Wizard of Ong's Hat

By Jack English

Ong's Hat is a town in the South Jersey Pine Barrens. Officially, it has a population of zero, but people live there anyway.

Local legend says the town got its name from Jacob Ong, a handsome and dashing dandy known for flirting with young women. He was also famous for his flashy dress, fancy dance moves and his trademark silk top hat. One of his love interests found he was cheating on her, so she stomped on his hat. Ong, drunk and angry at what had happened, tossed his hat high into the air where it got caught in a pine tree. It stayed there several years and became a landmark. Thereafter, the area became known as Ong's Hat.

I met the Wizard of Ong's Hat on a clear, chilly autumn day while sitting in the lobby of the Burlington County Court House waiting to argue a motion. He looked like Santa Claus in overalls.

"How are you doing?" I asked.

"Angry."

"Why?"

"The police hauled me down here for some kind of hearing or trial or something. I have the paper here."

I read it. It was a hearing on an "order to show cause." "You're a week late. This was supposed to be last week."

"That's why the police dragged me down here." He pointed to a sheriff's deputy who was just returning to the lobby with a cup of coffee in his hand.

It was vending machine coffee. In my experience, it is better to hit your thumb with a hammer than to drink vending machine coffee. The deputy's name tag said Murphy.

"Are you his lawyer?" Murphy asked.

"No. Does he need one?"

"I couldn't say, but he is being charged with reckless endangerment, disturbing the peace and nuisance."

"What did he do?" I asked.

"Do? I didn't do anything!" the old man said. "I was minding my business. And he should mind his own business too!" he pointed to Murphy

"I'm sure he was just doing his duty. Mr.…. what did you say your name was?"

"Horatio Ergstrom," he stuck out his hand and I shook it.

"What's this all about?" I asked.

"I was trying to find a way to exploit the electric potential difference between the stratosphere and the earth."

"He was making lightning," Murphy interrupted.

"And how were you making lightning?" I asked.

"Trade secret. I can't tell you until I file my patent."

"When will that be?"

"When I finish my experiments."

"Same question. When will that be?"

"A couple of weeks, a couple of months, I can't be sure."

"Do you want a lawyer?"

"What good would that do? They're bound and determined to stop me."

"Maybe we can slow them down enough for you to finish your experiments and file your patent."

"What will it cost me?"

"I bill hourly. Let's see how it goes. If you don't like what I'm doing, fire me. That way you are only in for a limited amount."

"Done!" the old man said and stuck out a beefy hand.

~

A few minutes later, the court clerk called our case, "*The People versus Horatio Ergstrom*."

The assistant prosecutor, a skinny young man, stood. "Randy Sileigh for '*The People*,' Your Honor."

Then I stood, "Brian O'Hara for the defense, Your Honor."

"Mr. Sileigh," the judge extended his hand in Sileigh's direction.

"Your Honor. '*The People'* seek a permanent injunction against Mr. Horatio Ergstrom requiring him to cease and desist from any and all activities that would tend to create lightning."

"Did you say lightning?" the judge asked.

"Yes, Your Honor."

"This is a new one on me. What makes you think he can create lightning? Can you prove it?"

Ergstrom jumped to his feet. "My Provoker can create lightning anytime I want!"

"Counsel, will you constrain your client," the judge pointed to me.

I tugged on Ergstrom's coat sleeve. "Let me do the talking, please."

"Well, I can make lightning," he whispered.

"Mr. Sileigh," the judge asked, "do you know anything about this Provoker thing?"

"No, Your Honor. All I know is that it's a hazard."

"Assuming that Mr. Ergstrom can create lightning, what legal theory do you want the court to rely on as the basis for a restraining order?"

"Reckless endangerment and nuisance."

"Do you have any evidence, Mr. Sileigh?"

"I addition to the statement the defendant just made, I have an affidavit from one of his neighbors. A copy is attached to my 'order to show cause'."

"Do you have a copy?" I asked Ergstrom.

He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a thick wad of papers. I read the affidavit.

"Is there any other evidence the court should consider, Mr. Sileigh?"

"No, Your Honor. I think that covers it."

"Thank you, Mr. Sileigh. I will decide whether that covers it. Mr. O'Hara, you're up."

"You're Honor, I move this entire matter be dismissed for failure to state a cause of action. New Jersey's Reckless Endangerment Statute has two parts. Part a is about any act that causes loss or destruction of a vessel and part b concerns the manufacture or selling of golf balls that contain dangerous substances and putting dangerous substances into food and drink. '*The People*' have made no allegation that falls within either part a or b of the statute."

"What about that, Mr. Sileigh?"

"It seems to me, Your Honor, that creating lightning is an ultrahazardous activity and should be stopped."

"I might tend to agree with you, Mr. Sileigh, but I need a statutory basis for issuing a cease and desist order."

"What about nuisance?" Sileigh asked.

"What about that, Mr. O'Hara?"

"First, Your Honor, nuisance is a private right of action, not a criminal offense so it is not the province of the criminal courts. Second, there has been no showing, not even an allegation that Mr. Ergstrom's activities interfered with the right of his neighbors to enjoy their property."

Sileigh jumped to his feet. "'*The People*' would like the court to take judicial notice of the fact that lightning causes thunder and thunder can impact a person's enjoyment of their property."

"What about that, Mr. O'Hara?"

"Historically, lightning has been considered an act of God. So, what Mr. Sileigh is looking for is a legal precedent he can use against God."

"That's enough, Mr. O'Hara. Confine your arguments to the facts of this case."

"Yes, Your Honor," I said. "I see that Mr. Ergstrom's address is in Ong's Hat. Ong's Hat is an unincorporated and uninhabited section of Pemberton. The affidavit is signed by one Carlton Stig. Is Mr. Stig in the courtroom?"

"No." Sileigh said.

"The affidavit says he lives on Sheep Pen Hill Road. There is no information as to how close that is to Mr. Ergstrom, and no measure as to the sound intensity at his property. Without those, no nuisance claim can stand."

The judge looked down at the papers in front of him, then looked at Sileigh. "If we take Mr. Ergstrom at his word; he can make lightning. Lightning is dangerous. But, without more, there just isn't enough of a factual basis for the court to enjoin him from doing whatever he is doing. Case dismissed."

As we left the courtroom, a sandy haired young woman in a waitress uniform steamed toward us.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Brian O'Hara. May I ask who you are?"

She ignored me and locked her arm around the old man's arm. "Are you all right dad? They said at the diner you'd been arrested."

"Not arrested, dear, picked up. Apparently, I missed a court appearance."

"About what?"

"The county is asking for a cease and desist order to stop my experiments. If I could just get the Provoker to work, it would solve all our problems."

"Provoker?" I asked. "Can you explain that?"

The woman put her hands on her hips. "Who are you? And what do you want with my father?"

"He's my lawyer, dear," Ergstrom said.

"We can't afford a lawyer," the woman said, "so bill us for today's appearance and leave us alone."

Just then, a man stepped up and handed Ergstrom some papers. "Mr. Ergstrom, I'm sorry but you've been served. This is a notice of a foreclosure sale to be held in ten days. You haven't made a mortgage payment in three months and you haven't responded to any of the bank's payment demands. So, this is the last step in the process. As soon as the property is sold, you and your daughter will have to vacate the property. Do you understand, sir?"

The old man stared at the papers, then looked at me. "Is there anything I can do?"

"You can pay the mortgage. Otherwise there is nothing you can do at this late date."

"This is damned unfair!" The woman screamed in the process server's face. "We'll sue you! We'll sue the bank! We won't let you take our home!"

The process server sighed deeply. "Do what you think you have to." Then he turned and walked away.

"Can we sue him?" The woman asked me.

"No. What did you say your name was?"

"Susan Collins, Susan Ergstrom Collins."

"Married?"

"Widowed."

"Sorry."

"Not as sorry as I am," she turned away.

"Tell you what," I said. "What if I buy you both a cup of coffee and you tell me what's going on. If I can help, you can rehire me. Otherwise, I will consider myself still fired. Fair enough?"

"What do you want?" Collins asked with a fishy eye.

"Fame, fortune, my own rock and roll band, and maybe a noble prize, that ought to be enough."

"Come on, Susan. The man offered to listen to our story and throw in coffee to boot, that's the best deal we've had in a long time."

~

The air was crisp and cold, but it was only a half block to the coffee shop. There is something comforting about getting out of the cold, and the shop was warm and filled with the smell of fresh baked pastry. I ordered coffee with extra, extra cream and a slice of blueberry pie. Ergstrom and his daughter ordered tea and scones.

"So, how did you get to foreclosure?" I asked.

"It's a long story," Ergstrom said.

"Is it a two cup of coffee story or a three cup of coffee story?"

"It's not that complicated," Collins said. "It's my fault. I made some bad choices in my life and now I'm paying for them."

"I was going to college, Rutgers in Camden, and I got involved with an older student. He was pre-med. By the time I had finished my second year, he had been accepted to medical school and we got married. I quit school and got a job to support us. We both worked hard. He graduated medical school and when we went out to celebrate, an uninsured driver hit our car broadside. It broke my arm and killed him." She began to tear up.

Ergstrom put his hand on her arm. "Now, now, Susan. There is no point in crying over what might have been. Joe's gone now and you have to think about living your life."

"Joe and I were going to take care of each other," she said. "And now…."

"Mr. O'Hara, the legacy Joe Collins left my daughter was a broken heart and a quarter million-dollars of medical school debt."

"Ouch!"

"Without a college degree, the best work she could get was waitressing and she couldn't make student loan payments on her waitressing income. Debt collectors were hounding her day and night, so I took out a quarter million-dollar loan on my property just to get them off her back."

"And you haven't been able to pay it back," I said.

"I would have, if I had finished my Provoker."

"You mean a lightning rod."

"Lightning rod? What are you talking? Lightning rods can't make lightning strike!"

"You lost me. I'm just a dumb lawyer."

"Isn't that redundant?" Collins asked.

"Susan," Ergstrom held up his hand to stop her, then turned back to me. "The typical lightning bolt carries a gigajoule of energy."

"That sounds like a lot."

"It is. It's about 278 kilowatt hours or what the average home uses in nine days. If I can provoke four lightning strikes an hour for ten hours, I can power a home for a year."

"Yeah, but how do you catch lightning?" I asked. "Won't it destroy anything it touches?"

A smile spread across Ergstrom's face. Then he tapped his head with his index finger. "That's where genius comes in."

"So, what are you doing? Catching it in a bottle?"

"That is very nearly correct. Come out to my place and I'll show you."

I pulled out my phone and checked for messages. There were none. Then I texted my secretary. "Client meeting. Won't be back in the office this p.m." I looked at Ergstrom. "Let's go."

~

I followed Horatio Ergstrom and his daughter Susan Collins from the courthouse to Ong's Hat. A dirt road turned off Magnolia Road and headed into the woods. Someone had spray-painted the word "Wizard" on the blacktop at the mouth of the dirt road.

"No Trespassing" signs were nailed to trees every few feet along the first hundred yards of the dirt road. Most of them had been spray-painted with "Get Out Wizard!" or roughly painted wizard hats with a red circle on them and a line crossed through them.

A quarter mile down the dirt road we came to a clearing. There was a modest log cabin to the right and a cement block garage to the left. The garage had been recently whitewashed. Bleeding through the whitewash were the words, "Get Out Wizard!" written in red spray paint.

A cylindrical device sat at the far end of the clearing. It was six feet across and perhaps four feet high.

Ergstrom got out of his daughter's car and marched toward the device, motioning for me to follow. I did. Susan Collins headed for the house. A chill breeze kicked up a swirl of leaves.

"This is my Provoker. It provokes lightning strikes."

"It's not going to go off while we're standing here, is it?"

Ergstrom scrunched up his face and looked at me like I was an idiot. "Nooooo!" he said. "Don't be daft."

"How does it work?"

"There is an electron gun in the center," he leaned over the device and pointed, "that sends high energy electrons straight up. Eventually, it creates and electrically charged path in the atmosphere, a path that lightning can follow to the ground and wham! A lightning bolt."

"What do you mean when you say eventually?"

"Average wait time is 3.2 milliseconds."

"As soon as current begins to flow, the polarity on the electron gun is reversed so the lightning doesn't strike it, and a copper ring four inches across and two inches thick takes the lightning hit. From the ring, the energy of the lightning is channeled into coil made of one-inch square copper bars."

"Then what happens?"

"The current flowing through the copper coil generates and enormous magnetic pulse, but just for half a second or so. Surrounding the main copper coil there are thirty-two secondary copper coils. They each pick up a fraction of the electromagnetic energy from the lightning strike. Each of the coils charges a capacitor bank."

"Then what happens?"

"A computer-controlled circuit taps the capacitor banks, draining energy into batteries slowly so the batteries don't get overcharged and

explode. At that point, I have taken the wild, destructive energy of a lightning strike and tamed it so it can be harnessed. Then I can draw energy off the batteries as I need it."

"Does it work?"

"I haven't paid an electric bill in two years."

"And you haven't paid your mortgage in three months. My question stands. Does it work?"

"Of course. My house, my shop, everything runs off electricity collected by my Provoker."

"If it works, you ought to get it patented."

"I tried."

"The Patent Office rejected my application."

"Did they say why?"

"They sent me a letter. They said that unless I could replicate lightning strikes over a prolonged period of time, it wasn't useful. Does that make sense?"

"To be patented," I said, "an invention has to be novel, useful and non-obvious. Your invention is certainly novel and certainly non-obvious. They just don't think capturing the energy from lightning on a one-off basis was useful. Did they say how many lightning strikes they wanted and over what period of time?"

"The letter is in the house. Let me find it."

A porch ran across the length of the cabin. Something had been painted on the front door, then hastily painted over. A large red "W" seeped out from underneath the paint. The door opened into a great room. To the left, a fire crackled in a

fireplace. To the right, the there was a dining room table and a kitchen beyond. The kitchen hadn't been updated for half a century. A corridor led away from the great room to a series of other rooms. I could see a bed through an open door.

Susan Ergstrom Collins was asleep in one of two ancient wing chairs that flanked the fireplace.

"Let's let her sleep," Ergstrom said. "She has been working double shifts trying to keep this place together while I worked on the Provoker."

Ergstrom rummaged through a dresser that served as a divider between the dining area and the rest of the large room and found a paper. He handed it to me.

I read it. "This is the important part, 'Unless you can demonstrate your invention can harness at least ten lightning strikes over a four-hour period, it will not meet the minimum standard of usefulness'. Can you do that? Can you generate ten lightning strikes in four hours?"

"I'm working on it."

"How close are you?"

"I got four lightning strikes in an hour. Want to see it work?"

"Now?"

"Sure. Follow me." The old man strode out of the cabin and across the dirt track that served as his driveway to the cinderblock garage. It was filled to the ceiling with all kinds of junk except for one corner which generally faced in the direction of the Provoker. A large, green metal panel was mounted

on the wall. It was covered with switches and dials and gauges and meters and lights. The old man flipped on a circuit breaker and the panel came to life. He threw another switch and there was a low, ominous hum. A series of lights on the panel started blinking red. The hum got louder.

"Is it safe to be here?" I asked.

"Sure. It's as safe as being in your mother's arms." He flipped another switch and there was a high-pitched whine. The red blinking lights turned yellow. The low hum and the high whine merged into a single sound. The blinking lights turned green.

"Do you want to fire it up?" Ergstrom asked.

"Me?"

"Push the red button."

There was a large red button, square in the middle of the panel.

"Don't act like a frightened child. Push it!" Ergstrom urged.

I pushed the button and a brilliant white light filled the room as a lightning bolt struck the Provoker. A thunder clap loud enough to rattle my teeth followed instantly. Gauges on the panel spiked and then settled back toward the middle.

"Thank you. You've just collected enough energy to power my house for nine days. The problem is that by the time the Provoker has collected four or five lightning strikes, somebody calls the police and they order me to stop. Let's go

back to the cabin and I'll cook dinner," Ergstrom said as he shut down his device.

~

I said little as I sat at the kitchen table watching the old man open and close cabinet doors and poke into the refrigerator. Finally, I asked, "What are we having?"

"I was just trying to figure that out. I think we have the ingredients for pancakes. Is that OK?"

"Whatever." I looked over at Collins. She was still asleep in the chair. The fire was dying so I said, "Mind if I put on another log or two."

"Suit yourself."

There was a chest under a window, halfway between the front door and the fireplace. There was a neatly folded wool throw on the chest. I laid it gently on the sleeping woman, and stood there watching her. She had short sandy hair that didn't quite reach her shoulders. She had high, round cheekbones and a smallish nose over a smallish chin. She didn't wear a speck of makeup. When she wasn't being angry, she was very attractive, a natural beauty. I turned away and placed two logs on the fire.

Ergstrom placed a stack of pancakes on the table between a bottle of maple syrup and a butter plate. The table had been set for two, he expanded it to three. "Help yourself."

"Are you going to wake her?" I asked.

"She needs sleep more than she needs food. Unless I've lost track, she's worked ten days in a row, poor thing."

We ate quietly for a few minutes then I asked, "What does all the wizard graffiti mean?"

"As you can imagine, the Provoker uses a lot of copper. A couple of months back some teens decided to steal some of it and sell it for scrap. I caught them in the act and scared them off with my shotgun."

"You shot at them?"

"With rock salt. I didn't aim directly at them, I just fired in their direction. Anyway, a few pieces of rock salt hit a couple of them and they complained to the sheriff. A couple of the sheriff's deputies confiscated my shotgun. They said it was only temporarily, but I haven't gotten it back yet. A week later, the teens came back and without some means to protect myself and my property all I could do was call the sheriff. By the time his men got here, they had made off with the main Provoker coil. It's about two hundred pounds of pure copper. That set me back a bit, not just for the cost of copper, but it takes quite a while to fabricate something like that. I figured they would be back so I set up a light trap."

"OK, you lost me. What's a light trap?"

"Ever see a light that is so bright you had to cover your eyes?"

"Sure, once in a while. Why?"

"About a hundred yards down my dirt road, I set up a couple of banks of LED lights that are very intense. So intense, whoever is on that road will have to cover their eyes. That means they can't see. And if they can't see, they can't drive."

"What happened next?"

"There is a webcam covering the entrance to my road. I saw the teens returning, I recognized their car, and when they got in the center of the light trap, I turned it on. They couldn't see and stopped driving.

"One of them had the sense to get out of the car and crawl, with his eyes closed, back toward the highway. The others just stayed in their car and cried. I called the sheriff and he sent people to arrest the boys as trespassers. Of course, as soon as the sheriff turned down my dirt road, I switched the lights off. After that, the wizard graffiti began to appear. From a teen's perspective, I get it. Who can control lightning and trap someone with light? Only a wizard."

Collins woke up, folded the woolen throw and placed it back on the chest under the front window. Then she sat at the table. "Are you still here?" she asked without looking at me.

"Have I worn out my welcome?"

She said yes and her father said no at the same time.

"What are you going to do about the foreclosure?" I asked.

"I was hoping to have the Provoker working in time to pay off the mortgage. I already have an offer for it."

"An offer? May I see it?"

Ergstrom rummaged around in the dresser near the front door and produced a rumpled document. He handed it to me.

"This says the Renewal Energy Association has an option to purchase your patent for two million dollars. It doesn't say they have to purchase it. It just says they have the right to purchase it."

"Well then, I'll just sell the patent to someone else."

"It says you took five thousand dollars in consideration of this option. That means you have a contract to sell it to them if they want it."

"They said they weren't going to exercise the option until I got my patent."

"Do they know the Patent Office rejected your patent and why?"

"They know."

"What are you going to do? And, how are you going to do it before the sheriff sells your house?"

"You're my lawyer," Ergstrom pointed to me with a boney finger. "Come up with something."

"You, or your daughter, fired me. Remember?"

"Well you're hired again."

"Dad?" Collins raised her voice. "We don't need somebody selling us snake oil. I can't see how he could possibly help. Let's not dig ourselves deeper in debt!"

Ergstrom stared at his daughter for a moment, then turned back to me. "What can we do?"

"Nothing is going to happen until the Patent Office issues you a patent. And, according to the letter you showed me, they aren't going to issue a patent until you prove your Provoker can consistently and predictably cause lightning to strike."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I'm neither a scientist nor an engineer, but I'd figure out a way to get your gizmo…"

"Provoker," Ergstrom corrected me.

"… to get your Provoker to make the ten lightning strikes in the four hours the Patent Office called for. Is it possible to make some kind of computer record of the time of the lightning strikes and the amount of energy captured from each?"

"Sure, I could hook something up to the control panel in the garage."

"I would also videotape the experiment and I would have an independent witness observe the experiment so they could sign an affidavit as to what they saw. I don't want to leave any room for doubt that your experiment was on the level."

"Who would you get to observe?"

"I know a consulting engineer in Moorestown. He'd make a credible witness. You'd need to pay him for his time, though."

"How much?"

"Two hundred dollars an hour."

"OK. What are you going to do?

"We need another bidder for your patent, someone to force the Renewal Energy Association to either exercise their option or walk away."

"Who are you going to get?"

I tapped my nose lightly with my finger. "Trade secret. You work on your Provoker thing and let me know when you are ready. And…"

"What?"

"The sheriff's sale is only nine days away."

~

The next morning, I returned to my office carrying a coffee with extra, extra cream for myself and a hot tea and blueberry muffin for my secretary.

"Thank you," she said.

"Any calls?"

"None so far."

"I'll be in the office."

Who would want to invest in lightning capture technology and why? I asked myself. *There are three reasons someone might want the patent. First, they might want to capture lightning energy for their own use or possibly to resell if they were a utility. Second, they might want to manufacture Provokers to sell. Third, and this was the big one, a company might invest in Provoker's to show how "green" they were. If a big company wanted to show they were doing something "green" it would be a heck of a lot cheaper to spend two million on a Provoker than to build a couple of acres of solar cells or put up a dozen windmills and it would*

generate much more publicity. I started making lists.

"Brian?" my secretary called. "A Mr. Ergstrom is calling."

"Brian," Ergstrom said breathlessly, "the teenagers came back and they trashed the place. They also tried to burn down the garage."

"Are you and Susan OK?"

"A little shook up, but unharmed. They wrecked the Provoker."

"Did you call the police?"

"The sheriff's department sent Murphy over, you met him at the courthouse. As usual, the law showed up too late to do any good. He took a report and said they'd have the evening shift do a drive-by. But that's not going to solve our problem is it?"

"Did they get the copper coil?"

"No, but they smashed a lot of the equipment, the capacitors and some of the electronics."

"Can it be repaired?"

"I don't know," Ergstrom said.

"You know what this means don't you?"

"No Provoker, verifying no experiment, no experiment, no patent, no patent, no money"

"No money, no home," I said.

"Exactly."

"Take a breath and go over your gizmo top to bottom and see whether it can be repaired. If it can, figure out whether you have the parts to fix it or

can get them. Call me in a couple of hours and let me know."

"Why?" Ergstrom asked.

"I'm trying to line up the engineer as a witness for your experiment, and contact someone at the Renewal Energy Association to see whether they want to exercise their option. I'm also trying to see whether anyone else wants to bid against them."

"Why?"

"First, to force your Renewable people to make a decision one way or the other and second to see whether we can bid up the price. I don't want to put a lot of pressure on you, but if you are going to save your place you don't have a lot of time. The sheriff's sale is in nine days. If you want to make sure it doesn't slip away, you better pay up in eight days."

"Susan is taking this worse than me. She's taken to her bed crying."

"Doesn't she have any friends she can call?"

"Not really. You're the first person we've had to dinner since her husband, Joe, died three years ago. Just between you and me, I'm worried about her."

"Why?"

"After Joe passed, there was an incident where she overdosed on sleeping pills."

"A suicide attempt?" I asked.

"That was never clear. She refused to talk about it. Then there was the cutting incident."

"What cutting incident?"

"She was sitting in the kitchen cutting carrots and stabbed herself in the leg. She said it was an accident, but the doctor said it looked like the knife had gone in two or three times in the same spot. It took nine stitches to close the wound."

"Has she been to counseling?"

"And where is the money for counseling going to come from?" Ergstrom asked.

"Sorry."

"Maybe you could talk to her," Ergstrom said. "Tell her we'll get through this."

"Me? I only met her yesterday."

"I saw how you snugged that throw around her when she was sleeping. It takes a kind heart to do that."

"Don't tell anybody. It would ruin my reputation as a lawyer."

"Seriously, can you talk to her?"

"Put her on the phone," I said.

"No, I mean in person. Then we can talk about whether there is any chance of fixing the Provoker or keeping the sheriff from foreclosing."

"I'll be there in an hour."

~

It wasn't hard to find the dirt road leading off to Ergstrom's house. The word "Wizard" was still visible on Magnolia Road even though tires had worn away part of the lettering. I eased down the dirt road past a section of trees festooned with LED lights. It was Ergstrom's light trap. It didn't look like much during the day, but with the

number of lights, I could see how they could be blinding.

Blackened grass and burn marks up the side of the garage showed where the fire had been. The place smelled of smoke and gasoline. Across the clearing, Ergstrom was taking apart the gizmo he called the Provoker. A red tool box sat in the grass. A yellow cart full of electronic equipment stood nearby. The air was chilly.

I parked my car and walked across the clearing. "How bad is it, Horatio?"

"Looks like they took an axe to it." He used his thumb to point to the Provoker, then he pointed to his garage. "They tossed gasoline on the garage and lit it. Fortunately, it was made of cement block so it only got singed."

"How did they get past the light trap?"

"They hiked through the woods," Ergstrom pointed to the woods opposite his dirt road.

"What about your gizmo… your Provoker."

"They didn't take the main copper coil. That is the hardest thing to fabricate. They destroyed some of the capacitors and the electronics used to switch current in and out of them."

"Fixable?"

"Probably. But it will take time."

"How is Susan taking it?"

"She hasn't said anything intelligible since I called you. She's just lying in bed, rocking back and forth saying 'No use. No use.'"

"If you've been up all night, I figured you'd be hungry and tired, so I brought food. Let's take a break, and have lunch," I said.

Ergstrom brushed the dirt off his jeans and hands as he walked back to the cabin. He opened a squeaky screen door. The spring on the screen door twanged as it slammed shut behind him.

"Susan!" Ergstrom called. "We've got company. Make yourself presentable."

I retrieved a bag of food from my car and entered the cabin, closing the screen door gently so it wouldn't bang. Susan Collins stood halfway out of one of the rooms off the cabin's central hall as she wiped tears from her eyes.

I turned my attention back to Ergstrom. "I brought Chinese. Hope that's OK, Horatio."

"Very kind. I'll get some plates."

By this time, Collins had advanced to the end of the cabin's central hall and was just peeking into the great room.

"Come on, Susan. Sit! Sit!" Ergstrom motioned his daughter forward. "The food is getting cold."

"I'm afraid it's already cold," I said. "You might want to microwave it a minute or two."

"Quite right!" The old man waved his hand in the air.

Collins sat at the table and avoided making eye contact with anyone.

"That's some mess out there," I said.

"Some mess," she mumbled.

"Were you scared?"

"Didn't have time to be scared," she said. "I had to put out the fire."

"How did you do that?"

"The well pump is in one corner of the garage. I hooked a hose to it."

"Did you get burned?"

"A little," she pointed to a blister on her arm.

"You're very brave." I said and turned back to Ergstrom. "How did you get rid of them? Did the sheriff's people scare them off?"

"Air rifle."

"You shot them?"

"Metaphorically."

"What does that mean?"

Ergstrom pointed to a rifle-like device propped against the fireplace. A backpack was sitting next to it.

"I've been experimenting with non-lethal weapons. That one generates a focused blast of sound designed to be so loud, it's painful."

"Effective?"

"At close range, a yard or two, it can curdle milk. Effective range is about twenty yards."

"And you wonder why kids think you are a wizard."

"Not a wizard, just a tinkerer." Ergstrom helped himself to some sweet and sour pork and put two egg rolls on his plate.

I helped myself as well.

Collins just sat there.

"Not eating, Susan?" I asked. "Don't you like Chinese?"

"It all just seems so futile. Nothing ever seems to work out. My whole life is one big smoking crater."

"Remember what Ford Prefect said in the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Things seem darkest just before they go pitch black."

"Is that supposed to be funny?" Collins did a half turn.

"I guess not. The point I was trying to make is that no matter what happens, you'll get through this."

"What makes you think so?"

"Him," I pointed to Ergstrom who was eating like it was his last meal.

Collins forced a smile and put her hand on top of mine. "I know you're just trying to help, but I've been in such a bad place for such a long time… I just need something to go right." She hung her head and looked away. Her hand still rested on mine.

"Horatio," I asked. "is there anything I can do to help with your gizmo?"

"I wouldn't trust a lawyer to hand me a wrench, let alone do brain surgery on the Provoker. No offense."

"None taken."

"In that case, I'm heading back to the office. I've got some other work to do. I left a message for your friend at the Renewable Energy Association.

He hasn't gotten back to me yet. And, I've put out calls to some utility companies that might be interested in investing in something new and…"

"Revolutionary?" Ergstrom asked.

"I was thinking, unusual."

I gently lifted Susan's hand off mine. "I'll be back in a couple of days when Horatio is ready to test his giz… Provoker."

She looked up at me as I stood. She couldn't bring herself to smile, but she'd stopped crying and the corner of her mouth had a small upturn. Maybe it would grow into a smile if things got back on track.

~

Six utility companies returned my call. Four of them dismissed the idea of capturing energy from lightning as simply nutty. One said to call back when Ergstrom had a patent. Trenton Light and Power seemed interested. I told them another company made a two-million-dollar offer and we were looking to improve upon that. They said that if Ergstrom could demonstrate that his gizmo worked, they could do a lot better than two million. I sent Ergstrom a text about Trenton's interest.

A day passed, then two and I didn't hear anything from Ergstrom. On the third day, I decided to call. "Horatio, what's the word? Have you got your giz… Provoker working?"

"No. The teens did a lot more damage than I thought. They pounded the Provoker with an ax

trying to get at the innards and that cracked a couple of circuit boards. I've been up half the night making new ones. I should be ready for a trial run tomorrow. Want to watch?"

"Sure, what time?"

"After lunch."

"I'll be there."

~

I hadn't seen much food in the kitchen on my last visit and with Collins moping about and Ergstrom fixated on his Provoker, they probably didn't have the energy to shop. So, I brought lunch again. It was just hoagies, chips, and creamed cabbage, but it was something.

"This is great," Ergstrom said. "I can't think of the last time I had anything solid to eat. I've been running on coffee and donuts."

"How about you, Susan?" I asked. "Have you been eating?"

"I had a cup of bran cereal this morning. I haven't been very hungry."

"You've got to keep your strength up."

"Why?"

"What if the giz… Provoker works? Then it's a race to the finish. A race to see whether we can get someone to cough up money in time to save your house. You've only got four days to go."

"Then we better get cracking!" Ergstrom said. He left a mouthful of hoagie and a couple of chips lying on his plate as he headed for the door.

Collins and I put down our half-eaten sandwiches and followed him to the garage.

A video camera sat on a fixed tripod pointing out a garage window at the Provoker.

"Susan," Ergstrom said. "Turn on the camera. And get ready to log the results."

Ergstrom flipped dials and switches and the low ominous hum began, followed a few seconds later by a high-pitched whine.

"Ready?" He said as he pushed a big red button in the middle of a large green panel.

An instant later, a lightning strike lit everything up. A deafening thunder clap shook the garage.

Ergstrom glanced at a row of gauges that ran across the top of the panel. "That was about 1.05 gigajoules."

Collins wrote it down.

"Let's give it twenty minutes and we'll try again."

"Why the delay?" I asked.

"Negative charge builds up in clouds – too complicated to explain right now – and the ground is positively charged. When the voltage difference gets large enough, positively and negatively charged particles seek a path to neutralize each other. That's one of the things the Provoker does. It creates a path of charged particles that acts like a lightning rod. Once the charges neutralize, it takes a while for the voltage difference to build up again."

"How long?"

"It's not clear. There's no real science to tell us. I'm guessing twenty minutes, but it could be a little more or a little less."

"What's happening here?" I pointed to a square of gauges eight across and four down. "One by one they seem to be dropping from their maximum reading to their minimum."

"Lightning creates a huge magnetic field in my primary coil, the big copper thing."

"Right."

"And I have thirty-two secondary coils that each suck off a little energy from the primary coil and store it in capacitors. Then the electronics tap each capacitor draining out electricity a little at a time so the current doesn't fry the batteries. It's all in the patent application." He looked at his watch. "Ready to go again, Susan?"

She nodded and he pushed the red button again. There was another flash of lightning and a thunder clap shook the garage. Everything went well until Ergstrom tried to make lightning the fourth time. As the lightning bolt struck, part of the Provoker exploded sideways sending a jet of hot plasma toward a stand of trees.

"Crap!" the old man spit.

Two thirds of the gauges for the secondary coils maxed out. A third never moved off zero. Smoke began pouring from the Provoker.

Red and blue flashing lights swept across the scene as two deputy sheriffs got out of their cars. One of them was Andy Murphy. "Mr. Ergstrom, I

thought you agreed not to set off lightning bolts? You know we talked about this. You know you're disturbing the peace. We've got people from five miles away calling the sheriff's department complaining about the noise and you're driving dogs wild. You don't have anything against dogs, do you?"

Ergstrom pushed past him. "I'm a little busy, Andy. I got a fire to put out." He grabbed a fire extinguisher off his front porch and sprayed his gizmo. Carbon dioxide foam was everywhere and the white, frozen carbon dioxide vanished almost as quickly as it was sprayed on.

"You got your wish!" Ergstrom shouted over his shoulder. "This thing is shot!"

"Deputy," I took Murphy aside, "you know the old man is about to lose his home."

"I was in the courthouse when the bank served him with papers. Remember?"

"Right. You know he's trying to get a patent on his gizmo."

"Nothing would surprise me."

"The Patent Office said that if he can get his gizmo to capture ten lightning bolts in four hours, they'll grant him a patent. If he can get a patent, he can sell it and save his house."

"Who is going to buy a contraption that makes lightning?"

"Causing lightning isn't the point. Capturing the energy of the lightning is the point. The old man claims he can capture enough energy from one

lightning bolt to power his house for nine days. One company has already taken an option on the device."

"Who?"

"The Renewable Energy Association. I think I can get a couple of others to bid on the device too."

"He's still disturbing the peace. When the sheriff gets a noise complaint, it's my job to investigate and stop it. There is nothing I can do." Murphy hooked his thumbs in his belt. "Do you really think he can save his home?"

"We're working on it."

"I've known Susan and Horatio for a long time. I hope they can figure something out. But they have to do it quietly. Next time we get a noise complaint, the sheriff is going to insist I arrest him," Murphy pointed to the old man.

Murphy and the deputy with him turned their car around in the clearing and left.

Ergstrom was on his knees pulling soot covered parts out of the gizmo.

I walked over. "How bad?"

"There is arcing between some of the secondary coils. Maybe the teens did more damage than I thought. Maybe I need to better insulate the coils from one another."

"Can you stuff fiberglass up in there or something?"

"That would probably stop the arcing, but then, with all that insulation, I'd have an overheating

problem. What did Andy have to say? Anything useful, or more of the same?"

"He said next time the sheriff got a noise complaint he'd arrest you."

"I don't care if he arrests me, I just want to get my patent!"

"Can you fix the…" I pointed.

"Probably, if nothing else goes wrong. It should take two days, if I don't take time to eat or sleep."

"Can you rig some kind of a cooling system? That way you can stuff insulation between the coils and be done."

"Designing and installing a cooling system will take longer than we have."

"I was thinking about something simple." I picked up the carbon dioxide fire extinguisher and squeezed the trigger for an instant. Carbon dioxide ice jetted out of the nozzle.

"What did you have in mind?" Ergstrom sat on the grass.

"Stick a hose in the giz… Provoker. Run it back to a trash can full of dry ice. Put a valve on the hose. Thirty seconds before lightning strikes, flood the Provoker with cold CO_2. Keep flooding the Provoker for thirty seconds after the lightning strike and you're home free."

"It'll take more than a garden hose to move enough CO_2 to cool things down, but I get your drift. Let me think about it. And they say lawyers aren't smart!"

"They're not smart, just tricky," I grinned.

I left Ergstrom to work on his gizmo and looked around. Collins was nowhere to be seen. I stepped into the cabin. She was sitting in a chair next to the fireplace, bent over, crying.

"What's the matter, Susan?"

"It's no use! No use. No use," she whispered.

"What's no use?"

"Everything, anything. Dad's crazy inventions. The foreclosure. My life. It's just one disaster after another."

I kneeled down and put a hand on her arm. "Whether your father's gizmo works or doesn't, whether you lose your home or you don't, life will go on."

"Will it?"

"Guaranteed. What we need to do, you and me, we need to give him one hundred percent support over the next three days to so he can get his patent. We can't let him be distracted by you being weepy. For the next three days, this has got to be about him. Understand?"

She nodded yes and wiped the tears from her eyes. "What if the teenagers return? Then what?"

"Would it make you feel any better if I stayed overnight?"

"I couldn't ask it."

"Why not? It would be like camping out. Maybe I can even help him with something. And you… you've got to keep the coffee flowing and whatever food you can rustle up."

"Pancakes."

"Sure, if that's what he wants."

~

I walked back outside and explained that I was going to stay over.

Ergstrom looked at me a second and then said, "Then I might as well put you to work." He produced a hastily scrawled list of items. "Can you pick up some supplies for me?" He handed me a credit card. "Take the truck and Susan. She knows where to find this stuff. Try to get back before dark in case the teenagers decide to take another run at us."

"Sure, no problem."

~

We pulled out onto Magnolia Road over the remains of the white spray-painted word Wizard. Susan drove the truck.

"Why are you helping us?" She asked.

"I kind of like your old man. He's… different. Full of wacky ideas, but different in a good way."

"Do you really think he can get his Provoker to work? Do you really think he can get it patented?"

"I don't know. That's where the drama comes in. I wouldn't bet money on it one way or the other."

"You've been leading him on! You've been leading him to believe he can pull this thing off! He's killing himself because he doesn't want to disappoint you!"

"Me? I only met him a few days ago. What have I got to do with anything?"

"Other than me, you're the first person who has shown the slightest interest in his work. You're the first person to believe in him!"

"I'm just a legal weenie. I don't know anything about physics or engineering."

"He's not hearing that. He's only hearing that someone believes in him."

"I tell you what, for the next three days let's both believe in him, a no ifs ands, or buts belief. If he can pass the Patent Office test, great! If he can't, you and he need to take a breath and reassess where you are going to live and what you are going to do. But, don't look to me for answers."

"That's cold."

"That's reality. I can't possibly know what's best for you or your father. Just like you can't possibly know what's best for me. Everybody has got to carve their own path in life. Sometimes, if you see someone struggling, you can give them a hand. I'm giving you the next three days. But you are going to have to write your own next chapter."

"We're here," Collins said as she pulled into the parking lot of an electrical supply store.

~

The old many worked on his gizmo, by himself day and night. He kept a schedule that would have exhausted a man half his age. Finally, it was the day before the sheriff's sale. The day that Ergstrom had to prove his gizmo could harness lightning reliably enough to earn a patent.

I was stiff. I had been sleeping in a sleeping bag in front of Ergstrom's fireplace for three days. I awoke to the sound of Suzan Collins banging dishes in the kitchen at the other end of the great room.

"Finally up?" she asked. There was the hint of a smile on her face and her tone was light and breezy.

She seemed to be coming out of the dark funk she'd been in the short time I had known her. Would she slip back into her funk if things didn't turn out as she hoped? Time would tell.

It was going to be a day of ifs. If Ergstrom fixed the gizmo. If it didn't short out again. If it actually harvested electrical energy and didn't simply make noisy lightning flashes; and if he could capture the energy of ten lightning strikes in a row; and if the video camera worked; and if the consulting engineer found this place and signed an affidavit attesting to the results; and if the Renewable Energy Association sent someone to witness the experiment; and if that person was authorized to exercise their two-million-dollar option and wire money into Ergstrom's account; and if a representative of Trenton Electric Service Company came ready to deal for the gizmo, and if Andy Murphy and his murphettes didn't stop the experiment, then Horatio and Susan could keep their house. Throwing money at a roulette wheel seemed more like a sure thing.

"Where is Horatio?" I asked.

"He worked on the Provoker until two a.m. Then he was up and out working on it at five this morning. I've been sending out coffee and donuts on the hour."

I glanced at the clock, as I slid into a chair at the breakfast table. It was eight a.m. "Everyone who is going to come should be here by ten. Any idea when he wants to start?"

"Right away, I think. As soon as everybody gets here."

"I'll take this round of coffee and donuts out to him. I have an idea about how this should unfold."

A hint of fog lingered in the air as I waded through the knee-high weeds to where the old man was kneeling. He was looking into the guts of the machine. It hadn't rained, but the grass was wet, probably from the morning dew. Something in the back of my mind said, *electricity and water are not a good combination*. I wondered whether it would create an even more spectacular electrical short and explosion.

"Will it be ready?" I asked.

"Sure."

I couldn't tell whether the old man said *sure*, as in no way in hell, or *sure,* as of course it will. I didn't press it.

"I had to move some of the innards around to get the carbon dioxide hoses in the right spot."

"So, you are doing some last-minute brain surgery."

"Something like that. Hope I remembered to connect everything back up. Short term memory is the first thing to go, you know."

"Great!" I mumbled under my breath. "I have a thought."

"It's a little late to start changing things now." The old man sat in the weeds next to his invention and bit into a donut.

"As I recall, Officer Murphy showed up about the time you set off your fourth… what do you want to call it? Lightning discharge? You were spacing them twenty minutes apart so he showed up an hour after you started. If you want to get off ten shots before the law shows up, you're going to have to space them six minutes apart. Is that possible?"

"I don't know. I don't know how long it takes a charge to build up in the atmosphere."

"Don't you have any data?" I asked.

"None."

"So, for all you know, you could set off your Provoker every thirty seconds."

"Well," the old man sat on the ground, "then we come up against other limits."

"Such as?"

"The capacitor banks only temporarily store energy from each of the lightning strikes. We have to drain the energy out of them slowly so we don't fry the batteries."

"How long?"

"Six to eight minutes." The old man's face lit up. "But…!" he stuck his finger in the air. "Suppose I only dumped half the energy into the batteries and dumped the other half into a resistor."

"I have no idea what you are talking about."

"Never mind, I do." Ergstrom leaped to his feet. "I could put two large metal stakes in the ground, one on each side of the field and use the earth itself as a giant resistor – a place to dump the excess energy."

"Is that safe?" I asked.

Ergstrom spread his hands and shrugged. "I'll let you know after I try it." He marched into the garage and started rummaging around for parts.

Collins walked up. "What's he up to now?"

"He just got a new idea."

"It happens a lot," she paused. "Is it dangerous?"

"You mean is it more dangerous than trying to catch a lightning bolt?"

She hung her head. "Don't tell me. I don't want to know."

"Susan."

"What?"

"The observers will be here soon. Any chance you could put on a fresh pot of coffee and organize a fresh batch of donuts?"

She looked at me. "How many donuts constitutes a lethal dose?"

"I don't know about donuts; ten grams is a lethal dose of caffeine. That's the amount in thirty cups of coffee."

"You're getting close. Dad is way over the limit."

~

The consulting engineer showed up at exactly ten o'clock.

The representative of Trenton Power and Light showed up a few minutes later. She was an older, dark-haired woman in a pantsuit. She looked very corporate. "What's he doing?" she asked.

Ergstrom was pounding a large metal stake in the ground.

"It's a redundant safety device in case the primary, secondary and tertiary systems fail," I said. I had no earthly idea what I was talking about, but it sounded good. *Years of legal training*, I thought.

The representative of the Renewable Energy Association turned up an hour late. "Did I miss anything? he asked.

"Not a thing," Ergstrom said, as he wiped mud from his hands onto his jeans. "Gentlemen, ladies, I am going to ask that you not look directly at the lightning. I will sound a horn then, two seconds later, lightning should strike. I have mounted a large copper sheet on the front of my cabin. If you turn toward the sheet you will be able to see a reflection of the lightning strike. Ready?"

Everyone mumbled yes and Ergstrom stepped into the garage followed by Collins, her stop watch, and clipboard.

Ergstrom turned a control that sent cold CO_2 flowing into the Provoker. Then he pushed a yellow button and a horn sounded. Two seconds later he pushed a red button in the middle of a large green control panel and everything lit up from a lightning strike. Just as quickly, a thunder clap rattled everyone's teeth. All the gauges on the control panel hit to their maximum value.

"That was about 1.2 gigajoules!" Ergstrom grinned.

"Mark," Collins said as she clicked her stopwatch."

"Tell me when we're coming up on three minutes," Ergstrom said as he watched the gauges indicating energy was draining out of the capacitors.

The second shot went off without a hitch, capturing 1.1 gigajoules of energy. By the third shot, the crowd wasn't as shocked by the brightness of the lightning or the roar of the thunder. It captured 1.05 megajoules of energy.

By the seventh shot, energy capture was down to .85 gigajoules. Ergstrom tapped the gauge, looked at me and shook his head no.

Susan Collins handed me her clipboard and stopwatch and just said, "I've got to go."

I assumed she meant to the bathroom. I counted down to the time for the eighth shot.

Ergstrom flooded the device with carbon dioxide, sounded the horn and pushed the red button. Nothing happened.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"I don't know!" Ergstrom said, glancing over the control panel.

I tapped Ergstrom with the back of my hand. "We've got trouble," I pointed to a monitor. The webcam on Magnolia Road showed a sheriff's department car pulling into his dirt road. "What are you going to do?"

Ergstrom walked to the other side of his garage and threw a large circuit breaker. A section of the dirt road lit up with the light of a dozen suns. "The light trap. It should hold them for a few minutes."

"Try the gizmo again," I said.

"The Provoker."

"Whatever, just push the damned button."

Carbon dioxide flowed, the horn sounded and lightning struck followed by a thunderclap. The energy captured was 1.0 gigajoules.

"Tell me when we get to three minutes," Ergstrom said.

Time slowed to the speed of molasses in January.

Deputy Murphy and two other deputies appeared at the garage door. They were wearing mirrored sunglasses. "Mr. Ergstrom, you are under arrest for disturbing the peace. Please come with us, sir."

Ergstrom pushed the red button. There was no warning horn, no carbon dioxide to cool the gizmo, just a flash of lightning followed by a thunderclap that took the officers by surprise.

Murphy handcuffed the old man, and two other deputies led him away. Then Murphy turned toward me. "Mr. O'Hara, do you know how to shut this thing down?" He pointed to the control panel.

"I think so. You have to throw the circuit breaker over there," I pointed to the light trap circuit breaker, "and a couple of switches on this control panel and it's all over."

"Can you do that? Or do I have to send for the county engineer?"

"Can't you let the old man finish his experiment?"

"You know I can't. I already warned him twice. I'm afraid the judge is going to insist on jail this time. Now, can you shut this thing off or not?"

I hung my head. "OK, you win. I still represent him, so don't ask him any questions until I get to the lockup. Understand?"

"Sure. Whatever," Murphy flicked his hand over his shoulder as he walked away.

I turned off the light trap. Then I stepped up to the green control panel. Pushed the yellow button sounding the horn. That brought Officer Murphy running back toward the garage. Then I pushed the red button. A flash of lightning lit up the area and a thunderclap shook the garage so hard that a curtain

of dust fell from the rafters. The energy level hit 1.2 gigajoules.

"OK, you're under arrest too." Murphy motioned toward me.

As Murphy walked me to the car, I shouted to the engineer. "Can you sign that affidavit?"

"No problem," the engineer said. "I'll fax it to the Patent Office."

Murphy pushed me toward the car.

"Does the old man get his money?" I shouted to the representative of the Renewable Energy Association."

"We'll think about it."

"Think quick. Your option is just for the right of first refusal. What does Trenton Power and Light say?"

"We'll give you three million for the patent," the woman from Trenton Power and Light said. "We can deal today, right now if you want."

"Officer Murphy," I asked, "can you give me five minutes to close this deal so the old man won't lose his house?"

The two deputies with Murphy shook their heads no.

"Five minutes," Murphy said.

"Wait a minute!" the representative of the Renewable Energy Association said. "We've decided to exercise our option. We can wire the money to Mr. Ergstrom's account as soon as he signs these papers." The man produced a quarter inch thick document from his briefcase.

"Let him sign through the window," Murphy said. Ergstrom was already in one of the deputy's cars.

"Duck your head," Murphy said as he pushed me into the back seat of his patrol car.

"Thank you, deputy. I thank you, my mother thanks you, Horatio Ergstrom thanks you and Susan Collins thanks you. Susan, where is Susan?"

Murphy leaned into the patrol car's back door. "Stay put!" He wagged his finger in my face. Then he marched toward the cabin. He knew she wasn't in the garage; he would have seen her there. He threw open the door and found her sprawled out on the rug. Pills spilled from a bottle inches from her hand.

"Susan?" he asked. She was breathing, but unresponsive.

"911 Dispatch?" he spoke into his radio, "We need an ambulance in Ong's Hat, the Ergstrom place."

~

Collins awoke in the hospital. Her father, Deputy Murphy and I were standing around her bed when she woke up.

"What happened?" she asked.

Her father grasped her hand. "The doctor thinks it was a bad interaction between your blood pressure medications, your anti-anxiety meds and the stress you've been under."

"Will I be OK?" she asked.

"The doctor says you'll have flat feet for the next six months," I said. "Other than that, you'll be fine."

"Flat feet?" she mouthed.

"It's a joke," I said.

"The experiment? The house?" she spread her hands, "What happened?"

"The experiment went well, thanks to Brian," Ergstrom said. "He set off the Provoker one last time so we could get the patent."

"Yeah, and don't forget," Murphy said, "you two are still technically under arrest for disturbing the peace."

"Somebody bought the patent?" she asked.

"The Renewable Energy Association bought the patent," Ergstrom said. "The money has already been wired into our account and I sent the bank what we owe them."

"So, now we can look forward to thousands of Provokers catching lightning bolts all across the country," she smiled. "You'll be famous, dad."

Ergstrom tugged his ear and looked at me. I held my hand in Deputy Murphy's direction. Murphy pointed his finger at Ergstrom. "This is your show, Horatio. You better tell her."

"Tell me what?"

"I asked the people from Renewable Energy how soon they planned to start building Provokers and whether I could help. They said, they weren't going to build any Provokers. They bought the patent to bury it. They said people wouldn't build

huge expensive windmills or spend money putting up acres of solar panels when they could use a Provoker to get all the energy they needed.'"

"So that's it? They're going to bury your invention?" Collins asked.

"It's even worse. Under the terms of the option agreement I signed, they can prevent me from perfecting my patent. If the Provoker was patented, in twenty years anyone could look up its design in the patent office and start building them. No patent, no technology disclosure. The Renewable Energy Association is going to pretend my invention never existed."

"That's crappy!" Collins said.

"It's not personal," I said. "It's only business."

THE END

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