

Maker Messiah

by Ed Miracle

Prologue

BATTLE MOUNTAIN, NEVADA. THURSDAY, APRIL 4. ADVENT MINUS SEVEN YEARS.

Philip Machen sat on a rocky ledge of the great Nevada nowhere and turned up the collar of his pea coat. Since midnight, a bully wind had dashed fat clouds against the mountain, smacking the lightning out of a few but releasing no rain. Beyond the glow of his computer screen the tempest howled, impatient and buffeting. A dazzle flashed and was swallowed by darkness, as time had swallowed his moments.

Just because your math is solid doesn't mean you can do this.

Philip nodded at the memory of his father reading his son's precious equations and not seeing what they really meant. Leonard Machen, part-time philosopher, full-time math teacher, should have helped him back then, but he died a week later. *Dad should be here, too.*

Across the ledge raced a four-legged skitter.

"I have a secret," Philip called after it.

The skitter stopped, terrified by his voice or puffed with reptilian contempt. *My rock.*

"Okay," Philip said. "But we're in this together, live or die."

The lizard responded with pushups. *My rock.*

Philip tossed a pebble at it. "Take cover, Old Shoe."

Because it was time to poke the universe, to push the big red button and shatter his stuckness. The blast he was about to unleash might vaporize half of Nevada. Or collapse to a singularity that would burrow through Lander County and devour the earth from beneath his feet. What a vision that would be.

His equations predicted three mutually exclusive possibilities; one would kill everything for five miles around; one would swallow the Earth before plunging its remains into the Sun; and one would change the world for everyone. So his hopes for the evening—maybe his last—lay in the third prospect. If that outcome prevailed, his moments would continue, and the lizard could keep its rock.

Should the attempt fail, however, if the blast produced noise and debris but no quantum effects, his future would die with the echo. Then he would erase his equations, expunge them from every medium, and dispose of himself. Without a way forward, there could be no advent, no Philip Machen worth keeping, and stuckness would prevail.

The sky flashed again, bright and close. He poised a finger over the icon on his screen. Tonight he would succeed for all time or fail forever. Thunder cracked and rolled away. His flinch sent the signal: Begin, begin.

Half a mile north, at the bottom of a deserted pit mine, a circuit closed and two cylinders the size of rail cars detonated. Shock waves imploded the carbon sphere stationed between the cars, as flash channels pumped gamma rays into its collapsing heart. For a fraction of a second, pressures and temperatures exceeded those of the solar core. The genius part came next.

Seeded by a gumball of depleted uranium, and charged by intense radiation, nuclear reactions multiplied the forces, generating quantum fluctuations at their center and forming not one but two entities never observed in nature. Microscopic and invisible, separate yet coupled, these quantum effects should have flashed to pure energy in mutual annihilation or collapsed to a singularity that would destroy the Earth. Yet they could not. Conforming to fractal twists of space-time inherent to their ten-dimensional geometries, they embraced ferociously, but could not merge. They whirled mightily, but could not escape. Hyper-geometrically, each entity fell continuously through the other. While their frantic tango consumed just enough mass to make up for dimensional boundary losses, as Philip predicted. In twelve milliseconds the imprisoned pair became the first quantum duplex.

The flash from its birth turned the desert wedding-cake-white, brilliant even through closed

eyes. His rocky ledge heaved Philip off balance, while stones and dust rained from above.

Holy shit. Not his favorite expression, but . . . *Damn.*

When he could see again, the ruckus had stolen his laptop, abducted it down some crevice, though there was no time for a search. If the duplex had formed as he hoped, they needed to stabilize it right away. He had plans for that, but the darned thing might wink out of existence before they reached it. Or explode. Quantum freaking dynamics.

He brushed his coat, buffed his scalp, and hurried to the tow truck. Tanner and Uncle Orin would drive their rig down from the west rim, while he would enter from the south. If either access was blocked, they hoped the other would remain passable, and that the duplex would not be too heavy, or too radioactive.

An icy dawn was blotting shadows from the mine when they unearthed the product of their labors. Centered on the steel crash plate intended to support it lay a crystalline lump of diamond the size of a tennis ball, a perfect jewel-cradle for the newborn duplex. Its radiations were low-level betas, no gammas or neutrons, so Philip laid a cable mesh beside it on the plate. Then his uncle and his best friend helped him lever the glassy black sphere onto the mesh. As they hoisted it clear, a strain gauge rendered its verdict: 717 pounds.

Philip stopped the winch and sank to his knees. Swaying at the end of a taut chain, the black diamond's unnatural mass affirmed every lonely moment he had endured to create it. From the exhausted grip of what must be, he had prised the first breath of what could be. Tonight was not an irrecoverable end. It was the beginning for which he yearned. His equations worked. Their possibilities had beaten their probabilities, and his duplex was no longer a mathematical curiosity. It was here. It was real. It was his.

One touch of its obsidian face and the anguish of his twenty-seven years sloughed away. He inspected the veins of his hands, as he had the night his family was murdered. Flesh and bones are made of stardust his father used to say, from thirteen-point-seven-billion-year-old protons and

electrons, bequeathed to us through our parents' love.

No matter what lay ahead for him now—destruction or glory—he had confirmed his vows and bound himself to their consequences. There could be no turning back. He straightened and stood. If success were the best revenge, his would be perfect. Lizards, especially, would be amazed.

Chapter 1

SEVEN YEARS LATER, TRACY, CALIFORNIA, SATURDAY, APRIL 18. MAKER ADVENT, DAY ONE.

On the night of Philip Machen's world-wide announcement, twenty-two-year-old Everett Aboud threaded his motorcycle between the ranks of taillights descending herd-like into California's Central Valley. The herd bunched and surged as Everett passed among them, numb to the cold, yet hyper-alert. One distracted driver might cancel his choreography, but splitting lanes on his way home from work was the best he'd felt all day. He was making thirty-miles-an-hour, versus twenty for the herd, eastbound over the sagging shoulders of Altamont Pass. Eight more miles in fourteen minutes brought him to a swath of tract houses, tile-roofed kudzu spreading outward from the old valley town of Tracy. Then finally home to a peeling white clapboard he and his father rented in a neighborhood of tall trees, wooden porches, and detached garages.

He parked beside the sentinel of their barren flowerbeds, a stone-quiet Powerpod. Waist-high and loaf-shaped, the white, ceramic monolith could have formed the base for a monument or a statue. Except for three saucer-sized disks bolted to its front, its back, and its top. Moisture dripped from the eaves overhead, emphasizing its silence.

Everett stretched and flexed, removed his helmet, and shook out his ebony hair. Johnny Mathis on a motorcycle, the boss's wife had called him this morning. A singer, not a biker, he learned, so he took it as a compliment. He might resemble someone who had actually made a difference.

He stomped through the back door into a stale potpourri of cigarette butts, gun oil, and powder

solvent. Used cleaning patches littered the kitchen counter between two antique revolvers his father, Bobby, never fired but had lately been trying to sell. In the living room, Bobby was collecting dead Budweisers from the sofa. He wasn't drunk, but the smell was on him. The first time too many Budweisers had punched Everett in the mouth, ten years ago, was the start of calling his father Bobby instead of Dad.

"There's a guy coming from Stockton tomorrow about those Colts," Bobby said. "And I made a hundred dollars lumping furniture for Dario."

"That'll help." Everett peeled off his riding leathers and hung them in the laundry. "General paid me in cash."

His father, clad in habitual denim, came into the light. "I should go over there and thank him personally."

This was Everett's first week at General Johnson's Shoes-for-You in Oakland, a forty-eight-mile commute from Tracy. The job was temporary, but with the rent due Tuesday, he and Bobby needed the money.

"Remember that hulking box of parts we got?" Bobby opened the refrigerator and removed two bottles. "The junk that Powerpods Company has been sending to people who didn't order it? They're making an announcement tonight on the internet. Supposed to be a big deal."

Why would anyone care? "Spaghetti all right with you, Pop?"

"Sure." Bobby decapped a beer and sipped. "You want to watch the announcement?"

"I need to check my email." One of his long-shot resumes might snag another interview.

Bobby shrugged, held out the second bottle.

"No thanks," Everett said. "I'm flying tomorrow."

"Did you get a charter?"

"Just an hour with a student." For which he might clear thirty bucks. He moved past Bobby to the drawer where they kept their cash. He fished his wages from a pocket and stuffed all but a single

twenty into the rent envelope. “We’re two hundred short.”

Bobby nodded, cleared his mess from the counter. His thick gray mane shifted against his collar as he dumped an ashtray. Smoker’s wrinkles like Bobby’s would never crease Everett’s face, and he hoped to stay as trim and muscular when he reached fifty. But it was clear his father’s fate could easily become his own: lurching from one shaky, no-benefits job to the next, reduced to odd jobs and day labor. It wasn’t supposed to be this way.

Flying was supposed to be a career, not a supplement. Three years ago, Bobby sold his heating and air conditioning business in Oakland and moved inland for the lower rents, just to finance Everett’s dream. But the investment wasn’t paying off. More than a year had passed since Everett graduated from an expensive flying school in Florida where he flew every day and loved every minute. Except for seaplanes and jumbos, he could pilot anything with wings. Yet flying jobs were as scarce as others, so he took students and occasional charters from the service at Stockton. Between engagements, he launched resumes at every airline and charter outfit in North America and rode long distances to interviews that came to nothing. Probably because his name—*Aboud*—remained suspect, automatically an Arab, potentially a terrorist, even though he was third-generation Lebanese-American, not a Muslim. At least tomorrow the automatic Arab could fly.

Bobby set the table then switched on the video screen. “Here we go.”

Up on the wall screen, a sturdy blond teenager strolled through a rose garden wearing a sleeveless yellow blouse and a cheerleader’s grin. She approached a familiar white boulder the size and shape of a steamer trunk: a Powerpod. Six years of upbeat marketing and they still looked like tombstones.

“We have exciting news for all Powerpod owners,” she said.

Everett filled a saucepan with water and set it on the stove.

“A new paradigm that will change your life.” Nothing to buy. Blah, blah, blah. “You must see Philip Machen, Saturday, April 18, at 9:00 p.m. for the most amazing demonstration of your life. Got

power? Get Powerpods.”

A countdown clock appeared at the corner of the screen, while *Mock-en* rattled through Everett’s head. Philip *Machen*, the millionaire inventor of Powerpods, never gave interviews, never spoke publicly. When President Washburn hung that medal around his neck last year, the guy said, “Thank you,” then returned to his cave, or wherever he lived, a place the paparazzi with all their cameras could not find.

The screen displayed PhilipMachen.com and played elevator music, which Bobby muted. “Ten minutes to go,” he said.

Everett boiled water and fed noodles into the pot. *How could a stupid commercial change anything?* In another pan, he stirred spicy red sauce with a wooden spoon and tasted it—tomato, basil, oregano.

“So what do you think, Son?”

“Who cares?” More than fatigue weighted his voice.

“You know,” Bobby said, “we can make it on day-labor and help from friends like General Johnson, but not if we had to pay for electricity. Having that Pod is saving our butts.”

“You were afraid of them.”

“Yeah, there’s something weird about sucking electricity out of tiny bits of tap water,” Bobby said, “but nobody’s getting zapped or polluted. If the rest of the world worked as good as Powerpods, we wouldn’t be stuck in this damn recession, that’s for sure.”

Everett dumped boiling noodles into a colander and hoped Bobby wasn’t warming to a Dad-lecture. Bobby lived in a world of manifest duties and summary order, from which he imparted his judgments, no extra charge. Everett ladled sauce over a plate of noodles.

“Here you go, Bobby.”

As usual, they ate in silence, until the screen came back to life and Bobby un-muted it. Everett expected another episode of the Powerpods commercial, featuring a guy cutting a Pod in half with a

giant chop saw to prove it contained nothing hazardous. This time a smooth-faced white guy with skinny arms and wispy blond hair gazed at them, eager to begin. His flowing white shirt stood open at the collar, sleeves rolled—a pale academic trying to look manly. Except for his eyes, which seemed to draw the light out of the sky and reflect it back, brighter. Ghosts would have eyes that gray.

“Hello. My name is Philip Machen. What I am about to show you is going to change your life, and mine, forever.”

“See,” Bobby said. Everett stabbed the last of his noodles.

“In this introduction, I will show you a Maker and demonstrate it. In the next segment, I will show you how to convert your Powerpod into a Maker, to begin making things you need or enjoy.”

Everett carried his plate to the sink.

“In later segments . . .” The ghost cleared his throat. “I will describe some of the changes we can expect Makers to bring, and why you should use your Maker to secure your family in a new and universal prosperity. My webpage and the free Cambiar net-phones I sent to every Powerpod owner contain complete documentation, including a Maker guidebook.”

Infomercials sucked, but a movement caught Everett’s attention.

A darker man with hairy arms rolled a Powerpod, still on its delivery cart, to Machen’s side. The modifications were bizarre. From the Pod’s two broadest sides and from its top, fluted metal cones protruded at right angles. About a meter in depth and diameter, each jet-black cone tapered to a saucer-sized flange, bolted to the Pod. Hinged metal doors covered the wide ends of the cones. Stadium speakers, it seemed, sprouting from a fat, white tombstone.

“This is our prototype, the world’s first Maker. It makes perfect duplicates of anything that fits into its chambers.” Machen smiled like a kid with a frog in his pocket.

Bobby blew across the top of his bottle, producing a soft hoot.

“Big deal. It’s a 3-D printer.”

Everett waved for silence. This wasn’t the usual Powerpods spiel. On-screen, the hairy arms

passed a garden hose to Machen, who lifted a top-cone cover and directed a stream of water into it.

“Any material which fits in the upper chamber can be used, but water may be the handiest. Consider this water to be the raw material from which you will make your copies. Your raw material does not have to be water or even a liquid. It could be any sort of scrap, from lawn trimmings to sewage, to common dirt. The imperative restriction is that the mass of the raw material in the upper chamber must always be greater than the mass of any item you wish to copy.”

“Mass?” Bobby peered down the neck of his bottle.

Everett snatched the remote and increased the volume.

The upper cone overflowed, splashing Machen, who ducked too late and threw the hose aside. He opened a side-cone door. The camera zoomed to reveal a wire shelf spanning the interior. Machen unclasped his wristwatch, held it to show a twitching second hand, and laid the watch on the shelf.

“Place your original item in one of the copy chambers. It doesn’t matter which side, except the opposite chamber must always be empty.” He shut the door and reached between the cones to the Powerpod.

“Then you press the green button.”

Hairy Arms retrieved a second watch from the opposite chamber, while Machen removed his original. They held them to show identical straps and faces with perfectly synchronized minute, hour, and second hands.

Everett stared. *How could this not be a trick?*

“You may copy anything that fits in the chambers,” Machen said, “so long as there is sufficient raw material in your upper cone.”

Hairy Arms brought out an old-fashioned, boom-box stereo. One arm steadied the box on a table while the other pressed a running circular saw against it. With a whine and a screech, it lopped off a jagged corner, leaving the case splintered. Hairy placed this wounded artifact into one of the cones and shut the doors.

Again, Machen pressed his button. The emergent stereos were identical in every visible respect including their ripped edges.

“Wonder how they do that,” Bobby said.

Everett shushed him. If anyone could do the impossible, it would be the guy who had already conjured electricity from artificial boulders.

Next, Machen and his assistant copied the circular saw, followed by a baguette of French bread, a plate of fish, and a wicker tray of fruits and vegetables. Holding up a tiny white speck, Machen waited for the camera to focus on it.

“From a single grain of wheat or rice, anyone with a Maker can feed a city. Copy one grain and you have two. Copy two grains and you have four. Within an hour, you could fill a truck.”

Machen produced a toad in a red-wire cage and placed the cage in one of the cones. A close-up showed the amphibian panting and blinking.

“Never,” he said, “never try to copy a living animal. This means *any* animal. Your Maker will kill it.” He pressed the button. Two cages emerged, each containing a collapsed, motionless toad.

“At the molecular level these toads are identical, but they are both dead. Nothing with a nervous system can survive duplication. If your children try to copy a pet, the pet will die. This is very important. Children must never play with your Maker. In particular, they must never play hiding games in the cones. Maker cones should be locked shut when not in use. Please be careful with living things.”

Everett’s stomach churned.

“Duplicate toads,” Bobby said through a belch. He held his bottle at arm’s length, swirled it by the neck. “Didn’t think I drank that much.”

Machen strolled to a bigger Maker. This one’s side-cones exceeded his height, and the towering top-cone, supported by steel struts, cast a shadow. Nestled between the cones, a central Powerpod was jacked waist high.

“As you can see, larger items may be copied by extending the size of the chambers. Among the

first things you will want to copy is a friend's Powerpod, along with the cone segments he will need to turn it into a Maker. Copy as many Pods and cones as you wish, and share them with your friends. Ask them to do the same. In this way, you will help ensure that everyone who wants a Powerpod or a Maker will have one. It will cost you nothing but the effort to do it." He backed from the machine and faced the camera.

"Then together, you and I will eliminate poverty and scarcity for all time."

Everett froze. His limbic brain, beneath the conscious one, locked every motor impulse against a tectonic shift that it alone detected. Hairy Arms rolled a second Powerpod into view, and Everett held his breath. The narration faded. Hairy jacked his Powerpod chest-high and set a bridge into one of the big side cones. He aligned the rails and shoved a twelve-hundred-pound Powerpod into the chamber. Only when Machen leaned between the struts to press his green button did Everett breathe again. Thump, a boulder falling on moss. Then Machen and his assistant extracted two identical Powerpods.

Everett stood. "If that thing is real . . ."

Machen continued, his ghost-eyes blazing.

"Just as a lens splits and rejoins patterns of light, Makers split and rejoin patterns of mass and energy. $E=mc^2$. The mass-equivalent energy of the item being copied is drawn into folded dimensions within the machine where an equal mass-equivalent energy is drawn from the raw material in the top cone. The Maker splits these energies between the two receptor chambers to form perfect duplicates—all in the wink of an eye.

"While a full description of this process requires some advanced mathematics, I assure you there is nothing mystical or supernatural about it. It only looks like magic."

His half-smile blossomed into a grin.

"Makers are not about making more stuff. They are about getting stuff out of our way. As Maker owners convert their goods into free commodities, they will free us to focus our compassion and humanity on improving the world. For the first time, Makers will allow us to—"

Everett wielded the remote to skip the baloney. “Where’s the part about setting it up?”

“You going to build one?” Bobby set down his bottle.

Everett found a menu and clicked *Assemble Your Maker*. A training video commenced, and they viewed the first part, learned how to attach the cones. When the voice went on about extending the cones to build a larger Maker, Everett switched it off.

“Do we have—”

“Still in the crate, behind the garage.” Bobby spoke with his fist against his mouth. “I was going to throw them away.”

Everett strode toward the door, and Bobby rushed to catch up.

“Do you suppose this thing is for real?” Bobby said. “I mean, if we can copy the copy machine, how will that guy make any money?”

Everett stopped to glare at him.

“Bobby, nobody’s going to make toads or wristwatches.”

“Holy cow.” Realization flowed into Bobby’s rheumy eyes. “Everybody’s got one, everybody’s going to get one, and everybody’s going to make . . . money.”

They unpacked the parts and lugged them to their Powerpod. Working in the glow of a fluorescent drop light, they assembled and attached the small cones, then filled the top one with water. First, they tried Bobby’s wallet.

When Everett pressed the green button, the machine thumped softly, and the house lights blinked. As the droplight flickered back to life, he extracted two identical wallets containing duplicate cards, identical driving licenses, and two wads of currency. They sat on the damp grass, comparing Federal Reserve Notes: three sets of fives, a pair of tens, and a pair of twenties.

After a moment Bobby couldn’t decide. “Which are the real ones?”

Without a word, Everett got up and slipped into the house. He returned with Bobby’s favorite pistol—a semi-automatic, still in its holster—and stuffed it in the machine.

“Stand back, Dad. It might cook off the ammo.”

Bobby scrambled as Everett pressed the button. A louder thump. Again the lights blinked. Identical holsters and pistols emerged, right down to the worn bluing, the scratches, the serial numbers. Even the smell. Disbelieving, Everett hefted one in each hand.

“Son . . . of . . . a . . . bitch.”

Then Everett Aboud, the automatic Arab, pointed his father’s pistols at the lawn and pulled both triggers. The double blast woke every dog in the neighborhood.

Chapter 2

“Gimme those.” Bobby grabbed the guns, leaving Everett to stare at his empty hands. “What did you do that for? Get inside. Quick.” Bobby yanked the drop light and ran. Everett followed. Inside, they rushed from room to room, turning off the lights. When the dogs quieted down, and nobody came knocking, Bobby said, “Well, that was stupid.”

Everett went to his room. Bobby always said playing with guns will get you seriously killed, and Everett agreed, but he wasn’t playing out there in the yard. He pulled those triggers on purpose. Something didn’t make sense. Something was wrong. Yet those ear-splitting reports, those blinding flashes, the sting that lingered in his hands, they were real. Those pistols weren’t just lumps of steel, inert and heavy, devoid of consequence. They fired, serious as could be.

Everett lay on his bed and pressed his toes to the wall, tried to stop the buzz in his hands from migrating to his head, knowing it was too late. Already, an old lyric presented itself. “Things as they are Are changed upon a blue guitar.” Instant copies meant instant stuff. Just stuff. More of the junk we already have. Some freaky machine generates confusion and stuff. *Now that’s stupid.* But it didn’t quell the buzz tattooing his skull from the inside.

He drew a pillow over his head. Too much thinking made his head hurt. He breathed a hundred

slow breaths until he sagged into an old familiar dream.

Once again, irresistible gravity pinned him to a dusty rug of the old house in Oakland. Once again, he was ten years old, flexing skinny fingers, unable to release the weight they held. No amount of wiggling would rid his hand of that ugly Colt .45 pistol. Involuntarily, he strained for its trigger. For the hundredth time he watched the hammer snap, a fireball erupt, and the top of the Colt flick back like a steel cobra. *Boom*. Once again, his mother rushed into the room, her muffled cries and frantic waves stirring the cordite stink. Once again, a softball-size gap appeared in his sister's bassinet, and the wall was spattered red.

“What did you do?” his mother screeched. “What did you do?”

Her wails sucked the air from the room and out of his lungs. His chest refused to rise. Flattened, he waited for the buzz to stifle his booming pulse. High above, his mother leaned over the crib and wailed. “What did you do?”

Everett blinked awake, choked on a burlap tongue. It didn't happen that way. His guilt was real, but the nightmare was false. The bullet passed into the ceiling that day, never touching his baby sister. Yet the next morning his mother stood on the porch of their old house and told him, “Choose me or choose your father.” He didn't understand. He was ten years old and he didn't want to choose. When he said nothing, she took Melinda and departed for Canada. Remembering that day, fresh as a slap, made him gasp all over again. It was the same buzz.

Something beyond his control or understanding demanded a response. Only this time he was supposed to know what to do. But he didn't, so he drew the covers over his head and waited for the buzz to fade. *Why did the world have to change before he'd found his place in it?*

#

Sunday morning, Everett rose before Bobby and retrieved his Cambiar internet phone from the laundry. It came free in the mail a month ago, no fees or charges, from the same people who shipped those Maker cones.

He turned it on and scrolled through his email. Nothing from Montana Skies, where he interviewed three weeks ago. They might still respond. Midway Aero in Chicago liked his resume but had no openings. Don't call us, we'll call you. Buster's Dusters said they wouldn't consider him without experience-in-type, meaning 500 hours in a Turbo AgCat. So much for crop dusting out of Fresno. And the last note, sent by his student pilot, canceled their session this morning without asking to reschedule. *Damn.*

Bobby shuffled through the kitchen in his underwear.

"Too bad you're flying," he said. "Winter finals start today."

"Well, my eight o'clock just canceled, so how much is it worth to you?"

Bobby smirked. "You're not that good, kid."

"Oh yeah? I haven't shot trap since we left Oakland, but I can still knock clay birds better than anyone at your club."

"Yeah? Prove it."

Everett rubbed two fingers with a thumb.

Bobby feigned disgust. "Top score buys doughnuts," he said.

"No wonder you guys can't shoot. That's reverse incentive. You gotta reward the talent, Old Man. You gotta pay."

Bobby raised his hands, defeated. "Okay, I'll spring for doughnuts, but only if you break ninety-five."

"You really need the points, don't you. Did any of your guys shoot a ninety-five all season?"

"Like I said, we could use some help."

"I'm expecting a call from an Italian actress. We might go to her place."

Bobby laughed, indulged the fantasy. "Hey, if I can shoot with a hangover, you can shoot with lover's nuts."

Laughing felt so good, Everett made a counter-offer.

“You help me with my engine this afternoon, and I’ll carry your cross-eyed team.”

He was rebuilding a Honda four-cylinder to replace the one on his bike, partly to save money and partly for the experience. Motorcycle engines mimicked their aviation cousins, so if he found work with some fixed-base operator in Outer Podunk, knowing the tools and the skills would come in handy. Also, an ironclad rule of the Aboud household was no booze while handling weapons or tools, so here was a chance to wean Bobby off the alcohol for a while.

By the time they arrived at the gun club, the strangeness of the previous night had gone. No one under the overcast sky spoke about Makers, or copying money, or duplicating pistols. Bobby’s team was happy to see him, as if nothing had happened. As if everyone had missed Philip Machen’s announcement and had not yet done the impossible.

Bobby sold ten boxes of twelve-gauge reloads. Everett shot a ninety-six, earning his doughnut, and everyone grinned and slapped his back. Their team, The Hardly Ables, won the match.

As lunchtime came, Everett and Bobby returned to their backyard, still wary from the night before. Now they were the neighborhood weirdos, the troglodytes with machinery despoiling the lawn. They copied food and ate it, and Bobby fetched a six-pack. Bottles copied from the fridge emerged cold from the Maker, so he tasted one.

“Not bad for homemade,” he said, smacking his lips.

Everett munched a cloned Oreo. “You can have your cookies and eat them too.” He grinned like a fourth-grader, showing off his black-and-white teeth. Afterward, Bobby copied his antique pistols, twice.

“We could start a business,” he said, “and never run out of stock.”

Everett’s rebuilt engine was too big to fit into the small cones, so they spent two hours assembling extensions and erecting a full-sized Maker. By the time they wrestled identical motors out of the cast-aluminum caverns, the afternoon was fading, and Everett decided to postpone his engine swap. Tomorrow he might copy the whole bike. This idea pleased him so much he took one of Bobby’s

beers and slouched in a lawn chair beside him. They'd done enough for a Sunday afternoon.

Bobby opened his eyes. "What about the rent?"

Everett was sipping Budweiser, thinking about flying for Montana Skies.

"Well, I guess we should put our cash in the bank and write a check. Otherwise, the agency will figure we copied the money. If everybody does a few dollars, just to prove it works, nobody will be able to say for sure what's real or what's been duplicated. They can't match serial numbers against every other serial number, every time. It's going to be a mess."

Bobby got up. "If we combine our budget envelopes, we can deposit the rent today." He strode for the house. "You drive."

When he returned, Everett was warming his motorcycle.

The line at the teller machine was seven-deep, all men, each one guarding a stuffed envelope. Something was happening after all, and here it was. They were drawing stares from passing motorists.

"Machine on Eleventh Street stopped taking deposits," one guy said. "Sure hope we get a turn before this one fills up."

Chapter 3

LIVERMORE, CALIFORNIA. STILL SUNDAY, APRIL 19.

Philip Machen completed his walk-around inspection, tipped open the canopy of his red, two-seater sailplane, and stepped into its rear seat. He fastened his seatbelt and turned the key for the master switch. His instrument screen hummed and displayed a pre-flight checklist.

Tiedowns, *Off*. Voltage, *Green*. Control locks, *Off*.

Leaving good places and good people always crushed him. He glanced at the two gray pavilions of the ranch house they had rented. In the hanger behind it, he and Tanner had turned their quantum duplex into the first Powerpod, and then the first Maker. For seven years they had lived here and

worked here, even hired Karen Lavery here. His throat tightened as he brushed an imaginary cobweb from his brow.

The night they announced Makers, he and Tanner had celebrated with poolside drinks and a tin of Hawaiian Poke. Raw, marinated tuna. They should have held a proper party, but a torrent of logistics swept away the brightest triumph of his thirty-four years. He had yet to absorb the reality of what they'd accomplished or to savor his feelings. There was simply no time.

The authorities would surely come for them, as they would come for Karen, magnificent Karen. Six years ago, when they first met, her mossy-green eyes had probed him like a jeweler searching for flaws. She was everything a marketing executive should be: smart, adept, and tenacious. At 44, she'd sold 55 million Powerpods, world-wide, and still looked like a classic Mediterranean diva.

How could he possibly protect her? Loiter in the East Bay, waiting to get arrested with her? He shook his head.

Altimeter, Set. Display, Ground Mode. Engine Start Air, 2,000 psi.

He needed Karen so desperately. Needed to know she would be safe. But since his Maker announcement, she wasn't answering his calls or texts. Maybe her daughter would help. He keyed his Cambiar internet phone, hoping Tiffany Lavery would respond. Electronic ring tones played five times, then six. His thumb hovered until the petulant face of a previously friendly teenager appeared in his hand.

“Tiffany, how are you?”

“What do you want, Philip?”

“I need to reach your mother.”

“She's downstairs, auditioning vodka martinis. She can't hear me yakking in the closet, sitting on a pile of shoes.”

“Sorry.”

“No, you're not. She got your messages, but she's not going to reply. Your big surprise chopped

her off at the knees, you know. She pretty much hates you.”

He nodded, quite aware. “I don't blame her, but we need to talk. Can you put her on your phone?”

“Then she'd hate me, too.”

“I need to explain, Tiff. Help her see what she needs to do.”

“She's counting on her new boyfriend, the hot-shot attorney from San Francisco.”

“Terry Quinn doesn't have the horsepower to shield her from what's coming. It won't be just subpoenas and lawsuits. She needs to disappear until Makers—”

“She won't go anywhere, not with you. And she won't hide, either. She's sending me to Grandma's.”

“That's good, that's good. I think she doesn't appreciate the magnitude—”

“Philip, she's downstairs throwing a double-PMS hissy fit because of you. She's not going to listen to you or to me anytime soon. So don't . . . Oh, shit. She's coming upstairs.”

“Call me,” he said. “Tomorrow. Please.”

The connection dropped, and he pounded his knee. He needed to apologize, to explain, to help Karen escape. Which was why he was last to leave the ranch, daring the world to show up with cameras and warrants and handcuffs, while Tanner trucked their gear south.

Behind Pleasanton ridge, a murky sunset was collecting its colors to leave. To his right, a column of baby thunderheads extended eastward. He would love to switch on his variometer and go thermal-hunting over there. Soar engine-off, like a natural-born hawk, on slender red wings, just for the joy of it. But one by one, twilight was stealing his options.

Clear the Area, *Check*. Throttle, *Set*. Engine Sequencer, *On*.

He pressed the START icon, and the baby turbofan behind his seat whooshed up to a hungry idle.

He must not pursue Karen, nor any woman. He must avoid attachments. Though he had already

attached, hadn't he? He needed to store his feelings for Karen on that mental shelf he reserved for future projects. He could admire her up there as often as he wished, examine her in detail, and invite her into his dreams, but he must keep Karen Lavery at a safe distance.

Oil Pressure, *Green*. Lights and Beacons, *On*. Flaps, *10 degrees*.

If he couldn't control his feelings, "She pretty much hates you" might bring down the whole shebang. His attempts to help the woman he loved would only imperil the advent. Because Makers were just the beginning. If the advent failed, his deeper project would die stillborn. His father's legacy would not survive the terrible fire that had killed him. And the world would collapse into chaos for which he, Philip, would forever be blamed.

This is not a stunt, folks. Time to figure it out.

He released his brakes, turned into the wind, and shoved the throttle full forward.