

## 49. CAT AND MOUSE

When I woke up, I felt as if had been drugged. Lee Tate was sitting at the desk across from my bed.

“We meet again.”

His dialogue was lifted from a bad movie.

“You can’t move. So don’t even try. If you stand up, you’re just going to fall on your face.”

“Why are you doing this to me?”

“Take it easy. Enjoy yourself. Some people would pay just to feel as you do now. So don’t complain.”

“Now that you’ve have me, what are you going to do with me? I have no idea how you even found me.”

“We’ve been watching you since the beginning. There were cameras in the bus station and the train station. Did you really think that you were going to get away that easily? We had people in your room in Lincoln. And recently in Las Vegas., we were on top of your every move. There was no way that you could be staying the same hotel as Cody, and we wouldn’t be monitoring you all the time.”

I reviewed my every move. Could I have been that transparent.

“What have you been waiting for? I thought that you were ready to kill me when Cody woke up.”

“What have you been waiting for? We expected you to come right back to us. And here you are.”

“Where the hell am I? I thought that I was in upstate New York.”

“You’re on a need-to-know basis.”

“What difference does that make if I’m going to die anyway? Or are you going to transform me into the next guinea pig?”

“You really think that the world is ready to follow your lead.”

“I thought that you were going to rig me up as the poster child for the Cody Brainerd fan club.”

“That’s enough of that.”

“I still don’t understand why you care one way or another what I say about Cody. No one is going to believe me. I’ve already tried. And anyway, what is the big fuss about? People are willing to spend their money like it’s going out of style for any old fad. You’ve got millions buying lottery tickets, and they never have anything to show for it. So what’s the next stage in total obedience to the cause? Are you trying to get everyone down on their knees barking like dogs?”

“You don’t have the slightest idea what is going on? Half the population expects some kind of free hand out from the government. This kind of business has to end.”

“I’m glad that Cody is going to end money for creeps like you.”

“Ha ha!” Lee was trying to contain his frustration with me. Even though I was immobile, he still was unable to have his way.

“So you are going to kill me after all.”

“You’re just waiting for some investigative journalist to lend the needed credibility to your story.”

“If it hasn’t happened now, it’s never going to happen. Even if it does, your boy can just play the role of the martyr.”

“Chloe, I wasn’t born yesterday.”

“I don’t understand how you did such a masterful job? He was left for dead.”

“It was our mistake. Too many drugs. But we backed off, and everything was fine.”

“If your man Cody is the genius that they say he is, then he should be able to deflect any criticism. Why do you think that he’s not going to be accepted?”

“No one wants to think that they’re being brainwashed.”

“So you admit it!”

“Not at all. Cody is a free man. And that’s why people like him. He promises liberty. But if you start running your mouth off, you are going to create problems where there aren’t any.”

I was doing my best to stay one step ahead of his logic. He could slip up and admit something that he didn’t want to say. Who knew when that might come in handy? I wanted to tell myself that things weren’t as bad as they seemed.

“So you’re just going to make me disappear.”

“Let’s just say that I’m going to hasten your natural end.”

“Why tell me? Are you trying torture me? For what reason?”

“We’ll get to you when we’re good and ready”

“Do you love prolonging the misery. Is that your thrill?”

“Chloe, you continue to believe that this is about you. You think that we’re trying to create some kind of reaction in you. Your emotions don’t matter in the least to us.”

“So end it now!”

“We will do it on our time not yours.”:

“What have you learned by chasing me around the country? Because I haven’t learned thing. I knew a lot more when I was sitting in Cody’s room.”

“Really.”

“Is that what you want me to tell you? You want to know what I learned sitting next to Cody. That I have all the answers. I have the answers. And you don’t. You can’t torture that out of me, because it’s the most basic fact in the world.”

I was slowly getting to him.

“You try to use fancy words to make the world think that you’re intelligent. It doesn’t work. Never will!”

“OK, I get it. I’m the only one who knows where to put Cody’s batteries. He’s not functioning at full potential. He gets tired easily. He goes away for days at a time. If you don’t watch it, he’s going to get really run down and just stop completely.”

“You’re believing your own shit again.”

“Yeah? Then kill me. Do it!”

“Quit taunting me! I will.”

“You better not miss at point blank range.”

“I don’t want to make a mess.”

“How long are we going to keep this up?”

“We’re going to keep this up until you quit resisting us.”

“I was helping you all along when Cody was in a coma. Then you tried to get rid of me. How do you want me to react?”

He was running out of answers to share with me.

“It really doesn’t make a difference at this point.”

“So I’m going to my grave not really knowing what’s behind it all.”

“You don’t know?”

“I know a few things here and there. But I continue to be surprised. Even Cody amazes me. You not only raised him from the dead, now he’s your superman.”

“Why do you think that we had you read to him? He absorbed everything that you taught him.”

“Why didn’t you get a college professor to help.? Or you could have got one of the super brains from the agency. Why me?”

“You had a technique unlike any other.”

“And you could tell that just by meeting me in a sandwich shop. Were you waiting there for the right candidate. Strange place to recruit.”

“We were waiting for you to come back to us.”

“That makes no sense. I ended there by accident.”

“We had you doing what we wanted every step of the way.”

“Why go to all the trouble? Why send me away to live with Bill and June, and then call me back when you need me?”

“It was a puzzle. You needed to figure it out.”

“And Rose. All that shit was off the wall. It couldn’t have fit into a master plan”

“All part of the learning experience.”

“Lee, what are you trying to tell me.”

“That you shouldn’t try to move. It will only make things a lot worse.”

What he said didn’t make sense. What could I do but listen?

“You like to tell people that you’re in control to make up for your own sense of helplessness. I’m not like you.”

I was telling him that he was helpless.

He tried to be cruel: “You really believe if you aspire after a reprehensible state of being that you’re going to find redemption in the end.”

“That’s more your attitude than mine. You play off people’s sense of guilt, that shit never worked with me.”

“I had you going from the get go. Where do you think that June’s script came from? I couldn’t have played it better myself. Every gesture, every tick, every wink, all timed to the second. And you were there to see it all. It should have been a Broadway show.”

“Why are you telling me this now?”

“Because you think that you’re on some deep journey to discover the self.”

“I’m only trying to get away from monsters like you.”

“So why do I keep popping up?”

“Coincidence. This world isn’t big enough for the both of us.”

“Maybe so. And after today, we won’t have to worry about that.”

“Still the big man.”

Maybe I could keep pushing him until I got a reaction. I would set him off. He’d do something stupid. Damn, he’d kill me. I needed a few more tricks if I was going to succeed. This was going to be a lot more difficult than I could have imagined. I had to play along. I needed to make him think that I still knew something that was important.

“Lee, you’re just making things up after the fact. Then it all has a feeling of complete certainty.”

“There was this girl who did remarkably well on standardized tests. She had a phenomenal memory. She could understand advanced mathematics. She was a stupendous reader. So we recruited her. We needed to find out what made her tick. We gave her a story. We gave her a life. And she responded perfectly to all our experiments. The more that we worked with her, the easier that our task became. She seemed to accept everything that we did. She actually helped us. And eventually we figured out her technique. We knew that we could teach it to anyone. But we needed a trial subject to see if our method would work. That was where Cody came in. He was successful in business. He was well liked in his community. But he had never been able to maximize his skills. At times, he almost seemed sluggish. So we hooked him to our machines. And we fed him drugs. And we did everything to him that we had learned from the girl. It was a slow process. And there were times that we thought that we were getting nowhere.”

“Why did you need me to help?”

“We had all the parts. But we needed to put them together. We had to calibrate our results. It was like adjusting the frequencies. We needed to get the practical part right.”

“And you never could have done that without me.”

“Something like that.”

“So what next?”

“You know what’s next. Cody is building a following. And in his audience, he as discovered an image of himself. Everything that he has been able to do internally, he will eventually do in the world. People will respond to him as if they are part of an organic whole.”

“That’s perverse.”

“I know that you have spent all your life reacting against other people. But you’re really no different than they are. You crave acceptance. You only wish that you could find somewhere to belong. You’re not running from us. You’re running from yourself. If you found a situation that really did appeal to you, you would just sabotage it just to give yourself an excuse to move on.”

“Not only do you understand cognition, you’ve become an expert on human interaction.”

“I observe. Chloe, we’ve had our eye on you from the beginning.”

“If you’re so good at what you do, why didn’t you make things more hospitable for me.”

“We wanted to. But you were a freak. We needed you to enhance your skills so that you could apply them to every sort of knowledge. That way we’d be sure that our method would be a success.”

“That means that Cody is also a freak.”

“It’s not the same thing. Everyone embraces his ideas.”

“How did I become so far out of the mainstream?”

“You are too critical about the world?”

“Why isn’t he that way?”

“That’s how we programmed me.”

“I thought that you programmed me too.”

“It’s not for lack of trying. But that’s why we had to get you back to read to Cody. You had something that we couldn’t reproduce.”

“So you’re telling me that you still need that skill.”

“Not anymore.”

“I wish that I could believe you.”

He made every effort to share everything with me. And I was still resisting him. It really did piss him off.

“I want to know how you made the switch in Saint Louis.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m there for less than a day. The next thing that I know I’m destitute and just fighting to stay sane.”

“It’s an old trick. We picked you up the minute that you got there, and then we went to work on you.”

“How did you do that?”

“You know the routine. Sleep deprivation. Hypnotism. Psychological conditioning. Loads of stuff.”

“You aged me years. Then all of a sudden I was in Lincoln. I didn’t remember a thing. Did you move me?”

“No, it just felt as if we had. You could lose someone’s whole life that way. We’ve done it before.”

“That’s how you did Cody. That is why you still need me.”

“Chloe, you are too wrapped up in this. We can’t do any more for you. It is time to end our relationship.”

“Lee, breaking up is so hard to do.”

“Chloe, there’s nothing that you have that could possibly be valuable to us anymore.”

“So I just told you what you needed from me.”

“We can take your life and rearrange it in any order that we want.”

“Why are you telling me this? Why don’t you just do it?”

“We are!”

“Sure you are. I get it. I finally get it. I’m Cody Brainerd. And I’ve taken the form of this character Chloe Donzneac. You’re trying to program Cody; that’s me! And it’s still not working. So now you’re pretending that you have me trapped in this room. In fact, I’m free somewhere else. Just like Cody is free from your mind control.”

“Very good, Chloe. But now it the time to get rid of you.”

“Do it, and you kill your Cody. You couldn’t get rid of me in Saint Louis. You’ve never been in control of this operation. And now I’ve proven that to you.”

“Keep talking Chloe. The drugs are going to wear off. And then I’ll do it then.”

‘ “Why not beforehand? If the drugs wear off, I’ll be mobile. I’ll have a better chance to

resist.”

“You said it yourself. You’re at point blank range.”

“You’re trying to convince me that you’ve left me no option. But I’m not even here. Either are you. You’re back somewhere with Cody. You’re trying to resuscitate before he goes out for good. And you need to trick him into doing your bidding for this one and final time.”

“Cody’s safe somewhere in a hotel room.”

“Are you sure? Because I’m not. Lee, I’m Cody Brainerd. I’ve always been Cody Brainerd. I created Chloe so that I could use my psyche to escape you. You could do anything that you wanted to the rest of me. But you never could touch Chloe Donzenac. You still can’t. Even if you tracked me all the way to Lincoln, I would have lost you on the road. I quit taking trains. You can’t watch over every truck and car in America.”

“We are infallible.”

I was mulling over the nature of Lee Tate and his organization. They were infallible. I couldn’t move in my bed. I felt paralyzed. This was freaky. What a strange dream! I had no idea where I was.

I was sure that I had seen Lee Tate on the streets near Provenance College. But my imagination had been playing tricks on me. I wasn’t supposed to be in this town. I needed to make my exit.

At this point, Lee had probably forgotten about me. He was too impressed with the success of Cody. Cody had an army of body guards that would be impossible to get by. It just didn’t seem to matter. Things would take their course.

Harriet Fleming had seemed like my last possible alternative. She wrote as if she had a systematic understanding of the world. But when she was face to face with Cody Brainerd, she became afraid. She thought it would be better to ignore what he was doing.

I could have followed another course of actions. Maybe there was an investigative journalist who would want to hear my story. Someone who worked for the alternative press. There were enough people in New York City who could help.

I had no idea where to start. I could check the computers in the library. But it would be good idea to leave this town before I ran into Harriet Fleming by accident.

I didn’t want to get swallowed up by New York City. Loads of kids arrived there with nothing but a dream. I didn’t want to go down that same road. I had enough experience to know better. The only person that I really knew there was Jimmy. And I had gotten the best of that deal. He never thought of me as a con artist. I didn’t want to give him a reason to think of me that way now.

This seemed worse than my dream about Lee Tate. I had a world of possibilities. But nothing was shaking out. I didn’t have enough money to make it a go.

Everything told me that I needed to find Cody. I chanced a trip to the library. I learned that Cody was going to be at a conference in Philly. That would work for me. I wanted to scout around just to give me more ideas. What else could I do? I had expended all this effort just to get to Provenance. Now I had to take it further.

I would have to be extra careful in Philadelphia. Time was working against me. And I had no back up plan.

I took the bus back to New York. And there was a train to Philadelphia. I found a cheap

room downtown. I was really low on funds. There was no blackjack table here to get back my winnings. I was roughing it.

I realized that my technique didn't play so well in these larger cities. College towns were more my style. After I got my bearings, I could come up with a new plan. For now, I needed to find this conference.

I lucked out when I learned that they were going to need volunteers. I would be fed. And I'd have an in. This was better than I could have expected.

Mildred Andrews was my trainer. There wasn't a lot to learn. I was stationed by the information booth. I was given a computer to help me answer people's questions. I even arranged my schedule so that I would be able to catch Cody's two addresses.

Some of the workers were being paid. They seemed to know a little more about what was going on. They were all big fans of Mr. Brainerd.

Cody was staying in one of the penthouse suites. I couldn't get up there without some kind of clearance. It was impossible to jump the chain of command. I was at the lowest rung.

I spent the first day getting to know the ropes. At some points, I would be swamped with requests. Some people wanted information about sight-seeing. Others were looking for restaurants or stores. They had come for the conference. But they wanted to explore the city.

I felt that there were more questions than answers. Toby was helping me. He was a student at Penn. He told me that he was doing this for a project at school.

"I hope that I'm not offending you, but I'm not a big fan of this guy."

I felt that I had an ally on my quest.

"What is your project?"

"It for my communications class. We are examining media and politics."

"Cody seems a little bit of both. Although he hasn't announced for any political office yet."

"He's still building his following."

I stared at him for a moment. "You're telling me that you're not taken in by any of his ideas."

"He's a crack pot. There's a tradition of his type. He's just a little more polished than the others. There's something that I can't make sense of. He came out of nowhere. And he has this command of facts and figures that I've never seen before. Sometimes I think that he's a different species."

"I guess it's the master race."

Toby answered back, "I wouldn't joke about it. They really have some mighty strange ambitions."

"It's a little like Scientology. It has its adherents. But it really has no universal appeal."

"It doesn't need to. Not anymore. They just have to rally a group of vocal supporters. And they'll drown out everyone else. Cody Brainerd has game."

This was too good to be true. I had someone who was willing to listen. I was just afraid that he might be a plant. Lee Tate was setting me up again.

"Do you know who Lee Tate is?"

"I've seen the name. Is he on one of the committees?"

Lee continued to remain in the shadows. People knew about Cody. Hardly anyone knew

about Lee Tate.

I wasn't sure what to make of Toby. We both worked the booth for most of the day. Then we were off for good. We still got money for dinner. This was great!

"Where do you want to go?" Toby was asking me to join him.

"You know Philly a lot better than I do."

He suggested a place about a mile from the hotel. I didn't mind walking. This was the first day of the conference. And there was nothing important going on.

We were walking closer to the water. Things were very damp. They were made worse by the night air.

"I feel a little chilly."

"The place is right here."

It was a cool place. It was hopping at this time of the evening. We managed to get a table without a reservation.

"Where are you from?" he asked.

I said Indiana. It was one of the few states that I hadn't visited. But it was far away enough that he probably wouldn't ask me too many questions.

"Are you in school?"

"I'd like to be. I have a little problem with my transcripts. I was at Nebraska for a almost a year. And things got messed up. No big deal. I just have to wait it out."

"Sounds complicated."

I smiled. I didn't want to ruin this connection. I wasn't going to have to convince Toby of some big plan. We were both already on the same page. I was taking it slowly.

"Have you learned anything yet?"

"Working with the Stepford wives."

I laughed.

"I'm serious. Mildred Andrews was just arose from the dead. And some of those other people are straight out of horror movie."

"We could reprogram one of them to do our bidding."

"I wouldn't mind that."

Toby was able to get us drinks for dinner. That was a nice beginning.

"Are you majoring in communications?"

"My father wants me to go into law. But I have other plans."

"Is he a lawyer?"

"He wanted to be. He wasn't able to take the time. So he is looking to me to live his lost dream."

"It doesn't appeal to you."

"I like the law. But I don't see it being a career. I have a lot that I want to study. I can't see sitting in law school and doing all these useless exercises."

"It sounds like you know what you're doing."

Toby ordered a pizza.

"Do you want to share?"

"I'm just going to have some tortellini."

"Great!"



We both ordered salads. I was able to splurge at someone else's expense.

"They really should pay us. They believe that we're so devoted that we'd give our lives to Cody Brainerd."

"I thought that the conference had an independent sponsor."

"It does. But it would be nothing without their honored guest."

"That's frightening."

"They're teaching these people that it's OK to spy on your neighbor. It's total paranoia."

"You seem to know quite a bit about it all."

"I've been following him ever since I first saw some stuff on the internet. Just his style of talking says it all. Pure propaganda."

"You know all about his computer operations. Is that stuff real?"

"More or less. He took some ideas from other people. And he's surrounded it all with some hocus pocus. So it appears to be a lot more formidable than it really is. He's no genius. Although he comes across that way. He is well-prepared. There just seems to be this gaping hole in his logic."

I let Toby talk on. It wasn't time to share any of my ideas with him.

The next day, I tried to discover if there were any jobs that required someone to go up to the penthouse. But they had everything taken care of upstairs, and they really didn't need us. Toby wasn't going to come on until later. I was paired with someone else. And she was one of the Stepford wives.

Cody was going to speak at eight. I would be off. Toby had arranged it so that he would be an usher. So he had it was all taken care of from his end.

My experiences with Lee and my discussion with Toby alerted me to some flaws in Cody's presentation. I would be listening extra-carefully this evening.

I had dinner by myself. Then I went back to the auditorium. After the lecture, I went looked for Toby. He was supposed to help arrange the room afterwards. But he was nowhere to be found.

As I was leaving the auditorium, I saw Lee Tate. He was walking straight towards me. I didn't know what to do. He said hello, and walked right by me. He had no idea who I was.

"You scared away that little friend of yours."

"What are you talking about?"

"You thought that you had a helper, didn't you. You're more alone than ever. No body cares about you,"

I sat up in my chair. It was Dr. Briggs.

"Are you hear to correct my latest story?"

"I thought what you did with Lee Tate was pretty good. Pretending to be Cody."

"I am Cody. I always have been. You knew that when I gave you the story. I was the one in the coma, not the girl looking on."

"That's silly."

"There are too many coincidences for it to be otherwise. I need a favor. I can't do it myself. So I get Chloe to do it for me."

"That doesn't make you Chloe Donzenac."

"I invented her to throw Lee off the trail. He has this master plan for me. I'm going to

take over the country. Instead, he's chasing her all around. That way he can't keep track of me."

"And what do you intend?"

"To stay hidden in the cocoon. So deep that Lee Tate can never get me out."

"He's good with his interrogation technique."

"But I am better at resisting him."

"He caught up with you in upstate New York."

"Temporary."

"He had you trapped in Saint Louis."

"I got away. He thinks that he can get inside my mind. He can't even beat Chloe Donzenac."

"Chloe, your story is becoming more outlandish. There is no way that I'm going to pass you for this."

"I am trying so hard to be accurate."

"You can't keep making things up."

"Everyone else does. Lee is trying to convince me that he made me up."

"Who made Lee?"

"You did? Is that your great secret. These are all your characters."

"Except Tammy. She freaks me out. She's yours."

When I woke up, I had to rush over to the hotel. I had overslept. I made it just in time.

"I thought that I was going to have to cover for you."

"What happened last night?"

"I was looking for you. But I had this chance to explore. I got backstage. I couldn't get into Cody's dressing room. But I saw enough. When I finally got out, you were gone. I don't even have your number."

"I'm lucky to still have a phone."

I wanted to compare notes with him.

"What did you think of the speech?"

"Nothing surprising. Pretty standard stuff. I think that they are just coasting now. But they were talking about something big back there. I tried to look busy so no one hassled me."

I warned Toby to be careful.

"These people are playing for keeps. They'll kill you if they think that you're standing in their way. It's not worth it just to get a good grade on your essay."

"It's about more than that. They have to be stopped."

"How are you going to do that now? They're getting too big."

"They're going to make mistakes."

"They haven't made many up to this point."

"There's too much pressure on Cody. I'm sure that he's going to crack."

"Toby, that's just wishful thinking."

"I don't know what's wrong with our world when people can get away with these completely illogical arguments."

"Cody is no fool. He appeals to people's insecurities. And he offers them science."

"Pseudo-science!"

"He has proven results. That's all that they care about."

“If you’re heading over Niagara Falls, it doesn’t matter how sturdy your craft is. It’s going to break apart on the rocks.”

I felt good for once. Toby was totally committed to deposing the tyrant. I felt as I could depend on him. But something was going to go wrong. I didn’t know what.

We were able to get off early. We rushed out for dinner. This time the restaurant was a little closer to the hotel. It was crowded so we ate at the bar.

Was I meant to stay in Philadelphia and work with Toby. I was getting ahead of myself. I had only known him a few days. And he really knew nothing about me. I didn’t want one of my honesty sessions like I had with Donna. I had to let him know as soon as possible what was going on.

Even though Toby and I were getting on so well, I still didn’t have a plan to deal with Cody. We were only better informed spectators. If Cody was going to continue on the way that he was, he would have loads of people in his corner. And it would be harder than ever to bring him down.

Had the stars aligned for Cody Brainerd? Without me, would he have been as successful? If we got rid of Cody, would there be a replacement in the wings. I only wished that it was simpler to get people to analyze what he was saying. People really did want magic.

Toby and I filed into the hall with everyone else. We were able to find a seat a little closer to the front than last time. I felt this strange sense of anticipation. Cody was about to appear. This would be the climax of our efforts.

“Ladies and gentleman, I am sure that you all feel honored to be able to participate in this evenings session. Cody has a great deal to tell all of you.”

I felt as if we were going to be led in a prayer. I looked over at Toby. He seemed transfixed.