

## Chapter 1

I got a call from Sterling right in the middle of health class. One phone call on the handsfree, and I was in it thick. He told me that he was going downtown to a meeting, and that I should come.

"You *have* to come."

"What kind of meeting," I asked.

"You'll see," he said with childish pleasure.

"Sterl," I said, "unless you make a rock solid bargain that there will be girls there, I am not interested."

"Thom, my friend," -- I could tell he was practically laughing, even over the handsfree -- "there will be girls. Hundreds of them. Standing room only."

"Right. Tell me what's this all about," I said, wishing desperately that he would be serious.

"If I tell you, you won't come." And he was right. Had I known what he was up to, I would not have gone. But Sterling had this way of looking past the obvious risks and seeing only the potential for fun. I, on the other hand, was much more conservative than Sterling and much less of a risk-taker. I am more like my dad in that way -- at least that is what I've been told. I never met him, since he died when I was a baby.

Sterling, however, was a different kind of high school senior. He cut his red hair instead of keeping it long and tied back like the rest of us. I never asked him about why

he cut his hair like that -- flat on top. And the tightpants he wore were always colored: bright green or orange. He stood out sharply.

I always stuck to gray. Sterling said that gray was borey. So what if gray was borey? It suited me just fine. I was borey, and I would probably stay borey the rest of my life.

It took a long talk over the handsfree to convince me to go, which almost got me kicked out of health class. Sterling laughed the whole time I was getting a tongue-lashing from my teacher, and was trying to get me to laugh too. I just said "Yes, ma'am" a lot and then cleared out as soon as the bell rang.

I ran most of the way home from school. He hadn't left me much time, as usual. Mother wasn't home yet -- I didn't expect to see her until about nineteen o'clock. She didn't mind me going out, especially with Sterling. I was almost eighteen, after all. She liked him. To tell the truth, everyone liked Sterling. If it weren't for him, I'd have no friends at all.

I ran to my room and tied a clean crimson into my tail. I always wore crimson in my hair when I went out. My mom told me it was a power color; politicians usually wore bright crimson in their tails, for instance. My tightpants seemed dirty, too, so I pulled out another gray pair from my top drawer and put them on. My tunic was clean enough, and besides it was my favorite, with a picture of Che Guevara on the back. I loved telling people about Che when they asked. Funny how so few people know about ancient history, especially Che.

People haven't changed much in the two centuries since Che was holding his revolutionary councils in old America. But back then, someone like Che could motivate

people into action. Nobody motivated my friends or me in the same way Che did back in his time. I suppose we didn't really think we needed that kind of person in our lives. These days it's all about wealth -- all about your carbon shadow.

One time I ran with a girl who'd asked if the picture on my tunic was my dad. I'd let her think it was, and she liked me for a whole evening. Marley was her name, I think. Doesn't matter, because I never saw her again after that. I didn't like her much because of the way she dressed. I liked it when girls covered themselves -- leaves a little to the imagination, like a good mystery. But all bare in the middle, with no stockings, or sometimes a top that's just painted on: that's not for me.

I ran down to the kitchen to grab a bite. Mom had made dinner for me that morning, knowing that she wouldn't be home until late. It was mock chicken with potatoes and a vegetable. I ripped the Organi-Wrap off the top and zapped it for a minute and a quarter. The chicken was good (the potatoes were sticky but I ate them anyway), and there was no way I was going to touch the veggies. I have this policy: if I can't tell what the food is, I don't put it in my mouth.

I finished and started to put the Organi-Wrap in the incinerator, but I didn't know what our bank balance was. It would only cost two-tenths of a credit, but why waste it just because I'm lazy? I spread it out, sprinkled it with sugar and just a little cinnamon, and ate it. It was a pretty good desert and tasted better than the potatoes. The total meal cost half of one credit, and I felt good that I wasn't wasting mom's hard-earned salary on trash. I forgot to rinse my plate, however, and should have gotten a talking-to about how scrubbing off the dried on food completely offset eating the wrapper and blah, blah, blah. But mom never made it home that night.

I hopped the loop at K Street and rode over the Fox to meet Sterling. When I got off, true to form, he was waiting outside at a table with two girls. How he was able to get girls like that, I will never know.

"Hey! Thomaseee!" he yelled across the constant stream of pedestrians. "Over here!"

When I pushed through the crowd, I bumped into the table and almost spilled their drinks. "Hey Sterl," I said sheepishly, trying not to look too obvious as I steadied the glasses. I wasn't nervous, exactly; I just wasn't expecting girls.

"Thomas Hargrove the Third," he said with a put-on voice, "this is Melody and Faith. Faith, Melody: Thomas."

"Please call me Thom," I said politely. "Sterling, could we talk for a minute?"

"Toe-mas, I would be happy to conversate with you," he said with a silly voice. He stood up, took a deep bow, and slid out from behind the table. The girls giggled a little at his antics, but the one named Faith look terribly uneasy.

"Sterling you have done it again," I said, trying to whisper loud enough to be heard over the din of the passing crowd. "You have managed to turn an outing into a date."

"What's this all about?" he said. "You said you wanted girls."

"I was joking, mate. You have heard of jokes, right?"

"I do know a few jokes," he said, holding his finger in the air. "Try this one: Thomas Hargrove."

"Funny," I said as I punched him in the arm. Hard. He let out a little yelp and rubbed the spot. "Look, my mom hasn't given me my allowance yet, and my credits are almost gone. I don't want to blow what's left on drinks."

"I have got it covered, my friend," Sterling said. He pulled out a piece of paper and shook it in front of my nose. "I am the proud owner of two balsam firs in Cali."

"Really?" I said with disbelief, snatching the paper out of his hand. Sterling was not lying. It was an authentic bearer bond, issued by the President's Economic Council and signed by the Governor of The Pacific. I'd only see a picture of something like that at school -- only corporations or the really rich kept bearer bonds. It entitled the bearer to twenty-two carbon credits every year for every five feet of tree for as long as the two trees remained alive.

"Offsets!" I screamed. "How did you get them? When did you get them?"

"My dear old departed aunt left them to me," he said, holding his hand to his heart and looking down at the sidewalk. "God rest her soul."

"Seriously," I said, threatening to punch him again "you didn't steal this, did you?" I stuffed the paper in my tunic pocket.

"Thom, give it back, please," Sterling said through clenched teeth. It was the first time since I had arrived that his voice was serious.

"I will -- the moment you tell me how you got hold of an offset bearer bond. Printed on paper, besides."

"Fine, " he said, his playful tone returning as quickly as it had disappeared.

"Promise?"

"In blood."

"My dad," Sterling said. "He planted them for me."

"But your dad ... your dad's gone, Sterl."

"I know that, mate. I found a key to a lockbox in my mom's wallet." He stopped; I must have been giving him a look. "I know, I know! I shouldn't have been digging in my mom's wallet, but I was supposed to have an appointment for the doc, and I was looking for the notice. Anyway, I found the key. I always knew that my mom kept a lockbox under her bed, so I put two and three together. That's what I found," he said, pointing at the pocket of my tunic.

"But it's not yours."

"Yes it is! It was in -- you know -- that old style paper wrapper. It had my name written on it."

"An envelope! A real paper envelope? You didn't incinerate it, did you?"

"No, of course not. My mother's not swimming in credits, like some people."

"That's not fair!" I said angrily. But Sterling had a face that he made when he was making a good-natured jibe. I couldn't stay mad at him when he made that face. "So, now what?" I asked, handing the bond back.

"We have to take it to the ecobank, just to see if the trees are still there."

"They should be big by now."

"I know!" Sterling said with delight. "This could be worth two or three times face."

"But the girls -- We aren't going to take them with us to the bank, are we?"

"No. But we can go tomorrow after they open. Besides, the girls want to go to the meeting."

"I thought that this -- the bond, I mean -- was what you meant by 'meeting.'"

"No," Sterling said, "there is a real meeting."

"What kind?" I asked, being very aware of his ability to trick me.

"Thomaseee. You are going to have to wait and see."

I hate it when he does that. I wanted to knock him down

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The chapel was very small and very crowded. There were people hanging out in the foyer and even out on the sidewalk. I couldn't help but notice two women -- older like my mother -- outside burning what looked like a short drinking straw. I had seen smoke a couple of times before, but Sterling had to explain why they had lit it on fire and were inhaling the smoke. The whole time he was explaining it I kept thinking about how many credit those 'cigarettes' must have cost. My god, I could have eaten for a week. In typical Sterling fashion, he waived his hand and told me that those didn't cost a single credit. He told me that they paid cash for them, but I didn't understand at the time.

I thought it was shameful of Sterling to lure the two girls and me into a church meeting -- I didn't even know he was religious. I'd wait curse him out after; I didn't want to be the spoiler. So, I grabbed Faith by the hand and we made like a couple of earthworms, wiggling our way through the mass of people. We stopped behind the last pew. From there we could see the pulpit, and considering the size of the crowd it was about as close to the front as we could get. Sterling and Melody came up a few moments later and pushed in next to us. There were several grumbles from the people around us,

but we had our spots, and we were going to stay there. I had learned that trick from going to concerts.

I was just about to complain to Sterling about tricking me into coming to church when the lights dimmed and a screen rolled down in front of the altar. It flashed a couple of times, and then a man's face appeared.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the face began, "for those of you who don't know me, I am Claude Terry. I am a former cabinet member and former professor of economics at Stanford University." At first I thought that he was appearing over a network stream or wireless, but as I looked around I saw that Mr. Terry was actually standing at a lectern to the left of the big screen. He was in the room, projecting his image on the screen so that everyone could see his face.

"I have come here to talk about this." Mr. Terry's face disappeared to be replaced by a photo of stacks of gold coins. I knew what they were from my history class -- I tried to explain them to Faith but she already knew about them.

"Drachmas, pesos, gilder ... money. Negotiable instruments. Many say that it is a thing of the past, but I say, 'Look around you! Money is a thing of your *future*!' Countries of long ago used units of exchange, much like we do now with carbon credits, to buy things. They bought homes, transportation, food, clothes, everything.

"The difference from today is that there was a finite amount of money. Nobody could create money the way they can create carbon offsets. Money passed from government to corporation to supplier to consumer and so on. It represented your status in life -- the amount of money you had, that is -- and people demonstrated their willingness to spend it by the type of clothes they wore or the vehicle they owned."

By this time my head was spinning. I am not an historian, economist or mathematician. Terry's introduction baffled me. But I did realize that I wasn't at a religious meeting, and I had the sinking suspicion that what he was saying was very revolutionary. I don't mean that what he was saying was new; I mean that the man was trying to start a revolution.

The audience cheered and shouted back to Terry's rant. I guessed that many of them must have heard him speak before. The girl, Faith, seemed to be bored with the whole mess, and she kept looking around as if she were waiting for someone to show. I figured that, as soon as we pushed our way out of the place, she would find whomever it was that she had been waiting for, and I would have another ride home alone on the loop.

Over the next hour Claude Terry explained how we had lost sight of ourselves because we had lost the sense of worth that money provided. He claimed that we had come so far in our efforts to save the environment that everything we owned, from clothes to chairs to cream, had value only because of its benefit or detriment to the environment. Having only one standardized unit to determine the value of everything, he argued, watered down the worth of everything.

"Nothing has worth beyond that one measure," he said. "Here is one sad example: art. It only has a value according to its carbon footprint -- what kind of paint one uses, or canvas, and so on. The grand masters of eons past have no value to us anymore. The Mona Lisa and Sistine Chapel are merely curiosities of a time when painters used animal fat and charcoal to mix their paints."

He was right about that one. Some of those silly old paintings weren't nearly as valuable today. There was so much waste in the making of them, and their footprint was

immense. The painters had used fossil fuels to wash their brushes, and even burnt trees to collect ash for pigment. I understood that part of his speech, but only because one of the classes I'd taken that day was Art History.

"But what is the value of these things to our souls -- to humanity?" he asked, shouting, almost chanting. "The masterpieces of old used to have value in our lives. They brought us joy that was incalculable. They captured our human spirit -- encapsulated our history. They reflected our nature and exposed our weaknesses. And we, in turn, expressed their worth to us: *with money*. A thing of beauty had value to us in inexplicable ways, and we could demonstrate with a price tag just how important a thing was. We trusted our money to speak for us -- to even *vote* for us.

"Today, however, there is no measure of human trust in carbon credits. Carbon is simply a product of mathematics. There is no humanity in carbon. How can anything have real meaning if its value is so narrowly defined? Can governments decide what is a good painting or good sculpture based solely upon this carbon-centric myopia? No, I say. *We* must decide what it is worth! *We* are the ones who should say if a thing has value! And *we* should be able to say it with money!"

The crowd continued to murmur and shout back, and I started to feel uneasy.

"Can we let politicians decide what the value of a cantata is because of the singers' carbon silhouette? Cannot I decide if a thing is worth the price that I pay for it? Am I not worthy to judge how much a potato is worth? I think you are smart enough to determine how much is the right amount to pay for your shirt or your groceries. Do you not think I am? But the only way this can happen -- the only way we can reclaim the

value of our society -- is to abolish carbon credits. We must go back to the economic fundamentals of cash!

"Let me tell you brothers and sisters, the effort to reclaim our country has already started. In the mountains of the Central Superstate and on the Eastern coast, the people are stepping into the streets to reclaim their birthright. They are telling the Carbies that we, the people, get to decide our own worth. And they are telling them with sticks and rocks and even bullets. Now it is your turn. Your time is now to step up and join the fight for our future!"

The crowd was very restless by this time. They were chanting, "CASH, CASH, CASH!" Then the screen image melted in a one-line phrase that everyone started shouting in unison: "I'LL TAKE MINE IN CASH!"

Everyone started pushing and shoving, and I got very scared. I shouted to Sterling that we should get out of there, but he and Melody were standing on the back of the pew, shouting. Sterling had taken his shirt off and was swinging it over his head like a flag. He motioned for me to climb up with him, but suddenly the crowd surged forward and I heard shots. Sterling shouted and pointed: "RIOT POLICE!" Then I saw a rupture bullet hit him between his third and fourth ribs. His naked chest expanded like a balloon as the ammunition did its explosive task, and he fell backward, dead as night.

I turned and saw daylight at the doorway and tried to make for it, but somebody grabbed my ankle and I fell to the floor. It was Faith. She had jumped down beneath the pew. She had dragged me under with her, and we covered our heads as the massacre continued.

The police showed no mercy. One boy my age fell near me and I saw that a rupture bullet had caught him in his eye -- his face was all that was left of his head. There were screams and terrorized shouts for what seemed like a lifetime. Then it was quiet. Faith was balled up, breathing hard against one end where the pew met the floor. I was stretched out, hands over my head.

We lay there forever. Not speaking. Pretending we were dead. I don't remember exactly what happened, but I do remember Faith calling my name and telling me to go now. I ran, instinctively, I suppose. I don't remember exactly.

I do remember getting back on the loop. The car was empty, mostly, and Faith and I sat for a long while, facing forward, panting. I told her that we shouldn't get off at my normal stop in case the police were waiting. She said that she was on the wrong loop anyway and could get off anywhere, so we got off two stops before and walked the rest of the way to my house. We didn't speak after that.