

A MISTER SUNSHINE ADVENTURE

ALEX HAWK

A THRILLER

THE
ALGORITHM

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BY

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Chapter Three

Jake leaned back in his chair, staring at the lines of code on his computer screen. Ty's trading program was brilliant in its simplicity, but also dangerously naive. It made trades based on correlations and patterns in historical data, oblivious to real-world complexities. Jake sighed, running a hand through his short brown hair. Ever since his friend Mike's suicide, he'd felt adrift, desperate for something to cling to. This algorithm, if it worked, could be a lifeline, but using it came with great risk.

As far as he could tell, Ty was truthful, there was nothing illegal involved. No insider secrets, no dark web data funnels. Honestly, the systems he used at work were more on the shady side than this. Still, the warnings from Ty had rung true. It could cost him his job if they found out about it or his association with Ty if that came out in the questioning. But the siren song of easy money called to him like a nightbird.

Jake glanced at the pile of overdue bills on his kitchen counter, then at the bottle of whiskey, still half-full from the night before. The surfer dude he'd met had bragged a bit about living the high life from the automated trading profits. But Jake wasn't convinced. Mike had

warned him about get-rich-quick schemes. They promised paradise but delivered hell. Mike had known first hand how hard they could bite you. "Be smart, be a Ranger," Jake said to himself before moving forward.

He opened the algorithm's source code again, studying it. The bones were good, but improvements could be made. With his own AI expertise, he could take Ty's sketch of a system and turn it into a masterpiece. Excitement bubbled up in him. This wasn't just about money. It was a chance to reinvent himself. To put his skills to use. To find meaning again. Perhaps he could sell the program itself, even if it was just slightly successful. Day traders would snap it up.

He knew the risks. Using Bennett's code could mean ruin. But staying put was slow death. He had to try. Jake began tweaking the code, refining the logic. He would keep this offline—no more logging into Ty's website. And he'd start small at first, investing just what he could afford to lose. It wasn't much, but it was a start toward something bigger. Toward the life he wanted—no, deserved. Maybe toward a tiny bit of redemption. He had a long road ahead, but finally, he could see a flicker of light in the darkness.

* * *

Jake stared at his computer screen, his tired eyes struggling to stay focused. He had been working on improving Ty's trading algorithm for the past three nights, fueled by desperation and cheap coffee. The original code was brilliant but unrefined, like a rough diamond that needed polishing.

He knew he was taking a huge risk by even considering using the algorithm. Ty's disappearance after handing it over was more than a little concerning. But Jake also knew he was out of options. His debt was mounting, his job was going nowhere, and he needed a way out. This algorithm could be his deliverance if he could just make it work as well as Ty indicated.

After making a final tweak, Jake compiled the code and ran a test.

The improved algorithm churned through historical market data, analyzing and predicting with uncanny accuracy. Jake leaned back in his chair and sighed, equal parts exhausted and relieved. It was ready. Now came the real test.

The next morning, Jake logged into his trading account and pulled up the commodities market. He had done his research, and the algorithm which he'd taken to calling Mr. Sunshine was still a yes on orange juice futures. It would be a good first trade. The media had been reporting for weeks that a citrus disease was decimating orange crops, causing prices to skyrocket. But according to Ty's algorithm, the disease fears were overblown. It predicted orange crops would recover, and prices would stabilize.

Jake sat at his computer, the soft glow of the screen illuminating his furrowed brow. He leaned forward, elbows on the desk, hands cradling his chin as he pondered the simplicity at the heart of commodity trading. It was a straightforward concept: buy low, sell high. But there was a twist that not everyone grasped—making money when prices fall.

Commodity trading isn't just about scooping up goods when they're cheap and offloading them when they're high. It's also about anticipation, about prediction. He could almost see the trainer at Saxon and Locke going over this his third week there.

Jake tapped a finger against his temple. "If you reckon that orange juice prices are set to tumble because everyone's scared of this disease that isn't half as bad as they say, you can bet on that drop. You promise to sell orange juice at today's high prices, then wait for the market to catch up with reality."

His eyes scanned over the charts again, where fear had driven prices up like a gust of wind inflates a sail. "When the market realizes there's more juice than they thought, prices plummet. That's when you buy back what you promised to sell but at this new, lower price." A smile flickered across his face. "The difference between your selling price and your buying price? That's your profit."

With this strategy in mind, Jake prepared to take a position

known as 'going short' on orange juice futures. He anticipated the fall in prices, banking on Mr. Sunshine's analysis to be spot on.

As he hovered over the 'Confirm' button for his trade order, he felt his heartbeat in his throat. The room was silent save for the hum of his computer and the distant sound of traffic outside his window. He exhaled slowly and clicked. It was more money than he had ever bet on any stock, much less an option. It was risky, but it wouldn't bankrupt him...well, wouldn't bankrupt him any worse than he was doing on his own.

Jake's first short position was now live; he had sold orange juice futures he didn't yet own at what he believed to be an inflated price due to panic overblown by media hype. All that was left, theoretically, was to wait for the market to calm and buy back at a lower price before the contract came due. Mr. Sunshine also had a code for each yes or no response. It was in the code and also part of Ty's handwritten notes. This told him how long to hold, generally no more than three days. This trade was a two-day hold; he was to dump it by market close tomorrow, no matter what.

By his own choice, he ignored the market. He knew the stress over that money would lead to a drink, or ten. He let it ride and went and bought a suit. He couldn't afford two, any more than he could get one. Several of the veterans had told him about a shop down in Chelsea that sold the name brands at about half the cost. He assumed they were knockoffs, but they fit and wore like the real thing. Just like the fancy buildings and luxurious waiting rooms, it was all set decoration. Make the suckers think they are dealing with real players.

As the workday finally ended, he rushed to finish out his daily reports. He'd programmed in the trade to take place at 3:45 just before the market closed. He was nervous with anticipation; he'd either lost money or gained. Right now, he could hope for the best.

Jake took off his jacket and opened up the laptop. As he squinted at lines and numbers that danced before his tired eyes, he heard a faint knock on his door. His heart skipped—a reaction conditioned by latent PTSD if he was being honest. Today, he blamed it more on

using a somewhat illicit trading algorithm that a man presumably in federal custody had designed.

"Who is it?" His voice sounded hoarse from disuse.

"It's Nora from next door," came a muffled reply through the wood of the door.

Jake stood up stiffly and opened the door just a crack to see Nora holding out a faded Tupperware container.

"I made too much lasagna again," she said with an apologetic smile. "Thought you might want some since you've been working so hard."

He couldn't help but return her smile—a warm reminder that there was life beyond these walls filled with endless streams of data and risk calculations.

"Thank you, Nora," he said, gratefully accepting her offer. She was single, in her late fifties and raising her two grandsons. Jake had never once seen the kids' parents.

He returned to his desk with lasagna in hand but didn't eat right away. Instead, he stared at it for a moment—the warm bowl of comfort food a stark contrast to the pit of cold logic in his stomach. He confirmed the sell order went through. Now he had to wait to see if he made money or not.

As days went by, Jake watched, astonished as orange juice futures began their descent, just as Mr. Sunshine predicted. The media started releasing optimistic reports about orange crop yields recovering faster than expected—exactly what he had been betting on.

He waited patiently until one morning, he saw it—the price dipped below where he needed them to be for a comfortable profit margin. With hands that were surprisingly steady considering how much was riding on this moment, Jake closed out his position by buying back the future contracts at the lower price.

The profit from this trade alone would pay off the credit card balance and a chunk of his debts and add a cushion to his account—proof that Ty's algorithm worked, and that Jake's enhancements had turned potential into reality.

But as he leaned back in his chair and let out a long sigh of relief mixed with triumph, Jake knew this was only the beginning. He had taken one step down an uncertain path lined with risks and possibilities alike—a path that could lead him out of financial ruin or deeper into legal peril.

For now, though, he allowed himself a small celebration—just him and the smell of reheated lasagna in an office that felt slightly less oppressive than before. He considered a celebratory drink, then felt the challenge coin in his pocket.

"I know, Mike. Focus." He had work to do and dove into it as if his old friend were coaching him. He made three more trades based on Mr. Sunshine. With the profit from the first trade canceling out that initial debt, Jake was 'indeed' playing with house money now. He opted for options in energy, beef, and again in agriculture—three of the four main segments for commodities trading.

Jake hesitated, his cursor hovering over the trade execution button. He had gone back and forth all night, weighing the risks in his mind. But he was all in now. He steeled himself and clicked "Buy," investing \$5,000 in shorting pork belly futures. It and the other two larger trades went through instantly. Now, all he could do was wait and see if the algorithm's prediction was correct.

He tried to focus as he sat through the mind-numbing, back-to-back meetings at work. But his mind kept wandering back to the trade. He was anxious to check if the price had started dropping yet. The algorithm had predicted a steep decline in the next few days as the crop reports came in.

Finally, alone in his cubicle, Jake pulled up the commodities market data. He froze. Just as the algorithm had predicted, pork belly futures were already down 2%. And crop reports were showing the disease was not as widespread as initially feared. He watched the price tick lower throughout the day, just as the algorithm said it would.

Over the next few days, Jake spent his free time voraciously reading everything he could find about crops, climate, diseases, and

the futures market. He was astounded at how many factors the algorithm was able to analyze to make shockingly accurate predictions. Several days later, pork belly futures had plummeted nearly 30%. He sold his position, netting over \$15,000 in profit on that one trade. The other two positions were even better.

He could hardly believe it had worked. The algorithm was real. As he stared at his account balance, still soaring from the dopamine of his first sizeable trades, he had a moment of clarity. This was his chance to turn everything around. If he was smart and played it right, this algorithm could make him financially independent. No more credit card debt, no more pointless job. He could have real freedom for the first time in his life.

Jake knew he had to be cautious. What he'd done the last two weeks was not significant enough to raise any alarms. Hell, Landretta had shown him personal trades he was making in the six figures. Jake was a broker; he was expected to have an investment account. The kind of money he stood to make, though...yeah, that would draw attention. He would need to make some changes to cover his tracks. He would funnel profits through shell companies, keep his identity off all accounts, and make small, inconsistent withdrawals to avoid triggering red flags.

As his mind raced with plans, he felt the first glimmer of hope he'd had in years. For so long, his future looked bleak. But now, finally, he had a chance to be the master of his own destiny. "Don't screw this up, buddy."

Chapter Four

Several days later, Jake leaned back in his desk chair, running his hands through his hair as he stared at the computer screen. The algorithm's code was laid out before him, numbers and symbols marching in inscrutable rows. But it was the metadata that had grabbed his attention—specifically, one tiny bit of programming that the AI had attributed to someone else.

It wasn't a name; it was more of a programmer's tag. Like a gang sign incorporated into graffiti on a train's box cars. The thing was, this tag was familiar. He'd seen it before...at work.

While Jake was a trader, his programming background got him involved in some side projects with the brokerage house. That tag had stuck with him because it was splattered across much of Saxon & Locke's house's trading system. Where Jake had spotted it was on a bridge terminal linking the house system to the Bloomsburg terminals.

Jake knew that quants, or quantitative analysts, were the real masterminds behind the complex mathematical models that drive modern financial strategies. In a brokerage exchange like Saxon &

Locke, they were the architects of algorithms that analyzed vast amounts of market data to identify profitable trading opportunities.

These whiz kids, armed with PhDs and an arsenal of statistical techniques, wielded their computational wizardry to predict market trends and craft automated trading systems that could execute trades at speeds no human could match.

Jake's eyes narrowed as he scrutinized the tag again, a string of characters embedded in the code like a digital fingerprint. He recalled the countless hours he spent working on the firm's trading system, side by side with quants who spoke in probabilities and algorithms. This tag was their secret handshake, a mark of craftsmanship hidden within layers of complex financial modeling.

With a click, he pulled up a secure browser and logged into the brokerage house's system. He sifted through repositories of code—proprietary stuff, not meant for prying eyes. There it was again, that same tag nestled in a subroutine dedicated to risk assessment. A chill ran down his spine; whoever wrote this had deep access, the kind only a handful at Saxon & Locke could boast.

The walls seemed to close in around him as he scanned for more of the coder's tag. Jake's heart beat a staccato rhythm as he contemplated the implications. Could Ty's system be a rogue offshoot from Saxon & Locke's own digital bowels? Was Ty aware? Worse yet, were Ty's abductors?

A quick glance at his watch told him it was nearing midnight. The office was empty except for the janitorial staff who gave him no more than a passing nod as they went about their nightly duties. He stood up and stretched his legs, feeling the tension in his muscles from hours of sitting.

Jake's mind raced as he walked over to the window overlooking Wall Street. The city below bustled with life even at this late hour; yellow cabs streaked by like comets in an urban night sky.

He locked himself in one of the small conference rooms reserved for private client consultations—rarely used these days with most business conducted virtually. He rolled up to the table, opened his

company laptop, and began to dissect every line of code associated with that tag.

Hours passed as Jake immersed himself in the world of quants once more—this time not as an ally but as a detective searching for clues in a web of deception spun within his own firm's walls.

He found patterns—trade strategies that mirrored those suggested by Ty's algorithm but with slight deviations meant to throw off anyone looking too closely.

It dawned on him that someone at Saxon & Locke could be running a parallel operation using Ty's system or something eerily similar as a template. But who? And why?

Jake's thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the conference room door. It swung open to reveal Cynthia Jameson, one of Saxon & Locke's senior quants known for her acerbic wit and unparalleled skill with numbers. Truthfully, she was not a quant, she designed the quants, or more often, optimized and refined them.

Quantum algorithm trading had been around for decades. A former math professor and professional gambler had been credited with developing the original formulas. When computers came along, they got better. AI hadn't been a factor until lately, and even now it was unwelcome in most trading houses. Most senior traders thought it was useless as it relied on logic, patterns, and history to predict trade value. The unsaid aspect was deliberate market manipulation. That was something not even a super-computer could anticipate. Mr. Sunshine seemed to be able to, though.

"Mind if I join you?" Cynthia asked without waiting for an answer and took a seat across from him.

Jacob quickly minimized his analysis but knew she must have seen something on his screen. Her sharp eyes missed little within these walls.

"You're working hard on something that looks decidedly non-official," she remarked casually while unpacking her laptop.

He weighed his response carefully. Cynthia could be an invaluable

able ally or another piece in this dangerous puzzle he had unwittingly become part of.

"I've been dabbling in some extracurricular coding," Jake replied with equal casualness. "You know how it is when you can't shake off an idea."

Cynthia nodded, but there was something about her expression that suggested she was not entirely convinced by his nonchalance.

"Looking for a permanent move to our department?"

He laughed, it was no secret that the code-level IT guys were the lowest paid in the building, despite the fact they were responsible for most of the wealth.

Jake and Cynthia had a tiny bit of a past. They'd become friends when his work took him into her department during orientation week. Later, they shared drinks and a meal, but nothing seemed to spark in either. Still, they were friendly. Now, he needed to know if he could trust her.

He pulled up a standard bit of programming code. "Hey, have a question. I see this programmer's tag on lots of our programs. Do you know who he is?"

Cynthia leaned back and folded her arms, without looking at his screen. "He?" She shook her head. "You just assume it has to be a male?"

"Yes, No...I mean," Jake stumbled. He'd fallen into a trap of his own making and now, had no way out.

She smiled, letting him off the hook, "Yeah, I'm sure it was a he. They never let any of our work get into the production servers. It is a guy's club." She swiveled the Dell XPS laptop around and studied the screen. Her face darkened.

"Alex," she said. "The original author of the code was Alex Chen."

Chen's name meant nothing to Jake at first. But Cynthia continued. Alex Chen had been a developer at Saxon & Locke up until three years ago. He had been let go abruptly, though the reasons were

unclear. There were whispers of 'ethical concerns' but no official statement from the firm.

"So, you worked with him?" Jake asked, trying to sound impressed.

"Not really. He was way up the food chain, you know. Not top floor but getting there. Guy was supposedly brilliant."

Jake was going to ask more but decided that would be too obvious for what was supposedly casual interest.

"Gotcha," he said.

Later, on his own, he dug into Chen farther. Had Ty gotten his code from Chen and was that why he'd targeted this firm and Jake to approach? He didn't see Ty as a programming genius, which meant he'd likely had help.

Jake did a Google search on Alex Chen, and seeing the results page, he immediately shut the laptop down. Alex Chen was dead, murdered in Singapore two years ago. That headline was enough to know he didn't need to be leaving digital fingerprints anywhere near that story.

Getting home, he logged into the anonymous browser on his virtual VPN system and continued reading. What really intrigued Jake were the circumstances of Chen's death a year after leaving Saxon & Locke. He had turned up dead in a luxury Singapore resort suite, apparently the victim of a robbery gone wrong. But something about the whole thing seemed off to Jake. Why was a disgraced former developer at a Wall Street firm staying in a high-end resort in the trendiest section of Singapore? And if it was just a routine robbery, why were the details so scarce?

He leaned forward, scrolling through the news articles again. Most were short, barely more than a paragraph about an unidentified male found dead, deemed a tourist targeted by thieves. But one article mentioned marks on Chen's neck consistent with strangulation. Jake felt a chill run down his spine. This was no random crime.

He closed the browser window, mind racing. It was clear Saxon & Locke wanted to get rid of Chen. Perhaps he knew too much or

created something he shouldn't have—like Ty's algorithm. Did Ty Bennett have him eliminated and stage it to look like a robbery? Given the profits this algorithm could generate, Jake wouldn't put it past him.

He stood and paced around the room, his unease growing. How had Ty gotten a hold of the algorithm? Had he stolen it? Or had Saxon & Locke let it out themselves, using Ty as an unwitting pawn?

So many questions swirled through Jake's mind. He sat back down and pulled up the algorithm code again. He had to be extra smart about this. Making a lot of money very quickly would raise red flags. But taking it slowly, spreading trades across multiple accounts—that would give the authorities more time to track it down. How careful could he be?

Jake knew he was playing a dangerous game. But what choice did he have? His debts were piling up. He lived paycheck to barely getting by paycheck. This algorithm was already changing all of that. He just had to keep his head down and be cautious.

Opening a new window on his computer, he began drafting an email to increase his trading credit limits. A vision filled his mind—paying off debts, quitting his job, moving somewhere warm and peaceful. The algorithm would provide the key to a new life. He just had to unlock the door.

Jake clicked send on the email, then sat back, tapping his fingers on his desk. This wasn't the life he had imagined when he started at Saxon & Locke. But maybe that dream was never realistic. He had seen enough since then to know that people like him seldom got ahead through hard work alone. Sometimes you had to bend the rules.

With a shake of his head, he closed the browser windows. He would keep digging into Chen's background, but carefully. If Saxon & Locke realized what he knew, he might end up like Chen. For now, no one could know about the algorithm.