

# **FATAL SCORE**

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# ONE

“SO YOU’RE THE DUMBASS.”

The woman plopped into the booth across from Joe Mayfield. The bite of over-easy egg halfway to his mouth dripped a spot of yolk on his pants.

“Pardon me?”

He set down his fork and tried for an offhand smile, which he knew came off closer to a rictus. He had watched her enter, out of place here in North Dakota farm country. She was tall, not quite stick-thin. She wore cargo shorts, an MIT T-shirt and an untamed mop of chestnut hair. Certainly not the thug he’d watched for since he ditched Big Louie and Snake back in Florida.

“Plenty of people think I’m a dumbass. You’re the first person to say it to my face.”

The woman grinned and picked up a menu.

The diner was warm with the smell of bacon and coffee in thick cups served with honest-to-god cream. Forks clicked against plates and conversation flowed, a pleasant backdrop punctuated by an occasional laugh. The early crowd was finishing up now, people standing, nodding to friends, leaving. Not the place he expected to be caught.

Joe’s pulse slowed toward normal.

No way this was official. Florida Consolidated Energy

wouldn't send someone to North Dakota. Particularly not a pretty woman who looked barely old enough to buy beer, must shop at Goodwill, and hadn't met a hairbrush in a couple days. Neither would the FBI.

She turned her attention from the menu to Joe, big brown eyes serious. "I've been tracking you and your avatars ever since New Orleans," she said with a shake of her head. "This RazorBlue website thing you're doing? A great idea, but every time you add to the blog, you show your position. Pretty easy to connect the dots. You must know that. And that old guzzler you're driving? With the Louisiana plate? I suppose you might have been easier to spot if you had a tractor with wings, but not much."

She tilted her head, examining him like a specimen in a science experiment. "I don't expect you to open right up, Joe, or should I call you Mr. Mayfield?" she paused, but continued before Joe could answer, "or Sarcosy? John Maxwell, maybe? Or Chester Burnell or Stevie Ray Morse? They're your avatars, right?"

She'd traced his avatars? After all that work? His breakfast turned leaden in his stomach.

"Who are you?"

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves, Joe. If you need something more than 'Hey, you,' call me Weezy. But, to answer your question, I'm either your worst nightmare or your last best hope. That's why you have to start at the beginning and tell me what you're doing and why."

Her look softened. "You're a smart guy. What you have done so far is way beyond what most hackers achieve. But consider: I know your real name. I know your wife Cynthia died in February.

Ovarian cancer, I think it was. I know you used to work for Florida Consolidated. I know you've been on the Yak, rotating through those avatars I mentioned." She ticked off each point as she made it.

"You checked into the Florida Consolidated network last week as Nicolas Sarkozy. Clever, to spell it wrong. Then you hit it again yesterday as Stevie Ray." She cocked her head. "French politics and blues music, huh?"

Joe felt like a skunk must feel staring into the headlights of an oncoming semitrailer, strongly inclined to spray.

"It almost worked," she continued, "but the Yak firewall is sophisticated. You established a pattern, I recognized it, and here I am."

She shrugged. "I don't know why you're driving around the countryside. I don't fully understand why you stuck your nose into Florida Consolidated medical records. You're either just plain nuts or onto something."

She slapped the menu closed.

"My regular go-to-the-office-and-get-paid-for-it job back at IAC headquarters ... the Yak ... is to protect the national database from people like you. I may be here to help you. I don't know that yet, because ever since CyberWar One, it's a federal crime to hack the Yak. But you know that, don't you?"

She pursed her lips, waiting. Joe's thoughts were a tangle of questions, piling on each other, whirling toward nowhere. Finally, she gave a little puff of irritation.

"While you think about how to be forthcoming with me, I'm going to order breakfast."

She looked over her shoulder at the waitress, who eyed them from behind the counter. “Ma’am, I’m ready to order.”

The waitress smiled at Joe as she approached. They had bantered about nothing much a few minutes earlier. She took the woman’s order for the American breakfast with eggs scrambled, bacon, toast, hash browns and a piece of apple pie. To Joe’s raised eyebrows, this woman who called herself Weezy said, “Well, the pie looks delicious. Besides, this place has real food. I was brought up on real food. Now I live in the D.C. metroplex. I can get fast food, or something lumpy and glutinous a vegan thinks is good for the environment, or a fifty-dollar meal with a foreign name served with an attitude. Hard to find real food where I live.”

The waitress brought pie and coffee. She looked at Weezy warily and said, “Breakfast’s coming up.”

Joe told himself to look unconcerned, overcome the fear, and assess the situation. He picked up a triangle of toast, realized his hand was shaking, quickly set it down. So much for unconcerned. But was this real or some distraction to get him to ... what? Run? Confide? Give up? She knew about his hack of Florida Consolidated, but maybe not the details. The reference to IAC might be a red herring. But why not have him arrested? Or send out Snake and Big Louie to finish their work?

He drew himself up into what he hoped was an authoritative posture.

“Alright, Weezy. I don’t know you, and I don’t know what you’re talking about. I did work for Florida Consolidated for almost fourteen years. An exemplary employee until suddenly, I wasn’t. My wife’s dead.” A hitch in his throat. “My life’s gone to hell.”

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He stopped to draw a slow breath.

Her face was unreadable.

“Let me ask you ... have you ever lost somebody you love? Ever wondered what to do with the rest of your life when most of what you care about is taken away?”

Weezy’s mouth was taut, but her eyes seemed to reflect his pain.

“Until a couple of weeks ago, I was on a trip my wife had always hoped to take up the Blues Highway in Mississippi, visiting places where the music she loved was born.”

He got up from the booth.

“All I know about you makes me think Florida Consolidated has decided to indulge in more harassment of a former employee. You need to stop threatening me.”

He gave her a look he hoped was intimidating.

“I will leave you now to enjoy your breakfast.”

Weezy spoke around a mouthful of pie. “Yes. Well, you did hack the Yak.”

Joe turned toward the door.

“Sorry about your wife.”

A wall of rage stopped him like a big hand slammed to his chest. He turned, choking on his words. “Pardon me?”

She froze. He retraced his steps, leaned down, face close to hers.

“You’re sorry about my wife? My wife! Listen, you tell

whatever fucking bureaucrat you report to back at whatever the hell agency you really work for that the fine folks at Florida Consolidated can think whatever they want, but you bastards killed my beautiful—” Tears flowed. “My beautiful Cynthia.” He continued in a hoarse whisper. “If you want to do something to me, just do it. Go write your report. Send out your bozo security guys. Let them erase me like they promised. They scared me the first time, but not anymore.”

He drew a ragged breath.

“It’s not what you think,” Weezy said. “Don’t walk out.”

Joe straightened up, jaws working to bite off a response. He turned, went to the counter and slapped down three tens. The door complained as he shoved it open.

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Weezy watched Joe Mayfield cross the street to an ancient, dark green Honda Element, get in and drive away too fast.

Elbows on the table, she massaged her forehead. She had been so confident when she asked for the travel chit back in Bethesda. After all, she had studied Mayfield backward and forward. He was smart, and his dossier pointed to a happy, reasonable man. She had no doubt that logic and humor, spiced with a little of her trademark sarcasm, would prevail.

When she entered the diner, she had recognized him right away. Handsome, or close to it. Dark hair, receding a bit. Big but not imposing. Denim shirt, sleeves rolled up. Pretty much the same as the pictures in the dossier. When she sat down across from him, she started with her patented snappy repartee—intimidate him, then

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turn on the quirky charm. It worked most of the time, but here, she realized she hadn't factored in what happened since those carefree pictures were taken. Now there was pain, anger, and loneliness in his eyes.

And she blew it, got defensive.

She stared out the window, taking in the little town. Hand-written advertisements for chicken feed and antifreeze taped in the dusty window of the hardware store across the street, "Available" signs in empty storefronts. Old and tired. Maybe this whole project was a mistake. Maybe this man had become more than a case of a moderately capable hacker whose mission made no sense.

The waitress brought breakfast, setting it in front of her too firmly.

"The guy paid," she sniffed, turned and returned to her post at the end of the counter.

Weezy ate. She chewed and swallowed, thinking over the situation. Finally, she pulled an e-pad from a pocket in her shorts, found a phone number, and tapped out a message.

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Joe kept his anger bottled up until he hit the edge of town. Then he jammed the accelerator to the floor. The four-cylinder engine groaned.

He read somewhere that the uncontrollable physical response to anger—the adrenaline rush, the ringing in the ears, the heightened sensory awareness that makes everything seem to move in slow motion—is purely chemical and lasts for ninety seconds. The rest is all on you. Joe welcomed the anger that rose up hot and

nearly choked him. He replayed the conversation with the Weezy, jumping back to scraps and phrases from the officious denials by the insurance company, the smarmy bullshit about what Cynthia would or wouldn't have wanted and the threats from Snake and Big Louie at his 'exit interview.'

A ring. A friendly synthesized female voice said, "Phone 3 wants your attention." *What?* All four phones were in vibrate mode. They were generic disposables he bought in Florida, Alabama, Mississippi and Minnesota. Phone 3 was registered to his avatar John Maxwell. No privacy settings without giving out too much information. As a result, each day brought a dozen or more ads on each phone claiming to have latched on to some personal preference. He needed to stay sweet and clean, shave effortlessly, save energy, have a chance for free intercity passes to Spokane/LA/Butte, enjoy a happiness massage, meet someone wonderful. A pause, then from the phone, "John Maxwell, you have a message."

Joe pulled off the road and got out. A wheat field stretched west. Redwing blackbirds argued in the distance. Through the warmth of morning, the earthy scent of summer. Wouldn't it be nice just to enjoy it? Wouldn't it be beautiful to be on this road, in this place, with Cynthia?

Phone 3's text said: One more chance. Lake Morain Park, 10 miles west of town. Second entrance, picnic area. I'll go there and wait 15. Otherwise, I upload my report & go home.

Joe muttered Damn under his breath, turned back to the car, and reached into the front seat for the ditty bag. He shut off the phones. His gut told him to go silent and get away, keep moving.

One foot in the car, he hesitated, thinking. He'd made a habit

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of studying maps of places he passed through in case he needed to make a quick exit. If he continued west, it was forty miles with no major crossroad. She had tracked him to Underhill, could probably do it again. He imagined the road ahead, wheat and soybean fields, farmhouses every mile or so.

It wouldn't be hard to run him down. If he were to disappear, life would be easier for them. Maybe that was it. This Weezy was trying to lure him to some place they could erase him like they promised.

He checked over his shoulder. Nothing.

But if she was who she said she was ...

A line of Robert Johnson's "Cross Road Blues" that Cynthia loved looped in his mind. He was at a cross road, too. He looked back toward town. Run some more? Or face down the evil he had found?

The song wound through his mind, Johnson's tenor carrying a tinge of fear.

He shivered.

Was Cynthia calling him? What would she want him to do?

He blew out a long breath and got into the Element.