Blockchain Lords

The Battle for Bitcoin

DAVID ROSS

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"This universe is constantly splitting into a stupendous number of branches, all resulting from the measurementlike interactions between its myriads of components."

— Bryce S. DeWitt, physicist

The Many-Worlds Interpretation of quantum physics, originally proposed by physicist Hugh Everett, suggests that when more than one outcome is possible, all of them may happen—but in different versions of reality. These realities are often described as branches. We experience only one branch, with no way of knowing what happened in the others.

Except for now.

This book provides a glimpse of what happened in another branch.

PROLOGUE

The Last Night

Chain Verse — Autumn 2002

Lord One had not slept in eleven nights.

He stood at the window of his study with the lamp turned low, the way he had stood every night that autumn, and watched the Temple. The bell tower was black against the stars. Below it, the oldest wing ran back into the dark behind its high wall, and nothing moved anywhere along it.

Nothing ever did. That was what troubled him.

For a year now, someone had been reading his work. A note he had filed in the spring came back to him in the summer, as a question asked at a Council session by a Lord who could not have seen it. A design he had shown no one turned up, slightly wrong, in a project that failed for reasons no one could explain. Whoever it was moved through the Council's records the way water moves through stone: slowly, patiently, and without leaving a mark.

He had spent his life building a world where everything was written down. He had never imagined that someone might use that against it.

At midnight he put on his coat and went out.

* * *

The campus was asleep. He walked the long way, past the research halls and the old library, where a single lamp burned in the librarian's window. He did not stop.

He went past Lady Jane's residence too.

Her window was dark. He stood beneath it for a long time in the cold, with his hands in his coat pockets. He could go up. She would wake the moment he touched the door. She always did. She would see his face and

know that something was wrong, and she would ask him, and this time he would tell her.

If I tell you, they'll know you know.

He had said that to her a week ago, when she asked what was keeping him awake. She had been angry. She had been right to be.

He thought of the record on the chain with both their names on it, and the single word beside them. *Open.*

He did not go up.

* * *

The Temple was dark. He let himself in by a side door and went down a narrow stair beneath its oldest wing, to a place that appeared on no plan, and that no one but he had ever seen.

There was not much left to do. Most of it had been done months ago, quietly, an hour at a time, so that no one watching his movements would see anything unusual. The cases in the long hall were labeled. The notebooks were shelved. The things that were dangerous were locked away, and the things that were only strange were left where someone curious might find them.

In the deepest bay, he opened a case of dark wood and looked for a long time at the two things that lay inside it.

They were the best things he had ever made. They had put him on the floor more times than he liked to remember.

He picked up the slim gray book that lay beneath them and turned to a page near the back. He read it through once. Then he took a knife from the bench and cut the page out cleanly, close to the spine.

Someone would read this book one day. Someone brave, and curious, and sure of himself. He knew exactly what that person would do with this page. He had nearly done it himself.

He burned the page in the lamp and watched it curl.

At the long table by the entrance, he laid down his tools one by one, neatly, the way he did at the end of every working day, as if he would be back in the morning to pick them up.

* * *

At the far end of the hall, past the last bay, there was a door he had built and never used.

He stood in front of it for a long time.

He had made his choice in the spring. He had known then what it would cost, and he had made it anyway.

Tonight was only the bill.

He put his hand on the door. Far above him, through the stone, the great bell of the Temple hung silent in its tower. It would not ring again for a very long time.

He went through.

Behind him, something closed that would not open again. Not for him.

* * *

In the morning, Lady Jane went to his rooms and found them empty.

There was no note. There was no message. On a chain that recorded everything, there was nothing at all.

PART ONE

Genesis

2008–2009



CHAPTER 1

Date Night

Main Verse — December 2008

The night was quiet when they turned onto his street. Streetlights flickered as if dancing to a beat. Jane's hand was warm in his. They had known each other for only a few weeks, yet he already felt a connection he couldn't quite explain. Her fingers laced through his so naturally that it felt meant to be.

She was laughing at something he'd said, a casual remark about a car idling with its lights off. People sometimes laughed at things he said even when he wasn't trying to be funny, but Jane seemed to understand him in a way he couldn't quite put his finger on. It sometimes felt as if they had complementary instincts: she was alert when he was relaxed, and relaxed when he was alert. Tonight, he was relaxed, which meant it was her turn to be alert. True to form, she asked, "Why is that truck making a delivery so late at night?"

"Hmm. Better late than never, I guess," Satoshi replied.

They entered the building and walked down a brightly lit hallway to his first-floor apartment. Satoshi whispered something in Jane's ear as he unlocked the door, and she giggled as they stepped inside.

Satoshi paused. Something wasn't right. He flipped the living room light switch and froze. Four men were positioned comfortably around his living room, staring at him. Cain Williams, a wealthy tech investor, sat on the couch with one ankle resting on his knee, as though this were his apartment and Satoshi were the unexpected guest. At Satoshi's workstation, in front of the triple-monitor rig he'd bought with grant money, sat Brian, Cain's software engineer, drumming his fingers beside a keyboard he couldn't use.

Behind Cain, on the bookshelf, Satoshi's three fencing trophies from college caught the lamplight, small brass fencers frozen mid-lunge on their marble bases. It was an odd thing to notice. He noticed it anyway, the same way he noticed the distance to the door.

Satoshi would not have been overly concerned if they had been the only two uninvited guests. Unfortunately, there were two more men who looked like linebackers stuffed into suits. One stood behind Cain. The other stood between Satoshi and Jane. Satoshi briefly considered grabbing Jane and fleeing but decided against it. Cain had anticipated that move; his glare made that plain.

Then Cain's eyes shifted to Jane and lingered a moment too long. Something crossed his face. It wasn't surprise, exactly. It looked more like recognition. Jane held his gaze without blinking. Then Cain turned back to Satoshi, and the moment was gone. Satoshi told himself he had imagined it.

Cain stared at Satoshi like a chess player confident that checkmate was imminent. "Ssssatoshi," he said, drawing out the name with a slight hiss, "you're supposed to have something for me."

"I need more time," Satoshi replied.

"That's actually not what you need. We'll give you what you need in a moment. Right now, I want you to give me the password for this computer."

"I can't do that."

"Sure, you can. Because if you do, I will let you and your lady live."

Satoshi studied Cain. He didn't think Cain would actually kill either of them, but he wasn't willing to bet Jane's life on it.

"If I give you the password, how do I know you will let us live?" he asked.

"You don't," Cain replied. "You'll have to take a chance. That shouldn't be hard for you. I'm sure you realized you were taking a chance when you accepted my $100,000 investment, promised me code, and delivered nothing."

"Cain, you misunderstand. I'm a programmer. Our time estimates are more like aspirations. I just need a little more time. Give me another week."

Cain sighed impatiently. "I'm giving you five seconds to give me the password. If you don't, one of you will not walk out of here."

One of the henchmen raised his Glock and leveled it at Satoshi.

Satoshi looked at Jane, then looked at Cain. He relented and said, "Okay, okay. I'll give you the password. Let me write it down for you."

"Why can't you just tell me?"

"I don't want a room full of people to know my password."

Cain nodded at one of his henchmen. The henchman retrieved a Post-it note and a pen from the desk and handed them to Satoshi. Satoshi wrote the password, folded the note, and handed it back. The henchman passed it to Cain.

Cain unfolded the note and read it aloud. "DaBomb#2008#." He smirked. "Oops. Did I say that out loud?" He handed the note to Brian. Brian typed the password, and the computer began to start up. Cain and Brian were focused on the screen. The henchmen were focused on Cain and Satoshi. The screen said, "Starting system, stand by..."

Satoshi caught Jane's eye and glanced at the floor, a look that said get down. There was no time to explain and no way to know whether she would understand. She understood. As Satoshi dropped into a crouch, Jane dropped with him.

BOOM! A blast tore up through the floor beneath the desk.

Dust and smoke filled the room. The floor near the computer gave way, and Cain, Brian, and one of the henchmen plunged into a basement storage unit below. Satoshi's ears were ringing. Jane did not seem disoriented at all. The remaining henchman raised his gun and aimed at Satoshi, but Jane had anticipated the move. She grabbed his wrist and twisted hard, and the gun clattered to the floor. He looked at her, surprised, then bent to retrieve it. Satoshi snatched a heavy marble bookend from the table beside the door and brought it down on the man's head. Old reflexes from a college fencing strip: see the opening, commit, recover. Together they shoved him through the gaping hole in the floor, into the storage unit below.

Jane yelled, "Let's get out of here!"

Satoshi grabbed a backpack and stuffed some external hard drives into it, and they ran out of the apartment.

Jane was yelling into her watch. "Base, come in. Base, come in. I'm with Panda. We need an evac from my location, ASAP."

Satoshi stared at her. "Base? Panda? Who are you talking to?"

Jane ignored him. "Base, we're heading to RP1. I repeat, we're heading to RP1."

"Who the hell is Base? What is RP1?"

"I'll explain later. Just follow me."

They ran to the corner and turned left. As they approached the next block, two black SUVs came screeching around the corner and stopped beside them.

The passenger in the front seat of the first SUV yelled. "Get in!"

Satoshi hesitated. "Who are these people?"

Jane pulled him toward the SUV. "Just get in. I'll explain later."

Satoshi and Jane climbed into the first SUV, and the two vehicles sped away.

"Take us to Safe House Three," Jane said.

"Yes, ma'am," the driver replied.

The man in the passenger seat twisted around to look at them. He was lean, with close-cropped hair and a headset hooked over one ear, and he studied Satoshi the way a mechanic studies a car's engine.

"Panda, I presume," he said.

"Adam," Jane said. "Are we clear?"

Adam turned toward the rear window. For a few seconds the street behind them stayed empty. Then headlights swung around the corner: two black sedans, running fast and close together. Satoshi recognized the first one. It was the car he had seen idling on his street with its lights off.

"We have company," Adam said. "Stay low."

Satoshi had barely bent forward when the lead sedan pulled alongside the second SUV. A man leaned out of its passenger window with a pistol. Shots cracked, and sparks jumped from the SUV's rear panel.

The driver of the second SUV sped forward to take the lead and cut off the sedan. The driver then stood on the brakes. The sedan, still accelerating, slammed into its rear corner, spun across two lanes, and came to rest against a lamppost with its hood folded like paper.

The other sedan swerved around the wreck and came after them.

Another shot. The rear window of Satoshi's SUV turned into a spiderweb but held.

Satoshi stayed low, his cheek nearly against the seat, and noticed something that bothered him almost as much as the bullets. Jane's people were armed. He could see the holster under Adam's jacket. No one had drawn a weapon.

"I appreciate the rescue," he said, "but I'm curious about something. They're shooting at us, but you're not shooting back."

"No, we're not," replied Adam. "We don't use our guns often."

"Is that a strategy or a philosophy?"

"Both," Jane said.

"How do you stop bad guys without using your guns?"

"Do you have a gun?" Adam asked.

"No, I don't."

"How do you stop bad guys without using a gun? They're chasing us because of your code."

"Guys, let's focus," Jane interjected. "Right now, the objective is to disable their vehicle with minimal collateral damage. Adam, try the service alley behind the market."

"I'm on it," replied Adam.

The driver cut hard to the right, into a narrow alley lined with dumpsters. Adam lowered his window, took a small cylinder from his jacket, and rolled it underhand beneath the last dumpster as they passed.

"Was that a grenade?" Satoshi asked.

"Yes," Adam said.

The sedan swung into the alley behind them. The charge went off with a flat, heavy thump. The dumpster lurched sideways into the sedan's path, and the driver swerved straight into a second one, wedging the car across the alley like a cork in a bottle.

Through the cracked rear window, Satoshi watched the doors open and two men climb out, unhurt and furious. Then the SUV turned onto the avenue, and the alley was gone.

Adam settled back into his seat. "We've lost them."

Jane let out a long breath.

Satoshi looked at her, then at Adam, then back at her.

"We need to talk," he said.

"I know," Jane said. "Later."

CHAPTER 2

The Whitepaper

Six Weeks Earlier — October 31, 2008

On October 31, 2008, Satoshi Nakamoto posted *Bitcoin: A Peer-to-Peer Electronic Cash System* to the Cryptography Mailing List. His post linked to a nine-page paper proposing a way to send digital cash directly from one party to another without relying on a trusted third party. The proposal addressed the double-spending problem through proof-of-work and a distributed, timestamped chain of blocks. Bitcoin was not yet a functioning public network. For now, it was only an idea, one whose consequences would reach far beyond this world.

Lady Jane stood in the courtyard of the Council Research Center, the sprawling campus that belonged to the Council of Lords, and read the message projected above the node on her wrist again.

We detected something. Meet me at the Temple. Come alone.

Michael, her cousin, had sent it eleven minutes ago. He was the chairman of the Council's quantum physics department. He was not a man given to alarm. Nor was he particularly religious. Jane could count on one hand the number of times she'd seen him in the Council Temple.

But the Temple was the one place on Council grounds where nothing was written to the chain. There were no entry logs, no timestamps, and no record of who had spoken to whom. Whatever Michael had to tell her, he wanted it kept off the ledger.

That was what made the message troubling. For weeks, small things had been nagging at her. A research array kept registering faint signals that no one could trace. Two senior Lords had stopped attending Council sessions without explanation. Each, on its own, meant nothing, and she had filed them away as unrelated.

Michael's message made that harder to believe.

She closed the display and started across the courtyard toward the Temple.

Jane entered the Temple's main hall and saw Michael seated three rows from the rear entrance. She quietly joined him. He was wearing a bespoke blue blazer with dark navy jeans. He seemed fascinated by the ornate architecture of the building, particularly the stained-glass windows rising along the walls.

Michael liked to think out loud. Jane sensed that an observation was forthcoming.

"Jane, do you know why old churches used stained-glass windows?"

"No, Michael, I don't. The thought never occurred."

"The glass transforms ordinary sunlight into a mystical, heavenly light. The colors and images tell stories that help worshippers visualize scripture. Something familiar becomes something more revealing."

"Sounds fascinating. Why are we here?"

"I have an important message for you, transformed and illuminated for your benefit."

Michael raised his wrist and used his node to project a document between them.

"Recognize it?"

Jane looked at the title.

Bitcoin: A Peer-to-Peer Electronic Cash System.

"Looks like the Bitcoin whitepaper to me."

"Look more closely," Michael suggested.

Jane studied the document again. This time she noticed the author's name.

Satoshi Nakamoto.

"Who is Satoshi Nakamoto?" she asked. "Is this the original Bitcoin whitepaper that was posted twenty years ago?"

"No. This was posted today."

Jane turned toward him. "What do you mean?"

"Earlier today, the research array registered the strongest signal we've seen so far. We traced it to the Main Verse."

"And?"

Michael gestured toward the document hovering between them.

"This was posted at exactly the same time."

Jane looked at the title again. "You're saying the whitepaper triggered the signal?"

"I'm saying the timing is too precise to ignore. The moment this appeared in the Main Verse, our array lit up."

"How similar is it to ours?" Jane asked.

"Disturbingly similar. Same underlying architecture. Same solution to double spending. Same use of proof-of-work and a timestamped chain. Even some of the reasoning follows the same path."

Jane looked at him. "Could someone have copied it?"

"That's what I thought. Until I studied the differences."

"What differences?"

"The language is different. The organization is different. Some of the technical choices are different. Whoever wrote this didn't simply copy Lord One's paper."

For several seconds, neither of them spoke.

Twenty years earlier, Lord One had developed Bitcoin in their verse. Now someone in another verse had independently arrived at almost the same invention.

"That can't be a coincidence," Jane said.

"I don't believe it is."

"And the other signals we've detected?"

"We're going back through them now. If today's signal was connected to this event, the earlier ones may have been connected to events in the Main Verse as well."

Jane stared at the name beneath the title.

Satoshi Nakamoto.

"Do we know who he is?"

"No."

"Can you find out?"

"We've already started."

Jane lowered her voice. "Does anyone else know about this?"

"My research team knows we traced the signal to the Main Verse. They don't know about the paper."

Jane dismissed the projection and leaned back against the pew.

For weeks, she had wondered whether the unexplained signals meant something. Now she had an answer, and it had only produced a more troubling question.

Why had Lord One's invention emerged again, in another verse, twenty years later?

Michael glanced at her. "You know what you have to do."

Jane nodded.

"I'll help any way I can," he said.

"Thanks, Michael."

She activated her node.

"Hello, Alice. It's Jane. Call an emergency meeting of the Security Committee."

"How soon?"

"One hour."

The Council Security Committee normally met at the Council of Lords headquarters, three miles from the Research Center. Jane decided to walk. She needed time to think, and along the way she contacted several key committee members, telling them enough to understand the urgency without revealing everything Michael had shown her.

The meeting room resembled a concert hall built for orchestral performances, with tiers of seats rising around a grand stage. For tonight's session, a large oval table for twenty occupied the center of the stage. Jane took her seat as the Lords and Ladies arrived, exchanging pleasantries while her thoughts stayed on the document in the Temple.

Lord Raymond, chairman of the Security Committee, called the meeting to order. "Thank you for coming on such short notice. Lady Jane has brought an important discovery to my attention. Lady Jane, you have the floor."

Jane stood. "Twenty years ago, Lord One developed Bitcoin and laid the foundation for the society we live in today. We also know that the Council Oracle has warned us about blockchain development in other verses. That is why we continue to monitor them."

She activated her node and projected the document above the center of the table. "Earlier today, someone in the Main Verse published this."

Several committee members leaned forward.

"The author calls himself Satoshi Nakamoto. Our researchers put its conceptual similarity to Lord One's original whitepaper at roughly ninety percent. And its publication coincided with the strongest signal our quantum research array has ever recorded."

A murmur spread around the table.

Lord Jude spoke first. "Are you suggesting that someone in the Main Verse has independently developed Bitcoin?"

"That appears to be the case."

"And could it adversely affect our society?"

"We don't know yet. That's what we need to find out."

Lord Raymond leaned forward. "What are you proposing, Lady Jane?"

"A small task force, authorized to enter the Main Verse, identify Satoshi Nakamoto, and determine whether these developments pose a threat to the Council. I would lead it."

Raymond looked around the table. "Any objections?"

Several members exchanged glances, but no one spoke.

"Then the task force is authorized. You'll report directly to this committee, and the mission remains restricted. Proceed with caution, Lady Jane."

"I intend to."

Jane had expected more resistance, given the Council's strict controls on interverse travel. The silence around the table should have been a relief. Instead, she found herself wondering why no one had argued.

Wondering would have to wait. Now she needed to assemble her team, prepare for the journey, and find the man calling himself Satoshi Nakamoto.

* * *

The Lords left the Security Committee chamber in twos and threes. Lord Jude stayed behind to compliment Alice on how quickly she had assembled the emergency session. Lord C left without a word to anyone.

Later that night, in the back of a car, someone opened a channel that appeared in no Council directory. He wrote four lines, read them once, and signed them with a mark that meant nothing to anyone but the man who would receive it.

Signal traced to the Main Verse. Author calls himself Satoshi Nakamoto. Paper nearly identical to Lord One's. Task force authorized, Lady Jane commanding. BK65.

He closed the channel. By the time the car reached his residence, he was thinking about dinner.

* * *

Across the city, in a house above the river, the lights in Lord Cain's study dimmed by themselves.

There was no tone and no name. There never was. Cain set down his glass and rose to his feet.

The projection assembled in the center of the room: a tall figure, broad through the shoulders, its edges crawling and flickering as if the image itself refused to resolve. Where the face should have been, there was nothing: only a deeper flicker, a place where the light seemed to give up. In all the years Cain had served him, the projection had never shown him more than that. He had stopped expecting it to.

"Lord Kronos," Cain said.

"Lord Cain. The moment that we've waited for has arrived. Someone in the Main Verse has written the paper again," Kronos said. "The Council has authorized Lady Jane to find him. You will find him first."

"You want me to enter the Main Verse."

"Yes. Find Satoshi Nakamoto. Become useful to him. Fund him. Encourage him. Be whatever kind of friend he is willing to accept."

"And when he publishes his software?"

"Let him. What he publishes is of no interest to me." The figure leaned closer, and the dark where its face should have been seemed to lean with it. "Bring me what he doesn't publish."

"My lord?"

"Every inventor keeps something back. The first version. The one he wrote before he knew anyone was watching. Bring me that."

"And if he refuses?"

"Then you will learn what kind of man he is. That will also be useful." The edges of the projection flickered. "I have waited twenty years for someone to write that paper again, Cain. Don't make me wait much longer."

The figure was gone. The lights came back up, warm and ordinary, as if nothing had happened in the room at all.

Cain stood where he was.

The Security Committee had met that evening behind sealed doors. Its session could not have ended more than an hour ago. Yet Kronos already knew who had been sent, and why.

Someone on the Council was talking to Kronos. Not to Cain. To Kronos.

Cain picked up his glass, found that he no longer wanted it, and set it down again. He had been trying to learn the name of that someone for years.

He began to pack for the Main Verse.

CHAPTER 3

The Meetup

Main Verse — November 2008

Upon arriving in the Main Verse, Jane and her team established a base of operations, securing warehouses and safe houses in several locations. Their first priority was to identify the mysterious Satoshi Nakamoto and determine how much progress he had made toward developing Bitcoin.

Jane began participating in an online technical community frequented by cryptographers, programmers, and digital currency enthusiasts. Initially, she posted comments and joined discussions about peer-to-peer networks and cryptography. Later, she announced an invitation-only digital security meetup, promoting it as an opportunity to discuss emerging technologies, decentralized networks, and developments in cryptography.

Satoshi saw Jane's announcement and sent her a private message asking about the event. They began chatting online, and over the next several days, their conversations grew increasingly interesting.

Satoshi was intrigued by Jane's knowledge of peer-to-peer networks. She seemed genuinely interested in his ideas about digital money and decentralization, and occasionally offered critiques that made him reconsider certain assumptions. What he didn't know was that Jane had to be careful not to reveal just how much she understood about the technology.

Within days, Jane sent her first report to the Security Committee. Satoshi was not a threat, she wrote. He was building something remarkably close to Lord One's design, and he seemed to believe in it for the same reasons Lord One had. Bitcoin was going to emerge in the Main Verse with or without the Council. Better that it grow in the right hands than be left exposed to the wrong ones. Lord Raymond's reply came the next morning.

The committee agreed. Jane's mission was no longer simply to investigate Satoshi. It was to help him succeed.

When Jane invited him to attend the meetup and share some of his insights, he was hesitant. Satoshi valued his privacy and generally preferred online discussions to public appearances. But Jane explained that the gathering would be small, informal, and off the record. There would be no photography or recording, and attendees would be identified by first names only.

After some encouragement, he agreed.

* * *

Satoshi entered the private conference room of a downtown hotel and was pleasantly surprised by how well organized the event appeared to be. About twenty-five people were gathered in small groups, discussing technology over drinks and appetizers. A large screen near the front of the room displayed the evening's agenda.

A hostess greeted him at the registration table.

"Good evening. Are you here for the meetup?"

"Yes, I am," Satoshi replied.

"Wonderful. Please write your name on this name tag. First name only."

Satoshi hesitated for a moment, then picked up a marker and wrote *Satoshi*.

It wasn't his real name, but it was the one he used in technical circles. No one here needed to know anything more.

The hostess smiled.

"Nice name. Thank you for joining us. The bar and appetizers are over to your right, and the restrooms are just outside, to your left."

"Thank you."

Satoshi made his way to the bar.

"I'll have a club soda with lemon, please," he told the bartender.

While he waited for his drink, a man approached him.

"Hi, I'm Tom."

"Satoshi. Nice to meet you."

Tom glanced at his name tag.

"Wait. Satoshi? As in Satoshi Nakamoto? The guy who wrote that Bitcoin paper?"

"Just a fan of the paper," Satoshi said. "It's a more common name than you'd think."

Tom grinned. "Too bad. I've got a few questions I'd love to ask that guy."

"I guess you'll have to settle for me," Satoshi said.

Tom laughed. "Fair enough."

"Hey, guys, come here! This is Satoshi. Not that Satoshi, but he's read the Bitcoin paper we were talking about."

Three of Tom's friends joined them.

"Hey, Satoshi. Nice to meet you," one of them said. "I've been wondering something. Do you think we'll eventually be able to buy things with Bitcoin, or will it be something people just hold on to?"

"Maybe both," Satoshi said. "It depends on what people want to use it for."

"But how big can it get?" Tom asked. "Do you think one bitcoin could ever be worth as much as a U.S. dollar?"

Satoshi shrugged and sipped his club soda. "Hard to say. It certainly is possible. A lot depends on adoption."

One of Tom's friends looked skeptical.

"Wait a minute. One of these digital coins could be worth as much as an actual dollar?"

"Why not?" Tom asked. "People assign value to all kinds of things. Gold, stocks, even pieces of paper. If enough people believe Bitcoin has value, it could happen."

"I don't know," the skeptic replied. "I like the idea, but I can't imagine anyone paying a dollar for something that doesn't even exist physically."

"You never know," Tom said. "If the demand is there, one bitcoin could be worth a hundred dollars someday."

His friend shook his head.

"A hundred dollars for one bitcoin? Now you're dreaming."

Satoshi smiled. "You never know. Time will tell."

The discussion continued, with Tom and his friends debating Bitcoin's potential. Satoshi mostly listened, quietly amused to hear his own ideas argued over by people who had no idea the author was standing among them.

Then he noticed a striking brunette standing near the bar.

She was looking in his direction. When their eyes met, she smiled.

For a moment, the conversation about Bitcoin seemed considerably less important.

There was something familiar about her, although he was certain they had never met. He excused himself from the group and walked over.

"Hi, I'm Satoshi. Have we met before?"

"Does finding flaws in your peer-to-peer ideas count?" she asked with a smile.

"Jane? Wow. You look different from what I expected."

"What exactly did you expect?"

"You probably don't want to know."

Jane raised an eyebrow.

"Now I'm curious."

"Let's just say I wasn't expecting someone quite like you."

"Nice recovery," Jane said, smiling.

Satoshi glanced around the room.

"What's more important is that this is a very well-organized event."

"Thank you. I try."

"I have to admit, I wasn't sure what to expect when you invited me. But I'm glad I came."

"So am I. You hold court pretty well. Better than I expected," Jane said with a smile.

"What exactly did you expect?" Satoshi asked.

"You probably don't want to know."

"You're mischievous," Satoshi said, smiling. "I'll have to keep an eye on you."

For a brief moment, neither spoke. Jane had spent days researching Satoshi, studying his ideas, and communicating with him online. Meeting him in person was supposed to be another step in her investigation.

Yet something about him caught her off guard. He spoke about Bitcoin with the conviction of someone who believed he was working on something far more important than a new technology. It was a conviction she recognized, although she couldn't immediately explain why.

Before she could say anything more, the hostess approached and whispered that someone at the front desk was asking for Jane by name.

"Excuse me for a minute," Jane said.

"Sure, no worries."

As Jane walked away, Satoshi turned to rejoin Tom and the others. Before he could reach them, a tall, well-groomed man approached him.

"Excuse me. Satoshi?"

"Yes?"

"My name is Cain. I read the whitepaper you posted. Fascinating stuff."

"Thanks. I think we need a digital currency like Bitcoin more than ever."

"I agree," Cain replied. "I run a foundation that funds promising open-source projects and emerging technologies. I believe decentralized digital currencies could have enormous potential."

"That's certainly what I'm hoping."

"I'd like to hear more about your plans. Perhaps we could arrange a meeting. There may be ways we can help you."

Cain reached into his jacket and handed Satoshi a business card.

Satoshi glanced at it.

"Appreciate it. We'll talk."

"Excellent. Enjoy the evening."

"Thanks. You too."

Cain smiled and moved on.

Satoshi slipped the card into his pocket and returned to Tom and his friends. But his attention kept drifting toward the other side of the room. Jane had come back from the front desk and was speaking with the hostess, looking puzzled. The hostess shrugged and gestured toward the lobby, as if whoever had asked for Jane had simply vanished. Near the exit, Cain set down an untouched drink and slipped out without a word to anyone.

Satoshi had come to the meetup expecting an evening of technical discussions. Instead, he found himself wanting to know more about Jane.

CHAPTER 4

Safe House Three

Main Verse — December 2008

Satoshi sat quietly beside Jane in Safe House Three, a spacious loft occupying the upper floor of an old warehouse. Beyond the enormous industrial windows, the streets of the warehouse district were nearly deserted. Exposed brick walls and steel columns framed an open living area. A staircase near the far wall led to a mezzanine, while another disappeared behind a heavy steel door. He wondered why anyone needed so many stairs.

A month ago, he'd wanted to know more about Jane. Now, he wasn't sure he wanted to know any more.

He turned to her and said, "Jane, I think you owe me an explanation."

"There is a lot to explain," Jane replied. "I work for an organization that wants your project to succeed."

"You work for an organization that wants my project to succeed," Satoshi repeated. "Something tells me that you and I meeting a month ago was planned, contrived. Am I right?"

Jane met his eyes. "Meeting you was planned. Spending time with you was not."

"Hmmm. Not so sure, but we can come back to that. What organization do you work for? And why do they care about my project?"

"It's a private organization called the Council of Lords. We're interested in technologies that can fundamentally change society. Bitcoin is one of those technologies."

"The Council of Lords?" Satoshi repeated. "Are you guys British?"

Jane smiled faintly. "No." She paused. "We get that a lot."

"And what exactly does this Council want from me?"

"For now, we want to help you finish Bitcoin and understand what happens when people begin using it."

"That's it?"

"That's our immediate concern," Jane said evenly.

Satoshi leaned back in his chair.

"You're choosing your words very carefully."

"I have to."

"Well, let me ask you something else. Do you know Cain Williams?"

Jane hesitated. "Yes."

"How well?"

"Well enough to know he's dangerous. I'm a little surprised that you accepted an investment from him."

"Not really an investment. He gave me a hundred-thousand-dollar grant to support the project. No equity, no control. All he asked for was early access to a development version of Bitcoin and some supporting software. But I'm behind schedule."

"Were you concerned about what he might really be after? Did you vet him first?"

Satoshi sighed. "Jane, sometimes we programmers have a heavy burden. We have deadlines, stakeholders, customers, competition, and the never-ending pressure to upgrade our software and hardware. It consumes us like a siren's song. As a result, the quest to have the best is all that matters. It's a programming thing. I don't think you'll understand."

"You took Cain's money so that you could have the latest and greatest toys."

"Hmmm. Maybe you do understand."

Jane nodded. "I understand very well. I'm concerned because Cain's money always comes with strings attached. He's interested in more than an early preview. He wants influence over Bitcoin, possibly control over its development."

"Well, he's going to be disappointed. The code I promised him doesn't give him control of anything."

"Does he know that?"

"He should," Satoshi said. "We discussed what I was developing. But apparently, he thinks I'm hiding something."

"Are you?"

Satoshi smiled and didn't answer.

"I'm asking because I need to understand what he might be looking for."

"Bitcoin is designed to be decentralized. No single person or organization should control it. I've been very clear about that from the beginning."

"So why haven't you delivered the code you promised him?"

"Because it isn't ready. Software development takes time, and sometimes things don't go according to plan."

"Interesting. There's something else I need to ask. That password you gave Cain. You knew what would happen when his engineer entered it?"

"Yes."

"You prepared for something like that?" Jane asked.

"I prepared for someone trying to force me to give them access to my computer. I didn't expect to have to use it."

"And the floor?"

"Part of the security system," Satoshi said. "A small shaped charge under the desk. It only drops the section of floor above my storage unit in the basement. I rent that unit, and there's nothing in it but old boxes. No one else could have been hurt."

"That's quite a security system."

"I'm a bit paranoid sometimes," he said with a shrug.

"I noticed."

"There's something about tonight that bothers me," Satoshi said.

"Only one thing?"

"Don't get excited. It's a long list."

Jane smiled. "Go on."

"When the explosion happened, you barely reacted. Then you disarmed a man twice your size like you'd done it a thousand times. A few minutes later, two SUVs appeared out of nowhere, and your friend in the front seat blew up a dumpster to end a car chase. And now we're sitting in a safe house with people who call you ma'am."

Jane listened without interrupting.

"Who are you, Jane? Really?"

"I'm someone who cares about you."

"That's not what I asked."

Jane looked down at her hands. "I know."

"Was any of it real? The conversations, the dates, the time we spent together?"

"Yes, Satoshi. All of it."

"Except the part where you were investigating me."

"Except that part," Jane admitted. "I was sent to learn about you and Bitcoin. Getting this close to you wasn't part of the assignment."

For a moment, neither spoke.

"I want to believe you," Satoshi said.

"I know," Jane said softly.

"But how am I supposed to trust you?"

"I'm not asking you to trust me blindly. I'm asking you to give me a chance to explain."

Satoshi sighed.

"All right. Let's start with something simple. What happens now?"

"First, we make sure Cain can't find you. Then we help you recover whatever you need to continue your work."

"And what does your Council expect in return?"

"Information," Jane said. "We want to understand Bitcoin's development and its potential consequences."

"Consequences for whom?"

Jane hesitated. "For more people than you might imagine."

Satoshi shook his head.

"Another mysterious answer."

"I'm afraid so."

He glanced toward the backpack containing his external drives.

"Well, mysterious answers or not, I have work to do. I was hoping to have Bitcoin ready for public release soon, and I don't intend to let Cain stop me."

"Good. Because we don't want him to stop you either."

"There's one condition," Satoshi said.

"What's that?"

"Bitcoin remains my project. Neither your Council nor Cain gets to control it."

"Agreed," Jane said without hesitation.

"And I'd appreciate it if your people stayed away from my computer unless I ask for help."

"That can be arranged."

"Excellent. We're making progress."

Jane smiled. "Is there anything else?"

"Yes. Does this place have decent coffee?"

"I'll find out," Jane said.

"Good. Because apparently, I've got a cryptocurrency to launch, a dangerous benefactor to avoid, and a council of lords who aren't even British watching my every move."

Jane laughed.

For the first time since leaving his apartment, Satoshi felt some of the tension ease. He still had questions, far more than Jane had answered. But he had come too far with Bitcoin to abandon it now. Whatever Cain wanted, whatever secrets Jane was keeping, he intended to finish what he'd started.

CHAPTER 5

The Genesis Block

Main Verse — January 2009

January 3, 2009

The warehouse loft had become Satoshi's world. One corner was now a workstation, crowded with monitors, cables, spare drives, and the equipment Jane's people had acquired from a list he'd handed them. The rest of the space belonged to the security team, most of them former special forces operatives, whose comings and goings he had learned not to question unless they interrupted his work.

Jane approached with two mugs of coffee. Satoshi was staring at a newspaper headline on his screen.

"Please tell me you've slept," she said.

"I've closed my eyes several times," he said, taking the mug she offered.

Jane leaned toward the monitor. "Chancellor on brink of second bailout for banks. Not exactly cheerful reading."

"No," Satoshi said. "And not exactly surprising."

He explained that he was preparing Bitcoin's first block. The software was not ready for a public release, but the chain needed a beginning. He had chosen to include the day's newspaper headline in the special transaction that created the block's reward.

"Why put a headline in it?" Jane asked.

"It helps establish when the block was created. No one can reasonably claim I made it before that headline existed."

"And you chose that one by accident?"

Satoshi glanced at her. "Do you think I did?"

Jane smiled. "I'm learning not to assume anything about you."

He looked back at the screen. Banks had failed, governments had intervened, and ordinary people were left wondering who would pay for the rescue. Bitcoin would not fix every problem. But if it worked, people could transfer value without needing a bank's permission.

"It's a small beginning," he said.

"Most beginnings are."

Satoshi returned to the keyboard. Jane stood beside him as he checked his work and started the process. For a while there was only the hum of equipment and the occasional click of a key.

Then the first block was there.

Satoshi studied the result before allowing himself a smile.

"That's it?" Jane asked.

"That's the beginning."

He showed her the block's identifying details and the message he had embedded in its coinbase transaction:

The Times 03/Jan/2009 Chancellor on brink of second bailout for banks

"Fifty bitcoins," Jane said, reading the block reward. "What are they worth?"

"At the moment?" Satoshi lifted his coffee. "Less than this."

"Then you'd better make the coffee last."

He laughed. Neither of them knew what Bitcoin would become in the Main Verse. But Jane had seen what a similar invention had done to her own world, and the sight of that first block unsettled her more than she let on.

January 9, 2009

Six days later, Satoshi made Bitcoin version 0.1 available to the public and announced the release on the cryptography mailing list. The software could now be downloaded, examined, and run by anyone willing to give it a try.

He had told Cain that Bitcoin would be open source. Satoshi hoped the public release would put an end to his benefactor's demands, even though the development snapshot and supporting software he'd originally promised were not the same as the published package. He had not delivered that private snapshot, and Cain had made it painfully clear that he was not a patient man.

Jane was less optimistic.

"Do you think Cain will leave you alone now?" she asked.

"He should. He can download the software like everyone else."

"That wasn't my question."

"No," Satoshi admitted. "I don't think he will."

January 12, 2009

The first recorded Bitcoin transaction between two people followed. Satoshi sent ten bitcoins to Hal Finney, an early cryptographer who had begun running the software. The transfer was small, but it proved that Bitcoin could move from one participant to another on the new network.

Satoshi leaned back from his screen, exhausted and pleased.

"It works," he said.

Jane looked at him. "You sound surprised."

"Relieved. There's a difference."

She let him enjoy the moment before sending a short message to Lord Raymond, chairman of the Council Security Committee.

Bitcoin is live in the Main Verse. Panda is making progress. We are preparing for possible opposition.

His reply came soon after.

Good to know. Proceed carefully. Cain will try again.

Jane read the warning twice. She had already been considering moving Satoshi to another safe house. Remaining in one location for weeks had made her uneasy, and now that Bitcoin was public, Cain had fewer reasons to wait.

She was about to summon her team when Adam called from the surveillance station.

"Jane. You need to see this."

Adam's main monitor showed the warehouse entrance. A van and three SUVs had stopped along the street. Men were stepping out and spreading into positions. On the smaller monitors, more men appeared at the side and rear entrances.

"How many?" Jane asked.

"Twelve that I can see. Seven out front, five covering the other exits. Maybe more in the vehicles."

"Cain?"

Adam enlarged one camera feed. A familiar figure stood beside the van.

"That's him."

Jane studied the screen. "What took you so long?"

Adam gave her a look, unsure whether she was joking.

She pressed the alarm switch and lifted her radio. "Everyone, listen up. Cain is here. Prepare for a Level Three extraction. I repeat, Level Three extraction."

Across the loft, doors opened and footsteps quickened. Satoshi appeared at the entrance to the surveillance area.

"What's going on?"

"Your friend Cain is back," Jane said.

"What does he want now? The software is open source. You guys sent him the link, right?"

"You mean the publicly available download link? Yes, we sent that to him," Adam said. "I think he wants more than that."

"Hold your positions," Jane said into her radio. "I'm sure he'll call soon to tell us what he wants."

A phone rang. Jane looked at the number, then put the call on speaker.

"Lord Cain."

"Lady Jane. I see you've been busy."

"I could say the same about you. I see you brought more men this time."

"It seemed prudent. You may have the home-field advantage, Lady Jane, but not for long."

Jane let the threat pass. "What do you want?"

"You know what I want."

"If it's Bitcoin's source code, it's available to everyone. I can send you the download link again."

"Cute. Hand over Satoshi, or this won't end well for you."

Jane glanced at Satoshi. He stared back at her, waiting.

"Satoshi makes his own decisions," she said. "And I think we both know what he'll decide."

"You have three minutes. After that, my men come in."

On Adam's screen, two of Cain's men advanced toward the main entrance.

"Do what you have to do," Jane replied, and ended the call.

"Three minutes?" Satoshi asked.

"Probably less," Adam said. "They're moving."

A metallic crash sounded from somewhere below. Adam checked another camera. "They've blocked the loading bay. Side entrance too. Every ground-level exit is covered."

Satoshi looked toward the stairs at the far end of the loft. "How exactly are we getting out?"

"We prepared for this. Follow me," Jane replied.

END OF PART ONE

The battle for Bitcoin is just beginning.

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