

Chapter One

The Death of a Great University

The two-thousand-pound ball of iron began its lazy downward arc like a playful child on a swing, gathering speed as it descended, pulling against the unaccountably thin cable that tethered it to the roaring piece of machinery that gave it life. As large as a small car, it bore the scars of countless conflicts. It was the champion. It had never lost.

But unlike a smiling and laughing child, the wrecking ball brought no joy, elicited no smiles other than from its master whose gnarled hands controlled it as a conductor did his orchestra. It impacted the north wall of old Tibbs Hall—Jack’s Castle as it had been known on campus—scattering bricks and lath, oak flooring and plaster, into the basement where the detritus would later be gathered and hauled away to fill some low and boggy place in the land.

The area around Tibbs Hall was cordoned off so the handful of people watching the demolition on this bitter cold winter day were well out of harm’s way. They didn’t stand together or huddle closely in groups. Instead, they stood apart and alone, as if they had their own thoughts they didn’t want to share.

The wrecking ball impacted the old building again and again, each time sending a shower of bricks and plaster skyward. The operator, as skilled as the finest surgeon, placed his crude instrument at precisely the spot to elicit the greatest effect, the maestro of the wrecking ball. Massive

timbers exposed by this latest strike revealed an underlying wooden post and beam construction prevalent in the days before steel construction was commonplace. The granite carving proclaiming its dedication date—September 21, 1867—had disappeared before the demolition, spared the ultimate degradation of being hauled to some landfill to rest forever next to soiled diapers and discarded shoes. The massive oaken front doors, hauled off to be part of some billionaire’s home, left only a gaping maw on the corpse.

A poster fluttered in the vortex caused by the falling debris, a gaily-colored scream of freedom in the middle of dun-colored destruction. The poster must have given someone pleasure, sometime, before the fate of the second oldest building on campus had been sealed. Screaming, “See! I live! I exist!” the rubble swallowed it without remorse.

Were ghosts also there, standing silently with the living? Ghosts of generations of sons and daughters, each having left an impression on the great institution, the hollow cup of their passing still visible in the worn granite steps of old Tibbs Hall. Where were they when the death knell was struck?

The landscape for a distance of many blocks around Tibbs Hall took on the bleak appearance of ground zero at a nuclear detonation. Block after block of what had once been a great public university had been cleared, the rubble hauled away. The football stadium, basketball arena, libraries and laboratories—all had fallen to the wrecking ball. Commons, once full of trees and grass, flowers and shrubs, where students had gathered to discuss Kant and Rosenberg, were

now little more than dirt smears between broken concrete slabs. Parking garages, once full of commuters and faculty, were gone; worn turn arrows painted on the cracked streets pointed to missing entrances as if directing drivers to another dimension. It was Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Empty streets with no people. Only dreams and memories.

The great machine roared again and belched black smoke as it labored to once more raise the ball of iron, raise it to dizzying heights, and bring it downward, to work its wrath on the scant remains of old Tibbs Hall.

Onlookers came and went, shaking their heads, trying to understand what forces could have brought a public institution more than one hundred years old to this sad death. Finally, the destruction was complete and the great beast rumbled, watched its vanquished foe from a distance—a prize fighter leaning against the ropes, waiting for its steel arm to be raised in victory. Assured that Tibbs Hall would not rise like a phoenix from its ashes, the great beast growled and snorted, lumbered away to be transported to the next scene of destruction. The workers spraying the demolition with water to keep the dust down, quit, seeing that the water was freezing almost as fast as they were spraying. Yet one man remained.

Heinman Brueger wore an out-of-fashion topcoat to ward off the cold. It was one of those long woolen coats favored by Nazi spies in old black and white movies. When seen in the light of day, one realized that it *was* the exact color of a black and white movie. No change in the sunlight.

For him this was a personal tragedy. Most of his professional life had been spent in Tibbs Hall, first as a graduate student, and later as faculty. It had been a constant, an anchor. His very best memories had been here, and his worst.

He sighed and turned to leave. A young man hurried to his side, out of breath, while another man followed with a television camera. A reporter and a cameraman.

“Excuse me, sir,” the young man asked, panting. “I’m afraid I’ve missed the demolition.” Actually, the reporter couldn’t have cared less. Another twenty-second spot on the ten o’clock news wasn’t going to get him to New York. He was going to be stuck in Smalltown forever.

“They started the execution early,” Heinman said, “I think to keep the witness list short.”

“You were here?”

“As I have been for almost forty years.”

“Could you tell me what happened, why even one historic building couldn’t be saved?” The reporter waved his finger in a circle and the cameraman popped the lens cover off the camera. He was here, he had an interview. Show time.

“One name, young man. If you understand one name, you’ll understand everything.” The cameraman hastily started the video camera as Heinman Brueger returned his gaze to where the building once stood. Had someone asked him even two years ago if a prestigious public university could be summarily destroyed, he’d thought it impossible. But history didn’t lie, and the empty streets were mute testimony to the vindictiveness of one man.

Brueger looked at the pile of rubble that used to house the Department of Psychology and Perception. He looked to where the second floor had been, where he'd had an office for twenty-five years, to the ground now, where as chairman he'd had an office for the last fifteen. He looked back to where the Perception Laboratory had been housed in the far reaches of the attic and to the offices of Ron Matalavage who, through his own selfishness, had unwittingly prompted the destruction of everything Heinman Brueger had valued.

"Torus Vandeneuvel, young man," Brueger said finally. "The man responsible for all this was Torus Vandeneuvel."

"Certainly," the reporter agreed, "it was Mr. Vandeneuvel's vision that led to the closing of..."

"Greed, young man! Greed! But if it were simply a story of greed it would just be another American tragedy. On the contrary, it is the result of avarice and power, of a country so afraid of doing the right thing, so afraid that the good times would end, that it sacrificed its soul on the altar of technology. Some have said an enemy from within would destroy our country, rather an enemy from without. I'm afraid that has been the case."

"You know this to be true, to be a fact?"

"Son," the man lamented, "I have prayed every day, unsuccessfully I might add, that it wasn't true."

Torus Vandenheuvel, boy wonder, entrepreneur of the century, had graced the cover of every newsmagazine at least once, had been named “Man of the Year” by dozens of trade associations, and had founded VanLabs, the world’s leading marketer of computer software and information chips. Though well known as a personality by the general population, few actually knew the breadth and depth his technologies permeated society. His story was prototypical. After dropping out of Cal Tech his freshman year, and with borrowed equipment, he created a computer chip that when embedded in common household appliances gathered information about how the devices were used, when and by whom, for how long and for what purposes, and would relay that information via existing short wave technology to strategically situated ground stations.

This had been in the late sixties, right at the time domestic television manufacturers threw in the towel, admitting that they could not, and never would, successfully compete with Japanese manufacturers. They said they just couldn’t, that the Japanese had an unfair advantage. The advantage had been given to them by this American *Wunderkind*.

In fact, this change in market dynamics couldn’t have come at a better time for Torus, seeing the Federal Communication Commission’s obvious interest in regulating industry and the Supreme Court’s interest in protecting United States citizens’ constitutional rights to privacy.

But the predatory Japanese electronics industry had no such qualms. So for the next fifteen years, every television,

stereo, camera, microwave, and radio sold by JML—the *Japanese Manufacturing League*—every toaster, microwave, and refrigerator, all contained Torus Vandenheuvel’s computer chip, the V-chip. The smallest nuances of our lives were recorded, analyzed, and manipulated so that we would buy more, use more, become more dependent.

Eventually, JML simply paid Torus Vandenheuvel a small royalty for every chip it installed. Pennies per unit generated huge sums of money, so much that by 1974 all the trade magazines were asking, “Who is Torus Vandenheuvel?”

That question was answered when VanLabs was founded to provide software that automatically read, recorded, and transmitted data from residential electric meters, a non-competing application of the same chip design Torus had licensed to JML. He figured that electric companies spent billions of dollars per year just trying to secure electrical usage figures and bill customers. By 1980, V-chip technology, unheralded, was on the side of everyone’s dwelling and embedded in every electrical or electronic device used around the world. Responding to lawsuits by the American Civil Liberties Union, several challenges to its legality had been successfully disposed in Federal Court. The Supreme Court had refused to hear the cases on appeal, agreeing with the Seventh Circuit Court’s finding that no invasion of privacy had actually occurred. *Time* magazine had indeed named Torus their Man of the Year, estimating his net worth at that time to be nearly twenty-five billion dollars. Everyone thought they knew who he was, but they really knew nothing.

VanLabs branched out, using the constant flow of royalties from Japanese manufacturers and American utility companies to quickly monopolize the market for almost all computer software. Mainframes ran VanLab's *PowerServer* software. Web sites delivered pages using *PowerBrowser* on PowerServer computers, across the *PowerNet*. Schools uniformly adopted *PowerClass*, a distance learning application that, as one might expect, ran on PowerServer mainframes. Home computers universally adopted *PowerHome* because it communicated so nicely with PowerClass for the kids and *PowerSmarts* for the parents. And, of course, every device had a V-chip that dutifully sent its data to VanLabs without the knowledge or permission of its user.

All in all, it was a classic vertical monopoly. Vandenheuvel made the chips that ran his software that communicated with other computers...containing his chips, running his software, across his networks. An endless cycle—a beautiful cycle, Torus thought. From cradle to grave, or as he liked to refer to it in high-level company meetings, the *PowerLife*.

When several states brought suit against him, Torus Vandenheuvel stared directly into the cameras (cameras that all had the Vandenheuvel chip inside, of course) and lamented that the government simply didn't understand. What was good for VanLabs was not only good for the consumer, by golly, it was good for the country! He had given everyone so much. How could they even think of breaking up his company?

So, they hadn't, and VanLabs continued to do what it constantly called "innovate," getting bigger and bigger, until its yearly profits were the same as the combined annual salaries of 93% of the country's entire population. Torus changed the company's name to the American Power Information Company, or just *The Power Company* for short. He put on his nerdy persona and instantly became the harmless boy next door. You just had to trust a kid that looked like Opie and dressed like he didn't have a care in the world, right?

Buried in Torus Vandenneuvel's past, during the first years of the V-chip, was a secret association with JML. It was this association that ultimately resulted in his war against the university.

The demise of the university began when Torus started his own institution of higher learning. Christened, not surprisingly, *Vandenneuvel Institute of Technology*, or VIT, it was touted to be the power university of cyberspace. Students could stay home in their jammies, take classes at 2:00 in the morning, and, upon graduation, be guaranteed a job in one of Vandenneuvel's companies. Educators cried, "But this isn't a *real* education!" The students answered, "But what's your point?"

VIT was founded on three premises: hire the best faculty and pay them twice their current salaries, give all students full scholarships, and ultimately destroy the university that had nurtured Torus Vandenneuvel's greatest disappointment—Dr. Ronald Matalavage.

Torus understood the fragile nature of a public institution of higher education better than the most

experienced college president. Without the best faculty, scholarship withers. Federal funding—necessary to make up for the shortcomings of legislative appropriations—dries up and then disappears altogether. The best students, whores that they are, gravitate to the fattest scholarships. Vandeneuvel took particular glee destroying Ron Matalavage's academic home. He didn't have to. After all, Matalavage was already gone. But for Vandeneuvel, that made it even sweeter. Anyone can destroy something for good reason. It takes a special person to destroy something for no reason at all.

The wholesale departure of entire faculties for VIT, and the university's subsequent inability to replace these losses, meant that only the incompetent, those ready to retire, and teachers of general studies remained.

Vandeneuvel Institute of Technology promoted a curriculum of liberal technical studies to attract a generation of game-playing, DVD listening, net-surfing students already indoctrinated with the benefits of The Power Company's products, the *PowerWay*. They would be receiving a free *PowerEducation*. There was no reason to look elsewhere.

The once-great State University lost its faculty, its students, and its grants and funding. It closed, the state unwilling to turn it into a community college. Legislators were happy to get ten cents on the dollar for the physical facilities. Privately, Torus Vandeneuvel bragged that he bought the university with the monthly rounding error in his checkbook. It wasn't far from the truth.

“But we know all of that,” the reporter later explained, disingenuously, giving Brueger his best “I’m barely interested in your story” look. Secretly, he gasped. This was great stuff, with aspects about the boy wonder that no one had ever published. The reclusive Torus Vandeneuvel hadn’t been seen in a dozen years. It was rumored that he’d gone Howard Hughes, let his fingernails grow impossibly long, had straggly hair down his back. But how did the dismantling of a mediocre state university have anything to do with America’s enigmatic scion of industry?

He patiently sat across the table from Heinman, gladly out of the cold, removed to a coffeehouse two miles away, and acted nonchalant while he scribbled what he knew was the kernel of a Pulitzer.

“Or at least most of it,” he added, putting down his notebook. The cameraman was set up in the next booth, filming the entire conversation. This story was going to be much more than another glowing exposé on America’s top techno-nerd.

“That’s what makes it so interesting,” Heinman Brueger explained. “Torus Vandeneuvel has always been behind the scenes, unseen. Our demise isn’t so much a story about him, as what he did, or the lengths he’d go to protect what he calls ‘his innovation, his intellectual property.’ When you combine the endless resources to wield ultimate power with pathological ruthless willingness to apply it to your enemies...”

“Sounds sinister.”

“Some call him evil incarnate.”

“And some call him a savior.”

“Maybe so, but there’s so much more to the story.”

Brueger then thought to himself: it’s a horrific story, a story that could place all involved in imminent danger. But what was left when everything had been taken away, when everything a person had worked for now lay in rubble? What could you lose when you’ve already lost everything? “Surely you don’t have the time to hear it all. It would take hours.”

The reporter turned to his cameraman. “How much tape you got, Willard?”

Willard held up four fingers, three times. Twelve hours. “That should be enough to start,” the reporter said.

“Shall we retire to my apartment, where we might be more comfortable? It’s just around the corner. I have some notes there, and photographs. I don’t want to leave anything out.”

The reporter agreed, trying to act calm, drove with the cameraman; the old man insisted on walking in the cold by himself to his apartment.

“You think there’s a story here?” the cameraman asked, dubious, switching battery packs.

The reporter tapped his gloved fingers on the steering wheel, slowly following the old man at a distance. “I don’t know. Call it reporter’s intuition. I got a gut feeling, it’s more than just a big story. It could be a hell of a story.”

The whole time his insides were turning cartwheels as he followed Heinman Brueger, softly humming the chorus to *New York, New York*.