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PART I

1

Jenna Wilkes pushed her glasses up on her nose to squint at the phony data on the screen in front of her, going through the motions expected of people analyzing real data. The junior researcher facing her from across the laboratory table looked up from his computer.

“Whatcha got, Jenna?” he probed, eyes locked upon her.

She fidgeted in her chair, chafing that she, a physicist, had been reduced to a thespian pretending to do physics. When she returned his stare, the overhead fluorescent lights caught her glasses just so, making her eyes over-bright disks. Jenna opened her mouth as if to answer, then closed it, brushing her long red hair out of her face. She was a bad liar. Her gaze shifted back to the screen to better avoid the wordless accusation she had seen in his eyes. His resentment at being excluded from her zealously guarded work was palpable.

“Don’t make me come over there,” he urged with a bit more force than he intended.

“You *know* I don’t like sharing half-baked research with anyone, Bryn.” As she turned in her chair, her eyes darted from Bryn to the screen to the massive titanium cube mounted behind her on its stainless steel frame. The matte black surface of the cube, measuring more than a yard on a side, bristled with copper tubing, wires, meters, foil, and thermal shielding. She didn’t know how long she could keep the device from being pried out of her hands. Decoys, deceptions, and lies had their limits.

Bryn Zilcher smirked and called over his shoulder to a senior researcher. “Jenna’s her usual talkative self again. Think she’ll ever get around to documenting anything she does around here?”

The older scientist, Ron Bartleby, slowly swung his chair around to regard Bryn with an upraised eyebrow. “You want to hide some secrets too, Bryn? Then discover something of your own to hide. Leave the redhead alone.”

Jenna cocked her head at her defender’s comment. She could count on Bartleby to keep the newer researchers in line—another reason he had earned her trust over the last

three years.

When Bartleby unexpectedly rose to approach her workstation, she knew her elaborate on-screen facade may need to come into play. She turned her monitor off and sorted through some papers. Bartleby came around her lab table and approached the room-dominating cube behind her. She pretended he wasn't there.

"Remember, Doctor Wilkes, a huge chunk of our division's 2024–2025 fiscal year budget was sunk into your isolator system here," Bartleby chided with undue formality, patting the titanium surface with a chubby hand.

"So I'm told," she mumbled.

Across the table, Bryn's eyes bored through her. He knew she had been working on the workstation just moments earlier. But Bartleby would assume Jenna's computer was turned off. Bryn tried to signal Bartleby, pointing at Jenna's screen. Bartleby shifted his eyes and caught the gesture. So did Jenna.

"Done for the day?" Bartleby asked her.

"Yeah, just looking for a journal article I'll need for tomorrow," she replied.

Bartleby reached over her shoulder and turned her computer screen back on. Her eyes narrowed at Bryn, who shot back a smug grin. She turned in her chair and looked up at Bartleby, who was leaning across her to examine her results. The decoy would prove more effective if she could feign some convincing anger.

"Great precedent. Thanks a lot, Ron. Tomorrow, Bryn will be doing that. Thursday, the grad students will check my work, and Friday, the cleaning lady will be running error regressions on my data."

"Temper, temper," Bartleby replied with a faint air of superiority, one she knew was rooted in experience, not condescension. Though technically not her superior, he was on much better terms with the lab managers than she.

"I'm not showing Bryn jack," he added decisively.

"Nice," Bryn fumed. "Great intramural data sharing. World class."

"Hmm ..." Bartleby dragged a finger down the column of data on her screen. "The same result as your other five prototypes."

She nodded, trying to push her chair out farther from him. Bartleby had no idea his older, heavier bulk was too far into her personal space. He kept his finger on the screen, his heavy-lidded eyes turning serious.

"Do you have any idea what it means?" he finally asked. "Without giving me your stock answer about it being too premature to draw any conclusions."

"I don't like ..." she began

"... to speculate," he finished.

"*Everything* she does is pure speculation," Bryn scoffed, knowing he wasn't being kept at arm's length from something trivial. "Our budget was torpedoed fabricating that mystery box."

Jenna ignored Bryn's barb and looked back up at Bartleby with renewed purpose.

"There's a way to know whether it's just a simple cryogenic effect, or something more," she whispered.

Bryn's ears perked up. She turned to glare at him, invisible daggers flying from her eyes.

"You heard that?" She wasn't whispering anymore.

"I don't like to speculate," he cracked.

Bartleby waved Bryn off, but looked at Jenna with concern.

"Look," he said, "I've done everything I can to keep management off your back. You're supposed to optimize existing products. If you keep stumbling on things by accident, that's bad juju in management's eyes. It proves you can't keep focus."

He looked across the lab table at Bryn, then back down at Jenna.

"You're the best researcher here, but they're pragmatists. They only care about tangible, marketable results. Period."

He released his fingerhold on her monitor and pulled up a rolling lab chair. Bryn tilted his head. Bartleby noticed and promptly ordered Zilcher downstairs on an errand they both knew to be meaningless.

Bartleby turned back to examine her data. "You said there's a way to know?"

"Yeah," she didn't miss a beat. "This thing might be a neutrino shield."

Bartleby stopped sipping his coffee, his eyes staring into hers. "You *do* know what you're saying, right?" They both understood that the subatomic particles called neutrinos were incredibly difficult to stop on their speed-of-light journeys through space, through matter, through anything.

She nodded, knowing she had just thrown him a bone, one calculated to divert attention from her bigger discovery.

"Are you proposing to test that?" he asked, a dark look passing over his face. Transporting the isolator to one of the world's underground neutrino detectors could bust their budget.

"How can we not?" she asked, naively surprised at his question.

For a moment, Bartleby embraced the spirit of her reply. He had cut his teeth on basic research like this. But the wave of nostalgia evaporated, and his face hardened.

"Easy there. We don't run the test unless you're willing to jeopardize your job again, Doctor Wilkes. That's a risk you're not taking seriously enough. Trust me."

Jenna dropped her gaze evasively, knowing Bartleby wouldn't stop staring until she acknowledged his concern.

"Ron, what would you do if you were sitting at your desk and got these results on the isolator?" she asked.

"You're changing the subject," he replied. "I'm not the one that management is thinking about firing every quarter."

Jenna brightened suddenly. “Then maybe *you* can sell the test to management!” She leaned forward. “Find some kind of value proposition they’ll buy.”

He regarded her warily. She was coming across as a daughter pleading with her father to let her do something ill-advised. Given their age difference, the comparison didn’t lack merit: he was fifty-eight; she had recently turned twenty-nine, a year older than Bryn. Bartleby scratched his balding head and tried to reason with her.

“We’ve done that with every aspect of your project so far. So far, no tangible results, just anomalies like this in the wake of otherwise successful ignitions.” He pointed an accusing finger at her screen. “I won’t sell a string of empty promises that goes on forever. It’s got to end, preferably before you lose your job.”

Bryn reentered the room with the journal reprint Bartleby requested and settled back into his chair, clearly miffed with Bartleby’s dismissive nod toward him.

“Look,” Bartleby turned back to Jenna. “Just turn the isolator off and we’ll track its behavior as it returns to room temperature.”

Jenna stiffened in dismay, alarm rising in her eyes. She’d been caught. That was the last suggestion she wanted to hear, but there was no going back. She’d have to take Bartleby into her confidence immediately to have any chance at damage control. Whether his suggestion was innocent or intentional didn’t change the crisis it would ignite—nor was there time to discern where Bartleby stood. Her gut knotted.

She grabbed a notepad from the table and scribbled furiously. She signaled to Bartleby to roll his chair farther away from Bryn, closer to the black cube. Once settled out of earshot, she turned the page toward Bartleby so Bryn couldn’t see it. Bartleby silently read the chicken scratch, barely able to make out her frantic handwriting: IT CAN’T BE TURNED OFF.

“Really?” Bartleby whispered. “Why not?”

“I don’t know. You turn it off, and it stays on. I’ve never been able to turn *any* of the six test isolators off.”

“Are you saying they’re self-sustaining?” he asked in bewilderment.

“No, no!” she hissed, pointing at the circuit boxes on the east wall of the lab. “If I shut down the switches and pull the plug, I show the meter *still running* in that local circuit box. The isolator is—was—the only thing on that circuit. I’m afraid of pulling the wall breaker.”

“Why should you be afraid . . .” Bartleby’s voice trailed off in recognition of Jenna’s fear. “Are you sure?” he asked again, grappling with the realization that this was no joke.

Bryn arose to leave. “I’ll be back in the morning. It’s so nice working with people who communicate openly with me. Wild horses couldn’t keep me from enjoying such a synergistic work environment.”

“You too, Bryn,” Bartleby called the bluff.

As the door closed behind Bryn, Bartleby quickly put his finger across his lips,

signaling for silence. He ambled around the lab table and examined the peripherals near Bryn's computer. He located a wireless microphone—its antenna was inserted into the workstation. He pulled the antenna out enough to deactivate it.

“Oh oh, I bumped Bryn's computer. I'm SO sorry.”

Jenna grinned at Bartleby's overacting as he lifted up the now-dead microphone to indicate what their coworker was up to.

Bartleby kept an eye on the wall monitor that would alert him once Bryn left the building. Until then, small talk was the safer option.

“You know, Jenna, most of the crew would have been flattered that someone considered them worth recording.” Bartleby brandished the microphone her way. “But not you. You, you don't much like Bryn, do you?”

“You don't either,” she retorted.

“Irrelevant. I don't treat every newbie as a threat. You do.”

“I have reason to distrust everyone in the lab.”

“Do you distrust me?” Bartleby asked, setting Jenna aback momentarily.

“No, Ron, I don't distrust you, I guess.” She looked vulnerable for a moment, but her anger quickly got its second wind. She pointed at the microphone.

“I won't let Bryn rip me off.”

“I don't think Bryn is your problem,” Bartleby suggested.

He was right. She was a stranger to her own greatest breakthrough. But the pit deep in her mind, the memory hole where she had buried her revolutionary ideas seven years ago at Stanford, wasn't a particularly secure place. Those ideas had crept into the six isolators she had designed, but she couldn't recognize or understand her own blueprints once she finished drafting them.

The green light on the personnel board in front of Bryn Zilcher's name winked out.

“Now is the time for answers.” Bartleby remarked grimly. He walked back around to face the isolator and folded his arms.

Jenna didn't know what to expect. Though Bartleby was the closest thing to a friend to her at CryoMax, he was a company man under the skin. It was getting harder to reach the scientist lurking beneath the executive facade he was expected to maintain.

“This is the most expensive isolator ever prototyped,” he asserted. “Solid titanium a meter on a side. A spherical control cavity, soccer-ball-size, in the middle ... and *nobody can shut off the power to it?*” The demanding expression on Bartleby's face unnerved Jenna. He marched over to the circuit breaker on the wall.

Jenna tensed up in her seat. She wasn't sure she wanted to be in the building if the breaker were thrown. “You're just going to check the meter, right?” she asked anxiously.

“That ... and turn off the breaker to the line.” He meant it.

“That might be dangerous,” she warned.

“It had better not be dangerous, Doctor Wilkes.” Bartleby's words were tense and

angry. “There’s nothing in the research being done in my lab that could possibly be dangerous to anybody, ever!”

His unprecedented outburst stunned her—he was visibly shaking. She found her hands gripping the armrests of her chair so tightly they were almost bloodless. They stared at each other.

They said nothing, but her mind was racing, her eyes searching his eyes for answers that couldn’t possibly be there . . .

Do you know what I’m really doing with this isolator, Ron? What I’ve been doing here for the last three years? It’s driving me crazy, designing things I don’t recognize or understand moments after the ink has dried. Am I going through someone else’s motions—or are they my own? I can’t push past the walls of pain to get at the answers I know must be in my head somewhere. I can’t even tell anyone what I’m going through. Nobody ever invented the right words to explain it.

She squeezed her eyes shut with a pained expression; Bartleby knew nothing of her inner turmoil. But his expression relaxed, and he continued without missing a beat.

“Take your cell phone with you. Go downstairs to the maintenance room where all the electrical lines come into this building. Find the box for this lab room: it’s marked 2130. Find the meter that matches the kilowatt hours being pulled from this isolator outlet, and then call me from there. I want you there watching that meter when I throw this breaker.”

Now she understood. He was going to put himself in danger’s way.

“I can’t let you be the one to throw that switch, Ron,” she insisted, rising to her feet. Realizing she had kicked her pumps off under the desk, she sat back down to recover them, interrupting her mock-heroic speech in midstream.

But Bartleby took charge. “Take your cell phone. You know my number. I’ll be waiting here,” he ordered.

“What if . . .”

“Call 911,” he shot back. “Get down there. Take a flashlight.”

A flashlight? she wondered. “This can wait, you know,” her tone as calm as she could muster.

“No, it can’t. I’m hungry.”

Hitting the speed bump of Bartleby’s sophomoric humor was momentarily jarring, yet it encouraged Jenna to cooperate. Shoes back on, she paused at the door after pulling a flashlight out of the wall cabinet.

He called out after her. “Unless, of course, you want to stop testing your hypotheses in this lab!”

She let the door close behind her and made her way to the elevator, carelessly leaving her cell phone earpiece behind. It dawned on her that she’d never taken the stairs before. If the electricity were going to fail, she’d better know what to expect in the stairwell. She glanced at the flashlight in her hand, gripped it even more firmly, and walked resolutely

past the elevator.

Her innocent decision to take the stairs, pragmatic in the extreme, changed everything.

2

Downstairs, division chief Bic Johanssen waited for an unwanted pest from headquarters to arrive. Such visits triggered reflections on the career-threatening conduct he'd been pushed into over the last three years. His thoughts took visual form, words on a computer screen that burned brightly in his mind's eye. He hoped the words, or more to the point, their absence, would never be detected. The day the deletions were discovered would be his last at CryoMax.

Jenna Wilkes is damaged goods.

Emotional baggage.

Big chip on shoulder.

Deleted. Bic Johanssen had long ago deleted those three negative evaluations of Jenna sent upstairs to him by her managers. That was the first time he had mutilated corporate data.

Rain Man. Except female, and less reasonable.

Motormouth last year. Lockjaw last eight months.

Promising initial results. Her project is still a money pit.

Bic had retained the one positive comment, striking the money pit assessment despite knowing in his gut that it was all too true.

Jenna's job interview from three years earlier hadn't escaped Bic's digital knife either.

Earned Ph.D. in Physics at Stanford, May 2018, age 22.

Denied opportunity for postdoctoral study.

Bic had deleted the denial. It would raise questions.

The four-year period between leaving Stanford and joining CryoMax bristled with red flags. She'd had fifteen jobs—*fifteen!*—which all ended prematurely. Therefore, no meaningful references. All she had was a powerful advocate upstairs, a bigwig on the CryoMax board, who chose to remain anonymous. A spook. Could be one of the good guys. Could be otherwise. Could even be a trap.

A spook. Bic didn't need one of his bosses complicating his life like this, but turning down an unknown board member could recoil on Bic's head in unseen ways. *Better to*

choose the devil you know, Bic reasoned. *I can control something that's predictable.* It helped that the laundry list was limited. Her advocate had wanted Bic to get Jenna hired and to spiff up her records as needed—which was often. Bic hoped his rear was being covered, but the spook could have vulnerabilities of his own. Most board members did.

Jenna's psych file was a melting pot of pathologies, none of them certain—the grammar of trauma stretched beyond its legitimate reach. Bic had cleaned that up too.

That made for two strikes against him.

Yet Jenna had thrived working with Ron Bartleby, had managed to somehow transcend her past. Her dysfunctional family situation was only part of the story. Bic didn't know the rest. Stanford had done its own deleting, he had guessed. Something had happened back then. As long as Jenna's work passed muster, it wasn't Bic's problem.

Bic assumed that Jenna's selective amnesia was benign because she functioned in spite of it. But the void in her mind wasn't truly empty, and what hid inside it had taken concrete shape in Bic's lab, under his nose, with his approval, on CryoMax's dime, carved out of a primal block of titanium, a coiled spring poised to snap in half.

Bic's visitor arrived at the lab entrance. This was already a bad sign—the man didn't want to meet Bic at the admin building but here, where he could wreak the most personnel damage. Bic quickly put the disturbing reveries of Evaluators' Labor Lost out of his mind and stepped outside to intercept his visitor, greeting his guest with as much sincerity as he could possibly fake. From all he could tell, it was an unqualified waste of energy.

Bic didn't like *any* visits from corporate headquarters in Boston, but he positively despised the quarterly visits from the most caustic director, Niles Emmerich. Niles was in one of his cut-and-run moods, shaking things up by terminating a handful of researchers. The stock price had dropped again, but Wall Street would respond favorably to hard-nosed action by management. It was all Bic could do to retain his most promising researchers against his superior's ruthless pruning.

The two gray-suited men, briefcases in hand, walked down the first floor hallway bisecting Building F, the part of the Livermore corporate lab focused on isolator optimization. The late afternoon sun couldn't reach this deep into the facility; artificial lighting illuminated the walls, which were emblazoned with the italicized blue CryoMax logo, a stylized red snowflake boldly superimposed on top of the final X. Niles was droning on about the room service at the hotel just outside the corporate campus.

"... and that's why I hate coming out to the Livermore lab, Johanssen. Aren't there any better hotels here? Like we have in Boston?"

Bic was quickly wearying of Niles's endless stream of complaints. "Well, there's ..."

"I mean close by!" Niles cut him off.

"Well ..."

"See what I mean?" Niles finished triumphantly. "One day we'll move the lab to a

better location.”

“Wouldn’t it be cheaper to build our own hotel?” Bic asked, but before Niles could answer, a side door in the hallway suddenly swung open, nearly hitting them, and a red-haired woman bolted out holding a flashlight and cell phone. Her lab coat had obviously never been washed: it was dingy gray and heavily mottled, not the bright white coats everyone else in the facility wore. Due to the angle the door opened, she never saw Bic or Niles and hurried away from them down the hallway, the sound of her shoes reverberating down the corridor.

Niles quickly set down his briefcase and purposefully put his hands on his hips.

“How rude!” he blustered. He called out more loudly. “Miss, come back here this instant!” The usual velvet tones of his English accent sounded shrill and brittle echoing off the hallway walls.

Jenna jumped when she heard the voice from behind her. She spun around in her tracks, now about eight yards from the two.

“I’m sorry!” she cried out, and turned back around and kept going. She had recognized Bic Johanssen, but not the other man. She couldn’t keep Bartleby waiting by the circuit breaker. She wasn’t even sure she wanted to be in the *building* when he popped the breaker, but right now she was committed.

Niles ignored her hasty apology and called again. “Miss, come back here. Now!”

“I can’t!” Jenna called back, nearly breaking into a run, forcing herself to slow back down to an urgent walk.

Niles’s eyes narrowed to angry slits. He turned to Bic. “Do you know her?” he demanded, pointing at the receding figure.

“Yes,” Bic answered glumly. “That’s Doctor Jenna Wilkes. She is one of my best researchers.” He looked down the hallway after her and was surprised to see her entering a maintenance room. “What the hell?” Bic muttered in surprise.

“Exactly my point,” said Niles, his gray mustache and goatee framing a severe scowl. “What the hell is *with* your people, Johanssen? What kind of show are you running here?” He paused and pulled out his pocket digiscreen. “Did you say Wilkes?”

Bic nodded absently, then turned his head, eyes riveted on Niles’s digiscreen. Niles only remembered the names of people he was planning to cut from the staff. Bic had insulated Wilkes so completely from upper management that they hardly knew she existed. Nothing negative about her ever floated upstairs. How did Niles get her name?

And what was Jenna doing in the maintenance room? The massive current pumped up to the lab provided power cushion to spare. What could possibly have triggered an interrupt? And Jenna wasn’t even qualified to handle power glitches.

“Niles,” Bic tried to excuse himself. “I need to see what Doctor Wilkes is doing. This should only take a moment of my time.”

“Of *our* time,” Niles tapped the stylus on his digiscreen decisively. “I want a word

with her.”

Bic groaned inside. The last two people he wanted to see cross paths were Niles and Jenna. Bartleby’s recent reports had implied that she was finally onto something important—important enough to justify not having fired her ten times over since she came on board. But *Niles* didn’t know Bartleby from Adam, nor how an anonymous board member had covertly orchestrated her arrival and retention through Bic’s ample distribution of lipstick on the pig. And given Niles’s first impression of Wilkes ...

“Right,” Bic sighed. “Of *our* time. Let’s catch up to her.”

Bic found the maintenance room door locked, so he knocked. Niles fumed impatiently. There was no answer, but they could hear Jenna talking inside to somebody.

“Liaisons in the maintenance closets, Johanssen?” Niles asked snidely.

Bic ignored the venom, knocked, and called out Jenna’s name.

“I’m busy,” came a muffled female voice behind the door.

Bic saw Niles turning bright red. *It’s getting ugly fast*, he realized. Bic held up an index finger at Niles, signaling for him to wait. He then went to his wallet to find his passkey. He rarely used it: he was always expected by his employees, who always left their doors open for him. He didn’t even take the passkey out, but just swiped the wallet across the sensor. The door buzzed, and Bic pulled it open. Niles followed him into the maintenance closet.

The room resembled a high-school locker room, except the lockers were electrical meters and modular interrupt boxes. Like Building H, this building used the older through-the-door fused pull-out disconnects behind panel door interlocks, instead of intranet-controlled power, ostensibly for enhanced current limiting, making the room a literal throwback to the twentieth century.

Jenna wasn’t in the first row, but they could hear her voice to the right. They walked around the first rank of meters. Bic glanced around the corner of the next row and saw Jenna, or at least the bottom two-thirds of her. Her shoulder and head were blocked by an open circuit box panel; she’d obviously defeated the interlock to open it. She hadn’t noticed them yet; the hum in the room had covered the buzz of the entry door lock and their footsteps.

“Okay, Ron, I’m ready,” she said. “We’re steady at 8.132. Throw the breaker.”

Niles took a step forward to open his mouth, but was startled when Jenna’s cell phone dropped to the ground and the shell split from the impact. Her hands dropped to her side.

“Oh my God,” she whispered.

Niles didn’t know why, but her words riveted him in place.

Bic recognized that this wasn’t just a minor power problem. He pushed past Niles and walked behind Jenna. She was staring at the meter, turning only for a moment to recognize Bic before refocusing her gaze on the digital readout ticking off the power flow.

Now Bic was getting spooked. He muttered to her under his breath. “Look, Jenna, what’s going on here?”

She just pointed to the meter, its display module showing a continual power drain of 8.132 kilowatts, and said, “It’s not stopping.”

“What’s not stopping?”

She pulled herself together and quickly closed the circuit module panel. Bic saw the number stenciled on the galvanized metal: 2130. He pointed at the numerals.

“That’s to the isolator lab, isn’t it?” he asked.

She nodded, bending down to pick up the broken cell phone, cursing under her breath that now she couldn’t talk to Bartleby, and even more upset that Johanssen and the stranger with an accent had been in the maintenance room with her.

Niles had had all he could stand at this point. He felt foolish standing there, poised as if something climactic were happening, and ... nothing. He felt she had made a fool of him.

“Doctor Wicks,” he began angrily.

“Wilkes,” corrected Bic.

“It doesn’t matter,” Niles shot back.

“Who’s he?” Jenna asked Bic.

Niles stepped forward, coming within a foot of Jenna.

“I’m Doctor Johanssen’s boss, Director Emmerich,” he announced with pointed condescension.

Bic recognized this pattern all too well: in Niles’s book, maximizing a target’s discomfort was the obligatory prelude to being fired.

Jenna nodded, not entirely comprehending, her mind still reeling from the fact that in the circuit box she had just closed, power was flowing to the lab that had no business flowing *anywhere*. Her mind was racing to try to find any plausible explanation for it. All she could conclude was summed up in one simple phrase she’d been subconsciously repeating to herself since trying to shut down the first isolator months earlier: *the laws of nature require it*.

“Miss Wilkes,” Niles started again, pointedly dropping Jenna’s title. “You nearly slammed a door in my face, refused to stop when I called you, and now you play me for a fool with your little game *in this stupid broom closet!*”

“Niles,” Bic began, “I think that was an accident. You know ...”

“If Johanssen isn’t going to run a tight ship here,” Niles sneered, “I know where to find someone who can.”

Bic recognized he had no choice but to back down. Jenna was on her own this time; he’d try to pick up the pieces later when he was in a better position to do so.

“Look, I’m sorry about the door,” she apologized, “but Ron was waiting for my call, and I had to ...”

“Is Ron a director of CryoMax?” sniffed Niles.

Jenna looked around, starting to feel trapped, desperate. *There’s no place to go*, she thought. *These guys are blocking me in. Should I push past them to get to Ron? He must be freaking that my cell phone went dead ... Cell phone. Bic has one.*

She ignored Niles’s question and turned toward Bic. “Doctor Johanssen, it’s critical that I call Ron Bartleby up in the lab. May I use your cell phone?” she asked.

As Bic started to reach for his cell phone, Niles grabbed his arm and glared at Jenna.

“We weren’t finished, Miss Wicks.”

This time, Bic didn’t try to correct him.

Jenna blurted out to Bic, “Just call Ron and tell him I’m okay.”

Niles snorted. “Of course you’re okay, for the moment. It’s your job here that’s not.”

Bic saw Jenna’s eyes boring in on him, imploring him to make the call. He backed away from Niles and pushed the speed dial to Bartleby’s cell phone while Niles continued to berate Jenna.

Bartleby answered the phone, but Bic was stunned at what Bartleby said.

“Bic, I can’t talk right now. I’m waiting for a very important call. Sorry.” And the line went dead.

Bic redialed.

“Bic, I told you I can’t ...”

“Jenna’s with me,” Bic interrupted. There was a pause on the other end of the line. “Did you hear me? Jenna’s with me.”

Bartleby could hear an Englishman yelling at someone through the line. “Where’s Jenna?” he asked Bic.

“Here in the maintenance room.”

Bic heard Bartleby curse.

“What’s going on, Ron?” Bic was rapidly losing his patience.

“Oh, just some flaky power spikes messing with our amps, Bic.” Caught unprepared, Bartleby had to improvise.

“Really.” Bic knew Bartleby was hiding something. He’d only do that if it were important. Or if it were something that would hurt Jenna.

Not wanting Niles to overhear his call to Bartleby, Bic moved to the far end of the maintenance room. He spat his words into the cell phone in a loud whisper.

“Funny thing is, Ron, that Jenna thinks the problem isn’t power spikes, it’s the power being too constant. Would you happen to know anything about that?”

“What’s wrong with power being too constant?” Bartleby’s improvisation had just slammed headfirst into the wall.

“Must be *something* wrong with it. Jenna dropped her phone in a state of shock. Wasn’t she talking to you at the time?”

Now Bartleby was stuck. He’d already said he was waiting for a critical call and had

hung up on Bic after saying so. Bartleby had obviously forgotten all about that call after Bic mentioned Jenna. He was caught red-handed.

“Can you and Jenna come up to the lab and we can talk about it?” asked Bartleby.

“I don’t know, Ron. Right now, Niles is having roast Jenna for dinner.”

“Niles Emmerich?” Bartleby tensed.

“Mmm hmmm.”

“Bic, listen. Don’t let Niles come up with you. You and Jenna get up here.”

“Niles may have different ideas. He’s probably gonna can Jenna. She’ll be the first researcher fired in a maintenance closet.”

“Is that Niles talking to her in the background?”

“Yeah, it ... was ...”

Nobody was talking in the next aisle. Phone to his ear, Bic walked back to the aisle and saw both Jenna and Niles staring at the power meter, with panel 2130 reopened.

Bartleby was beside himself. “Bic, what’s going on? You’re not talking.”

Bic spoke more quietly into the phone as he approached Jenna and Niles. “They’re both looking at the power readout.” Bic moved around to see what they were staring at.

“Bic, talk to me!” Bartleby wanted to leave the lab and get downstairs. He was running blind, with no idea what was going on, and with Bic saying nothing ...

“Ron, it’s just a power meter. Same eight-kilowatt power flow as before. Nothing special.”

Bic felt Niles nudge him. He looked down to see what Niles was pointing to. He followed Niles’s finger to the fused pull-out disconnect module. Power only flowed to the meter if the module was wedged into its socket.

Only the module wasn’t in its socket. It was in Jenna’s hand.