bathroom to clean up.

Whit stayed down, his porn-problem commanding his attention again. *First stop tomorrow, the bank.*

## CHAPTER TWO

Jimmy Northup, detective, caught himself before he fell off the chair. He shook his head, trying to stay awake. Except for periodic stretching, he had been behind the teller counters in the same fold-up chair, in the same position for over seven hours. *The Ghost Robber hadn't struck any bank in the last three days. Another lost night.* He sighed and let his eyes close again.

The creak of a door opened his eyes wide, his body tightened like the coiled spring of a trap. Looking through the windows barricading this part of the bank, he could just make out the black shadow deftly avoiding the security cameras as it moved closer to the front door. Blending with the natural shadows, the shape disappeared as it neared a metal cabinet. Jimmy looked up at one of the cameras just as its green light winked off. *Hmm...so that's why no one ever saw him. He disables the security cameras momentarily. Then after plucking thousands of dollars, he turns them back on. Clever guy.*

Now, walking casually to the vault, the small black shape kneeled down and disappeared once again. A minute later, Jimmy saw the great door swing open and the thief entered the metal chamber. A few minutes later, he emerged carrying a bag.

*Gotcha!*

The foyer lights came on, bright and unforgiving in their white stare. The robber, his head covered by a black ski mask and the rest of his slim body black as well, stopped and stared at the middle-aged man with curly, peppery hair who stood making a show of stretching his legs.

"Old basketball injury. Happens when I crouch down for a long time."

"I have a gun," warned the masked man slowly reaching into his pocket.

Pushing off the counter, Jimmy straightened up, obviously a painful task. His clothes remained a rumpled mess. He shook his head. "No, you don't. Look, give me break, will you? I've been waiting for hours and my entire body is one giant cramp. Just lean against the wall, hands high."

The bank robber looked over his shoulder at the back exit.

"And don't try the back door. We both know it's locked. By the time you reach the door, I'll put a bullet in you. I do have a gun."

The man in black sagged to an even shorter height. He walked a few steps to the nearest wall, spread his legs and put his hands flat on either side of a picture. When Jimmy looked at the picture, he smiled. It showed a fox hunt, the fox treed by a single dog, riders in the distance galloping toward the pair.

The detective, grimacing with every step, walked over to the man, pulled his arms back and clamped metal handcuffs on his wrists. "Sorry about this, but I get in trouble these days when I don't cuff guys."

"How did you know I don't have a gun?"

The handcuffs locked in place, ski mask off, the older man led a young man toward the door where there were comfortable seats beneath a wide picture window.

"You don't want any trouble. You planned these robberies carefully; precious few clues were ever left behind. You obviously have skills. Gotta travel light. Success for you is not confronting people. No gun."

"Where's your gun?"

Patting various pockets, Jimmy appeared distracted, confused. “My gun? Hmm...now where did I put it?” He smiled. “Never carry one. Too damn dangerous...for everyone. Hey, what’s your name, by the way?”

The man hesitated and then said, “Tom Smith.”

“Well, Tom, have a seat.” The detective settled him in a soft chair. Sitting across from the robber, Jimmy reached in his coat pocket and pulled out an open pack of cigarettes. “You smoke?”

Tom Smith shook his head. “How did you know I was going to rob *this* bank?”

The detective took a long drag from the cigarette, his eyes closed. A contented smile shared his face with the frown lines. He exhaled slowly. Another deep puff before he answered.

“Lucky guess. You never rob the same bank twice. So, it was one of six banks. Been sleeping out here for the last week. Not good for the back, I can tell you that, boy!”

The sirens now drowned out the gentle background noise of the air exchangers. A few moments later, the red blinking lights lit up the outside and the detective slowly raised himself up. “Well, we’d better let them in, Tom Smith.”

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Ten hours later the same detective was at his desk, yawning while he struggled with his computer. It was a daily battle which he usually lost. He had typed up the report without any problems (a minor victory), but when he pushed *print*, nothing happened. No sheets were coughed out by the dusty printer; its green, “on” light silently mocking him. He pushed one button after another, causing the screen to change its view, but computer and printer conspired to deny him the report.

A younger man, sporting a neat brown Baroni suit, put his head into the office, strolled in, and patted the detective on the back.

“Hey, Jimmy. You got the Ghost Robber?”

Jimmy Northup sat back in his chair, combing his hands through his tightly curled, uncombed hair. Brown eyes, cradled by well pronounced curved bags, fixed on his partner, Al Morelli. In contrast, Morelli’s wavy hair was in perfect position. His smooth, handsome complexion, a product of eight dedicated hours of sleep every night, was more appropriate in a fashion magazine than on his photo ID declaring him a detective.

“Just a good guess, Al.” Jimmy went back to the computer and jabbed the ENTER button four times. “Stupid printer won’t print!”

“Damn it, Jimmy, stop pushing the keys. You know what your problem is? You gotta love the machine. You can’t be banging it like that. You gotta love it. The computer knows.”

“Yeah, well, I’d *love* to throw this piece of junk into the garbage. Get it to print, before I do just that.”

“Watch me again, old man...”

While they were going through the three-step process to print, Jimmy’s land line rang. Watching Al slide the mouse here and there and finally push the button, his report magically emerged from the printer. Even more angry, Jimmy picked up the phone. “What?”

“Hey, Northup, we got this guy you brought in, and he won’t give us shit! Just stares at us. Not saying anything. Been at it for three hours now.”

“Jesus, Sammy, I gotta tell you your job? Go to his house and search it. Start there. Talk to his old lady.”

“Yeah, hot shot detective, tell me my job. No license, no identification, not giving any home address. Nothing. Not even asking for an attorney. Nothing. Tom Smith, John Doe. Who the hell is he?”

## CHAPTER THREE

The small sign on the desk declared the woman to be Marie West, the assistant bank manager. Positioned across from Whit, wire-rimmed glasses clashed with cleavage far too revealing.

“Mr. Emerson, you included this flashy site on your automatic pays.”

“No, I definitely did not.”

After an exaggerated sigh, she continued. “Sir, your password is known only by you, not us.”

“But I never.” He closed his eyes and clenched his jaw. “So, the money is gone. Gone to those assholes.”

She shrugged. “Looks that way.”

“So, how much money do I have left in my account?”

She rolled her eyes. “Well, that’s another problem. You are, at this point, overdrawn.”

“What?”

“Yes, the \$3000 you withdrew yesterday.”

“I wasn’t here yesterday.”

“Yes, you were. Here’s the check.”

He scanned the computer screen. His handwriting showing a check for “cash.”

“It’s a forgery! Look, you must have security cameras. Check them.”

Ten minutes later, surrounded by the bank manager, a security officer, and a smug assistant bank manager, Whit watched a video from the day before where he withdrew the money.

“That’s not me. Can’t be.”

There was no response from the three bank workers.

Whit got up. “Look, I—I’ll get the funds out of my 401K. Tomorrow. Okay?”

The bank manager nodded.

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Red-faced and bewildered, Whit left the bank quickly. He stopped just outside the door and cocked his head. Barely audible over the din of the city street, he heard an odd whirring sound. He looked right and left but could not find the source. A few more steps down the sidewalk, and he heard it again. Whit looked back at the bank door. There, perched above the door, was a rectangular surveillance camera. He tilted his head, wondering. He side-stepped to the right. The camera followed him, the whirring noise coming from its motor. Like a metal hawk, it followed him as though he was some sort of rodent. Retreating to his car, he noted the camera had turned nearly parallel to the building trying to follow him up the street. Once inside the car, the camera reverted to its normal position.

His head slowly fell until it rested on the steering wheel. *What’s happening to me? Did I blank out and actually write that check? And where’s the money? Maybe I blanked out and ordered that porn shit. Oh, my God! I’m broke now and tapping into my retirement.*

Whit worked for the Rochester paper. Returning to the aged, gray monolith housing the newspaper, Whit noticed the security camera there also riveted on him. He stood outside for a few moments and watched others go in and out. The camera pointed only at him. He casually strolled to the left, stopped, and turned around. The camera had rotated to continue its “stare” at

him. *Odd. Must be a coincidence. God, I hope so. Either that or I'm bonkers.* Whit shook his head, walked back to the front door, while the camera whined its tiny motor to track him.

Once inside, his frown flipped to a grin as he greeted one person after another. An exceptional writer, the magazine industry was just beginning to appreciate his burgeoning talent. Recognizing his ability and, truth be told, his new fame, the Rochester newspaper raised him to the status of editor. The dubious distinction earned him a small office and access to a snack table in the editor's meeting room.

By midafternoon, Whit finished research on a local politician accused of real estate fraud. He found that the allegations were all unsubstantiated. For the next hour he carefully framed an article for submission and proofed it. His cursor arrow was right above the send button when he withdrew his hand from the mouse. The last few articles he sent to the senior editor were riddled with errors from spelling mistakes to grammatical faux pas which only a freshman college student would make. In fact, entire parts of the articles were sometimes missing. The newspaper's email system conspired with his computer to mangle his writing. It was embarrassing and frustrating. *One way to fix that.* He cradled his laptop into his arms and walked to the tech department in the basement.

Jerry Weber, computer tech extraordinaire was alone in his office, his back to the door, hunched over a computer screen.

"Hi, Jerry. How are things going?"

When his friend turned, Whit's eyes widened. Usually fastidiously neat and well dressed, the technician looked like he had been up all night. Jerry's hair was uncombed, his clothes were rumpled, and his eyes darted back and forth, never settling anywhere as though he was still looking for something.

"Jerry, are you alright?"

The man rubbed his eyes as though he was just waking and trying to forget a bad dream. "I'm ahh...ahh...just tied up with this problem now. What do you want?"

Whit cautiously approached the counter. Jerry's eyes darted from Whit's eyes to his computer. The computer technician backed a way as though Whit had brought him some vile creature. Jerry stared at the black box, his nostrils flared and breathing hard.

"Jerry?"

The computer technician pulled his eyes away from the computer and shook his head. "It's okay. I'm okay. What's the problem?"

"Trashes my documents when I send them via email."

Jerry nodded. And kept nodding like a miniature bobble-head.

Whit tried to divert his friend's attention from his particular black box. He pointed to the laptops on the back shelf.

"Jerry, I don't know how you get any of these machines to work. It's all a mystery..."

The man shook his head violently, eyes wide. He interrupted Whit. "No. No! That's not the problem. The problem is the damn things work."

Whit eased away from the counter. Jerry took a deep breath and ran his fingers through his hair, neatening it a bit.

"Whit, look, I'm sorry, buddy. I have a problem with computer problems." Then he laughed. "A problem with problems."

Whit's eyebrows narrowed.

"You mean you're confused the computers work after you fix them?"

Jerry reached across the counter and grabbed Whit's sleeve. "No! Whit I don't fix these things. They're fixing themselves."

The editor pried Jerry's hand from his arm. "Explain it slowly to me."

Jerry pointed to one of the computers on the back table. "Whit, all I do is connect the damn computer to the internet. Then something happens within a few seconds and the problem or problems are all fixed."

"Maybe that's not a bad thing, Jerry," Whit said gently.

"It's a problem if you can't figure out how it's being done. Something's screwy, Whit. Definitely screwy."

Whit worried his friend might be a bit "screwy."

"You must be doing something, Jerry. Do you know what they call you upstairs? The Computer Maestro."

Jerry smiled for a moment and then frowned. "But I'm not doing it. Don't you understand? I'm not doing anything anymore." After a deep breath, he focused on Whit again, the strained smile on his lips. "Alright. This is my problem. I'll figure it out." Jerry gave a great sigh and looked earnestly at his friend. "In the meantime, let's fix your little baby."

Whit described his problems while Jerry attached an electronic umbilical cord from his machine to Whit's laptop.

"Okay, Whit. I'll connect your computer to the web in here. Now watch."

Jerry didn't touch the keyboard or the mouse. The cursor raced across the screen and the screen flashed off. *Oh, great. Crashed my laptop with all my articles on it and not backed up.* As soon as Whit finished his thought the home screen reappeared, the scattered files now neatly placed in various categories.

"Try sending me a copy of the article, Whit."

Whit maneuvered the mouse into position and a few seconds later he hit the send button. Jerry, in turn, went to his mail box and downloaded Whit's file and printed it. There were no mistakes.

"See? Fixed and with zero moves from... What do they call me? The Maestro."

"But, a few minutes ago..."

Jerry laughed. "Yeah, tell me about it. Crazy, huh?"

Jerry was still laughing as Whit walked away.