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JAKUB “PIES” Jakubowski gulped back the acidic slurry of formerly chewed breakfast sausage that rose in his throat. Beads of sweat sprouted along his hairline, and he fidgeted with the bottom of the three buttons on his large and ill-fitting, dark-blue golf shirt. He couldn’t stop his fingers from gently twisting the button back and forth.

Pies Jakubowski was literally in the belly of the beast, the large, windowless room where he sat presently—and he wanted out.

He sought to implement his ultimate escape-from-Chicago plan sooner than later, but he had to continually remind himself to be patient so that everything would work without complication.

Pies glanced down and noticed the emblazoned gold-threaded badge that was woven into his shirt, and his breath caught in his throat for a moment. He never dreamed he’d wear a badge, not even one made from stitching.

And this was certainly not the type of job he had ever planned to take on. Against his objections, and his better judgment, he was ordered—forced, really—to accept the assignment.

Pies would have to muster some real courage to make it all work out as drawn up, because his freedom was on the line.

He watched as his training officer, Naomi Gott—the woman who had taken him through two days of intensive classroom instruction before she shifted his schooling to their current location—toggled

the switch to deactivate the phone console. Once the small switch was thrown, no further administrative or emergency 9-1-1 calls would be routed to her police and fire communications pod.

Naomi had warm green eyes and wore her dark hair bluntly styled. Her lovely smile and high cheekbones worked to only enhance her overall charm. She carried some extra roundness on her midsection and hips, but Pies thought that she was utterly beautiful in every other way, especially in her personality and demeanor.

Naomi was a gentle soul and the perfect choice to train new employees into such stressful positions under equally stressful workplace conditions. Patient. With a voice like liquid silk, she was soft-spoken, yet somewhat direct—a classic earth-mother type.

Naomi Gott might have been a bit older than Pies, but he thought to himself that if he were here under different circumstances, and the woman he had loved so deeply for his entire life ultimately rejected him, Naomi would probably be the sort of woman he'd ask out. Any potential date would also hinge on whether Pies had been found out and arrested by that time. As soon as he recognized that he was lost in thought over Naomi, he forced himself back on task.

The communications pod where they sat was one of ten newly constructed, high-tech desk units, all of which formed the foundation of the systematized assortment of phones, emergency radio consoles, and computer monitors that filled the space of the massive room. The twenty-two-foot ceiling and the airy glass-and-glossy-white-walled-dominated construction of the interior in the brand-new building dwarfed the equally spaced communications pods.

Six of the ten communications pods were designed as phone positions where emergency and nonemergency calls from the public would be received. Three pods were radio positions where a communications officer would dispatch the police to various calls, and the last pod was for the fire/EMS radio dispatcher to occupy. The fire/EMS radio position was always manned, and at least two of the three police radio positions were occupied, depending on shift needs.

Eight-foot-high, clear, sound-dampening walls constructed of

beveled one-inch, tempered glass divided the individual communications pods. Each glass partition had “Northcomm” etched into it in twenty-inch-tall letters. Some sounds from other communications officers and radio traffic carried about the room just the same, especially if one of the communications officers happened to lean back and away from the glass partitions. Mostly, though, the sounds were muffled, and the sharp edges of the sometimes-frenzied police and fire communications were somewhat muted.

“Your mommy won’t wake up? Oh, honey, it’ll be okay. I need you to go and open the front door. Can you do that, sweetie?”

“Evanston 2 is requesting back up at his traffic stop. Evanston 7 and 8, can you break away?”

“Sir, if you don’t hang up now, you’ll be arrested. This is a 9-1-1 line for emergencies only.”

“Northbrook Ladder 2 reporting fully engulfed, single-story structure.”

“Kenilworth 2, report of accident at Sheridan and Oxford.”

“I’ll show you available Skokie 5.”

Street-side, the Northcomm 9-1-1 police and fire communications center looked like any other brick-constructed, commercial warehouse on the industrial frontage road along I-294 in Northbrook, Illinois. Passing motorists wouldn’t realize that the interior of the structure was visually more in line with a futuristic J.J. Abrams movie set than a place where emergency services were dispatched.

In the recent past each suburban municipality of the Chicago’s North Shore had its own small emergency radio room that was relegated to a tiny, closet-sized space somewhere in the individual police department building—a place where a dispatcher, or maybe two, could operate at a time and take phone and radio calls, so as to lord over the safety of the suburb’s pampered residents.

The recent amalgamation of local municipalities’ police and fire communications rooms into the one fantastic space that was Northcomm was the direct consequence of a smooth-talking Cincinnati native’s ability to schmooze his way into the civic pocketbooks of

every suburban mayor and city manager north of Howard Street, south of Lake Cook Road, east of I-294, and west of Lake Michigan.

The Cincinnati successfully convinced the civic executives that launching a new communications center would be a prudent decision for the safety of their citizens and the health of each town's coffers.

And if the Cincinnati's personal wallet expanded during the process, so be it. Privatization was in the air.

That newly installed director of communications for Northcomm had only four years prior established a similar communications center in the suburbs of his southwestern Ohio city. An emergency communications center that, on the surface, with its utilization of floating glass walls and high-tech gear, seemed like a total misuse of public funds but, in fact, had saved the taxpayers millions and millions of dollars each year since its inception—even as it lined the pockets of some of the notables who made the deal happen.

The new director achieved all of this when he slashed salaries of new hires by one third, shrank the overall number of dispatchers on each shift, and forced communications officers with more than twenty years on the job out the door through the utilization of a merger, "buyout" package.

For his latest operation in the Chicago area, it also didn't hurt that the new director of communication's brother-in-law owned the land on the frontage road in Northbrook where the building was constructed.

Through his daily dealings, the brother-in-law, a local lawyer, had enough personal and professional muck on nearly each and every mayor and city manager on the North Shore that the 9-1-1 center was a done deal before the municipal executives even knew they needed a new communications facility.

In the cases of both the suburban Cincinnati center and Northcomm, the pooling of communications personnel and services was a winning combination for all the municipalities involved—at least for the time being, and until the books would be reviewed five years

down the road. Only then would the auditors begin to get a sniff that their citizens would not see the savings they were first promised.

One year after that first whiff of impropriety, the auditors would also figure out where a hefty percentage of the municipalities' money savings was actually going, and it wasn't into the towns' treasuries. But that was going to happen further down the road—both in Cincinnati and on Chicago's North Shore. It would become a story for the newspapers and television investigative teams to cover on another day in the future.

Comparable to the massive Chicago 9-1-1 Emergency Communications Center located near the United Center sports arena on the West Side of the city, suburban Northcomm 9-1-1 Center was equal in state-of-the-art equipment, but not in workforce size. Whereas Chicago's center would typically have a few dozen communications officers working on a shift at any given time, the recently opened Northcomm 9-1-1 Center had shift sizes of only six to ten civilian communications officers—depending on the day of the week and the time of the day.

And since the suburban "public safety answering point," or PSAP, was responsible for providing emergency service communications to the several exclusive and moneyed communities on the North Shore, their hiring practices and personnel guidelines were quite stringent. Only the finest of the civilian applicants who took the battery of tests (written and psychological) required for the job were considered. Candidates had to have spotless criminal records, as well.

Pies Jakubowski fit that bill perfectly—on paper.

It wasn't really evident this day as he received his training, but Pies had a sardonic sense of humor. He was typically a fairly quiet man who kept his thoughts to himself. But sometimes—rarely—he would blurt out witticisms that hit the mark with those around him, at least those whose sense of irony was sharp enough to get his jokes. If anyone were here presently to explain to him how Northcomm actually came to be and how it would one day be caught up in a criminal controversy, he'd get a decent laugh out of the story. Pies dis-

liked politicians, but overall he had a sort of strange loathing/respect for white-collar criminals and the way they'd accomplish their rip-offs while wearing expensive suits and operating in the daytime, not skulking around in the shadows like he usually did to make money.

Maybe someday Pies's dry sense of humor would fully return, but for now he was on a solemn and dangerous mission. There was not a lot of room in his life for levity.

Naomi said, "I'll be back in five. You should take a walk and stretch your legs. If it gets busy, you may not get a chance." She rose and gently twisted her waist from one side to the other. Pies heard an audible "pop" when she twisted to her right. They locked eyes, and Naomi blurted out a giggle—Pies remained silent and just stared.

"You okay, Jakub? You seem off today. I know that there's a lot to cover, but you're doing great." Naomi called him by his birth name because that was the name on the reams of paper forms that he had filled out when he applied for the position several months back. Anyone who truly knew the man called him by only one name, though: Pies.

Pies shrugged and said, "I don't want to mess this up. Folks could get hurt."

"It hasn't even been a week yet. Take it all in. There's no rush," said Naomi. "When I first started at the Evanston PD, it took about three months to get comfortable with the job. You'll move through faster, I'm sure of it."

Naomi actually enjoyed training Pies because the twenty-eight-year-old seemed to pick things up rather quickly, as if he'd worked in, or was extremely familiar with, law enforcement and emergency communications.

And if Naomi were being honest with herself, she'd acknowledge that she enjoyed looking into Pies's clear, intense, hazel-colored eyes. She thought his eyes were stunning, like none she had seen before. He wasn't rugged or muscular, and he more resembled an awkward catalogue model, but there was something about those eyes that she couldn't get enough of. To Naomi, Pies was the male equivalent of

the sexy librarian. And that alone intrigued her to no end.

Pies's own late mother, in her more sober and lucid moments, would call Pies her *lis*, or "fox" in Polish, for the simple reason that her son was sneaky like a fox, not because he was particularly handsome. He'd bat those hazel eyes whenever he found himself in a childhood jam—and it usually got him out of trouble.

"I think we're going to start having you take calls while I do the computer commands," said Naomi. "You do the talking, I'll do everything else."

"Really? It's only been..."

When he stopped and glanced down, Naomi added, "You're going to be fine. A little baptism by fire won't hurt too much."

Pies nodded uneasily at that remark and remained seated. Naomi peeled the radio/telephone headset off her ear and placed it on the desktop of their communications pod.

Pies, adorned with his very own headset, watched as the similarly golf-shirt-adorned Naomi stepped toward the main door that led to the hallway, outer offices, bathrooms, and break room. She pushed open the glass door, which quickly swung closed as she exited.

A muscular, uniformed, male cop angled out of one of the offices with a stack of paperwork in hand and moved right alongside Naomi. They carried on a pleasant if inaudible conversation as they disappeared around a corner.

Pies made sure that none of the other police and fire 9-1-1 communications officers in the room were paying attention to him. All the others were busy speaking into their headsets and tapping away on the computer keyboards of the communications pods in front of them.

Pies went to work.

Through the fabric of his pants, he pushed the tiny rubberized on/off switch of the cell-phone-sized, mini-DVR control unit that was concealed in his right front pocket. As he turned the mini-DVR unit on, he gently pinched the bottom button of his golf shirt—which was actually a button camera—between his left thumb and forefinger

and aimed it at the middle of the four twenty-two-inch computer monitors on the desk in front of him.

Pies kept his left forefinger and thumb on the shirt-button camera and used his right forefinger to hunt and peck in a quick command on the computer terminal keyboard. It was a command he'd seen Naomi use several times since he started his training to be a 9-1-1 dispatcher.

The screen instantly displayed a list of data and business names and addresses, with notations on the right column of the page next to each entry.

The heading on the computer page read: Alarms Out of Service Log.

The computer pages listed each and every alarm system, both business and residential, that was out of service in the North Shore area of Chicago. The information was provided to the police so that if any errant alarms activated at those locations, the police could choose to ignore the activation knowing that there was a malfunction in the system. But it also allowed the police on patrol to pay a little extra attention, as time permitted during their hectic shifts, to the places where the alarms were on the fritz.

Pies did his best to act casual. He didn't want to attract any undue attention as he used the button lens on his golf shirt to record the screen. He hit the "down" arrow on the keyboard, and the computer page changed—and he kept recording. Three pages later, Pies tapped his right front pocket once again and turned off the mini-DVR device, let go of the shirt button, and pressed the Escape key on the keyboard to clear the computer screen of the Alarms Out of Service Log information.

He leaned back and let out the deep breath that he hadn't realized he was holding—and that's when he noticed that Naomi had not completely toggled the switch to deactivate their phone console.

The button should have flashed red to show that the deactivation mode was locked into place. The button was half-toggled and still green—the color it displays if the pod operator is available to take emergency calls from the public.

As he leaned forward to completely deactivate the communications position, he heard three abrupt tones in his ear through his headset and the low whisper of a terrified woman who said, "Oh my God, we're being robbed. Help us..."

Pies peered toward the hall, but there was no sign of Naomi. The other communications officers in the room were all occupied with their own phone and radio calls and didn't notice that Pies needed help. After only a few days on the job, mostly spent in a classroom or listening in to Naomi as she took call after call, he wasn't ready for this.

Immediately he saw the caller's location and business name information automatically displayed in a single line of data at the bottom of all his computer-aided dispatch monitors: Happy Sammies, 3511 Lake Avenue, Wilmette, IL.

"Hello...hello? Is anyone there?" asked the terrified woman's whispered voice on the other end of the phone line.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm here," said Pies as his eyes searched again for Naomi. When he couldn't locate her, he placed a finger over the end of the clear plastic tube that was the microphone of his headset and said, "Hey! Somebody! I need help here." But none of the other communications officers heard him. All of them were hunched over their own pods, busy with other calls. The well-designed tempered glass was beautiful, but the sound-deadening properties acted as his nemesis at that moment.

"My God, help me..."

Pies slid his finger off of the microphone and said, "Um, does he have a gun or...like...a weapon or something?"

The lack of confidence in his voice frightened the caller even more.

"Yes. A gun. Linda's with him. He doesn't know I'm here in back. We're not open for business yet. She unlocked the door to sweep the sidewalk, and then..."

In the background, Pies could hear the robber scream, "The money, you bitch."

"He's going to shoot her," whispered the woman.

“Happy Sammies. The sandwich place, right?” asked Pies, knowing he’d seen it before in his travels. It was on the border of Wilmette and Glenview—right smack-dab between two different police departments’ shared borders.

Criminals know that police get lazy from time to time and tend to ignore the far fringes of their own municipal boundaries while out on patrol. The small sandwich shop would be the perfect place to score a few hundred bucks in a lightning-fast armed robbery. You could be in and out in an instant before either police department could accurately determine jurisdiction.

Pies knew this because it was the type of thing he’d set up himself, on rare occasion, for the crews working for his boss Stan Zielinski out of their Edison Park neighborhood criminal operation.

Pies asked, “You have a drive-thru there, right?”

“Are you sending someone?”

“Um, sure. Do you have a drive-thru window?”

“Stop saying stupid things.”

“I think I can help, okay?” Said Pies.

“He’s going to shoot her,” she frantically whispered.

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NEAR THE CORNER of Lake and Laramie Avenues in Wilmette sat Happy Sammies, a quaint business housed in the one-story husk of a former Dairy Queen franchise. The place catered to the wealthy high school students at nearby Loyola Academy, so business was usually good—during the school year.

Because of the morning sun that reflected off of the front windows, from the street a person who passed by wouldn’t see the black t-shirt and blue jeans of the fetid and fidgety white man who pointed a cheap .22 revolver at the female employee inside the doorway. The employee held a broomstick in her hand and was terrified to the point of frozen rigidity.

“You got two seconds, bitch. The cash. Now,” screamed the robber, through a patchwork of rotted and crooked meth-altered teeth. He

grabbed the terrified woman’s arm and led her toward the counter.

“Hey!” said the woman in back, a short and skinny lady of fifty, the one who spoke with Pies on the phone. She stood behind the main counter next to the drive-thru window, and she held a thick and heavy-looking, blue-colored, bank deposit bag. The robber couldn’t help but lick his cracked lips as he took notice of the crinkled fan of dollar bills that messily stuck out of the overstuffed bag.

When the thief shakily angled the gun in her direction, the woman violently shoved open the small drive-thru window and tossed the bag outside and onto the parking lot where it landed with an audible plop.

“Son of a...,” yelped the robber as he backpedaled and barged through the front door and around to the side of the building.

The employee with the broomstick stood immobilized in shock as the woman in back raced around the counter and up to the front door. She instantly shoved her key into the lock and slammed the deadbolt home. Once she and her workmate were safe, she took the employee by the wrist and led her into a crouched position on the opposite side of the eatery.

Outside, the robber had heard the front door lock, but he didn’t give a shit. He got what he came for. He tried as best he could to act casual as he nodded about like a peacock to make sure that no one witnessed the robbery. He tucked the small gun into his front pants pocket, only the butt of the pistol visible, and pulled his sweat-stained shirt down to cover it as he advanced closer and leaned over to retrieve the fat bank deposit bag from under the drive-thru window.

He grinned at his easily achieved windfall. But as he lifted the bag closer he could see that there were only three one-dollar bills tucked into the top of the semi-opened, zippered bank bag. He hastily unzipped the bag the rest of the way—and the thing was jammed full of folded sandwich wrapping paper.

He said, “Shit.”

He grabbed the three one-dollar bills, tossed the bag aside, and ran.