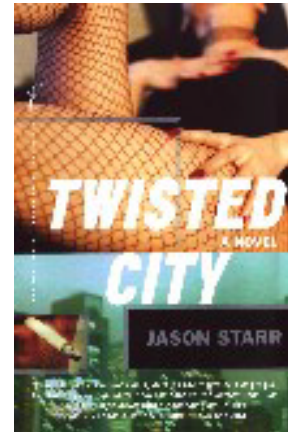


# TWISTED CITY

## ONE

Leaving the interview with Robert Lipton, the CEO of Byron Technologies, I wrote the lead to my article in my head:

After Byron Technologies' dismal first-half performance, analysts will search for signs of life in the company's third-quarter earnings report, but the bottom line could be the end of the line for this floundering tech start-up.



Actually, I could've gone either way on Byron. While the company had decent quarter-to-quarter revenue growth and showed increasing sales, their cash-burn rate was out of control and they were losing a ton of money. Lipton seemed like a good guy, and I would've liked to write an article with a positive spin, but Jeff Sherman, the wonderful editor-in-chief of Manhattan Business magazine, had a rule-no more than three positive articles in a row. Since my last three articles had been favorable, this one had to be a bashing.

Waiting for the elevator on the twenty-ninth floor of the Seventh Avenue office building, I noticed a woman standing to my right. She was a few years younger than me, maybe thirty-two, with short, stylishly cut red hair and pale, lightly freckled skin. She had a slender, attractive build and was wearing a black designer business suit. Something about her appearance reminded me of my sister, Barbara.

I wasn't planning on saying anything to the woman, but she caught me staring at her and I smiled instinctively. When she smiled back I said, "Hi, how's it going?"

"Good," she said. "Thanks."

We both looked up at the digital numbers indicating the building's floors. I continued to look over at her, still thinking about my sister. When we made eye contact again I said, "Long day, huh?"

"Yeah," she said, blushing.

There was another awkward silence as I noticed that the ring finger on her left hand was bare. When she looked at me again I said, "Do you want to go for a drink?"

I wasn't usually impulsive, and the question surprised me as much as it did her. She hesitated for a few seconds, sizing me up. I guess I didn't look like a serial killer, because she said, "Okay. Sure."

We got on the elevator together and talked some more. Her name was Heather. She was a marketing exec at an ad agency. When I told her I was a reporter for Manhattan Business she seemed surprisingly interested, asking me a lot of questions about my job. We left the building and headed downtown on Seventh Avenue. It was starting to get dark.

"So where are we going?" Heather asked me.

"There's this Scottish bar on Forty-fourth," I said.

"Okay," she said.

We continued talking, mostly about our jobs. Our arms brushed a few times and she didn't seem to mind. Waiting for a traffic light to change we stood face-to-face for a few seconds. She had light blue eyes that went well with her hair. I decided she was Irish, or part Irish. I realized she looked nothing like my sister, who had dark, wavy hair and dark eyes like me.

The front of St. Andrews was smoky and noisy. It seemed like an office party was going on, because everyone was in business suits and seemed to know each other. We wove our way to the back and settled onto two available stools at the bar. A bartender wearing a dark-green-and-navy-plaid kilt took our drink order—a pint of Guinness for me, a bottle of Corona for her.

"So where're you from?" Heather asked.

"Originally, Long Island," I said. "You?"

"Westchester," she said.

"Really. What part?"

"Ever heard of Hartsdale?"

"Sure," I said. "I went to school with a couple guys from around there. You know Mike Goldberg?"

"No."

"Stu Fox?"

"No."

"Oh well."

The bartender brought our drinks. I gave him fifteen bucks and told him to keep the change.

I sipped my beer, then said, "You know what's funny? When I first saw you, you reminded me of my sister."

"Really?"

"Yeah," I said, "but the thing is you look nothing like her."

"I guess it's just one of those things," she said, smiling. She was wearing red lipstick that went great with her hair. She took a sip of beer, crossing her slender legs, then said, "So does your sister live in the city?"

"Yeah," I said. "I mean, no. I mean, she used to live in the city. She died fourteen months ago."

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

I sipped my beer, realizing that my palms were sweaty.

"You know what I think?" she said. "I think when people die they stay with the people they loved for eternity."

"You mean like ghosts?"

"Or spirits. Or just an energy. I don't believe there's any such thing as dying."

"I like that idea," I said.

We looked into each other's eyes for a few seconds, then laughed nervously at the same time. I liked Heather and I could tell she liked me too.

We finished our beers and ordered another round. Over half an hour went by and the conversation was still lively. I didn't want to hit on her too hard, but I also didn't want to give her the idea I wasn't interested. So at an appropriate time, after she said something funny and I laughed, I casually rested my right hand on her left leg. Right away I knew I'd blown it. She immediately crossed her legs, rotated away from me on her bar stool, and checked her watch. I tried to make more conversation, pretend nothing had happened, but she stopped talking. A few minutes later she said she had forgotten that her cousin was coming over to her apartment tonight and she had to meet her. I tried to talk her into staying, but she thanked me for the drinks and left the bar quickly.

Finishing my second pint alone, I felt like a moron. A nice girl like Heather probably dated guys ten times before sleeping with them, and I had started pawing at her like a

horny teenager. If I'd just played it cool, maybe asked for her number or suggested meeting for lunch sometime, maybe it could have led to something.

I ordered another pint, feeling like even more of a jerk.

I had a deadline at two p.m. tomorrow for my article, but I wasn't ready to leave the bar. As I was nursing my third Guinness, the drunk-looking guy with long, stringy brown hair who had sat on Heather's vacated bar stool stuck out his big sweaty hand and said, "Eddie. Eddie Lomack."

Normally I hated when drunks talked to me at bars, and I would have ignored Eddie, but my own good drunk feeling was starting to set in, so I had more patience than usual.

"David," I said without shaking his hand.

"David," he said. "That's a good name. Simple, anyway. Don't gotta spell it out for people a lot."

"That's true," I said, wishing I'd kept my mouth shut.

"People don't ask me to spell my name either," Eddie slurred. "I just say my name's Eddie and that's good enough for them." He laughed. "So what happened with that girl you were talkin' to?"

"Girl?"

"The hot little redhead who was just here."

"There was a hot little redhead here?"

"Come on, I saw you walk in together; then she got up and left. What the hell happened?"

"Oh, her," I said. "She was late for an appointment."

Eddie gave me a long, drunken stare, his eyes looking like they weren't firm in their sockets, and then he said, "Late for an appointment, my ass. She ran out on you, didn't she?"

"Let's just say there was no love connection," I said.

Eddie laughed, more than necessary. I shifted my stool away from him to avoid being hit by saliva, and then I looked at my half-full pint, deciding I'd leave as soon as it was gone.

"Who needs her?" Eddie said when he was through laughing. "You can do better than that, my man. Hey, you wanna see a picture of my girlfriend?"

Eddie leaned back, wobbling so much he almost fell off the stool. After he steadied himself, he reached into his pocket and took out his wallet. He opened it to a picture of a naked blond centerfold.

"Pretty good-lookin', huh?" he said. Then he said, "Oh, and here's my other girlfriend."

He opened his wallet to a picture of another naked blonde.

I smiled and took another gulp of my beer; then I put the glass down on the bar, deciding that I'd had enough. I reached into my right pocket to leave a tip for the bartender when I realized my wallet was gone. I felt my other pockets, but the wallet wasn't there either. I checked all my pockets again, then looked around on the floor near my bar stool.

"What's wrong?" Eddie asked.

"I can't find my wallet," I said.

Eddie started looking around too as I stood up, feeling my pockets again. Then the realization set in that I had been pickpocketed. I suddenly felt hot all over, and I became even more frantic.

One of the Scottish bartenders came over and asked me what was wrong.

"Somebody stole my wallet," I said.

"You sure?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm sure!" I shouted.

Now other people nearby were looking over, and a couple of college-age guys started searching on the floor. Eddie was still looking around too, and then it hit me what had happened.

"Give me my wallet back," I said to Eddie.

He gave me a drunken stare, then said, "The fuck you talkin' about?"

"Come on, I know you took it," I said, "or you were working with somebody who took it." I looked around, but there was no one suspicious-looking nearby. I turned back to Eddie and said, "Give me my fucking wallet back."

A big surly-looking guy with a blond crew cut and bulging muscles squeezed into a tight black T-shirt came over. I figured he was the bouncer. "There a problem here?" he said.

"Yeah, there's a fuckin' problem here," I said. "This guy stole my wallet."

"I didn't steal nobody's wallet," Eddie said.

"He's lying," I said.

Eddie started taking things out of his pockets-his keys, change, crumpled-up bills, his own wallet.

"See?" Eddie said. "Where do you think I got his wallet, up my ass?"

"Why do you think he took your wallet?" the bouncer said to me.

"Maybe he didn't take it, but someone else did," I said, "somebody he was working with. He was distracting me while his friend took my wallet."

"I wasn't distracting nobody," Eddie said. "I was just sitting here, minding my own, then he starts screaming I took his wallet."

"Did you see him with a friend in the bar?" the bouncer asked me.

"No, I didn't see him," I said, "but that's what happened. Can't you call the cops or something?"

Eddie stood up off his bar stool.

"Hey, enough'a this shit, all right?" he said. "I didn't take your fuckin' wallet."

"Yes you did," I said.

"You callin' me a fuckin' liar?"

"Yes."

"Fuck you, asshole."

I pushed Eddie, not hard, but hard enough to knock him back a few steps. But he was so drunk-or faking drunk-that he fell backward, knocking over the bar stool and spilling his beer onto the woman to his right. The woman's boyfriend started shouting at Eddie, and the bouncer grabbed my arm and pulled me through the crowd toward the front of the bar.

"What the hell're you doing?" I said. "Let go of me."

He didn't let go until we were outside.

"The guy took my wallet," I said, "I'm telling you."

"I don't give a shit about your wallet," the bouncer said. "There's no fightin' in the bar. Now get the hell outta here 'fore I call the cops!"

The bouncer went back inside. A couple of seconds later Eddie came out. He looked at me, then headed away toward Sixth Avenue.

"Please," I said, walking next to him, "I don't want to fight with you, okay, and I don't want to call the cops either-I just want my wallet back. You can keep the money, all right? I just want my credit cards and ID and everything else."

Eddie stopped and turned to face me.

"For the last fuckin' time, I don't have your fuckin' wallet," he said, spraying spit in my face with each F sound, "so just leave me the fuck alone."

Watching Eddie walk away, I tried to decide what to do. I could call the cops on my cell phone, but by the time they came Eddie would be gone. Besides, from the position he'd been sitting, Eddie couldn't have taken the wallet himself-his partner had to have taken it, and by now his partner was probably long gone.

Then there was the chance that I was wrong about Eddie altogether-that he'd had nothing to do with it.

I decided that calling the cops would be a waste of time. I'd spend the whole night filling out forms for nothing, because they wouldn't make any effort to catch a pickpocket. I walked to the corner and checked the garbage can, figuring that the thief might have taken the cash and dumped everything else nearby. My wallet wasn't in the top layer of garbage in any of the garbage cans around the intersection of Forty-fourth Street and Sixth Avenue. I walked around the block, checking other garbage cans, finding nothing. Finally, I decided it was hopeless. The pickpocket could have dumped my wallet down a sewer, or anywhere.

I only had forty-five cents on me, so I couldn't take a bus or the subway. Walking home along Seventh Avenue, I took out my cell phone and got the numbers for my bank and credit card companies, and then I started closing my accounts.

## **TWO**

During the half-hour-or-so walk to my apartment on West Eighty-first Street, I froze my bank account and closed my credit card accounts, relieved to find out that nothing had been charged on any of my cards. I'd heard horror stories about identity theft, so later I'd have to call the credit bureaus and report that my wallet had been stolen. Then, tomorrow, I'd try to replace my more minor cards -- Blockbuster, United Health Care, the New York Public Library, Duane Reade Dollar Rewards Club -- and deal with the headache of replacing my Social Security card and driver's license.

As usual, when I entered my apartment hip-hop music was blasting and the living room reeked of pot. I was slightly surprised, because Rebecca had said she was going to be out for the night.

"I'm home!" I called down the hallway, toward the bedroom, but I doubted she could hear me over the pulsing music.

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