



**ANTHONY S. POLICASTRO**

# **DARK END OF THE SPECTRUM**

Digital terrorists have taken the country hostage  
and only one man can stop them.  
But he has to choose to save his  
family or save millions!

# Dark End of the Spectrum

By Anthony S. Policastro

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All of the characters and events in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual events or actual persons living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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For Joann, my wife, my soul mate,  
my rock in the world



## Chapter 1

He never thought it would come to this. His index finger poised over the enter key of his laptop, his hand wavering, his mind swirling with a dozen scenarios. John Bastille had lost his wife, his dreams, his house, everything. Now he was fighting back, but deep down he knew it was wrong. It went against everything he believed. He wavered one last time, deciding, not deciding and then he pushed his finger down. The screen flashed blue and it was done. He thought about his two toddler boys and what they would think of him when it was over, when years later he was older and useless or maybe dead. He threw the computer down and swore. The screen went black, but it was too late – the program was streaming into the Internet and what John didn't know was that in a few days a lot of people would die.

Nancy Foster stared at the five new emails she received this morning while sipping a cup of Earl Gray tea. The tea gave her a warm cozy feeling reminding her of her grandmother who she often shared a cup with on Sunday afternoons. The tea intoxicated her with past and not so past memories of her mother's mother - memories that flowed like a river ever changing into one pleasant thought and another until three men entered the lobby. Their shoes clapped on the marbled floor like a herd of horses and dissolved her thoughts like a breeze scatters a wisp of smoke. Two were young either Korean or Filipino, and the third was taller and middle-aged, a kindly next-door neighbor type. They spoke among themselves and pretended not to notice her.

"Excuse me, gentlemen. May I help you?" she got out as the men walked closer. A feeling of dread filled her chest as the men passed her desk oblivious to her. Call it intuition, a sixth sense or just plain common sense, but Nancy knew something wasn't right about the three strangers. Every visitor had to sign in before they entered the building and they had to be escorted by an employee. It was her first job after graduating as a communications major from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill last year, and now she was working for a communications company – Inviscom Wireless – at their national headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. She had tried for months to get into the company in the product-planning department, but always received the polite rejection letters saying they had found a candidate that would better suit their needs and encouraged her to continue to seek additional employment opportunities with the company. When she saw the receptionist position posted on Inviscom's web site, she applied for the entry-level job hoping it would lead to bigger and better things. She was hired because she "fit" perfectly into the company's image – young, attractive and up on the latest goings on, according

to the Human Resources manager who was assigned to acclimate her into Inviscom's corporate culture.

She put her cup down spilling some of the tea on the dark mahogany desk and moved her tall, slender figure from the crescent shaped reception desk. The men stood in front of the elevator doors. Her A-type personality took over completely.

“Gentlemen! Excuse me!”

The doors opened and the men vanished. She quickly slammed her hand on the call button, but the doors ignored her. She went back to her desk and snatched the phone.

“Hello this is Sergeant Lopez. Can I help you?”

“Hi Hector? This is Nancy at reception; three men just went up the elevator and didn’t sign in. I couldn’t stop them. I don’t know where they are headed.”

“Were there two Chinese guys?”

“Well, yeah, I think so. How did you know that?”

“Mr. Grayson is bringing in two computer experts to test the security of our systems. He probably didn’t think he had to check in,” Lopez explained.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I only got twenty emails reminding me about it.”

“Okay, if you say so. They had awfully big briefcases.”

“Computers and stuff.”

Nancy dropped into her high back chair and swiveled around to face the flat screen monitor. She stared at her unread emails and tapped her manicured fingers on the desk. She opened a new email and began typing to Scott Jones, head of the IT department on the fifth floor about the three men who had just entered.

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The elevator stopped on the fifth floor of the 20-story building and the three men casually walked out into the corridor continuing their feigned conversation and camaraderie. They entered a small



empty conference room and closed the door. The Asian men quickly unzipped the large black briefcases and pulled out laptops, Ethernet cables, and a radio frequency scanner. Within seconds, they had the computers connected to a live Ethernet port in the room that gave them access to Inviscom's network. Seconds later they were installing software they would later use to control the cellular phone company's computers.

"The HLR servers are not on this network," said the Korean man staring into one of the four laptops on the conference table. "They're in a computer room located in S seven hundred."

"Okay. I'll take care of it," the middle-aged man said.

He picked up the desk phone on the table. Nancy at reception swiveled in her chair.

"Hello, Inviscom Wireless. How may I direct your call?" she said.

"Hello. This is the CIO. I have two contractors who will be working with us for a few days and I need access for them."

"One moment, please," she said instantly recognizing the middle-aged man's voice, a distinct Midwestern twang.

Nancy scattered sheets of papers looking for the company directory, a gray booklet that she kept nearby. She found it under a paper tray and opened it to the executive officer's page. She ran her finger down the list until she found the CEO's name. She picked up the phone and pressed the hold button again.

"Hello, Mr. Payton, I'll connect you to the security department. They will help you get what you need," she said, deliberately testing the man to see if he really was Mr. Grayson.

"Okay. Thank you."

"Is there anything else you need?"

"Yes. By the way, my name is not Mr. Payton. He's the CEO. I'm the CIO."

"Oh, sorry for the mix up, sir. I'll connect you now."

Within minutes the three men had disconnected their equipment and headed for the security office on the first floor. A short woman with a round face and a large friendly smile met the men as they entered. Her baggy white starched shirt conflicted with her tight black pants, which highlighted her overweight abdomen. She asked them to press their hands onto a hand scanner and took their photos. The two men left the security office with freshly made access badges hanging from their belts. They met the middle-aged man in the corridor and took the elevator to the basement.

“That’s it,” the Korean man said. “I remember from the building layout.”

It was the only door with a hand print scanner next to the door jam. The Filipino man pushed his badge into the card reader and placed his right hand on the scanner. The door clicked open. The men stepped up six inches onto the raised floor, where miles of cables lay underneath and connected the Inviscom computers with the rest of the world. The Korean man quickly moved through the rows of refrigerator-sized servers and mainframes and stopped at one with a small plastic stick-on-label on top.

“Here it is,” the Korean man said grabbing hold of the sides.

The machine rolled forward easily. He dug in his jacket pocket and pulled out a four-inch long device the thickness of a cigar. He split the device open and clamped it around the optical cable snaking out the back of the HRL server. It matched the metal shielding on the rest of the cable perfectly.

“What’s that?” the middle-aged man asked.

“An optical tap. It’ll transmit data to us at the same speed it’s flowing in and out of the network. We can monitor all the cell phone calls in the country.”

“All the calls?”

“All the ones on this HLR. We have other teams infiltrating the others. My associate here is placing taps on all the optical cables coming in.”

“HLR?”

“Home Location Registry – the database containing all the information on the cell phones in this network. We’ll even know where a caller is located when they make a connection.”

“Are you sure it’s undetectable?”

“They have no way to detect it. I checked. It’s virtually impossible and if they did, they wouldn’t be able to find it. We will be gathering information for a long time,” the Korean man said smiling.

“And we will be able to control the network?”

“Yeah, when we have most of the passwords in a few days,” the Korean man said.

“And the weapons?”

“It goes without saying. They are all one and the same.”

“Okay, are we done here?” the middle aged man said. “We’re exceeding our window.”

“I just have to make sure the taps are working and we’re history.”

The Korean man produced a PDA and tapped the screen. The door jam clicked and a tall slightly overweight man wearing a baggy white shirt and brown casual slacks rushed in.

“You’re not supposed to be in here without an escort! What are you doing and how did you get in?” the man said his puffy face turning red.

“Mr. Grayson hired us to conduct a security audit on your network,” The middle-aged man said. “And you are?”

“Scott Jones, head of IT and Mr. Grayson never mentioned any audit to me,” Jones said.

“Maybe you were intentionally left out of the loop. We are testing for vulnerabilities.”

“I don’t think so. You all better come with me,” he said and pulled out a Blackberry.

The Filipino man quickly appeared and kicked the phone out of his hand with a precision aimed force that sent the PDA hurling towards the wall, where it hit and shattered into several pieces. He spun around, raised his leg like a jackknife, and thrust his right foot into Jones’ windpipe. Jones fell backward holding his neck gasping. The Filipino man knelt down next to Jones and looked into the fear in his eyes.

“You should have not come in here,” the Filipino man told him relishing the moment.

He pulled out a stun gun and stuck it against Jones’ neck. Jones writhed and bucked for several seconds, and then took one deep gasp and seemed to hold it for a few seconds. His body went limp and his eyes forever stared into the bright white florescent lights in the ceiling.

“You didn’t have to do that,” the middle-aged man said his face about to burst.

“He was going to tell,” the Filipino man replied. “I don’t like people who tell.”

The middle-age man shook his head and smirked.

“You stupid asshole!” he yelled. “We are supposed to be discreet about this now you’ll have the whole city putting a spotlight on this!”

“I don’t like people who tell,” the Filipino man said.

The middle-aged man reached into his jacket pocket – the other man did the same and they locked eyes. The older man knew he was no match for him and slithered his hand out of his jacket.

“Bring him over here behind the racks. Put him by the power conduits so it appears he was electrocuted.”

The Korean man walked over to the body and helped the Filipino man drag it next to the far side of the room. The middle-aged man watched them with emotionless eyes. He looked up and spotted an object in the corner of the room.

“Oh shit! What about the security cameras?”

“I turned them off,” the Korean man said struggling to pull the body behind the conduits. “Their security sucks. They don’t have anyone watching; they are just taping. No better than a supermarket. Lucky for us.”

“Okay, let’s go,” the middle aged man said.

The Asian men packed the gear and the three men walked out as casually as they had entered. The men were silent when they walked across the expansive lobby towards the double glass doors.

Nancy Foster immediately stood up her eyes riveting onto the three men.

“Excuse me gentlemen. Mr. Grayson you have to sign your guests in and out.”

“That’s ok. We’re in a hurry. I have to get them to the airport.”

“It will only take a second,” Nancy insisted. “Didn’t they just get here? They’ll have to turn in their badges.”

“I said we were in a hurry!”

“But, Mr. Grayson, you are the one who developed this policy. Are you going to violate your own policy?”

The middle-aged man looked at the Asian men and then back at Nancy. She slowly moved her hand feeling under the edge of the desk until she found a small button attached to the underside. She pressed it.

“Listen young lady. Sometimes I have to violate my own policy to accommodate a customer. Now if you don’t mind, we will be leaving.”

As he turned to leave, a loud intermittent alarm went off and the doors made a rapid clicking sound. The Korean man pushed

against the doors, but the locks were not match for him. The Filipino man reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a Glock 30 equipped with a silencer. He fired four rounds shattering the thick glass. The Korean man pushed himself through the door, kicking out the glass that remained. The middle-aged man followed and the Filipino man turned and aimed the gun at Nancy. She became a statue - their eyes locked like lasers. Two security guards rushed into the lobby and his trained reaction was automatic, instinctive. He swung the gun towards them and fired. They dove onto the floor but not quick enough. Hector Lopez slammed onto the hard floor, the pain from the five-inch bloody hole in his calf nearly blinding all his senses. The other guard scrambled behind Nancy's desk and lay there quivering like an epileptic. The gunman swung the gun towards Nancy and fired. She tumbled over the chair and fell onto the floor like a limp rag. Her hand hit the cup of tea as she went down – the memory-laden liquid instantly disappearing into the dark carpet below. A black Mercedes had already pulled up to the front of the building and the back door swung open. The car seemed to swallow the men as it shot out of the lot and quickly melted into the morning rush hour traffic on Interstate 285.

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Hildy Grummenweurkes drove her 1994 Toyota Corolla into the hospital parking lot as if she were in an obstacle course. She took the first empty parking space closest to the main building not caring if the car was perfectly spaced between the white lines. She moved her small purposeful frame out of her car and rushed into the emergency entrance. She approached the receptionist desk, but her confidence seemed to ooze away when she realized where she was.

“My granddaughter...she was in a...I have to see her. Is she all right? Where is she? I have to see her now!”

“Calm down and tell me her name,” the large black woman at the desk said her eyes revealing that she had been through this before.

“Nancy...” her face scrunched up and her jaw drooped. “Oh, god I can’t remember her last name...Foster...that’s it.”

“It’s ok. Take a deep breath,” the black woman said.

She typed the name into the computer and waited for the information to appear on the display.

“She’s in intensive care,” the receptionist said. “You’ll need to sign in and I’ll get security to take you there.”

“Is she all right?” Hildy asked her eyes beginning to glaze over.

“She’s stable and resting comfortably. The head nurse will know more.”

“Oh thank God!” Hildy said.

A police officer approached and escorted Hildy through a maze of hallways and waiting areas. Hildy gasped when she entered Nancy’s room. Her head was wrapped in a white bandage and there were intravenous tubes connected to her thin arms. An oxygen tube was strapped around her head holding the plastic piece to her nostrils. She looked like an alien creature to Hildy.

“Oh my God, you poor thing!” Hildy said. Tears raced down her weathered cheeks. She leaned over to get a closer look.

A hefty nurse with short blonde hair entered.

“Are you Mrs. Grummenweurkes? Is that how you pronounce it?”

“Yes,” she said dabbing her eyes with the tissue she pulled out of her small purse.

“This is your granddaughter?” Hildy nodded. “She is very lucky. The bullet grazed the right side of her temple, but didn’t cause any major damage. She lost a lot of blood, but she’s stable now.”

“Oh my God! Who would do such a thing? Do they know who did this?” Hildy said tears rolling down her face again.

“She has a slight concussion. She’s young. She’ll be ok,” the nurse said trying to allay the old woman’s fears.

“She’s my only granddaughter,” Hildy said.

The nurse turned to leave. “If you need anything just press the red button there by the bed.”

“Thank you,” Hildy said and raised her hand to wave her off. The nurse noticed Hildy’s small fingers were covered with tight fitting leather gloves. She thought it was odd for her to be wearing them in May.

Hildy got comfortable in the tired lounge chair next to the bed and listened to her granddaughter’s shallow breathing. Several hours later, Hildy noticed Nancy’s eyes flutter open. She grabbed Nancy’s hand and moved closer.

“It’s me, honey,” Hildy said tears filling the rims of her eyes.

“Hi, Nana,” Nancy whispered in a dry, barely audible voice. “I’m alive? I thought I was dead.”

“You’re very much alive and I’m so glad,” Hildy moved closer to hug her, but had to stop from the web of intravenous lines that snaked over the bed. “I don’t know what I would do without you.”

Nancy slowly noticed all the machines surrounding her and smiled.

“Now, don’t you go touching any of these machines?”

“I love you, child,” Hildy said smiling broadly revealing her perfect white teeth. It was the first time she smiled since getting the phone call about Nancy.

“I have my leather gloves. See?” She held up her hands.

“I love you, too Nana,” Nancy smiled.

Nancy closed her eyes and went back to sleep; Hildy did the same reassured that her granddaughter would be all right.



## **Chapter 2**

**Sunday, May 18, 2008**

Dan Riker entered his finished basement where he kept three computers and several radio frequency analyzers. Working as a wireless security consultant with a major university had its benefits – the use of state-of-art equipment that cost as much as a nice house and access to the brightest brains in the industry.

He wheeled out a small office chair from the long table and dropped his six-foot frame into it. He had planned to spend only a few minutes at his computers because he promised his wife, Amelia and his daughter, Kaileigh that they would spend the afternoon at the park.

A flat panel monitor displayed a changing view of the outside of the house from two surveillance cameras. He had created a screensaver that pulled in the images from the cameras and displayed them in random order. Dan pushed the computer mouse aside and lines of text appeared - the logs of the radio frequencies that passed through the air in and around his home in the last hour. He scrolled through the text – nothing out of the ordinary, cellular phones, cordless phones, a police scanner, aircraft transmissions,

lots of baby monitors. Then the phone rang and the upstairs door opened.

“Dan! Dan! It's for you, honey. Pick up the phone,” Amelia yelled.

“Got it. Hello.”

“Hi Dan.”

“Hello Jerry. Where have you been? I thought you fell off the earth! It's been weeks since I heard from you. Some friend you are,” Dan said smiling.

“I was traveling and I'm swamped at work. The baby is not sleeping, so I have been out of it. I've been going to bed at eight most nights, then the baby wakes us several times during the night. I'm exhausted.”

“Sounds like it. I remember those days too well and I'm glad they're over.” Dan explained.

“I can't wait so I can get some sleep,” Jerry added.

“Don't worry. It will be here before you know it. It seems like time just slips away. Kaileigh is eight now and it seems like we just blinked our eyes and advanced eight years. It goes really quick with kids. Enjoy it while you can.”

“Oh, thanks,” Jerry said. “I'll remember that at three in the morning when I'm feeling like a zombie and trying to get Sara back to sleep.”

Dan laughed.

“So what's up?” Dan asked.

“I was wondering if you could log a transmission.”

“Where are you?” Dan asked.

“I'm at the lab.”

“On a Sunday?”

“Yeah, I want to run a test to see if I can send a movie-length file to our site in Rochester in less than a second. I also want to see if it interferes with anything out there. It's illegal as hell, but it

would tell us a lot. No one has really tested this - it's all theory," Jerry explained.

"Really? I read about that, but no one has been able to do it. You're talking about an ultra wide band transmission, right?"

"Yeah, the cable and satellite companies are afraid it will interfere with their programming so they have lobbied the FCC to nix it," Jerry explained. "It's only been used for short transmissions up to forty feet. It's definitely disruptive technology. It will certainly disrupt the status quo and the pace of wireless technology."

"If you can do it," Dan said. "Are you sure you won't get caught? I'm not keen on jail cells."

"I'll just say it was an accident. It should work," Jerry said. "We've tested it here in the lab several times. Besides, why would they want to arrest a couple of geeks like us?"

"And if it works what will you do with it?"

"Are you kidding? It's worth billions, Dan! It would be a major breakthrough in wireless!" Jerry enthused. "We're not talking about transmitting a chunk of data from one city block to another. We're talking about transmitting data across the country and even to Europe in a matter of seconds! I think it will replace almost all of the current cell phone technology and eliminate the need for communications satellites," Jerry added. "It would be like taking the space shuttle to Europe. You would be there in a matter of minutes."

"Well okay mister mad scientist send your transmission. I don't think I can be implicated," Dan said smiling.

"Great. I'll send it now. Let me know if you see it," Jerry said.

Dan watched the computer monitor looking for the telltale spike on the wave graphs. The radio frequencies appeared on the monitor as green waves that danced up and down indicating frequency and strength. He watched the waves undulate in the 850 to 1900

megahertz frequency range indicating cellular phones in use nearby. Dan heard the faint clicking of Jerry's fingers on his keyboard and he could visualize him at his computer in lab. Dan had been there many times working with Jerry on joint projects with IBM. He recalled Jerry's tenaciousness at finding a solution. He would go at it all night if he had to causing his wife to call the police. Dan counted the years he had known Jerry – since sophomore year in college - and recalled why he liked him so much – Jerry was like a brother he always wished he had.

“Ouuuuuuuuuuch!!!” Dan screamed.

“What was that?”

“I don't know! It was a loud screeching sound. I think I'm deaf.”

“Are you ok?”

Dan swayed like a drunk and fell off the chair. The room swirled around in a kaleidoscope of liquid color as he lay on the floor overwhelmed by the vertigo. When the spinning stopped Dan picked up the phone, but the phone was dead. He carefully pulled himself up onto the chair and noticed his desk lamp was out. He was still woozy and wondered if the vertigo would ever go away. The light in the stairwell flickered and the door at the top of the stairway opened.

“Dan! Dan! The power's out!” Amelia yelled. “Check the fuse box!”

Dan started to get up and fell to the floor. He crawled to the first step and slowly pulled himself up, the nauseous feeling in his throat preventing him from going any farther.

“I can't,” he said barely audible.

Amelia gasped as she saw her husband lying on the bottom step.

“Dan! What happened?”

She rushed down to him.

“I don't know.”

“I’m making a doctor’s appointment for you tomorrow,” she said her blue eyes revealing her maternal concern.

Dan took a deep breath and rubbed his face in denial.

“I’m fine. I’ll check the circuit breakers now.” He started up the stairs.

“Are you sure?” She held her hand on his back and walked up with him.

As he climbed the steps, he thought it was strange that most people still called circuit breakers fuses. Fuses hadn’t been used in homes since the 1950s. He entered the garage and opened the power box looking carefully at the rows of circuit breakers. They were all in the “on” position. He went back into the house.

“We have a blackout,” he said to Amelia.

Then the lights came back on.

“Not anymore,” she said.

“Such a wiseass,” he said and reached over to her, his arms swallowing her petite frame.

“I love you,” she said.

“Ditto.”

He looked into her eyes and instantly he was in another world. He slowly pressed his lips onto hers and the kiss accelerated into the passion that always flowed between them. Then the phone rang. Dan ignored it, but Amelia squirmed.

“Get the phone!” she yelled.

Dan reached for the phone on the wall and looked at the caller ID.

“It’s Alex.”

“Your brother?” Amelia said her eyes wide. “He never calls you.”

“That’s because he’s too afraid to change his phone plan. I think he’s the only one left in the country who pays for long distance calls,” Dan said smiling.

“Now be nice,” Amelia said laughing. “He is your brother.”

Dan pushed the talk button.

“Hey Dan, this is Alex! A bunch of planes just crashed at the airport by you. They're saying its terrorists.”

“Oh no!” Dan hung up and rushed into the living room.

“What’s the matter?” Amelia said.

“Some planes crashed at the airport and they think it was terrorists!”

Amelia followed and Dan turned on the TV. The local station announcer Keith Garvey appeared on the screen.

*“Two seven thirty sevens circling the airport awaiting clearance to land literally fell out of the sky around noon, according to eye witnesses. The planes appeared to lose power and crash on two separate landing runways. It is feared that there are no survivors...”*

“Oh those poor people,” Amelia said as she sat on the edge of the sofa. “I feel so bad for them.”

“I hope it’s not another nine eleven,” Dan said turning to look at Amelia. His face paled.

“Dan...Dan...what's the matter? Are you ok? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Dan rushed downstairs to the computer monitor. Amelia followed. He grabbed the mouse, his hand shaking as he moved it and opened the log that had just recorded the last hour of radio frequency activity. He scrolled through the file and stopped at 12 noon. Tall green bars and waves took up most of the real estate on the monitor indicating that a powerful radio transmission had passed through a fifteen square mile area in and around his house. The airport was less than twelve miles away. His hand shook more violently.

“Dan! What's the matter?” Amelia asked frantically.

“I...I think Jerry caused those planes to crash! I have to call him! I have to call him!”

“How?”

“I’ll explain later,” he said.

Dan picked up the phone and dialed, but the line was busy. He dialed again and the line went dead.

## **Chapter 3**

**Sunday, May 18, 2008**

“I have to go there! I have to tell him!” Dan shouted.

“You should stay here with all that’s going on,” said Amelia, a frown distorting her sky blue eyes and opalescent skin.

“I can’t. He wouldn’t even know he did it and maybe we can come up with something to keep him out of jail.”

Amelia saw that clear purpose and intense determination in Dan’s eyes and she knew nothing would stop him not even her pleading.

“You’re a strange man, Dan Riker. Why is it that you show such confidence when dealing with issues at work, but you shy away from people who challenge you?”

Dan’s confidence melted away and he took on a puzzled, sheepish look. He took a deep breath and looked into Amelia’s eyes.

“I don’t know. I’ve told you this before. It’s just that work is black and white; people are gray. With technology, either it works or it doesn’t. It’s predictable most of the time. People are not.”

“So you are saying you don’t like to deal with people because they are unpredictable?”



“No, I’m not saying that at all. It’s just that...that I don’t like conflict. Something happens inside of me and I just freeze and have to get away. I can’t deal with it. It’s like instinct – I’m not in control of it. Afterward, I beat myself up thinking of all the things I would have liked to have said or done. Now, I have to go.”

“You better be careful! And don’t end up in jail! Bail is expensive,” Amelia smiled the smile that had smitten Dan twelve years earlier.

Dan smirked and grabbed a set of keys off a row of hooks in the foyer and rushed out of the house. Several minutes later, he pulled into the entrance to IBM’s main campus a few miles from the Raleigh Durham airport where the planes went down. He stopped at the white guardhouse with its single pole barricade across the narrow entrance. A blackened window slid open and a young uniformed guard with a round puffy face and blue-green eyes peered out.

“No one’s allowed in. You’ll have to turn around,” the guard said his voice revealing he was from New York.

“I’m here to see Jerry Lansbach.”

“I’m sorry. No one is allowed in with the blackout,” the guard said.

“It’s important. I need to talk with him now. Can you call him?”

“Phones are out.”

“I just spoke with him.”

“You better turn around.”

“Listen, he’s my friend and I really need to talk to him. It’s about the blackout.”

The young guard saw the steely determination in his eyes and reached for his radio. Dan thrust a contractor’s ID badge with an IBM logo at the guard.

“I used to work here for god’s sake!”

The young guard stared at Dan, who resembled a hungry dog waiting for a meal.

“I’ll try to locate him. What building?” the guard said defeated.

“The lab.”

The guard closed the glass and then opened it several seconds later.

“I’m sorry. No one is there. You’ll have to turn around.”

“Are you sure? I just spoke with him.”

“No one was there, sir.”

Dan drove onto the main road and turned into the parking lot of a local bagel shop. He dialed Jerry’s cell phone, but he didn’t get through. The bagel shop was closed and Dan walked around to the back and slipped into a heavily wooded area. He worked his way towards the IBM campus and emerged in the parking lot. He casually walked to the lab entrance and saw Jerry standing there talking to a security officer. Dan knocked on the glass door and Jerry opened the door.

“Did you get the transmission out? Two planes went down at the airport!” Dan yelled.

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“I think your transmission downed the planes at the airport; they just fell out of the sky. Your transmission probably fried all the electronics.”

“No way! When did this happen?” Jerry asked.

“About a half hour ago.”

“Oh no!”

“You’re screwed,” Dan said.

“No way! I never got the transmission out. When I started the sequence, the whole building went dead. I was scared to death. I thought I knocked the power out. Then I went to call you and my cell phone was dead. I don’t know what the hell happened. I was just about to leave for your house.”

“Are you sure it didn’t get out? My logs said a hellva pulse went through here.”

“I don’t know. No wait. My logs said the sequence failed, so none of it should have been sent,” Jerry explained. “What time did you say the planes went down?”

“Around noon,” Dan said.

“Hmmm, that’s about the time the building went out. Yeah, I started the sequence, it failed, and then the building went out. So, do you think something else happened?” Jerry said and looked at his watch. “Holy shit! Look at that! My watch stopped at twelve oh four! That’s when the building went out!”

“Something else happened. I think a powerful EMP brought down those planes and fried your watch, your cell phone, and whatever else was turned on at the time. I’ll bet you’ll find other things fried.”

“That would explain all the security here. Who could do that?”

“The government. We should leave,” Dan said the weight of his words suddenly hitting home.

“Yeah, we should leave.”

## **Chapter 4**

**Monday, May 19, 2008**

The next morning, Dan Riker woke up to a man's voice talking about morning traffic on Interstate 40 and he thought it was a dream until he heard the voice again. It was the Bruce and Cary show on WGVT, a radio DJ duo notorious in the area for executing outrageous stunts that sometimes got them arrested or sued. Bruce discussed the plane crashes and was convinced it was a terrorist act and came up with several outrageous scenarios that could have caused the disaster. Cary refuted every one and suggested they call an official from the airport to confirm Bruce's claims. They were calling the airport when Dan rolled over and put his arm around Amelia. She stirred slightly and then opened her crystal blue eyes to a foggy Dan with a smile.

"Time to get up," he said.

"It's morning already?"

"You always say that."

He gave her several light kisses along her neck and worked his way downward slowly unbuttoning the buttons on her pink pajamas until he reached her breasts.

"I'm not even awake yet," she said smiling.

“You will be.” And he continued downward.

“You’re giving me goose bumps,” she said.

“That’s the idea,” he said removing her bottoms.

“You always save the best for last,” she said.

As they made love, Dan drifted to a place only in his mind, place where all the pressures, annoyances, and disruptions of life melted away. It was a place of pure pleasure that he knew and shared only with Amelia. They made love rocking the bed so much that it moved several inches away from the wall.

“What was that?” Amelia asked out of breath when they had finished.

“I don’t know, but it was fantastic!”

“Spontaneous,” she said and kissed him. “You can wake me up like that every morning.”

“I’ll try.”

Dan put his feet on the cold wood floor and stretched – the euphoria of their lovemaking still pulsing through his body. He walked a short distance to the bathroom, turned on the shower, and waited for the water to get hot. As he washed, he thought about the data his equipment recorded yesterday. *Who could have sent those pulses? And how did they do it?* He knew the technology was progressing rapidly, but someone must have made a major breakthrough. There was nothing out there capable of bringing a plane down. It surpassed what Jerry was trying to do by a hundred fold. One thing was certain that whoever did it was doing it as a test for something bigger because it would take a lot of expensive equipment to pull it off.

Dan turned off the shower, grabbed a blue towel hanging on the rack nearby. The door opened and Amelia entered her eyes blinking, her walk like that of a drunk.

“That was something,” she said. “I can hardly walk. Make the coffee and get Kaileigh up. I’m going to be a while. I just got my period.”

“He bent over and kissed her on the neck – his six foot frame overwhelming her tiny petite figure.

He dressed quickly, got Kaileigh out of bed, and went downstairs to start a pot of coffee. He put six mini bagels in the toaster oven and then went outside and picked up that day’s newspaper lying in the driveway. He sat down at the round table in the breakfast nook and opened it to the technology section. Amelia and Kaileigh came down several minutes later.

“Are these bagels for us?” Amelia asked spotting the browning bagels in the toaster oven.

“Yep, for my princesses.”

“Wow! Look at this!” Dan yelled. “There was a break-in at Inviscom and they killed the IT manager. They must have been after something really big to go that far. This is the first time hackers killed someone to get what they wanted. Wow, this is really amazing! This has never happened before.”

“I don’t see what’s so amazing,” Amelia chimed in. “Information is just as important as money. Bank robbers kill bankers to get the money; hackers kill the IT guy to get information.”

“Yeah, but it’s never happened before. Hackers have never gone to such extremes to get into the networks. They even wounded a receptionist and a guard. They think the hackers were after the HLR database, but nothing was touched. If they did get it, everyone’s cell phone could be compromised.”

“Don’t we use them?”

“Yeah, we do,” Dan said. “Hmmm...if they erased the HLR or blocked it, no one could make a phone call. This is really

something. And look, the article is in the back of the section. I think they are downplaying it.”

“Why would they do that?” Amelia said pouring black coffee into a white mug from the hotel they stayed in last summer at Myrtle Beach.

“Because they don’t want everyone panicking.”

“No, I mean shut off everyone’s cell phone. Why would they want to do that?”

“Extortion. They can hold the carriers hostage and demand any amount of money they wanted. Can you imagine if no one’s cell phone worked? It would be catastrophic! I still think they downplayed it.”

“You’re such the conspiracy freak! They didn’t get the H-whatever, so it’s not an important story,” Amelia added. “But I love my conspiracy junkie!”

“Yeah, but they killed a person and wounded two others. It’s just like an armed robbery,” Dan said taking a sip of his coffee.

“Yeah, it’s terrible, but they don’t report every armed robbery and murder nationally.”

“I think this is going to wake up a lot of people.”

## Chapter 5

**Monday, May 19, 2008**

An hour later, Dan was driving on Interstate 540 to his job at NovaCom, a small startup specializing in the development and marketing of emerging technologies. Its founder and president, Adam Sayer, a graduate of Duke University, saw a need to harness many of the new emerging technologies and apply them to practical, everyday needs. One such application was a text-to-speech feature that connected to a Bluetooth-enabled cell phone. With voice commands, one could retrieve their emails via the cell phone and have them read over the car's stereo speakers. Sayer approached General Motors with the idea, and GM agreed to integrate the device in all their 2010 Cadillac models provided the company could develop a reverse application – speech to text – so one could respond to their emails by just speaking. The contract launched his company and Business Week considered Sayer one of the high tech whiz kids of 2006.

Dan had just entered his cubicle when the phone came to life.

“Hello. This is Riker.”

“Hello Dan. This is Michelle in reception. I have a gentleman here from the power company who wants to see you.”



“What? The power company? That’s weird. Tell him I paid my bill. What does he want?”

Michelle laughed.

“He wants to talk with you,” Michelle said smiling. “He said it’s important.”

When he entered the lobby a disheveled man got up from his seat and approached Michelle’s desk.

“Hello, Dan,” she said. “This is the man from the power company. I’m sorry, your name was?”

“Lloyd Dobbs,” the man said and extended his hand to Dan.

The man’s hand was limp and it made Dan nervous.

“I’m sorry I didn’t call you earlier and make an appointment, but you were highly recommended by John Bastille,” Dobbs said and tucked the front of his wrinkled white shirt into his slacks as if he were suddenly embarrassed of it. “Sorry, if I look like a mess. I’ve been at the plant since yesterday trying to figure out this blackout.”

Dan chose a small conference room nearby with glass partitions so that passing coworkers could see him and Dobbs. Dobbs placed a thick, three-ringed binder on the table and opened it to where he had placed a sticky note. He slid his hand across his forehead as if to move imaginary hair out of his small, dark eyes.

“I really appreciate you meeting with me. John Bastille suggested that I talk to you.”

“Oh. How is John? The last I heard he was up for a director’s position.”

“He’s my boss,” Dobbs added. “Actually, he called me on his vacation he thought this was so important. He asked me to talk to you about yesterday’s blackout. He couldn’t figure it out and said if anyone knew, you would. He said you were the best RF engineer in the state.”

“Well, thanks. I didn’t think I was so highly regarded. So, what do you have?” Dan said a bit more relaxed.

“Minutes before the blackout, our security servers recorded this data,” Dobbs explained turning the binder around so Dan could read the pages.

“We first thought that the blackout was caused by a virus, but we later saw from the logs that a large program was downloaded into the SCADA systems. It made the computers think there was an overload and our failsafe controls automatically disconnected the generators from the grid. The result is a blackout. You can see right here when the program entered our system,” Dobbs moved closer to Dan and pointed to the middle of the page. “Do you remember that massive blackout in New York a few years back? Well, the same thing happened again.”

“I thought they fixed that problem.”

“They fixed what caused it, but the failsafe systems are still in use,” Dobbs explained. “This was just another event that caused a blackout.”

Dan saw the log entry recorded at 12 noon.

“Is this for real?” Dan asked. “There is nothing that can move data at that speed.”

“We’re still trying to figure out how the hacker got in,” Dobbs explained.

“What do you mean? Didn’t they get in from the Internet?” Dan countered.

“Look again at the entry. It’s as if the program just materialized inside the computers. There’s no comm port, printer port, or Internet gateway breached. We think it was sent wirelessly.”

“Sixty four gigabytes downloaded in less than eight seconds over the air! How could that be?” Dan said frustrated. “That would be like downloading roughly sixteen full length movies?”

“We don’t know,” Dobbs added. “We do know the program got into our computers, installed itself, bypassed the virus scanning programs, and then caused the shutdown.”

“How did you get the power back on?”

“We have a set of backup computers not connected to the Internet and blocked off from any radio transmissions. We were able to put the generators back on line with them. That's why we think the hacker got in wirelessly,” Dobbs explained.

“Because there's no indication that the hackers got in through the Internet?”

“Correct.”

Is your network wireless?” Dan asked.

“No.”

“Are you sure there are no wireless devices connected to your network?”

“Positive.”

“What's SCADA?” Dan asked.

“Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition system. It runs everything.”

“And it's connected to the Internet?”

“Yeah. It allows our techies to monitor the system from almost anywhere. Corporate can see a snapshot of the system and how it is running. I can check the system from my home twenty four seven,” Dobbs explained.

“That's one of your problems. It's your biggest security risk. You just told me that you got the power back on with a system not connected to the Internet.”

“You're right and we've been begging management for the security upgrades, but it's not in the budget,” Dobbs explained.

“I'll bet it's in the budget now.”

“I hope so.”

Dan turned the pages in the binder.

“I think it was an inside job. I think they altered your computers so they could receive a wireless transmission. I recorded a huge transmission at my house yesterday morning around the same

time,” Dan explained. “I’m not sure if they are related, but the transmission carried a lot of data and had less power than a cell phone. I’m thinking this is the same one, an ultra wide band transmission.”

“I’m not following you. Ultra wide band? What’s that?” Dobbs said wringing his hands like a worried old woman.

“It’s a wireless technology developed in the sixties by the military. The military likes it because it is immune to eavesdropping, interference, and jamming. Ground penetrating radar and submarines use it because it travels through anything... water, walls, concrete, buildings. That’s why I think a transmission hit your computers,” Dan explained.

“Is it being used now?” Dobbs asked.

“Only for communications, voice – not for data. It’s still being developed, but I’ve heard some companies have sent data at speeds up to four gigabits per second in the lab. That’s why whoever did this is way ahead of the curve.”

“Well, this is beyond anything I have to deal with. We’re still trying to get Congress to give us money for more armed guards at the plants. Did you say you have equipment that recorded the same transmission? Do you have the log files? Can I get a copy?” Dobbs asked. “I can give it to our IT department. Maybe, they’ll figure it out.”

“Yeah, sure. It’ll take me a few minutes to log into my computers at home and get the files. Let’s walk over to my cube.”

Dan got up and Dobbs followed. They passed Todd Harris, a lanky software engineer with short red hair and freckles.

“Hey Dan, Adam is looking for you.”

“Thanks Todd,” Dan said. He turned towards Dobbs. “My boss is always looking for me.”

“I can see why.”

Dobbs looked at the posters Dan had hung inside the small space.

“You’re a Hurricane’s fan,” Dobbs said.

“Sort of. I got two caniacs on each side of me. It’s really hard not to get caught up in it when they’re hooting and hollering all the time. You can’t get any work done during the season. I just follow the scores,” Dan explained. “Never been to a game.”

“That’s too bad. You should go sometime. They are really a lot of fun. I like the Penguins myself.”

“You’re from Pittsburgh?”

“Yep. Born and raised. We have a good team this year and I think we got a good shot at the cup.”

Several minutes later Dan walked to the printer and retrieved the report. Dan handed Dobbs the pile of papers and Dobbs briefly looked at the 5-page document.

“Thanks for your help,” Dobbs said standing up and extending his hand to Dan.

This time Dobb’s hand was firm and his eyes clear and focused. Dan was relieved.

“You’re welcome. If you need anything else, just call,” Dan said turning to grab one of his business cards from a plastic holder on his desk. “Do you have a card?”

“Yeah, I do,” Dobbs said reaching into his back pocket to retrieve his wallet. He pulled out a bulging, worn black wallet. He searched around in the torn folds and worn sleeves pulling one out. The card was wrinkled and dirty like the wallet.

## Chapter 6

**Monday, May 19, 2008**

Dan went back to his cube to read emails. Most were responses to email he sent yesterday or a few days ago. He was bored. He thought of Amelia's statement about his fear of conflict and thought he did ok with Lloyd Dobbs, although it wasn't a conflict. At first, he thought it would be and was nervous to meet the man. It seemed his little idiosyncrasy came up a lot lately and perhaps it was time to deal with it once and for all. He thought about it deep and hard as he stared into nothingness, but found no epiphany. One thing he did know was that he didn't like his particular weakness.

"There you are." A familiar voice chimed in.

"Hi Adam. What's up," Dan said turning to face his boss, a transplanted Irishman from Philadelphia with red hair and flushed freckled skin.

"Wait until you see this," Adam said with a smile that seemed to take up the width of his small round head. He placed a white box about half of the size of shoebox next to Dan's computer. Dan took the lid off and looked inside.

"Yuk," Dan said shaking his head. "Are they going back to making the ugliest phones on the planet again? That may have

worked in the 1990s, but today everybody wants a phone that looks cool. It has no design at all. Are they trying to win the ugliest phone on the planet award? What the heck is it?"

Adam laughed. "It's one of the first UWB prototypes. They didn't use a designer. They just put together a case that would fit all the components. The cool design will come later. They need to test the technology first before they put a ton of money into the design."

"Ultra wide band? But there are no cellular networks for it. How are we going to test it?"

"There will be in this building. One was installed over the weekend and should be working this week. There are also test networks in Washington and in Asheville," Adam explained. "You will probably be going there and I want you to make sure the phone works as it's supposed to. I've sent you the specs."

Dan pressed the on button and the phone came to life.

"Hey, it works."

"Of course it works. Get me a prelim report in about three weeks," Adam said. "I'll let you know when you're going to Washington and Asheville."

"Thanks," Dan said staring into the color display of the phone and pushing the buttons. Dan moved into the menus and flipped through the pictures folder. The images were as clear and detailed as a miniature high definition TV.

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When Dan opened the fire door to the parking lot, the sun splashed in providing a refreshing change from the white constant light from the long overhead fluorescents. Large fluffy clouds hovered above - the edges glistened by the high sun providing a sharp contrast in the clear cyan sky. Dan walked over to the weathered picnic table on the other side of the parking lot and sat

down. No one was there as he un-wrapped the tuna fish sandwich he made that morning.

Dan was about to take his first bite when the fire door swung open and two men dressed in dark business suits rushed out looking in all directions. Dan put his sandwich down and watched the men hurry across the parking lot. *"Oh, shit!"* Dan thought. They were heading towards him.

"Are you Dan Riker?" the man with the pockmarked face asked.

"Ah...yeah," Dan replied, looking over the two men. Amelia's comments earlier about his fear of confrontation came to mind and he swallowed.

"I'm Agent Ken Merritt and this is Agent Larry Coughlin. We're from the CIA Raleigh office." The two men produced small black billfolds and thrust them into Dan's face.

"How do I know these IDs are real?" Dan asked feeling the power of his confidence growing. "Anyone can print them these days...you could have picked them up from Kinko's ten minutes ago."

The two men dug into their jacket pockets and handed Dan a business card. Dan stared at the CIA seal, which was the original sign from the agency's first office on E Street in Washington, DC.

"Okay, now I'm convinced," he said a smirk growing on his face.

"Lloyd Dobbs from the power company said you may know something about the blackout," Merritt said moving his hand over his buzz cut. His tiny, beady eyes seemed to pierce right through Dan.

"He didn't waste any time did he?" Dan said staring back at Merritt just as intensely.

"He said something about radio transmissions," Merritt said.

Dan raised his eyes. "What did he say?"

"That some kind of transmission caused the blackout."



“It's not possible with the current technology, but who knows.”

“Would you be willing to help us?” Merritt asked.

“And do what?”

“Determine the cause,” Coughlin said in a tone that sent a chill over Dan's scalp.

“I would have to see the computers at the power station.”

Coughlin reached into his jacket and pulled out his phone. Dan instinctively jerked backwards.

“It's only a cell phone,” Coughlin said laughing.

Dan sunk lower on the bench.

“Excuse us,” Merritt said and both men walked away. Coughlin ran a hand through his black hair, down along the back of his thick neck as he talked. A few minutes later they returned with their usual deadpan, emotionless faces.

“Can you go now?”

“Now? I don't know. I don't think my boss would be too happy,” Dan said trepidation spreading through his body.

“We can take care of that,” Merritt said.

Merritt nodded at Coughlin and Coughlin went back into the building.

“Agent Coughlin will get it cleared with your boss. You can come with me,” Merritt said. “Leave your lunch. We'll buy you dinner later.”

“Dinner? How long is this going to take?” Dan protested.

“I don't know. It's up to you,” Merritt replied.

“I'm not sure about this,” Dan said his hands beginning to shake at the thought of leaving work.

“We'll pay you for your time,” Merritt added.

“Oh,” Dan said and took two quick bites out of his sandwich and gathered it up with the rest of his lunch.

The two men went to Dan's cube.

“Do you need anything from your office?” Merritt asked.

“Yeah, my laptop,” Dan said between chews.

“Okay, get it and let's get going.”

He looked over the top of the cube and saw Agent Coughlin talking with his boss. He was about to leave when he spotted the test phone his boss gave him earlier and quickly stuffed it into his pants pocket. They walked towards a forest green Ford Explorer with blackened windows.

“I thought you guys drove plain black sedans,” Dan said nervously.

“Not anymore,” Coughlin volunteered. “We need the four-wheel drive to go anywhere.”

“Makes sense,” Dan added.

Merritt opened the right rear door and Dan nestled into the beige leather seat. Coughlin took the driver's seat.

“So where are we going?” Dan asked a bit nervous. “Downtown?”

The agents laughed.

“You watch too much TV, Mr. Riker,” Coughlin said.

“Shearon Harris,” Merritt added.

“The nuclear generating plant! I thought we were going to the power company's office downtown,” Dan said.

“That's just a billing office,” Merritt added. “I should know I had to run a check there once when the post office lost our bill and they threatened to turn off my power. They should have real jobs.”

A half hour later, the three men arrived at the generating station. Dan got out of the SUV and stared at the giant cooling tower belching out enormous white clouds of pure white steam. The steam rose up hundreds of feet above the tower and melted into the crystal blue Carolina sky.

“Never seen one before?” Merritt asked.

“Only in pictures. I didn't think the tower was so big.”

“Me neither.”

The three men entered a one-story cement building without windows - one of the three control centers for the generating station. They walked down a long, well-lit hallway with dull gray walls and stopped at two brushed steel doors. Merritt leaned down to the left to three small slits in the wall similar to those on ticket booths in movie theaters.

“Hello,” he said.

The glass wall slowly began to clear and a uniformed guard slowly appeared like a ghost coming out of a fog.

“Who do you want to see?” the guard asked. His dark brown eyes moving almost robotically as he scanned each of them.

“Agents Merritt and Coughlin here to see Lloyd Dobbs,” Merritt replied and he thrust his ID against the glass. Coughlin did the same.

The guard spoke into a small microphone clipped to his shirt collar and then motioned the men to move toward the metal doors; the locks clicked and the doors opened outward towards them. Two tall beefy guards ushered them in.

“You will have to leave your weapons and cell phones here,” said the taller guard closest to them.

He pointed to several bright yellow plastic bins slightly larger than a shoebox. The guard turned to Dan.

“You can put your cell phones there.”

When Dan placed his phones in the bin he noticed that all the signal strength bars were displayed on the UWB test phone. The men were led down another long narrow corridor similar to the first one and Dan moved closer to Merritt.

“How did they know what we were carrying?” Dan asked.

“Scanners,” Merritt explained. “Since nine eleven we have been beefing up security at all the plants. We're being scanned right now in case we weren't so honest at the first checkpoint.”

“X-ray?” Dan asked.

“Can't say.”

The entourage stopped at a second set of secured metal doors, the locks clicked, and the doors opened to a wide hallway with intersecting corridors and several offices on each side. Lloyd Dobbs was standing there.

“Hi Dan,” Dobbs said extending his hand. “Sorry about all the security, but since nine eleven and now the blackout...”

“No problem. Why did you have to call them?” said Dan shifting his eyes towards the agents. “I would come over if you asked.”

The agents looked at each other and smiled.

“Actually, I hadn't expected to see you so soon. I thought they were just going to talk to you. I'm glad you're here anyway – our IT department couldn't find anything in your logs.”

“Do you use ultra wide band here?” Dan asked as the men followed Dobbs.

“I don't know,” he said. “I never heard of it until you told me about it this morning.”

The men walked through a glass door into Dobbs' office where a large L-shaped computer desk took up most of the office extending from one wall to the other. A small round table with three chairs took up the space in the opposite corner. Three 21-inch flat LCD monitors stood on the desk, but only one had the familiar keyboard and mouse found on most computers. Dobbs motioned Dan to sit at the monitor with the keyboard and directed the agents to sit at the round table. The office was warmer than the hallways.

“What are they for?” Dan asked pointing to the other monitors.

“One monitors the reactor, the other the grid,” Dobbs said sitting down next to Dan.

Dan moved through the directories, folders, and network logs looking for any entries or files not normally found in the computer's operating system. Then he did the same for every

computer on the network. Luckily, there were only 10 computers that controlled the power grid because it would have taken weeks even months to thoroughly examine hundreds of computers on a single network found in similar businesses. Several hours passed. Dan searched the computers manually because he felt the virus search programs on the market miss a lot of programs disguised as regular software. He likened it to the way most spell checking software did not detect a word used incorrectly.

“Well, I’m stumped,” Dan announced. “I’ve been through every one of these computers three times. I’m fried.”

“You found nothing at all?” Dobbs asked.

“Nope, sorry. You know, you should hire a computer security company to track this down...”

“We did and they didn’t find anything, either,” Dobbs said disillusioned.

“Really?” Dan replied. “I’m sorry I couldn’t find the intrusion.”

“That’s fine, Dan. I appreciate your help,” Dobbs said looking downtrodden.

Dobbs escorted the men back through the long corridors. When they arrived at the first checkpoint, Dan gathered his mobile phones and noticed that his prototype UWB phone still had five signal bars on the display. Dan stopped and stared at the phone for several seconds.

“Wait! Can I take a look at your security computers?”

“They’re not connected to the plant in any way,” Dobbs added.

“I don’t care. I just want to take a look.”

The men were led back through the corridors and through a single metal door at the end of one of the hallways. The air smelled electronic - that combination of new plastic and a warm metallic odor. One wall contained several TV monitors with a small console below the monitors.

“Hi Tom,” Dobbs said. “I have some gentlemen here from a computer security firm. They would like to take a look at our security logs.”

“Another one? Sure. No problem. Use my computer,” Tom said pointing to his desk on the other side of the small room while continuing to stare at the TV monitors.

“Do you use UWB here?” Dan asked not expecting an answer.

Tom turned, the dry scaly skin of his face seemed like a mask, and looked at Dan for the first time. His eyes instantly flared as if Dan should not have asked the question.

“Actually, I'm not supposed to tell you, but we use it to scan visitors for weapons, bombs...you know normal stuff people usually carry into nuclear generating plants,” Tom explained his crooked front teeth marring the small smile on his face.

The agents didn't smile.

“You mean the same technology the military has been using?” Dan asked.

“Yeah, ground penetrating radar. We have it calibrated to go through a visitor's clothes just enough to see if they are concealing anything. They use it in diamond mines to scan miners at the end of shift to make sure they didn't accidentally pocket any goodies. Sometimes we tweak it a bit go a littler further on the ladies,” Tom said with that same crooked toothed smile that now took on an ominous appearance.

“Okay,” Dan said shifting uncomfortably on his feet.

“The logs are on my computer over there,” Tom said and turned back to the monitor.

Dan walked over to the metal desk and looked at the 17-inch monitor. There were no personal effects around the computer like a family photo, a coffee-stained cup or sticky notes carelessly stuck wherever. He sat down and began clicking and typing. Dobbs brought a chair over and sat down.

“Look at this,” Dan said. “Why would a video camera go out in the main hallway for eight minutes?”

“I don't know,” Dobbs said. “Here let me drill down and get more detail on that.”

Dobbs moved closer to Dan.

“Look at all that activity,” Dan exclaimed. “That's it!”

“What?” Dobbs said.

The two agents walked over and stretched their necks towards the monitor.

“They got in through a wireless device on one of your computers.”

“But these computers are isolated from the power grid,” Dobbs said.

“Look further down. The transmission got into your system through a wireless device on this terminal,” Dan said pointing to the number of the computer. Dobbs jumped up and approached Tom near the wall of TV monitors.

“Where's your list of employee's computers?” he asked.

Tom picked up a 3-ring binder and handed it to Dobbs. Dobbs quickly leafed through the pages.

“It's Stanley Paulson! He's in finance. Now, what would he be doing with a wireless device on his computer? I think we better go see him,” Dobbs said.

The group walked through a maze of corridors smelling of the stale, burnt odor of day old coffee. They entered a large room filled with cubicles and zigzagged through the maze to reach Stanley in the far corner of the room.

“Stanley, you're working late again?” Dobbs asked.

“End of the month P and L statements and I wanted to get a jump on them. I don't want to spend the next few Saturdays in here,” Stanley said not looking away from the computer monitor.

“Stanley, do you have a wireless device on your computer like a PDA or a cell phone?” Dobbs said matter-of-factly.

“Uh...what? Yes. Why? What did I do?” Stanley said looking through his gold-rimmed glasses at the small crowd forming at his cubicle. His fleshy nose turned red and his round, plump body began to roll around on his chair.

“What is it?”

“I...I have a...a Bluetooth station for my PDA...I synchronize it with the computer so I don't miss any meetings. Is it illegal? Did I do something wrong?” Stanley stuttered. His forehead began to shine.

“No, it's not illegal, but you'll have to stop using it. It may be interfering with some of the systems here,” Dobbs said.

“Sure...sure. I'll disconnect it now. I didn't mean to do any harm. My son bought it for me on my birthday...and I...” Stanley explained moving piles of papers away from his computer to find the desktop device buried next to the monitor.

“Just make sure you don't use it in this building anymore,” Dobbs said.

“Okay,” said Stanley. “I'm sorry that it caused problems.”

“We'll have to take it,” Merritt said.

“I'll take it home. I'll never use it here again...” Stanley pleaded. “I'm sorry. Please don't take it.”

“You can put a claim in for its value,” Merritt said and handed him a business card.

“Call the number on the back.”

Stanley looked at the card and his face flushed red again. He began to shiver.

“Oh...Okay.”

Stanley crawled under his desk and disconnected the device from the computer. He came up out of breath.

“I hate doing that,” he said.



Stanley handed the device to Dobbs and Dobbs looked at the blue lightening bolt logo.

“What’s a Bluetooth,” Dobbs asked looking at Dan.

Dan thought this guy spent too much time in the power plant, not knowing about Bluetooth technology.

“It’s an older technology that links two devices together wirelessly eliminating cables,” Dan explained. “All he has to do is bring his PDA within thirty feet and it will synchronize his contacts, calendar events, and tasks. I suggest you find out if any other employees have PDAs or cell phones connected to their computers.”

“Definitely, we’ll do it right away. Thanks for your help, Dan. We really appreciate what you’ve done here,” Dobbs said.

He extended his hand.

“It was fun,” Dan said smiling.

As the three men drove from the power plant, Dan watched the red blinking lights on top of the cooling towers grow dimmer and dimmer. Dan called Amelia and Merritt called his office. When Merritt finished the call, he twisted around towards Dan.

“I just wanted to mention that you cannot discuss this with anyone, even your wife. It’s a national security issue now and if you reveal it to anyone it will be considered an act of treason. Agreed?”

“Agreed. I didn’t think you guys were so serious.”

“We weren’t until now,” Coughlin added.

“This is serious,” Merritt said. “Hackers using wireless technology to get into our infrastructure; do you realize how vulnerable that leaves us? Imagine a foreign power with that capability?”

“Okay, okay, I get it,” Dan said. “I’ve been aware of these threats for years, but no one has ever pulled it off.”

“It seems they have,” Coughlin said.

"We appreciate your time and effort," Merritt said.

"You're welcome. You know I think it was a test for something bigger. I don't think they are just playing with it for the hell of it. I think we're going to see something bigger and much worse," Dan explained.

"Really?" said Merritt. "We came to the same conclusion and that's why we want you to work for us full time."

"Well, I have a full time job and..." Dan said.

"We'd like you to use your three weeks vacation, Mr. Riker," Coughlin added. "If it takes longer, we'll get you a leave of absence."

Dan thought about the question for a few moments and remembered Coughlin talking with his boss earlier.

"All three weeks? I have plans to vacation with my family in the summer and I..."

"We'll pay you ten thousand for your time," Coughlin said.

"Oh," Dan said trying to take in the information and contain his excitement.

"That's all?" he fired back.

"We'll make it twenty if you think your vacation time is valuable," he added.

"I do," Dan said smiling to himself.

"Fair enough," Coughlin added.

"When would I start?"

"Now."

"My boss will have a fit. I can't leave now!" Dan protested. "He just gave me a new project to work on."

"Don't worry. I think your boss can give you up for a few weeks for national security," Merritt said. "Besides, he doesn't have a choice. Are you in?"

"Twenty thousand for three weeks work...can you make that tax free?" Dan asked jokingly.

“Done.”

## Chapter 7

**Tuesday, May 20, 2008**

“I thought you were never coming home last night,” Amelia said as she placed a large plate of steaming scrambled eggs on the table. “You really had me worried. I almost called the police. Why didn't you call?”

“I couldn't. They wouldn't let me in with my cell phone,” Dan explained.

“I think you could have called,” she said.

“Thanks for making breakfast. This is nice,” Dan said.

“For you...anything,” Amelia replied. “I love you dearly.”

“Me too, Daddy,” Kaileigh chimed in her long curly brown hair illuminated by the sunlight coming in through the French doors behind her.

“I love you both very much, too.”

Dan placed a large spoonful of scrambled eggs on his plate, and then picked up the pepper mill.

“I have some good news and some bad. What do you want to hear first?” he said as he twisted the top of the pepper mill to rain flakes of pepper on his eggs.

“What is it?” Amelia said sinking down into the chair next to Dan.

“Well...we are not going to Disney World this summer...”

“Why not?”

“Oh, Daddy!”

“The CIA offered me twenty thousand to work for them for three weeks.”

“What about your job?”

“They’ve made arrangements with Adam, and I’ll get paid because I’m using my vacation time.”

“That’s great!” Amelia hugged Dan.

“Will you be going away?”

“The entire time,” Dan said.

The sparkle in Amelia’s blue eyes dulled.

“What about Disney World? We promised her.”

“We’ll go at Christmas. It will be cooler, there will be fewer crowds, and it will cost less.”

“I don’t want to go at Christmas,” Kaileigh added on the verge of tears. “I want to go now.”

“Won’t Santa and his elves be there, Daddy?” Amelia asked.

“I think so. I’ll call Santa’s Workshop to make sure.”

“Santa’s going to be there?” Kaileigh said her eyes wide. “When do we leave, Mommy?”

“Oh, not until Christmas. That’s a long time from now, but you know it will be here before you know it.”

Amelia looked around the kitchen and into the living room. Her blue eyes sparkled again.

“You’re thinking of how to spend the money, aren’t you?” Dan said.

“Oh no. Just looking at a few things we need to improve around here,” she said smiling.

“Seriously, I think we should use it for Disney World, get rid of some bills, and then put the rest away for Kaileigh’s education,” Dan added.

“That’s a plan. We can think about it. I’m so glad you’re home today. We can get some shopping done, have lunch, and take Kaileigh to the park,” Amelia said tying her hair into a short ponytail.

“Sounds good to me. How does that sound to you, Kaileigh?”

“Like fun,” the little girl replied. “Can we go to the park first?”

“We’ll see, honey. Now finish your eggs,” Amelia said squeezing Dan’s hand.

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An hour later, the three drove to the dinosaur playground named by Kaileigh because the slides and climbing areas were shaped like dinosaurs. They arrived and had the area to themselves. They walked down a narrow asphalt path to the playground. Kaileigh immediately ran to the highest slide, climbed up, and peered back at her parents through the Tyrannosaurus Rex’s mouth. The big brown teeth bearing down on her tiny face. Dan and Amelia sat on one of the benches positioned around the perimeter.

“Look Mommy! I’m in the dinosaur’s mouth!” she yelled.

“She does that every time we come here,” Dan said. “I love it.”

“She’s a character all right. Just like you. She does a lot of things you do, you know,” Amelia added. “What a kid!”

“Really? I’m just so happy that we have her,” Dan added.

“Me, too. She’s such a joy. She’s going to miss you when you go away tomorrow.”

“I know,” Dan sighed.

“Have they told you where you’re going?”

“No. I suspect it’s all the power plants that were disabled by the blackout,” Dan explained.

“We're going to miss you. You'll call everyday, right?” Amelia asked.

Dan looked away and a frown formed on her face.

“I hope so provided they don't lock me away in the bowels of some power plant...” Dan explained putting his arm around her and squeezing her close to him.

“Are you nervous?” Amelia asked her clear blue eyes showing the familiar worried look that Dan knew.

“Actually, I'm excited. I was really happy when I worked in computer security and now this is like the ultimate...working for the CIA. I really feel like I'm climbing out of the rut. I feel useful, important. I have a clear path, a mission, a purpose,” Dan explained. “And we can get rid of the credit card bills to boot.”

“I'm afraid. Call it intuition, a premonition, whatever. But I don't feel right about this,” Amelia said. “I don't ever want to lose you. I love you dearly. You're everything to me. This doesn't sound safe. You don't even know where you're going. How are you going to get there if you don't know where to go... and...”

“Don't cry. It'll be fine. It's not that I'm going up against terrorists or criminals. They probably want me unravel this blackout business and make sure the other plants are secure,” Dan explained.

He held Amelia closer and stroked her flowing blonde hair.

“They are picking me up at five tomorrow.”

“I hope you're right,” she added.

“Besides, I'm thrilled that the CIA called me after the security company that couldn't figure out the break in. Actually, it was John Bastille who recommended me. We worked together on several projects and then he got a job with the power company.”

“He's a friend of yours?” Amelia asked.

“Sort of. We had lunch a couple of times. He always seemed to ask a lot of questions about the network and security...” Dan explained drifting into thought.

“You should do something nice for him,” Amelia added.

“Oh, yeah. Maybe, I’ll call him for lunch when I get back.”

“That would be nice,” Amelia said.

Amelia and Dan watched Kaileigh slip down the spiraling green slide, her hair sticking up from the static electricity generated from the smooth plastic. She had a big smile on her face.

“You know how much I love you, don’t you?” Amelia asked.

“Yes, I do. You know I love you just as much if not more.”

“Yeah, but I love you more. I don’t know what I would do without you...you are such a good husband, a good father. I don’t think I could ever get over losing you. I don’t think there is another man that could be so perfect for me. We fit so well together.”

“I feel the same. You know what to do if I’m gone. It would secure your future.”

“I don’t want to think about it. I just have a bad feeling about this trip...”

“I’ll be extra careful. I know you have never been wrong about your feelings,” Dan explained. “But now I have a chance to do some good with my knowledge. I’m helping our country in a big way.”

“I know. I know,” Amelia said. “But, I don’t think we should have to lose you over it.”

“You’re not going to lose me. I’m coming back. I already miss you and Kaileigh thinking about the trip,” Dan added.

“Our marriage has been the best twelve years of my life,” Amelia explained. “Besides weren’t you voted the best looking nerd in high school? Where would I find a good-looking nerd? Good looking nerds are rare.”



“They’re all over the place. Look there’s one over there,” Dan said pointing to an older man jogging along the road next to the park.

“Very funny,” Amelia said smiling.

They both laughed. Kaileigh left the dinosaur slide and strolled over to the swings flapping her arms up and down pretending to be a bird. She climbed onto one and began swinging.

“Mommy! Watch how high I can swing!” She yelled.

“Okay, but don’t go too high,” Amelia added.

The little girl pumped her legs and swung higher and higher.

“That’s high enough, Kaileigh!” Amelia yelled.

A few moments later, Kaileigh jumped off the swing and walked to the edge of the playground her attention focused on a small object on the ground. She picked up the object and ran over to her parents.

“Mommy, look! Can I keep the birdie? Can I take him home? He needs me. Please, please!”

Kaileigh held a small sparrow in both of her tiny hands.

“Where did you find it?” Dan asked.

“Over there,” Kaileigh said pointing to an area just past the swings.

“Put that down immediately, young lady,” Amelia gasped. “Didn’t I tell you not to touch dead things? It’s probably full of germs. Kaileigh drop it now!”

Kaileigh frowned and dropped the bird. It hit the sandy ground and began flapping its wings, stood up, and flew away disappearing into the trees. Kaileigh ran to Amelia.

Within seconds several birds fell from the sky hitting the sandy area with dull thuds. Soon the playground was covered with different birds apparently dead. Dan went over to one of the birds and moved it with a twig. He quickly, picked up Kaileigh and ran.

“Run! Come on! Now! Try to hold your breath as long as you can!” he shouted. “Don't...stop...until we...get...to the car!

“What is it? What is it?” Amelia shouted.

“Just get to the car!”

## **Chapter 8**

**Tuesday, May 20, 2008**

Dan held his hand over Kaileigh's nose and mouth. She struggled to pull away. Dan released his hand and she screamed scaring both of them. The path back to the car was uphill and Dan felt his legs get sluggish very quickly. He pushed harder, but went slow enough so that Amelia could keep up at his side. Her eyes glowed in fear and her mouth opened and closed.

“Don't breathe!” Dan screamed.

Dan could not get his keys out of the pocket of his jeans while carrying his squirming daughter. He finally pulled them out and fumbled with the keyless remote. When he pressed the button, the trunk opened. He frantically pressed all the buttons and finally the lights blinked on the Volvo indicating that the doors were unlocked, but Dan did not see the lights. Instead, he saw the car move away from him and a fog surround the vehicle. He could no longer hear Kaileigh crying. He let out his breath and sucked in as much air as he could and then held his breath again. The fog lifted and the car came back into focus and he opened the back door and quickly placed Kaileigh in the seat.

“Put on your seat belt!” he shouted to Kaileigh.

She cried hysterically.

“NOW!” he yelled.

Kaileigh cried louder and Dan pulled the belt around her shoulder and clicked it into the latch.

Amelia rushed to the rear of the car, slammed the trunk down, and then jumped into the back seat next to Kaileigh. She held Kaileigh close to her while Dan started the car and slammed it into gear. They roared out the parking lot nearly hitting an entering car and Dan exhaled as they left the park.

“What is...going on?” Amelia shouted at Dan between gasps. “You scared...the hell out of us! Kaileigh is...hysterical!”

“There was something in the air...that killed the birds. I panicked. I thought it would get us, too!” Dan said gasping for air.

“You mean like a toxic gas or something?” Amelia asked.

“Yeah, birds don't just fall out of the sky.”

They approached an intersection with a red light.

“Daddy, what's that noise?” Kaileigh asked.

“What noise?”

“It's coming from your backpack,” Amelia said. “It sounds like one of your phones.”

Amelia dug in the Army green sling pack and pulled out a cellular phone.

“It's your phone,” she said. “Is that a new ring sound? It's awful.”

The phone emitted a loud, high-pitched electronic squeak in short bursts and the phone's vibrator ran continuously.

“This is really weird! This is the new prototype my boss gave me to test. It's not supposed to work here. There are no networks up and running yet!”

“You always sound like you're talking a foreign language,” Amelia yelled back at him. “What are you talking about?”

“Never mind,” Dan said.

The signal strength indicator on the phone displayed all five bars and Dan frantically pushed the buttons to turn it off.

“Well, it's doing something, honey because it's making a heck of a lot of noise,” Amelia added.

“Do you have a call, Daddy?”

“No, sweetie. Something is making the phone do those things,” Dan explained. “We have to get home.”

Dan removed the battery and the noise stopped.

“What an obnoxious phone!” Amelia said.

“The phone is not supposed to make noise like that. Some kind of high frequency transmission may have caused it. I'll know more when we get home and I can check my logs,” Dan explained.

Dan glanced upward and saw several large birds flying straight down into the road just ahead, but seconds before the birds hit the pavement they seemed to sense their impending doom and quickly soared upward out of sight. Several minutes later, Dan pulled the Volvo into their horseshoe shaped driveway and helped Amelia and Kaileigh out. The trio rushed to the front door of the two-story colonial and darted inside.

“Is everyone ok?” Dan asked. “Does anyone have burning eyes or a soar throat...a slight tickle in your throat? Is anyone dizzy or feeling sick?”

Amelia shook her head.

“No. Daddy. I feel fine. Can I go and see if Brook is home?”

“Not right now. It's not a good time to be outside. Probably later,” Dan explained to his daughter.

“Please, Daddy? I'm bored,” Kaileigh said.

“Come with me young lady. Didn't you want to make a chocolate cake?” Amelia said. “Besides, your Daddy has work to do in the basement.”

“Okay,” Kaileigh said a big smile dissolving the frown on her face.

Dan hurried to the basement and furiously looked through the logs going over the data recorded during the last hour. He printed out the logs and then took a yellow highlighter and rushed back upstairs to the living room. He switched on the TV, turned to Channel 12, the 24-hour local news channel similar to CNN, and sat down in his recliner with the papers on his lap. An attractive, older woman with short brown hair appeared on the screen reading the top stories of the hour. She announced a head-on collision between a compact car and a pickup truck on a rural highway in a nearby county that Dan had never heard of; she matter-of-factly announced another murder in Durham during a domestic dispute the night before, and talked about the upcoming weather forecast. Nothing was reported about the dead birds at the park or the possible release of a toxic gas or pollutant. Dan looked through the logs searching for a spike in the frequencies. He found nothing. Amelia and Kaileigh were in the kitchen engrossed in making a chocolate layer cake.

“You can’t pour the batter in the pans yet. You didn’t grease them. You have to follow the steps in order or the cake won’t come out right,” Amelia instructed.

Dan’s eyes fixed on Amelia.

“Are you ok? Why are you looking at me like that?” she asked.

“Something about the logs...something wasn’t right,” he said.

He rushed back into the living room and leafed through the logs he left on the lounge chair. He noticed two pages were missing and went back downstairs to print them.

“Your Daddy’s always talking about stuff we know nothing about,” Amelia directed at Kaileigh.

“Daddy likes to play with his phones and computers, Mommy. That’s all he does.”

“Yeah, I know. Sometimes he plays too much and not enough with us.”

“Damn stupid printer!” Dan yelled. “Amelia, I’m getting a new printer. This one is a piece of crap!”

“Mommy did Daddy say a bad word?” she asked.

“Yeah, let’s pretend we didn’t hear it.”

“Okay.”

He scanned the pages quickly and then ran upstairs in a panic.

“I’m going back to the park. I want to see what’s going on there. A strong UWB pulse was transmitted about the time we were there.”

“Do you have to? Don’t you think it may be dangerous, especially if there is toxic gas in the air?”

“I don’t think there was a gas. I think it was something else. I’ll be right back.”

“Or you’ll be dead,” Amelia added.

She shook her head and helped Kaileigh pour the batter into the round metal cake pans.

## **Chapter 9**

**Tuesday, May 20, 2008**

Several mini-vans and SUVs were parked in the spaces closest to the path that led into the playground area. Dan entered the playground glancing at several stay-at-home moms with strollers who sat at the benches rocking their strollers or helping their toddlers onto a swing. All the birds were gone and Dan thought the park service had quickly disposed of them once someone reported the disaster. He walked the entire length of the playground looking for any they may have missed. When he reached the end, he looked into the deeply wooded area surrounding the playground and heard birds in the trees. He walked about 10 yards into the woods and was caught in a thicket of thorny bushes that pricked his skin. Frustrated, he walked up the narrow path back to his car and noticed a tall structure through a clearing. He got into his car and drove towards the cell phone tower.

After driving down several neighborhood streets that dead-ended to cul-de-sacs, he tried a main, two-lane road that led away from the homes. About a mile down the road, he spotted a narrow dirt road that cut through a dense wooded area. The Volvo bounced along the eroded dirt road occasionally scraping its frame on the



ground. He followed it until he came to the back of a white van; the tower was several yards ahead with its base surrounded by an eight-foot chain link fence with curled barbed wire - the type used on prison fences. The gate was open and two men came out of the cinderblock shed each carrying a black box about the size of a VCR.

“What are you doing here?” the larger man with a crew cut asked abruptly.

He wore an elaborate leather tool belt with several pairs of pliers, a test handset, and several strange looking wire cutters.

“Well, I'm an RF engineer with NovaCom and I was wondering...”

“Oh, you're the assholes that messed this all up,” the burly man interrupted. “We looked at everything and couldn't find anything busted. It was just a freak transmission surge. You can look at it if you want, but you won't find anything!”

The man walked towards Dan in a deliberate, threatening manner.

“I'll take your word for it,” Dan cowered and headed back to his car.

“Hey! Tell those jerks to get their shit together!” the man yelled at Dan.

“What's his problem?” Dan mumbled and slid into the driver's seat.

When Dan arrived home, Amelia and Kaileigh were in the backyard swinging on the Adirondacks swing.

“You guys look cozy,” Dan said as he approached them.

“You can join us,” Amelia said. “Kaileigh move over and make room for your daddy.”

“Do I have to?”

“Now, Kaileigh...”

“Okay. Here, Daddy, sit next to me,” Kaileigh said her eyes bright with admiration.

“So did you find your dead birds?” Amelia asked. “I see you’re not dead so I guess it was all right.”

“No. They were all gone. Someone must have cleaned them up in a hurry,” Dan explained.

“So what happened?”

“I don’t know.”

“Oh, a guy named Jack called for you. His number is by the phone,” Amelia said.

Dan entered the house, picked up the cordless telephone, and dialed the number Amelia had written on a yellow sticky note.

“Hey, Jack. What’s up?” Dan said.

“I’m hearing that a lot of birds have been flying into buildings, cars, and stuff like that. Some of my students called me. Have you recorded any strong magnetic fields in the area?”

“No, but I saw the dead birds, too!” Dan said. “We were at the park and they just dropped out of the sky. Scared the hell out of me! I thought something toxic was in the air. I panicked and scared the hell out of Amelia and Kaileigh. I went back later and someone had cleaned up the area.”

“No one cleaned them up, Dan. They were stunned. They probably knocked themselves out when they flew into the ground.”

“Why would they fly into the ground?”

“A change in the earth’s magnetic fields. There are widespread theories out there that birds use the earth’s magnetic fields to navigate along with the sun and stars,” Jack explained. “If the magnetic field changes they fly off course. Haven’t you ever noticed a bird flying into a window or into the side of a building? They were probably following the sun reflecting off the window and got confused.

“Some people believe that homing pigeons use the earth's magnetic fields to navigate, but it's considered controversial since it can't be proven. Some think birds can see the magnetic fields just like we can in the Aurora Borealis. Have you noticed any stronger than usual magnetic fields in the area?”

“My equipment doesn't record magnetic fields,” Dan said. “But I found a strong UWB frequency around that time. Do you think a radio frequency can change the earth's magnetic fields?”

“Yes, but it would have to be extremely powerful,” Jack explained.

“Maybe that's what happened,” Dan added.

“It's a possibility,” Jack said. “We're doing research on that now that's why I called you. I wanted to know if you knew anything.”

“Well, there is a microwave tower near the park and I ran into a couple of angry repairmen there who said some kind of surge put the tower out for a short time.”

“Where is the tower?”

“Off Lynn Road.”

“I'm going to look into this. I'll let you know if I find anything,” Jack said. “We may have something here.”

“I think so. All of this is highly unusual.”

“Thanks and say hello to Amelia for me. I've got to run.”

## Chapter 10

**Tuesday, May 20, 2008**

Amelia and Kaileigh were in the backyard pulling weeds from Kaileigh's flower garden - a small area surrounded by two small white birch trees Dan planted when they moved into the house four years ago.

"What are you doing?" Dan asked as he approached. "Pulling weeds again?"

"These weeds are out of control. We have to get more weed killer," Amelia said not looking up at Dan.

"It's because of all the rain," Dan added.

"Well, they're choking all my flowers. Do we have any weed killer in the garage?" Amelia asked. "Can you check?"

"Okay, be right back."

Dan walked around to the garage. He headed towards Amelia's garden workbench he built for her out of an old redwood table and moved several plastic bottles of plant food, plant vitamins, and insecticides looking for the weed killer. He felt someone grab his shoulder and turned quickly nearly falling over Kaileigh's bicycle nearby.

“Hello Mr. Riker,” said Ken Merritt, the CIA agent who had hired Dan.

“Are you trying to scare me to death?” Dan replied. “You scared the shit out of me!”

“Well, yeah...that's one of the things we do,” Merritt said with a guilty grin. “What are you doing now?”

“Enjoying my day off,” Dan said regaining his balance.

“We don't get days off,” Merritt explained. “This kind of work gets into your blood and it lives with you like a disease. You're always thinking...thinking about your work. It never lets up. You live it twenty four seven.”

“Well, I have a life, it's not in my blood, and I don't think it ever will be. I'm a nine to fiver.”

“Not while you're working for us,” Merritt added.

Dan frowned.

“We need you to talk to one of our sources. We have to drive you there.”

“Where?”

“Can't say.”

How long?”

“Maybe most of the night,” Merritt said.

“Damn...I hope there's overtime or a bonus,” Dan said. “I didn't think this job would take ALL of my time. Can you give me five minutes to say goodbye to my wife and daughter?”

“Sure, but don't take too long. We have a long drive and the source will only be accessible for a short time,” Merritt explained.

“Nothing like good planning, huh?” Dan smirked.

“There's no planning in this job. You plan as you go.”

Dan went into the back yard empty handed.

“We're out?” Amelia said. “What's the matter?”

“The CIA's here and I have to go. Something about talking with a source that's only available a short time and...”

“Now? I thought this was your day off! You never put your family first, Dan! It’s always about you, isn’t it? You’re selfish and inconsiderate. What about us? Did you ever think of saying no? You don’t really have to go. You just want to get away from us! Everything you do is always more important than us!” Amelia screamed tears running down her face.

“That’s not true!” Dan said. “I agreed to help them and I think I should keep my word. It’s my job now.”

“At the expense of your family? I shouldn’t have married you. If you didn’t want a family, you shouldn’t have gotten married,” she said and rushed into the house. Kaileigh followed.

“I’m sorry!” Dan yelled. “But I think I should keep my word!”

“Go to hell!”

## **Chapter 11**

**Tuesday Evening, May 20, 2008**

The SUV moved quickly down the long dirt road easily crushing the two-foot high Mugwort weeds and wild flowers that had begun to reclaim the road. Coughlin, one of the CIA agents now assigned to Dan, had to break frequently from the extremely eroded deep gullies and craggy holes. When the vehicle reached the bottom, it turned left into a short driveway and slammed to a stop. Dan felt his body move forward and he instinctively stretched out his arms to break his fall despite the sleep that had overtaken him. He immediately thought of Amelia and regretted leaving her upset. He wished he had taken a few more minutes to talk with her, but he was angry at her accusations. He felt she was being unreasonable. Maybe it was her period, he thought consoling himself with the thought.

“What is this place?” Dan looked around sensing the steep downward angle of the SUV.

The blackness of the night surrounded them except for a tiny faint yellow bug light about 300 yards away burning on the front porch of a small farmhouse built around the 1930s. Dan looked at

his wrist to check the time, but his watch wasn't there – he forgot to put it on before he left.

“What time is it?” Dan asked rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

“Ten o'clock,” Merritt said in a weary voice.

Coughlin opened the driver's side door and the light splashed into the inside. Dan squinted.

“We've been driving for seven hours! Damn! Why didn't we fly? Where are we?”

“Can't say,” Merritt added. “Too risky to fly. Driving was safer. Now let's go.”

As the trio walked down an eroded driveway towards the faint yellow light, Dan checked along his belt to make sure his cell phone was still clipped on. *Damn! It must have fallen off in the SUV*, he thought. *There is probably no coverage here anyway.*

As they approached the house, the light revealed that the house leaned to the right from its crumbling seventy five-year-old foundation. Dan's nervousness returned.

“It is safe to go inside?” Dan said.

“As safe as it will be,” Coughlin replied.

They walked up three steps to a small front porch with a gabled roof. The multiple coats of white paint curled away from two narrow pillars that supported the roof. The naked wood was gray and weathered. Merritt knocked on the door five times and five more knocks came back.

“Hello. We got lost. Can you tell us how to get back onto highway forty?” Merritt said.

“You have to take interstate two ten to get back to forty,” a voice replied.

“Is two ten the highway that leads to the coast?” Merritt asked.

“Yes, it is. Don't forget to stop at the yellow light or you'll get a traffic ticket,” the voice replied.

“Thanks for the advice,” Merritt said.



The door opened and a thirty-something man with a crew cut appeared wearing a black flack jacket and a shoulder holster with a 9mm handgun tucked inside. Merritt nodded. The man nodded back and stepped aside.

The house smelled musty and damp and the floor moaned as they walked through the narrow kitchen into a small, dark hallway that opened up into a small living room. A single lamp with a dented black shade dimly lit a brown, worn sofa with a large jagged hole in the middle backrest. A thin man with deep wrinkles and lines in his face sat on the other end of the sofa opposite the table lamp. His striped, chocolate brown suit blended with the color the sofa. His eyes were in shadow.

“Hello, Dan. Sit down. We have a lot to talk about,” the man said his voice raspy and dry. Dan sat into a worn and smelly recliner facing the sofa and sunk so low that his butt touched the floor. He instinctively gripped the armrests thinking he was falling and the man smiled slightly.

The man spoke slowly and deliberately.

“We are now able to transmit so much data using UWB that we can literally reprogram anything anywhere in the world wirelessly and invisibly. We can send entire programs the size of Windows or larger over short distances in a matter of seconds. Imagine turning your Windows machine into Linux or a UNIX workstation in a matter of seconds. The possibilities are unlimited. We can reprogram a nationwide network in a matter of hours.” The man paused to take a sip of water from the glass on the end table.

“We could reprogram the onboard computers in thousands of cars simultaneously in cities all over the US. It wouldn't matter where the car was as long as it was in range of one of our towers,” the man explained.

“How?” Dan asked. “It's impossible. You can't reprogram computers. Their programming is hardwired into the processors.”

“Let me clarify that. We can on cars made after two thousand five and on all computers build after two thousand six. It’s something the government inadvertently required of all chipset makers.”

“What do you use? Radio towers? Microwave towers?”

“Cellular towers. A large number were fitted with advanced equipment for specialized transmissions,” the man said. “The equipment was put in shortly after nine eleven by Homeland Security. The devices were also designed to disable anything with software.”

He paused, looked across the small room and then back at Dan.

“The good thing is that we’ve never had to use the equipment. The bad thing is we think someone did.”

“Really?” Dan asked.

“We think that’s what caused the blackout Sunday.”

“If that’s the case, then I think there is more to come,” Dan added. “I think they were only testing their capabilities.”

“We believe the same... that’s why we brought you here tonight. We want you to know exactly what you’re up against before you go further.”

“What do you mean?” Dan asked.

“We’re not dealing with a couple of bright kids who decided to hack into our systems and see how far they can go before getting caught. We’re dealing here with a real threat.”

“Terrorists?”

“Maybe...maybe not. We don’t know enough yet,” the man said. “But once you commit to us you have to go all the way. There’s no turning back or quitting no matter how bad it gets. Your family could be in danger...”

“You just made the decision for me,” Dan interrupted.

“Your family?” the man said his eyes still in darkness so Dan could not see his expression.

Dan nodded in defiance.

“We thought so,” the man noted. He reached for the glass again and took a long gulp.

“So why did you have to bring me all the way out here to tell me that? Why couldn't they just tell me?” Dan protested waving his hand in the direction of Merritt and Coughlin standing nearby. “Is this your form of persuasion?”

“No, but we don't want them to know you are working for us,” the man said. “You are one of the few people in the country who understands UWB and its capabilities. There are others, but they do not fit as well as you and some are not available. Some cannot be trusted. You also know about security and hacking.”

“How do you know all this?”

“We ask a lot of questions. You were highly recommended by your peers,” the man explained.

“I don't know if I should be flattered or paranoid,” Dan said rubbing his eyes with both hands.

The man picked up several index cards from the end table and put on a pair of reading glasses.

“You're thirty seven years old, you have an honorary masters in telecommunications engineering from RIT for developing revolutionary software that led to the creation of the third generation wireless Internet and you are a few courses short of earning an MBS in RF Engineering from the University of Texas at Dallas. You have been married to Amelia Larson for twelve years and you have an eight-year-old daughter, Kaileigh. You're not interested in sports, so you have few friends, and you like to ride your bicycle to keep in shape. You pretty much keep to yourself and spend your free time with your family. You have worked for NovaCom for the past five years. Before that you worked in computer security for IBM,” the man explained and put the cards down.

“Should I go on?”

“Paranoid,” Dan said.

“What?”

“I should be paranoid. You have been spying on me for years!”

“Quite the contrary,” the man said. “We had to check you out before we hired you. We had to make sure you were on the right side and that you didn’t have any vulnerability. We’re the good guys and I would like us to work together.”

Dan frowned and blew air noisily from his mouth.

“Why did you drop out?” the man asked.

“Drop out?”

“Of college.”

“Why should I tell you? You probably figured it out anyway spying on me and all.”

“Well, we have an idea, but its speculation. We only have the facts, Dan not what’s behind them.”

Dan ran his hand through his brown hair and stared at the mysterious man trying to see the details in his face.

“It was too confined, too much thinking inside the box,” Dan said reluctantly. “During my senior year, I realized that I was ahead of the curriculum; I knew most of it. I had read the books and took the tests at the end of the chapters and passed them all. I asked for an exemption, but they wouldn’t do it, so I quit. Then I developed the software and gave it away. RIT heard of it and awarded me their honorary degree,” Dan explained. “I didn’t expect it.”

“That’s the only reason you dropped out?” the man said.

“I didn’t want to be labeled as the typical engineer stereotype,” Dan continued. “Engineers are really rock stars locked into the confines of their own discipline. Many cannot think outside the box, but they all dream of creating some revolutionary thing so that the spotlights will shine on them...so that they can be center stage

with thousands of fans cheering them on...just like a rock star. Many can't see the whole picture...only their own discipline and sometimes it takes an outsider to see what's really going on...to put all the pieces together to take that revolutionary step. I always wanted to be that outsider...the one who puts the puzzle pieces together, to be able to take that revolutionary leap. That's why I developed the software. I really didn't create the software, only the idea and plan for it. The programmers did the rest."

"That's all the more reasons we need your help now," the man said. "You see the big picture. You're the one most likely to solve our problem."

"So why don't you just shut off these devices in the cell towers and be done with it," Dan said.

"Because we can't. They are fully integrated into the cell tower equipment and whoever is controlling them now changed our access codes so we can't get in. These devices were built with the highest security levels available...five hundred and twelve-bit encryption. We couldn't break the code in two hundred years using all the computer power of all the computers on the Internet," the man explained. "We would have to destroy two thirds of the cell towers in the country to stop them. There are over two hundred and fifty thousand towers in the US and I don't know if we could do it in enough time to stop these bastards."

"So why not shut down the entire network and blame it on hackers?" Dan suggested.

"We don't have enough time. It would take months. You don't think we can just casually ask all the network operators to shut down their networks? Do you think they would agree to that? And what would be the reason? We would have to hack into the system ourselves and shut it down and that could take months," the man explained. "We know these people are ready to do something very soon."

“So how did they get in?” Dan asked.

“We think it was the people who designed the units for us. We think John Bastille sold the backdoor access codes to someone... or he hacked into the network himself.”

“John Bastille! Now I’ve heard everything! I worked with John. He would never do anything like that. He has the highest standards of integrity. Everybody respects him. He’s a great guy...a good family man...”

“Not anymore. He and his wife divorced three months ago,” the man explained. He picked up the glass again and took a sip.

“I still don’t think he could...” Dan stopped. He had a puzzling look on his face. “Did NovaCom design these units?”

“John did when he was there.”

“That’s why he was always asking me about security issues. I still don’t believe he sold the codes,” Dan explained.

“Well, he’s missed work for the past two weeks and his apartment is empty...cleaned out,” the man explained.

“He’s on vacation,” Dan fired back.

“That’s what he told everyone, but no one can find him.”

“Maybe, he moved back with his wife. I can’t believe he’s divorced.”

“We checked. His wife has not heard from him for over a month.”

“How could he just leave his family like that?” Dan said staring at the torn wallpaper hanging precariously over the man’s head.

“We were hoping you had heard from him” the man said.

“Me? I haven’t heard from him since he left NovaCom,” Dan explained. “Lloyd Dobbs from the power company was the last person to hear from him.”

The man picked up the glass and took another sip.

“So what do you want to do, Dan?” the man asked.

“I told you. I’m not endangering my family. Nothing is worth that,” Dan said speaking clearly and loudly.

“We anticipated this. We can offer your family a relocation package permanently or until this is over. It's up to you.”

“Are you talking about a witness protection program? No way! No contact with our friends and family. What kind of solution is that? I'm out. Sorry. I can't do it!” Dan’s voice was even louder now.

The man picked up the glass again and drank the water that remained. His face did not waver. He calmly placed the glass down.

“Do you know what DEWs are, Dan?”

“DEWs?”

“Directed Energy Weapons. Our Russian friends used them during the Cold War and they are still used today. The first ones were crude...made from a conventional microwave oven with the shields taken off. A metal funnel was constructed over the magnetron and the microwaves were beamed out to an unsuspecting victim. The radiation penetrated walls and was undetectable so these devices could be in a building next door and still be effective.

“The results were deadly: irritability, depression, and extreme fatigue. At first the Soviets believed that the effects were only temporary. But then they realized the effects were permanent. Other symptoms started showing up...heart attacks, cataracts, circulatory problems, permanent destruction of the nervous system, and then death. The weapons are more sophisticated today. They can beam the waves over longer distances and combined with lasers, they can beam the energy into your house from a plane or a satellite.”

“Are you saying they are doing that now?”

“Not quite. They are using the concept of directed energy to transmit the energy over ultra wide band frequencies.”

“Nice try, but you’re not scaring me. I would have detected energy of that magnitude!” Dan fired back.

“Not if they were using existing cellular phone frequencies to hide their signal. Have you detected any additional bursts since the blackout?”

Dan thought about it for a few seconds. “No.”

“Well, there have been. How do you explain all the computers failing at the same time on the top floor of the BB&T building in downtown Raleigh?” the man said with a slightly sharp tone in his voice.

“The bank suspected hackers, so they called the FBI. The FBI then called us. When we looked at the computers, they had been fried. All the chips were melted. A DEW had hit them. Hackers could never do that kind of damage from within. It had to come from a pulsed energy weapon. The computers were gone...junk. We think they increased the power output to move more energy over longer distances using our devices in the cell towers. Our devices were never meant to be weapons. They were designed to disable software. They were put in after nine eleven to link all law enforcement and emergency personnel.

“Now who’s ever doing this can wreak havoc on every metropolitan area in the country without detection,” the man explained. “Last week they sent a burst that caused a cascading shutdown that took out several phone companies in New Jersey. Tomorrow they could send a burst that disables our entire communications system.”

Dan raised his eyebrows.

“Are you saying my family is in danger?”

“The whole country’s in danger, Dan. That’s why we need your help.”



“This is bullshit! Pure bullshit! You’re trying to make me think I don’t have a choice here. Well, I do and I’m not doing it!”

Dan started for the door. Merritt and Coughlin followed.

“Dan, have you noticed your wife or daughter acting strange in the past few days? Any changes in behavior? Any small pets die in your house recently?”

Dan immediately thought of Amelia and her outburst. He stopped and turned around.

“You’re a sonafbitch!”

“Sit down, Dan. I don’t know if I wouldn’t react the same way if I were in your shoes,” the man said.

Dan kept walking.

“Dan!” Merritt yelled.

In his haste, Dan turned down another hallway thinking he was heading for the back door. Instead, he entered a large empty room with two windows where he could see the SUV shrouded in the dim moonlight.

Several loud booms sounded instantly shattering the silence. He sensed movement outside.

“What the hell?” Dan said turning towards the agents in close pursuit.

## Chapter 12

**Tuesday, May 20, 2008**

Merritt quickly shoved Dan into a small coat closet nearby. He felt Merritt's body crushing him into the back of the small space. The pressure increased when Coughlin also crammed in. A whisper materialized out of the blackness.

"Quiet," Merritt said.

The silent darkness was punctured by low clicking sounds, metal against metal and Dan could smell Merritt sweating. The air quickly became hot and thick. They could hear rapid footsteps in the living room and then they stopped. Coughlin pushed the door open violently and open fired filling the room with flashes of light. He had cut down two men who stood surprised and motionless in the far end of the room. They slammed into the wall and fell to the floor falling on top of each other. Another man entered and fired at Coughlin the bright flash from the barrel temporarily blinding him. Coughlin felt a sharp, intense pain in his left shoulder and then spun sideways. He fell onto his stomach and fired four rapid shots at the man killing him instantly. Dan felt Merritt grab his left arm and squeeze. The pain was sharp.

"Move!"

Merritt pulled Dan ran across the room towards the small foyer by the front door and crouched down pushing on Dan's head to do the same. Merritt pointed towards the SUV and Dan nodded. Coughlin joined them his limp, bloody arm dangling freely. Merritt ran first, reached the vehicle and crouched down near the rear wheel on the driver's side where the truck cast a shadow from the dim moonlight. Dan nearly tripped as he struggled to get across the thirty odd yards as quickly as possible. Dan watched Coughlin start to run towards them – at the same time a small blue light similar in color to an acetylene torch streaked out of the woods and followed him. The whole scene appeared to take on a surreal ambiance as the light honed in on Coughlin and matched his every move. When he saw the blue light, he dropped to the ground, but he wasn't fast enough. The light entered his side and disappeared just under his rib cage and exploded. Pieces of raw red flesh and jagged bone blew out of his back and his body bounced up about a foot before ending its death dance in the dry dusty dirt. Some had splattered on the hood and windshield of the SUV. Merritt shoved Dan in front of him.

“Get in now!”

Dan opened the door and scrambled up into the truck with Merritt pushing him into the passenger's seat with such force that his head slammed against the window. Dan's head flooded with pain and everything around him was a big blur. Another blue light streaked out of the woods and slammed the front fender of the truck followed by a bright white explosion that blew burning sparks all over the hood. It ripped the fender upward shredding the metal into several jagged shards. Merritt had already started the truck and was turning away from the woods with the accelerator to the floor. The SUV tipped on two wheels and Dan felt himself falling towards Merritt. He quickly grabbed the armrest and pulled himself back into the seat. Seconds later the truck bounced back on

all four tires and Dan noticed another blue light racing towards them. He watched it get closer and closer until it suddenly dropped altitude to about two feet from the ground. Merritt watched it in the rear view mirror.

“Hang on!”

He turned the SUV sharply to the right to avoid the tiny missile, but the projectile mirrored the vehicle’s movements as if it were being controlled remotely. It slammed into the exhaust pipe and the explosion ripped the bumper off and the latch on the hatchback door. As the SUV bounced wildly along the open field, the hatch opened and closed like a giant flap.

“Luckily, it didn’t hit the gas tank,” Merritt said.

The truck bounced over the terrain lifting them off their seats until their seat belts took hold.

“There’s a road at the end of this field,” Merritt said. “Luckily, we have a full moon to light the way.”

“Are they following?” Dan asked.

“Doesn’t look that way,” Merritt said.

Dan looked out the rear window again. “No such luck.”

Merritt looked into the rear view mirror.

“Shit.”

Two black forms moved across the field mimicking their every move.

“What the hell were those blue lights? A laser of some sort?” Dan asked.

“No,” Merritt said. “They were...”

“Whap! Whap!”

“What was that?” Dan yelled.

“Livestock fences. We’re not taking the road. I think they know about it. I have another idea.”

“What?”

Merritt turned sharply to the left and drove next to a long line of tall pine trees that cast a shadow temporarily hiding the SUV.

"I'm hoping they won't see us and think we took the road," Merritt said.

Dan turned and looked behind. He could barely see the other two trucks.

"I think it worked. They're not following us," Dan said. "There's another one of those blue things..."

"Is it coming our way?"

"No."

"Good. We're safe for now," Merritt said.

"What are those things?"

"HSPs. Heat Seeking Projectiles. We developed them about a year ago for our boys in Afghanistan and Iraq. They work exactly like heat seeking missiles except they hone in on body heat, engine heat anything ninety six degrees or hotter. The HSP is a little bit larger than a C battery with three miniature jet engines, a gyro, and heat sensor. When it makes contact it explodes. It's fired out of a grenade launcher. They have a range of about three hundred yards..."

"That's what got Coughlin..."

"Yeah," Merritt acknowledged in a low voice.

He let out a deep burst of air.

"If he had seen it sooner, he could have dodged it," Merritt added. "We were trained to elude them in case the enemy got hold of them."

"I'm sorry," Dan said.

Merritt was silent for a long time. They drove a short distance and then turned into a clearing between the tall pines and Dan was slammed against the door again.

"Is this another road?" Dan asked sitting upright in the seat.

“Don’t know. We’re winging it now. The GPS is out. That last HSP must have gotten the antenna.”

The moonlight barely lit the clearing, but it was enough for them to see the unfinished road. Merritt accelerated and the SUV picked up speed bumping along like a wild bull. Underbrush scraped against the bottom of the vehicle. As they moved deeper into the woods, the trees got bigger and their foliage blocked more and more of the moonlight.

“How do you see?” Dan asked.

“Practice,” Merritt said.

Merritt slowed the vehicle as the light grew even dimmer, but it wasn’t enough and Dan suddenly felt the seat belt grab his right shoulder and tighten. Two loud explosions went off and Dan felt something hit his face and push him back. He couldn’t move or breathe and then there was a hissing sound. The pressure holding him eased off and he had a gritty, dry powder in his mouth that tasted like metal. He pushed the defeated airbag off his face and turned towards Merritt. There was a loud crack, then several more in a cascading sequence. Rustling followed and the roof of the SUV caved in.

“Merritt! You ok?”

Dan could see only Merritt’s right hand in the dim orange light from the dashboard. His hand was twitching.

“Merritt!”

There was a low groan.

Dan tried the door, but it wouldn’t open. He slammed his body against the door several times, but it would not move. He tried the window and it slowly moved down and then stopped about half way. He unhooked his seat belt and started to squeeze his head through, but the opening was too small and his head got stuck. He had to move his head and body in a series of precise twists and turns to get his head out all the while enduring the pain of the

window against his ear and jaw. After freeing his head, he placed his back against the edge of Merritt's seat and pulled his legs close to his body and kicked the window with as much force as he could muster in the tight space. He kicked it several more times and then he grabbed the window and shook it.

"Break! You son-of-a-bitch!" he screamed.

*What an idiot!* he thought. *The windows are probably bullet proof.*

He noticed that the windshield was slightly separated from the frame. He turned and positioned himself so he could push it outward with his legs. The glass moved easily until he had enough room to get out. He carefully crawled across the hood and then jumped off. A pine tree with a trunk about a foot in diameter had fallen and crushed the left side of the vehicle. The impact from the truck had toppled the 100-foot tall tree. Dan went over to the driver's side and pulled on the door handle, but the door would not open. He climbed back inside the truck and squeezed his arm across Merritt's legs and searched for the window buttons on the driver's side. He moved his hand along the armrest feeling for the buttons. When he found it, the button was covered with a warm, gooey substance. He pressed his body closer against Merritt and managed to open a window, but it was the rear window on Merritt's side. He moved to another button. Nothing. He found another button and heard the low whirring of the tiny motor. When he pulled his arm back his shirt was wet and his hand was covered in blood. He quickly wiped his hand on his pants and climbed back out. The window was open only enough for him to get his hand in.

"Merritt. Merritt."

Dan reached in and shook Merritt's shoulder.

"I'll get help. Hang in there," Dan said.

“No...get...suits under...seat now. No time.” Merritt coughed spraying blood that dripped down inside of the window. “Invisible...heat...keep low.”

Dan stood there in awe as an empty, sad feeling ran through him for he knew that these would be the last words Merritt would say. The woods suddenly became eerily quiet and he knew he couldn't save Merritt.

He crawled back into the truck and began searching under Merritt's seat when his hand touched a hard plastic bag about the size of a loaf of bread. In the dying moonlight, he opened the bag and pulled out a green camouflaged, plastic suit with a metallic coating on the inside. He shook out the suit and saw it was similar to the radiation protection suits the workers wore at the nuclear generating plant. It covered everything. It had a long zipper in the front with a flap that went over the zipper and stayed closed with self-sticking pads. Dan stepped into the suit and pulled it up over his body. He brought the hood over his head and realized the top was a lot thicker than the rest of the suit. The front of the hood had a 2-inch strip of clear plastic that was mirrored on one side allowing him to see. A cloth-like material thicker than the rest of the suit was inside the hood near his nose and mouth. Some kind of filter, he thought. He went back to Merritt.

“I have the suit on. Now what? What's invisible heat?”

Merritt was silent. Dan reached down through the window and shook his shoulder, but he didn't move. The forest was quiet, the air very still, and Dan knew. He had never witnessed a life slip away and it made him think of how quickly it can be lost. He looked around and saw that the woods were thick in all directions. Whoever had started to clear the road stopped here. Maybe, Merritt knew there might be something ahead like a road or a house, he thought. He headed into the woods.

“Whiff! Whiff! Whiff!”



The sound was low in tone and slowly increased in volume. At first, Dan thought it was a bird, but when he looked up he saw the silhouette of a helicopter against the setting moon moving toward him. He began to run through the thick woods ripping his way through the tall grass and fallen tree branches. The chopper moved closer to the SUV and an ear numbing sound seemed to swallow the entire forest. A rocket from the helicopter slammed into the SUV igniting a thunderous firestorm in the dead of the woods. Everything around him lit up and he could see the details of the overlapping bark on the pine trees.

He tripped on a large branch and felt himself falling. His cheek slammed into a large rock and he lost consciousness for a few seconds. He looked back and saw balls of fire dancing wildly from tree to tree, bush to bush. He began running again, but he had to slow down because the forest grew thicker with small pine trees only a foot or two apart. He had to squeeze through the trees to get any distance from the explosion and it was slow going. His movement through the trees caused the tops of the pines to sway in the windless night and he worried the movement would give away his position. He worked his way through the troublesome miniature forest for more than an hour. When the trees thinned out again, he saw the land was high on both sides with a valley naked of trees. He saw that the sky was brighter in the East. He stopped and listened thinking he heard something rustle nearby, but it was only the cadence of the tree frogs and the songs of the crickets. Then he saw it - a tiny blue light working its way toward him through the trees. He ran back into the thick area he had just left, but stopped when he heard twigs breaking and saw the trees move ahead. The blue light was brighter and still closing in. A shadowy creature crashed through the thick foliage and ran past Dan breaking small tree branches and kicking up the dead dry leaves below. The HSP was closer now and, he remembered what Merritt

had said about Coughlin, *“If he had seen it sooner, he could have dodged it.”* He figured the device could not make a very sharp turn and there was his advantage over this particularly heinous weapon. He ran to the right and then to the left. The HSP followed. Dan saw a clump of trees ahead and headed for them zigzagging the entire time. He hoped the device might run into a tree before it reached him. As the tiny whining jet engines became louder and louder, Dan could feel his fear take over his body, his mind, his consciousness. He ran faster and faster not realizing it. The land dipped down slightly ahead, and Dan dove into the sloping area, and slid on his stomach like baseball player for that elusive base. The HSP shot over his head and exploded a few yards ahead of him. The large black object, a buck, tumbled several times until it slammed into the ground stopping at the base of a tree. Its hind legs and torso landed a short distance away.

## **Chapter 13**

**Wednesday, May 21, 2008**

Dan kept his face in the ground and trembled from a dark mixture of fear and cold. The ground smelled moldy like a pumpkin left on the porch too long after Halloween. Maybe the ground would lower his body heat and he would be safe from another HSP. Maybe, he could just stay there and no one would ever find him. There were bogeymen chasing him and hiding under the covers wasn't going to make them go away this time. He slowly raised his head and looked around just like he had peeked out from his covers to make sure the monsters went away. But this was real...real demons this time and they wanted to kill him...and they were not going away.

A light suddenly appeared in the darkness like a lighthouse in a fog. As he squinted, a square yellow light glowed dimly through the thick Loblolly pines at the bottom of the valley. He stared at it for several seconds and decided it was a house. He had to get there but he had to travel across a large open area to a gathering of trees near the house. They might see him in the fading moonlight and send another heat seeking death missile. He lifted himself up and started sprinting towards the house not bothering to look around to

see if anyone was nearby. He regretted not looking and called himself stupid because he could end up dead or worst. Dan gulped in large amounts of air to keep up his sprint, but his lungs began to burn, and his legs were numb and rubbery. He hadn't felt this way since he ran high school track, but it hurt a lot more now and for the first time he realized he was older, slower, and didn't have the speed and stamina of his former years. It was as if he was running through a wave having trouble breathing and moving. He kept going despite the pain, as the gathering trees got closer, but not fast enough.

“Whiff! Whiff! Whiff!”

He felt a hot wind wash over him that smelled of diesel fuel. The tidal wave suddenly drained away and he felt renewed with a familiar new energy - fear. He ran faster, but his legs could no longer support the strain. He tripped and his face hit the soft grass burning his skin as his weight pushed him harder into the ground. The pain sharpened as his face passed over several small jagged rocks and his body twisted and tumbled freely. His legs went up over his head and his back slammed into a large fallen tree trunk at the edge of the trees. He rubbed the dirt out of his eyes and looked behind him at the clearing. The helicopter had landed in the open area a short distance away. He wondered how they could not have seen him. He quickly climbed over the 3-foot thick tree trunk and peered over the top. Two men emerged from the chopper and walked towards Dan moving from side to side like animals stalking a prey. They wore the same camouflaged suit Dan had and they had night-vision goggles on their heads. The taller of the two men had a grenade launcher slung on his shoulder with a HSP attached.

“Do you think that old geezer is holding out on us?” Dan heard one man say in the stillness of the early morning forest.

“Naw. He’s just a stupid hick. Besides, we scared the shit out of him busting up some of his stuff. I think if he sees him, he’s going to tell us.”

“So what the fuck happened to him?” the first man asked.

“Maybe we got him. Did Lou check out where the HSPs hit?” said the taller man moving the HSP launcher to his other shoulder.

“Yeah. We lost two of them...”

“Well, there you go. One of them might have gotten him.”

“I don’t know. I don’t understand why we haven’t spotted him with the infrared. He would light up like a Christmas tree. Maybe, he escaped.”

“I doubt it. How the fuck would he get out of these friggin’ woods? They go on forever,” said the man with the launcher.

“Well, I left big John at the house to keep watch. If he heads for the house, John will get him.”

The men moved the night vision goggles over their eyes and looked over the valley.

Dan ducked below the log and held his breath in case they could spot the heat from his breathing.

“If he’s alive, he’ll head for the house,” one of the men said. “See anything?”

“Nope.”

“Let’s go.”

The men climbed into the small, black helicopter - the engine grew louder, the rotors came up to speed. The chopper lifted quickly vanishing into the approaching dawn. For the first time in his life Dan was fearful of the light, of the dawn. He could be spotted, and then he would be dead. Big John was in the house he had hoped would be his refuge. He got up and started running towards the West away from the brightening horizon and the house. He ran through a small clearing and then into a thick group of trees where he felt safer. He slowly worked his way through the

narrow cluster of trees until he came to a narrow path. He turned right onto the path and walked a short distance until he heard the forest rustle. He stopped, but the rustling continued. Dan took off like a spooked deer. When he thought he heard something in front of him, he turned and ran back up the path. He twisted to look behind him and didn't see the large tree root protruding from the ground. He slammed into the ground hard. Pain raced through his body from his knees to his face. He touched his cheek and felt the warm blood ooze onto his fingers. He struggled to breathe and then there was nothing.

Dan opened his eyes and thought he was coming out of a nightmare until he noticed movement in the corner of his eye. He couldn't move from the fear that took hold of him like nothing he had ever known before. A shadow appeared with two glowing red dots for eyes.

"Who are you and what are doing here?" the shadow said lowering the rifle.

"Don't kill me! Don't kill me!" Dan screamed and slowly backed away.

"Why are you here?" the man said his face in shadow from the Army-issue cap.

"The men in the helicopter are after me," Dan managed to get out.

The man moved the rifle to the side and the two red lasers on the scope went out.

"Follow me," the man said.

The man turned and walked in the opposite direction. Dan still could not move.

"Are you coming or not?" the man barked back.

Dan followed, but kept a few yards behind the mysterious man. They walked for a half hour and then turned left off the path. The man carefully moved small branches out of the way to make his way through the heavy brush.

“Do the same. Be careful not to break any.”

They kept moving until they came to a large expanse of Beautyberry shrubs, 6 to 8 feet tall and known for their brilliant purple berries that grow in clusters in the fall. The man moved along the shrubbery wall about five feet and then pushed his way into the shrubs and vanished.

“Follow through here,” he told Dan.

Dan squeezed through a tunnel in the shrubs about two feet wide and five feet tall. Both of them bent down to move through the tunnel. They walked for a short time until they came to a long narrow clearing. The man used his feet to clear a pile of leaves to one side revealing a square smooth metal plate that looked like it had been hastily painted with brown paint. He leaned down and felt along the edge of the plate until he found a handle and pulled up. A flickering cold steely light revealed a small stainless steel ladder descending into an equally cold hole in the ground.

“Go.” Dan reluctantly lowered himself down the narrow ladder – the man followed carefully replacing the metal plate.

“What is this place?” Dan asked after he stepped off the ladder and looked around.

“I live here, sometimes,” the man said.

A narrow counter to the right held three instrument panels that looked like short wave radios with rows of tiny red and green lights flickering on and off. Four computer monitors lined the rest of the counter and a long florescent industrial light hung over the counter. The counter was littered with yellow sticky notes. A row of windows about a foot and half wide lined the upper part of the

curved metal walls on both sides. Both the walls and the windows were painted hastily with silver metallic paint.

"This is a school bus..." Dan blurted out. "How did you get it here? And you buried it?"

"Yep," the man replied.

The man sat down in one of the long bench seats that lined the other side of the bus and took off his fatigue cap. Long stringy black hair fell out and covered his small ears. His eyes and skin had a hint of Oriental, but his jaw was square and angular. He was about 45 years old with a slender build and muscular arms and shoulders.

"Name's Jake...Jake Stone," the man said. He held out his hand and they shook.

"Dan Riker."

"Who were you running from?"

"I don't know."

"You're lucky I caught up with you. They wouldn't stop until they found you."

"All I know is they were trying to kill me. I was with two other guys – both are dead."

"I heard all that from here. I can hear a lot of other things, too," Jake added.

Dan started to unzip the suit feeling the heat of the confined space.

"Stop! Don't open the suit!" Jake said his face emotionless as a stone.

"Why?"

"It's an infrared canceling suit. They can't see you with night vision and it blocks any RF devices on your body."

Jake picked up a round black disk about the size of a CD with a coiled black wire attached to what looked like a computer.

"You had a medical information chip implanted right?"



“Yeah, a couple of years ago.”

“Well, that’s how they track you. If you unzip the suit, they may find you.”

“Son of a bitch! I knew it was a mistake! They’re not supposed to have tracking capabilities!”

“Believe that and I’ll tell you about the two-headed cow that lives in the pasture down the road.”

“Bastards. The damn insurance company wouldn’t cover me unless I had the chip implanted.”

“Well, the chips themselves don’t have the ability to reveal your location. It’s what they invented to detect the chips. All they have to do is send a signal that activates the chip to send its ID number. From there, they use another signal generator to triangulate your position using GPS,” Jake explained.

“How do you know all this?”

“I invented the device for the CIA. They use it to track their men in the field so they say. Now stand over here away from the equipment and put your arms out,” Jake said.

“What for?”

“Just do it!”

Dan complied. Jake turned on the device and then swirled the disk around Dan’s left arm just above his elbow. Dan moved his arm back quickly.

“Hey! It’s warm and it tingles,” Dan protested.

“It’s supposed to. It’s designed to destroy any electronic devices, including that medical chip.”

“So now you’re trying to cook me?” Dan said.

“Just stand still.”

Jake swirled the disk like a guard would swirl a metal detection rod. When he moved the disk near Dan’s elbow, the transmitter beeped three times and the red light flashed.

“What’s that mean?” Dan asked.

“It found your medical chip and destroyed it. Now take off your sneakers.”

Dan handed Jake one sneaker and Jake scanned it with the black disk. The machine beeped again and the red light flashed.

“You’re damned lucky they didn’t get you. There’s probably another one in the other sneaker.”

Dan handed over the other shoe and the machine beeped again.

“Sneakers are the easiest place to high these things. They are about the size of a grain of rice with a point on one end. They inject them into any thick soft area of the sneaker so they are undetectable,” Jake explained.

“That machine looks like something out of the seventies.”

“That’s the first prototype I built back in college. It still works, so I still use it. If it ain’t broke don’t fix it. The one I built for the CIA is the size of a cigarette lighter.”

Dan raised his eyebrows and looked at the other equipment on the counter.

“What is all this stuff? I’ve never seen these instruments. Hey, you have a KF analyzer. Wow! They cost as much as a house!” Dan said.

Jake laughed.

“I built this stuff myself.”

“Impressive.”

“Let’s say I work for a group that requires specialized equipment. You’ll never see this stuff on the market,” Jake explained.

“I’m sure this is the wave of the future...find an old school bus, bury it and that’s your new lab. You’re kidding right?”

“No. I’m not. The metal bus and the ground make it a perfect test bed. Random radio signals don’t interfere with the testing. The inside of the bus is coated with a special copper-tin alloy that shields the equipment from any RF signals. We’re out here in no

man's land where there is little interference from electronic equipment and commercial transmissions," Jake explained. "You're an RF engineer, right?"

"How did you know that?"

"No one except an RF engineer would recognize the KF."

"Why all the secrecy?"

"I like to live. People would kill for what I have and for what I know."

"Really? How do you know I'm not one of them?"

"The people chasing you...I picked up their transmissions. I have a decipher that will decode up to two hundred and fifty six-bit encryptions. They're using an encryption scheme similar to what the CIA uses."

"The CIA! How could that be?"

"What do you mean?"

"I was with two CIA agents."

"And that makes you?"

"What?"

"You're an agent or I wouldn't have brought you here. The CIA is one of my customers and maybe you can help me," Jake added.

"Whoa right there. I'm not an agent. They hired me for three weeks to look into the blackouts!" Dan protested.

"So then why would anyone want to kill you? They are very anxious, very determined. I know they weren't CIA, but they may have connections or be former agents. They used several protocols used by the CIA."

"I have no idea! All I know is that they brought me here to talk with this guy about the blackout and then the shooting started..."

"Harald Friedheld..."

"Who?" Dan asked.

"Wears wrinkled old brown suits and constantly sips a glass of water..."

“Yeah. That’s him. How did you know? You know him?”

“Know of him? He’s NSA and a professor of high touch, high tech. He’s a wireless wiz, and he brought wireless further by integrating it into a truly human interface. You’ve heard of tooth phones and crazy stuff like that? Well, he topped that. I heard he has a device that connects directly to the nervous system using the body’s natural wiring to communicate directly to the brain. He also invented a program that can literally reprogram any computer from any distance using the cell phone network.”

“He did mention something like that,” Dan added.

“What did he say?”

“Something about someone else controlling it now...”

“What?”

“Some other group controlled it now. They changed the passwords so they couldn’t get in anymore,” Dan explained.

“Oh, shit!” Jake shouted. “Do you know what that means? These people wield tremendous power. They can bring the whole country down. Hold the country hostage. Imagine several are chasing you in a car. They can direct an energy pulse and disable the car’s computer. Your car would just stop running. I can only assume that the blackout was the work of this group.”

“Maybe.”

“What do you know about the blackouts,” Jake asked.

“Why should I tell you?”

“Because I’m gonna save your worthless ass!”

“And I thought you were a nice guy,” Dan said.

“If I were really a nice guy, I would be dead a long time ago. Now are you going to tell me what the fuck is going on?”

“Okay. Okay. Hackers got into the power plants and managed to send a false reading to the relay computers telling them there was an overload. The safety software kicked in and disconnected the generators from the power grid. I think they were testing the

system,” Dan added. “They had to have help in putting this together.”

“I agree,” Jake explained. “With all those unemployed engineers out there, they could start a company, hire all the managers and engineers they needed to pull this off and do it within a matter of months. Even the people on the top wouldn't know what was going on. They would be glad to have a job even if the project was temporary. All they needed was money and it looks like they had plenty.”

“But from where?” Dan asked.

“They could have deceived VCs to invest. The VCs would be clueless as to what they were really doing. They would be looking only for a healthy ROI.”

“VCs?”

“Venture capitalists.”

“I thought there was a lot of security around these systems especially after nine eleven,” Dan said.

“Not really. It's these giant databases and systems that run the power and sewage plants,” Jake explained. “Many run on proprietary software and homegrown protocols that are not protected by firewalls and intrusion-detection software designed for the Net. Now that many of these systems are linked to the Net for access from anywhere, they are wide open for hackers. It would be next to impossible to detect an intruder before it was too late. Many believe that these systems are immune from hackers because of their obscurity and propriety. But, you've already seen that hackers can cause a massive power blackout. There was also a guy who hacked into a sewage treatment plant in Australia several years back and caused it to dump sewage twenty times before they figured out what was going on. People have been talking about more security for years, but it's never done because it costs money.”

The lights suddenly turned red and Jake jumped up pushing Dan aside to get to a computer monitor. Jake pulled Dan closer and whispered.

“Keep quiet. We have intruders. Jake started typing. It was the last thing Dan saw before everything went black.

## Chapter 14

Wednesday, May 21, 2008

Dan opened his eyes to a thick black smoke that immediately burned his eyes and set his stomach on a roller coaster of fear. The dark space was filled with an acrid odor of burnt electrical wire and sulfur. He could only inhale partially because there was something pushing down on his chest. He pushed back, but he couldn't lift the weight off his chest. He heard the clack of a switch and the whirr of a small motor. Small dim red lights began to appear through the black haze. The weight on him began to move.

"Oh shit! They must have hit us from the chopper," Jake said between breaths. "Son-of-a-bitches!"

Jake slowly moved off Dan.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!" Jake yelled. "My leg...it's broken. Oh, shit!"

He helped Jake off and Jake propped himself up against the back of an upside down chair.

"I think I'm ok. Shit, I feel like someone beat the hell out of me," Dan said brushing dust and debris off his clothes. "I can hardly hear. Let's see that leg."

“Here...wait,” Jake said slowly twisting to pull something from his military utility belt.

Dan took the small black penlight, switched it on. Jake’s pants had a dark stain. He slowly slid Jake’s pant leg up – blood was already blackening a large part of the material.

“Oh man!” Dan gasped. “I can see your bone!”

Jake slowly leaned over to take a look.

“Shit. That’s my shinbone. There should be a med kit over there,” Jake said pointing forward.

Dan looked around in the dim red glow from the emergency lights at the collapsed counters and the lightless instruments lying broken on the floor. Tiny wisps of smoke slowly rose from some of the equipment.

“Holy shit! Look at this place! We have to get out. Come on. I’ll help you up the ladder...” Dan said.

“No. You’ll have to go it alone. You can’t go out the top. They’re probably all over the place. There’s a hatch under the driver’s seat,” Jake explained finding it hard to breathe.

“The tunnel is narrow...only enough space for one man. You go. You’ll have ten minutes to get out. The tunnel leads to a road. Go right on the road and run like hell. It will take you to the interstate,” Jake explained struggling to get the words out.

He coughed up blood and a rivulet ran down the side of his mouth and dropped off.

“What about you? I can push you through, drag you through,” Dan said. “I’m not leaving you here!”

“Won’t happen. You’re gonna have a tough time getting out. I made that tunnel years ago and it may have caved in for all I know. You may have to dig yourself out.”

Jake reached around his back and opened a small pouch attached to his belt.

“Here take my PDA,” Jake said.



“That’s a PDA? It’s too small,” Dan noted.

“It’s a UWB prototype. Don’t turn it on until you reach the interstate. You’ll get a ring tone and a photo. Turn it off as soon as you get them. Turn it back on when you’re far, far away from this place. Instructions will follow. Don’t lose it. You’ll need it,” Jake said gasping for air after each sentence. “Trust no one – especially the CIA!”

“What! Need it for what! What are you talking about?”

“Shut up and get the hell out of here if you want to live!” Jake said raising his fading voice as much as he could.

“What about you?”

“Just get me the med kit over there.”

Dan moved one of the instruments aside and spotted an Army-green metal box with the familiar large Red Cross emblem stenciled across the top. He pulled it out and brought it to Jake. Dan stood there and watched Jake take out a hypodermic needle and a small glass bottle.

“Morphine.”

“We can get out!” Dan yelled. “Come on!” And bent down to grab Jake’s arm.

Jake pushed him away. “Either one of us makes it out alive or we’re both dead.”

“Whiff! Whiff! Whiff!”

“Go damn you! That’s the chopper! Go!” Jake yelled his voice growing weaker.

Dan climbed over what was left of Jake’s hideout, the broken tangle of tables, computers and electronic equipment tossed around the inside of the bus as if a tornado had just passed through. He reached the front and pushed the driver’s seat forward, but it wouldn’t move. He pushed harder and it still wouldn’t move. He peered around the seat and saw a computer monitor wedged

between the seat and the steering wheel. He reached around and grabbed the monitor and pulled, but it wouldn't move.

"Go!" Jake said between shallow breaths.

"I can't. A fucking monitor is stuck on the seat!" Dan yelled.

"Break it," Jake yelled.

Dan picked up a folding chair and swung it up over his head like an ax. It hit the monitor and shattered the tube spewing tiny shards of glass in all directions. He grabbed the monitor and lifted, but it was still wedged. He swung the chair again. At the same time the helicopter released a line of rapid fire running the length of the bus. The swath of lead hit the monitor instantly splitting it in half. Dan slammed the seat forward revealing the tunnel entrance, a black hole into nothing. The tunnel was about two and half feet in diameter and smelled musty. Suddenly his mind was filled with memories of Aunt Grace. He began to sweat and breathe rapidly. He knew he had to go into the tiny tunnel, but he didn't want to go. He looked at Jake and Jake had opened a laptop and was typing.

"Get the hell out of here!" Jake struggled to get out. "You have ten minutes!"

Jake closed the laptop. Dan turned and stood at the black hole.

"Whiff! Whiff! Whiff!"

Another round of machine gun fire penetrated the bus and Dan dove into the tunnel and pulled himself through the damp darkness. The machine gun fire was longer this time and Dan moved quickly suddenly remembering the 10-minute deadline. Then his hands hit dirt. He moved them up, down and sideways feeling for an opening but there was just hard dirt. He started digging frantically moving his hands in all directions feeling for the softest soil. When he found it, he concentrated his digging there, moving the soil to his sides as best he could in the narrow space. He dug furiously out of fear more so from his memories with Aunt Grace rather than out of his impending fear of being buried alive. The tunnel had ignited a

firestorm of bad memories from his childhood with his mother's sister, Grace, who lived on the same block a few houses down. She never married and always chased the neighborhood kids off her property. It was as if she stood by her windows waiting for someone to cross over into her yard and when someone did, her thin wobbly screen door slammed open and she rushed out like a barking, mad dog.

"Get out of my yard!" she yelled shaking her hand in the air. "If I catch you again I'm going to pull your pants down and take a stick to your behind!"

Everyone ran away. The thought of being spanked in front of your friends with your bare behind exposed for the entire world to see was more frightening than the pain her stick would wield. If a ball landed in her yard, it was gone forever. No one dared to go and get it. Her house was the only one on the block splattered with eggs and toilet paper on mischief night, the night before Halloween. Dan tried to push the memories out of his mind but the darkness, the dirt, and the damp musty smell of the earth was overwhelming.

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It was a clear, cold morning in January when a large, strange woman in a police uniform was standing by Dan's bed shaking him slightly.

"Dan. Dan. Wake up." Her wide face appeared like a giant's and Dan was immediately frightened. He moved away and pulled the covers over his head.

"Dan, please get out of bed. We have to talk to you about your mom and dad," the policewoman said.

She led him out to the kitchen where Aunt Grace was sitting at the square kitchen table with the chrome legs. She looked older than ever, and Uncle Peter was there, too, but didn't smile like he usually did.

“What’s the matter with everybody?” Dan asked sensing the gloom in the room.

The police lady squatted down so she could put both hands on Dan’s shoulders. She had icy blue eyes that were dulled with trepidation.

“Honey, your mom and dad were in a car accident last night and they both died...” the policewoman said. “I’m sure they are in heaven now looking down at you right now.”

“What do you mean? What do you mean? What do you mean?” Dan shouted between tears.

“They’re gone.”

Aunt Grace and Uncle Peter started crying, too. Uncle Peter tried to scoop Dan up, but Dan pushed him away. Aunt Grace stood there looking out the window.

“No! No! No!” Dan howled and ran out into the back yard. He stood near the rusting chain-linked fence and endlessly kicked. Uncle Peter came and put his hand on his shoulder. They cried together.

It was decided that Dan would live with Aunt Grace because Uncle Peter didn’t make enough money, and was on the road all the time driving big rigs up and down the coast. The house was sold to a retired couple. They never went outside and everyone thought that they had died in the house. When he moved into Aunt Grace’s house, he was given the smallest room in the back of the house and Aunt Grace threw away whatever didn’t fit, although there was plenty of room in the rest of the modest two-bedroom ranch. If he were a few minutes late for dinner, Aunt Grace would not let him have dessert. One day when Dan was playing baseball in the back yard with his friend, Edward Kydel, he hit the ball too hard and it crashed through the bathroom window. Aunt Grace was in the bathroom at the time and they could hear her screams.

Edward ran home and Dan cowered next to the storage shed. Aunt Grace immediately came running out with the ball in hand.

“You little beast!” she yelled. “You threw this baseball through the window, didn’t you?”

“No, I didn’t. It was an accident. I’m sorry, Aunt Grace. It was an accident!” Dan pleaded.

“You’re going to pay. Get over here,” she said.

She grabbed him roughly by the shirt and dragged Dan into the basement, an unfinished hole in the ground with dirt walls and floors. She locked him in a tiny room that was used to store coal before the gas furnace was installed. Now it was used to store old newspapers and magazines. There was only a small crack between the door and frame that let in the light from the tiny window near the furnace. At first, Dan didn’t think much of it. After all, she was mean all the time. She had locked him down here before for other minor infractions, but when the sun went down and he was in total darkness, he got scared. He was hungry, too. Then something moved in the small room and he could hear it scratch in the dirt. He yelled for her, but she never came; he kicked at the door many times to no avail. The solid wood door with several panels was the original front door of the house. Several hours passed and he had forgotten about the scratching he heard earlier. He was tired from yelling and kicking the stubborn door and weak from no supper. He spread some newspapers out on the dirt floor and crawled up into a ball in the damp, cold prison and fell asleep. He awoke to a slight pain on his right leg and moved his hand down and touched something that quickly darted away. He jumped up and stood in the darkness trembling. He felt his way to the door and pressed himself against it hoping it would open, but it only creaked and moaned from his weight. He heard the creature move again; he screamed and it scurried away to the right. He felt his way towards the pile of magazines and grabbed several to roll into a makeshift

club. However, his grip was not strong enough and they spiraled out of his hand onto the dirt floor. He scrambled to pick them up and then felt the animal's tiny claws dig into his cheeks and bite into his upper lip. He grabbed the animal, squeezed it with all his might and threw it as hard as he could. There was a thud, followed a softer thud. Dan jumped up and stomped his feet in a mad dance of fear, stomping all around the area screaming, crying, and waving his arms around. When his fear waned, he felt his way back to the door, sat down, and put his knees up to his chin. He listened to the darkness for the sounds of the creature. After he was satisfied it was dead, he slowly fell into a deep sleep. He awoke to a man's voice in the distance and the creaking of the wooden steps that descended into the basement.

"Dan! Dan! Are you there?"

It was Uncle Peter.

"In here! Get me out! Get me out!" Dan yelled and started pounding his fists on the door.

Dan squinted and shielded his eyes when the door opened.

"Are you all right?" Uncle Peter asked. "What happened to your face?"

Dan stumbled into the light crying and the man picked him up. Peter moved into the room, looked inside, and saw the large dead rat crushed in the dirt.

"Damn that woman!" Uncle Peter said. "Jennifer, we have to take him to the hospital."

"Oh. The poor thing was locked in there all night?" Jennifer said.

"Yeah, and it looks like he had to deal with that rat over there. Look at his face."

Jennifer moved past Peter and stuck her head into the tiny room.

"Oh my god!"

Dan had to undergo the full rabies treatment - six injections into his shoulder spaced over a 28-day period. They had to practically drag him to the doctor's office each time. He hated needles; they terrified him. He lived with Uncle Peter and his new girlfriend, Jennifer, after that night. Uncle Peter had warned Aunt Grace that if she fought to keep Dan, he would file child abuse charges against her. He never spoke to her again and Uncle Peter eventually married, Jennifer and she became Aunt Jen. Aunt Grace moved away and Dan never saw her again. Uncle Peter never talked about her after that. A few years ago, Uncle Peter called him and said Aunt Grace had died in her sleep, and could he come to the funeral. He said he would try to make it, but he never did. He said he had to study for several exams his boss wanted him to take to certify him as an IT security expert.

As the flurry of memories played out in his head like a bad horror flick, Dan dug harder and faster until his fingers hit something hard. His nails scrapped on the surface and he knew what it was. He moved his hands up, down, and all around feeling for soft dirt but there wasn't any. All he felt was the hard, cold surface of the giant rock. He moved his hands again and searched for the elusive dirt so he could dig himself out, out of this ghastly tunnel that was becoming more and more like a tomb. His hands moved faster, his body squirmed and throbbed, and tears ran down his face. He screamed uncontrollably until he saw a small sliver of light dance over the top of the rock. He furiously dug at the light as if he could grab it and hold it, but the light was elusive, the earth hard and unyielding. Then he saw the rock move slightly. He braced his feet against the tunnel floor and pushed. The rock moved again. After several attempts, the rock finally rolled away and light burst into the tunnel. Dan squinted and held his hands over his eyes the same way he did decades ago. The relief he felt now was all too familiar and all too painful as it flooded his mind

with the horrible experience of his youth. He was almost expecting to see Uncle Peter and Aunt Jen. He crawled out of the tunnel and rolled down a slight embankment to the edge of a road. It was narrow, unpaved and overgrown with weeds, but one could see it was once a road. He brushed himself off and then Jake's words rushed into his head almost as if Jake was standing there next to him...*run like hell*. He broke into a sprint down the road and within seconds a thunderous explosion broke the undisturbed calm of the early morning. Dan felt a force push him faster than he could run and his legs fumbled, but he recovered and didn't fall. The air turned hot and thick as the heat wave moved instantly through the landscape like a swarm of locust. Pieces of debris fell out of the sky landing all around him, some smoking, some on fire.

"Chop! Chop! Chop!"

Dan looked up and saw the black helicopter heading towards him. He ran faster and looked for a heavily wooded area where he could hide.

"Chop! Chop! Chop!"

The blades were slowing down and the chopper was closer, but it was yawing right and left. Dan ran off the road into a small clearing that was surrounded by large North Carolina pines. He tore through chest high baby pine trees like a wild bull. He stumbled several times as tiny string-like vines along the ground occasionally caught his foot and nearly tripped him.

"Whack! Whack!"

Tree branches the size of a tall man crashed down just behind him and some of the smaller branches stung his shoulders like several wild whips. He moved even faster through the tangle of bushes, weeds, and fallen trees.

"Crack! Crack!"

Dan turned and saw the chopper cascading down through the trees less than ten feet from him. A huge fireball erupted seconds



later and ignited several trees and dried leaves on the ground. The flash fire singed his hair and ignited the anti-infrared suit. He felt the intense heat move up his back and reach his neck and instantly he dropped to the ground and rolled, but much of the underbrush was already on fire. He rolled on his back and unzipped the suit - the plastic zipper was already beginning to melt and he could unzip it only down to his chest. He ripped the suit open wider and managed to get his arms out, and then stood up and pushed the suit down his legs. He instinctively stomped the suit to put the flames out and then gathered it into a ball and ran. He stopped at a small clearing, but the heat was still intense especially on his neck and scalp. He put his hand on the back of his head and pulled his hand away quickly – the heat from his blazing hair burned his hand. He dropped to the ground again and rolled, slapping his head as if a swarm of bees had attacked him. He wrapped the infrared suit around his head and the fire went out, but his burned skin felt like the fire was still there endlessly cooking his scalp.

## Chapter 15

Wednesday, May 21, 2008

Foot-high weeds and several varieties of wild flowers engulfed what was left of the deserted road. If it weren't for the deep narrow gullies created by years of farm vehicles traveling on the road, Dan would not have found it. He ran along the road until his legs felt like he was running in the ocean. He sat down on the trunk of a fallen tree and gulped the cool, fresh morning air. He felt the air was always fresher in the morning, not used up by people and other living creatures that stirred after the sun lit that side of the world. He watched the sun peek through the top of the tall pines that surrounded him and he wished he had his cell phone to call Amelia. He had Jake's PDA. Did it have a phone? Of course it did. It had to. Dan pulled it out of his jean pocket and turned it on. Several seconds later, a photo of Jake appeared holding an attractive, red-haired woman by his side. They smiled profusely. A snow-capped mountain stood behind them and both wore plain yellow t-shirts with black letters that said, "*Just Connected*" in a rounded computer-like typeface. Dan was sad that this woman would never see Jake again, that Jake had a life, that he was not

just a weird guy who lived underground in a buried school bus surrounded by electronic equipment.

The word “Searching” appeared on the display of the PDA as the phone searched for a signal. Dan hoped the signal would be strong enough to make a call, and then he remembered something, and the muscles in his stomach tightened, “...*don’t turn it on until you reach the interstate...*” was Jake’s cryptic instructions, “...*because they will be able to track your location and kill you...*” Dan immediately pressed the off button, but the PDA didn’t turn off. He quickly turned it over and fumbled with the back cover to pull out the battery. He pushed and pulled at the back cover moving it in every direction, but it wouldn’t come off. He used his fingernail and pried up one of the seams, but his finger lost its purchase and the PDA slipped out of his grip vanishing into a pile of leaves below him. He frantically moved his hands through the leaves feeling for the device scattering the dried, dead leaves in every direction. He dug and dug through the leaves until he reached the soft earth; the PDA was there with the cover off and the flat, silver, square battery lying next to the cover.

“Phew,” he said and wiped imaginary sweat off his brow.

He picked up the pieces, thrust them into his pockets and started running again. A short time later, Dan stopped at a metal pipe that ran across the width of the road to prevent vehicles and four wheelers from entering the property. A paved road running perpendicular to the dirt road was just ahead, and several yards beyond was the interstate. The gate was hidden from the road with large branches of freshly cut pine. Dan moved closer to the paved road and looked in both directions - to his left was a slow moving tractor towing an open trailer of hay - on his right was a sheriff’s car parked on the side of the road.

“Damn,” he whispered to the forest.

He waited for the tractor to get closer and when it hid him from the sheriff's car, Dan ran out and climbed into the back. He crawled between two bails of hay and covered his feet, hands, and head with the loose strands. An old man in denim overalls with a short white stubble and thick layers of wrinkles steered the machine slowly down the road. When the tractor passed closest to the sheriff's car, Dan put his head down and covered his hair with more hay. He waited a few minutes then looked back - the door swung open and the deputy got out of the car and started walking towards them. Dan braced his feet against one of the bails and laid his hands flat on the floor of the trailer ready to spring out. The deputy stopped at the front of his car, leaned his butt on the hood, and reached into his shirt pocket. He took out a cigarette and put it in his mouth.

Dan slid off the trailer into the four-foot high weeds when the tractor went under an exit ramp of the interstate. He waited for the tractor to get some distance away before coming out.

The road merged with the exit ramp farther down and Dan could see a gas station about a mile away. When he reached the gas station, he walked to the side of the building first, and then moved around to the front and went inside. He did this so that anyone inside would not see that he arrived without a car. The air conditioning was soothing to his bruised and sweaty body and especially to his burned scalp and neck. The cool air smelled of just-brewed coffee, candy, and freshly baked donuts all mixed in a chorus of pleasant smells. He was tempted to buy a cup of coffee and a donut, but he didn't have any cash, only credit cards and he knew the nanosecond the transaction went through they might find him. He walked into the men's room in the back of the store and put the pieces to Jake's PDA back together. He turned the unit on and dialed his home number. The call was transferred to his home

voicemail. He dialed Amelia's cell phone and the call went to her voicemail.

"Amelia! I'm ok. I'll call you later. Leave your phone on."

He frowned and dialed his brother Alex's cell phone.

"Hello Alex? I'm in a real mess. I need your help."

"Dan! What's the matter? Where are you?"

"I'm at a gas station in Crestmont on forty," Dan said looking at the green interstate exit sign. "Some people were chasing me. I need a ride home..."

"Are you ok? Call the police. What are you doing there? Where's your car? How did you get there? What..."

"I can't tell you now. Can you pick me up? I'm sorry I had to call you on your vacation...I can't get in touch with Amelia."

"Not a problem. I'll leave now. I don't think I'm too far away. Terri and the kids can hang out at the hotel. They'll have plenty to do."

"Thanks, Alex. I owe you."

"No you don't. That's what family's for."

Dan hung up and dialed home again, and again got his voicemail. He called Amelia's cell phone and got her voicemail.

Dan left the stuffy bathroom with its flat white walls and a large rust stain on the bottom of the toilet, and headed for the door to wait for Alex. He stopped when he saw a sheriff's car pull into an empty parking space in front of the convenience store. He quickly turned and went down the aisle farthest from the door. The same thin, lanky deputy he had seen before entered. His face was drawn and his skin was gray indicative of a heavy smoker. Dan squatted down, and examined a Milky Way candy bar on the lower shelf, and read the ingredients and the nutritional values on the wrapper. The deputy walked past the aisle and headed towards the bathroom. Dan left, and walked around to the back of the building,

and hid in the tall grass. He laid flat on his stomach and pulled out the PDA and dialed his home phone again.

“Amelia, this is extremely important. Take Kaileigh and go to your sister’s for the week. You **MUST** go. Park my truck at the pool. I’ll explain later. Love you.”

The PDA rang with a two short tones and Dan moved farther into the woods. He pulled out the tiny stylus and tapped on the display to open the email. It had no subject or text, just a photo attached. He tapped it again to open the attachment. It was a holograph of a single green eye, a close-up of a retina.

## Chapter 16

**Wednesday late afternoon, May 21, 2008**

The Chevy van pulled up to a two-story yellow house blending in perfectly with all the other vans and SUVs that breezed through this middle class neighborhood.

“Thanks for taking time out of your vacation and all,” Dan said as he got out of Alex’s car in front of his driveway. “You don’t know how good it is to be home.”

“What else could I do? You were stranded in no man’s land and I happen to be close by. Call me next week and we’ll get together. It was good seeing you bro.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to spend the night and drive back in the morning?”

“Thanks anyway, but Terri would be up all night worrying. It’s only a few hours drive.”

Alex drove off and Dan felt around his pockets for his keys.

*“Shit! I lost my keys, too!”* he thought.

He went to the back of his house. He stood on a large rock and reached up into the feeding tray of large white birdhouse on a tall pine tree he and Kaileigh had built from scrap pieces of wood. He felt around pushing away what was left of the seed Amelia had put

out yesterday. When he felt a small plastic box, he brought it down and opened it. He walked around to the front door and let himself into the house. He peered into the garage from the door in the kitchen and saw that Amelia's SUV was gone. Then he found a note in Amelia's handwriting on the center island in the kitchen.

*"Dan, we left for Heather's and I'm worried about you. I miss you. Call me at Heather's. I couldn't find my cell phone. Love you."*

Dan grabbed the cordless phone off its wall cradle and dialed Amelia's cell phone number, but it went to voicemail. He hung up and took the cordless phone upstairs to the master bedroom and pressed the redial button. A faint muffled ringing sound came from the bed. He picked up the bed skirt and the sound grew louder. Amelia's cell phone was there. Amelia kept her purse on a small wicker table nearby and it must have fallen spilling out the contents including the cell phone. He went into the bathroom and started the shower. When he came out, he glanced out the window and noticed a black SUV driving past the house. The SUV turned around in the bulb of the cul-de-sac then slowly moved past the house. Dan dressed as quickly as he could, grabbed bunches of socks and underwear, several pairs of pants and t-shirts, and rushed down to the basement. He sat at the monitor and replayed the last 15 minutes caught on the security cameras. The digital video showed the SUV going past his house with the two men talking and looking towards the house. Both wore dark jackets, white shirts and ties. Dan went back several hours and found when Amelia and Kaileigh left the house. He watched them get into Amelia's SUV and drive away. He watched for another 3 minutes for any vehicles that may have followed her, but none appeared.

He put a laptop in a dark gray backpack he obtained at a software trade show several years ago along with his extra clothes, and went back into his bedroom. He turned on Amelia's cell



phone and looked in the call list and wrote down the number with the 828 area code – the number of Jake’s PDA. Then he turned on the PDA and dialed Heather, his sister-in-law.

“Is Amelia and Kaileigh there yet?”

“Dan! Dan! Amelia is worried sick about you. Where are you? How can she reach you? What’s going on? No, they’re not here yet.”

“I’m fine. I’m home. I’m heading over to your place. Here, take this number down. Do you have a pen?”

“Hold on...okay.”

Dan read the number.

“Where is that?” Heather asked.

“It’s a cell phone that I’m using. I lost mine. Have Amelia call me as soon as she gets there. Tell her to leave a message if she doesn’t get through. I’ll leave here as soon as it gets dark.”

“Well, that’s not good. Why don’t you leave now? You should call the police if you’re in trouble. You know running from the law doesn’t pay...”

“Heather! I’m not running from the police. I’m not in trouble. Just have Amelia call me, okay?”

“But I can’t get her on her cell phone.”

“That’s because it’s here. I found it under the bed. It must have fallen out of her purse. When did Amelia say she was going to get there?”

“Around six,” Heather said.

“Okay. It’s five thirty now so she should be there shortly. I should be there around ten or so.”

When it was dark enough, Dan went out the back door and headed towards the neighborhood pool. His toreador red Ford F150 was in the parking lot where Amelia had left it earlier. He bent down and reached into the opening in the front bumper just under the grill and pushed his arm up to his elbow into the space. He

moved his hand around searching for a small metal box that contained a tiny remote. He had placed it there after he had locked his keys in his car while on vacation in Florida several years ago, and now he always hid a remote or a key somewhere on the outside of his vehicles. He continued searching for the box moving his hand all around the inside of the bumper and along the front of the radiator.

“Damn!” he said to himself.

He took out Jake’s PDA and dialed his house. He counted to three then punched in an 8-digit code, “94735377”, which spelled out “wireless” on the keypad. The truck doors unlocked several seconds later activated by a program he had created that sent a signal to the truck unlocking the doors. He used a newly introduced off-the-shelf software package that made programming as easy as creating a web page. He slipped into the truck and took off a small panel on the side of the dashboard that housed the truck’s fuses. He turned the panel over and pulled off a keyless remote taped to the inside. He held in one of the buttons and the truck started. He drove out of the parking lot without lights. At the first stoplight, he pulled out his wallet and slipped the micro card drive into the card reader slot just below the radio. A small LCD panel lit up with the word, “*Display?*” Dan said yes and a dim orange facsimile of a computer’s desktop projected on the inside of the windshield.

Dan said, “Evening home security.”

The commands were sent to the computers at Dan’s house and the home security system was activated. When Dan released his foot off the brake pedal, the display automatically reduced to a narrow horizontal bar at the bottom of the windshield. He switched on the radio and headed for his sister-in-law’s home in Corolla, about a four-hour drive.

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About an hour later, Jake's PDA rang and Dan saw Heather's number on the display.

"Hello Amelia," he said. "Are you..."

"It's Heather. They're still not here. I'm getting worried. Do you think they broke down somewhere?"

"Possibly, but we just had her car serviced. I'll keep an eye out for them. If they don't get there in a few minutes, call the police and ask them to look for them. Then call me."

"Do you think they were in an accident?"

"I hope not."

Dan pulled into the first service station off the highway and parked next to the pumps.

"Display," he said to the computer. "GPS. Track Amelia's SUV." The computer started a Global Positioning System program that would track Amelia's SUV via satellite. He waited several minutes for the program to load the North Carolina map and lock onto the satellite signals. The hourglass twirled and twirled, then a window popped up. "*Amelia's SUV not found.*" He set the program to search indefinitely and got out to fill up the tank. As the pump worked, Dan looked into the large glass window of the store, where a skinny young man chatted on a cordless phone in a very animated manner. Dan guessed he was talking to his girlfriend by the wild movements of his hands and arms. A wide, deep smile frequented the young man's small round face. A second later everything disappeared. It was dark everywhere, except for the light on the windshield from the truck's computer. The young man came out with a flashlight and approached Dan.

"What happened?" the young man asked his eyes wide with worry.

"Looks like a blackout. The streetlights are out."

Dan reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet.

"Can you shine that here?"

The clerk complied. Dan reached in and grabbed two twenties. He handed the bills to the clerk.

The clerk moved the light towards the pump and read the amount on the readout.

"I can't give you change. The register locks automatically when the power goes out."

"That's ok. Keep the change."

"THANKS!"

Dan got back into his truck and launched the remote video surveillance program at his house. A message displayed on the windshield, "Servers unavailable" confirming that the blackout spanned all the way back to Raleigh.

Dan checked the GPS program and it was still searching. He turned on the radio, but none of the radio stations played music - only excited DJs telling about the events of the past fifteen minutes.

*"New York and Chicago have had simultaneous blackouts along with several states on the East coast. The governors of Illinois and New York have mobilized more than ten thousand National Guardsmen. We can't confirm it, but there are reports of demands from a terrorist group claiming responsibility for the blackouts. We'll keep you updated as we learn more."*

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When he reached the Outer Banks, Dan slowed down and looked for signs for NC 12, a single-lane highway that ended at the beach. The road was covered with a light layer of sand blowing off the tall dunes on each side and more than once Dan felt the tires slip when the road curved sharply. There were no lights anywhere except for the randomly placed vacation homes on stilts that stood like sentinels guarding the road, the beach, and the land. It was like he was the only one there following the short funnel of light created by the truck's lights, watching the dunes continuously

move past. For several moments, it seemed like a trip to nowhere. The northern section of NC 12 was built in 1984 closest to the ocean instead of in the middle or close to the sound side. Since then it has been the “lifeline” for the tiny communities that rose up out of the sand dunes and gave life to this narrow spit of sand called the Outer Banks. It brings vacationers and money to the area in the summer to the lavish health clubs, upscale boutiques, and lush golf courses. The road is also the primary evacuation route when hurricanes approach the coast. The paved highway, unofficially called Ocean Trail by natives, ended three miles from Heather’s house – the rest of the road was a makeshift sand path created by the residents who lived in the expansive homes that dotted the beach. The path was often washed away during an abnormal high tide and during storms, and then recreated again by the resilient local residents.

Dan stopped where the pavement met the sand, and put the truck into 4-wheel drive, turned on the fog lights, and pressed the accelerator to the floor. The hemi-caliber 6.2 liter V-8 released its force of 550 horses to all four wheels and the truck fish-tailed when the tires hit the sand. Five seconds later at 60 miles per hour, Dan lifted his foot off the accelerator and looked frantically from side to side for Amelia’s SUV. All he saw was the naked sand created by the tunnel of light cast by his truck.

Dan pulled into Heather’s driveway looking for Amelia’s SUV, but it wasn’t there. He stopped the truck, and put his head on the steering wheel, and let out a deep sigh. Heather ran out of the house and Dan opened the door.

“Have you heard from them?” Dan yelled over the roar of the surf.

“Yes! Amelia called and said two state troopers pulled her over and then two CIA agents pulled up and told her to follow them to

CIA headquarters in Washington to meet you,” Heather explained on the verge of tears.

“That’s a crock of shit! I’ve been trying to locate her car since I left the house with my GPS,” Dan said. “Did Amelia sound worried or upset?”

“Yes. When I told her you were coming here she gasped and then the phone went dead. I called back several times, but couldn’t get through. I thought she would be happy to hear that you were safe. Are you having problems at home?”

“Oh, shit! Oh, shit! Why didn’t you call me?”

“I did several times, but I couldn’t get through. The service said your phone was not available or turned off.”

“Damn cell phone coverage! What time did she call?” Dan said his voice breaking.

“About an hour ago...maybe longer.”

Dan put his hands over his face.

“Oh, no! No! No!” Dan cried. “They’re gone!”

“Dan! What’s the matter? What are you talking about?” Heather asked.

His sadness was contagious and she hugged him tears flowing.

“You don’t understand. They weren’t CIA. That’s what I was trying to save her and Kaileigh from. What am I going to do? They’re gone. They’re gone!”

They stood there hugging and crying for several minutes. A cool, moist wind poured off the dark ocean and dampened their spirits further.

“You don’t know anything for sure, Dan. Come inside. Have you eaten? Maybe, Amelia will call back,” Heather said.

They walked towards the house and then Dan stopped.

“Yeah, you’re right, Heather. We don’t know for sure and that’s why I have to go right now, right now!”

“To Washington?”

“I don’t know.”

“At least rest a bit. Get something to eat,” Heather shouted back over the roar of the breaking waves.

“No time. Wait! Do you have caller ID? Was there a number when Amelia called?” Dan shouted as he walked back towards his truck.

“It said unknown number.”

Dan’s shoulders drooped a bit and he walked a little slower. He got back into his truck and then got out again.

“The sonofabitches must be monitoring the phones. How would they know where she was going? You may not be safe here. Call Josh. You should stay with him at the base for a few days.”

“Camp Lejeune? I hate that place! Besides he’s supposed to come home this weekend. I haven’t seen him for more than a month...”

Heather’s cell phone rang and she pulled it out of her jeans pocket. “Speaking of the devil!” Her face lit up.

“Hi, honey! I can’t wait to see you! When you coming home?”

Heather stopped talking and Dan watched the glow in her face slowly fade as she listened to her husband on the other end.

“Okay. Okay. I’ll leave now. Dan is here. He’ll make sure I get out ok. He was supposed to meet Amelia here, but they never got here. He’s going to look for them now.”

She was silent for a while and looked at Dan.

“No. We don’t know where they are, but they should have been here around six. Okay. I love you. See you in a few hours.”

“What’s going on?” Dan asked.

“The base has been put on alert because of the blackouts and he wants me to get a hotel there. He’s not coming home this weekend so if we want to be together I have to go there,” she explained sadly. “Come on inside. I have to pack a few things and then we’ll go.”

“Hurry up.”

“Okay.”

Dan went back to the truck and retrieved Jake’s PDA where he had placed it in an adjustable phone holder secured to the dashboard. He looked at the windshield and the GPS program was still searching for Amelia’s SUV. He let out a deep breath and then walked back to the house, up the long wood steps that ended on a wide wrap-around porch. He sat in an Adirondack chair swing that hung from the porch roof. The chair faced the ocean and the ocean was now a black void that pushed a cool, damp wind onshore. He looked out into the blackness and saw the clear emerald water breaking into frothy white waves. The breeze was warmer and the sun bright. Amelia sat next to him and they held hands while the chair gently rocked back and forth seemingly in sync with the waves.

“I’m so glad we met and got married. I’m gonna love having kids with you...our kids. Let’s have a boy and girl or maybe twins. Twins run in my family you know. We could have twins,” Amelia said, her eyes sparkling brighter than the sun glistening off the breaking waves.

“Whatever you want,” Dan said. “Twins would be nice as long as they are as beautiful as you.”

“They will be with your good looks,” Amelia replied. “I count my blessings everyday that I have you. You’re so handsome.”

“Me, too...for you.”

They stared into each other’s eyes and gently kissed. Dan saw his future, his entire universe in her eyes. Suddenly, the ocean was a black void again like his life was now without his family. He took a deep breath and shuddered. Tears rolled from his eyes as he reminisced about the week they spent at Heather’s years ago. This may be all that he had left of Amelia... just memories, he thought.



The PDA in his pocket vibrated. He took out the stylus and tapped on the blinking icon. The video player automatically launched a video. Jake was standing between two pine trees in a wooded area.

*“If you see this, I’m gone and my work is finished. I have programmed various computers to send messages and instructions at various times. This is my dead man’s switch. A file will arrive with all my logins and passwords for all the systems I had access to. A worm virus has infected the power grids and cell phone networks and we can’t eradicate it. We suspect Synertron Systems is behind the blackouts. You can gain access using the eye scan and voiceprint sent earlier. You must disable their power source by transmitting a virus that will be sent to this device shortly. Insertion protocols on this device should defeat their defenses and allow the virus through. Failure is not an option. My only regret is that I couldn’t be there to do it myself. God bless America and you. Beware of directed energy pulses (DEPs). They use the cell phone towers to transmit the energy by locking onto a particular cell phone that has registered with the cell. They have access to every cell phone. The pulses destroy everything electronic around a twenty five-foot radius of the targeted cell phone. Keep in mind that anything living caught in the burst is cooked from the inside out.”*

The video stopped with Jake staring out from the PDA with a confident smirk on his face. Dan let the tears roll down his face and drip off his chin. The situation was more real than he could imagine.

## **Chapter 17**

**Thursday, May 22, 2008**

Heather entered the living room with a fully stuffed Army duffle bag and stopped to look into a small octagonal mirror hanging in the foyer to arrange her wavy dark brown hair. You would never know she was Amelia's sister. She was 44, but carried herself like she was still in her twenties. Her arms were muscular for her petite size and her face was intimidating until she spoke. Her voice was soft and nurturing, yet she couldn't have children. Dan always said she would make a great mother, but she would never have that unless she adopted. After several attempts and subsequent failures due to shoddy lawyers and strange laws, she and Josh lost all hope. The years passed. She was Kaileigh's favorite aunt and often Heather would shower her with gifts anytime she saw her – treated her as if Kaileigh were her own daughter and Dan believed that Heather saw Kaileigh as a daughter she shared with her sister...a daughter she could never have. She blew out the three candles in the living room and pulled the door behind her. She switched on a small LED flashlight that provided enough light for both of them to find their cars in the damp, wet darkness.

“I’ll follow you,” Dan said.

Heather walked under her house past the stilts and got into a yellow Hummer. Dan walked over and knocked on the window.

“When did you get this?” he asked.

“About a month ago. Josh always wanted one and we got a good deal through the Army,” Heather explained.

“What does he do there now?”

“Counter intelligence.”

“Oh.”

Dan got into his truck and waited for Heather to pull in front of him. She took off creating a rooster tail of wet sand that rained onto Dan’s truck like a hailstorm. Soon the taillights of the Hummer vanished into the black ocean mist. Dan pressed hard on the accelerator and seconds later the dim red lights appeared as two tiny red eyes staring ominously back at him. As they approached Duck, a tiny sound side village named because of the large numbers of waterfowl that once flocked there during the migrating seasons, the PDA rang.

“Hello?”

“This is where you get off. Make a right onto Sea Oats Trail and follow the signs to the Croatan Highway, one fifty eight north. Be careful, Dan and find my sister and niece. I love them, too,” her voice cracking.

“Nothing is going to stop me. They are all I have,” Dan said.

The computer started beeping and several small windows popped up inside the windshield. Dan took his foot off the accelerator.

“Heather! The GPS found Amelia’s SUV! The computer is calculating the location!”

“Oh, thank God!”

“They’re in Wilmington! They’re in Wilmington!” Dan shouted. “What’s the shortest way to get there?”

“Follow me,” Heather said. “Take sixty four and get onto seventeen; it goes straight to Wilmington. Oh, and don’t go over thirty five on the bridge. There’s usually a cop on the other side.”

“Okay.”

Heather picked up speed and Dan kept up with her this time. They turned right onto Route 264/64 and approached the two-lane bridge over Roanoke Sound. Dan wondered if Amelia had escaped her captors and fled to Wilmington or if they took her there by force. The port city was certainly a good place to make a person disappear – ships came and went from all over the world and smuggling was no stranger there.

Several minutes later, Dan saw the Hummer slow down and he had to brake to avoid a collision. Then the UWB prototype phone started its high-pitched electronic scream - the same strange sound it made in the park when the birds flew into the ground. He grabbed the phone and pushed the buttons, but the phone still sang its strange electronic song. Heather’s taillights had disappeared again and he accelerated to catch up. The Hummer slowly drifted to the right and scrapped the metal guardrail spawning super white sparks that melted into the darkness. The Hummer then drifted to the left and hit the guardrail igniting more sparks. Ahead a speck of light appeared in the left lane and rapidly increased in size. Dan floored the accelerator and pulled along side of the Hummer pushing it against the guardrail. The metal screamed as it was dented, twisted and ripped as the two vehicles did their death dance on the narrow bridge. Dan’s rear tires lost traction and the truck began to skid as it was pushed left by the Hummer. Dan quickly turned the wheel left, the tires gripped and the truck straightened out, but not without slamming into the guardrail on the left lighting up the darkness with a flash of white hot sparks. The speck of light turned into two distinct headlights and Dan accelerated again and quickly moved in front of the Hummer. He pressed the brake

slightly. The brighter light from his stoplights illuminated the front of the Hummer enough for Dan to see that the SUV was drifting left again. Dan moved back into the lane and waited for the Hummer to drift back into the right lane. The oncoming car was closer now.

“Hurry up! Get over, get over,” Dan said to himself.

When the Hummer finally moved into the right lane, Dan pressed the brake pedal and the Hummer bumped hard into the rear of his truck. He pressed the brake harder to slow both vehicles and his truck began to skid into the left lane heading directly in the path of the oncoming car. He released the brake and turned the wheel right and the rear of the truck skidded left. The Hummer also began to drift back into the left lane.

“No!” Dan screamed.

The oncoming car flashed by so close Dan saw the side view mirror pass only a few inches from his door. The car, a tiny Mini Cooper, veered to the left barely squeezing past the two out of control vehicles and blowing its horn the entire time. Dan turned the truck left to bring the vehicle out of the skid and when the tires gripped the road again, he applied the brake slowly bringing both trucks to a stop in the middle of the two lanes. He ran to Heather’s door and found the Hummer with no lights and no engine running. He knocked on the window, but Heather did not respond. He pulled the door handle – it was locked. He ran back to his truck and got a steel flashlight out of the toolbox in the bed. He slammed the end of it against the window several times before the window crumbled into tiny shards that melted away into the darkness. He opened the door and Heather’s body fell out. He instinctively caught her and lowered her gently onto the pavement.

“Heather! Heather!” Dan shouted.

He put his hand under her head to lift it, and quickly pulled it away. Her head was hot and her skin began to undulate - her face

grew puffy and large. The skin on her right cheek cracked open and the blood that oozed out boiled as it ran down the side of her face. The skin on her left cheek began to bubble and burst spewing hot blood in every direction. The skin on her arms and hands also bubbled and split. Her face turned brown like burnt cheese on a pizza and shriveled around her skull. Her eyes popped out of their sockets and her skin began to smoke.

“No! No! NOT HER! NOT HER!” Dan shouted into the darkness.

Dan could barely run – his body shook from fear and horror as he stumbled upon his truck like a drunk. He pulled on the door handle, but he was too weak to open the door. A rumbling started in his stomach and quickly moved up his chest and burst out of his mouth spewing thick vomit onto the door and the clean black pavement. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and pulled hard on the door handle nearly falling backward as the door swung open. He tumbled into the seat and brought himself to look into the rear view mirror. What he saw only intensified his horror – flames licked upward from what remained of Heather’s body. He couldn’t keep his hands on the steering wheel - they shook uncontrollably along with the rest of his body.

## Chapter 18

Thursday, May 22, 2008

Dan's shaking stopped and the image of Heather's burning, blistering skin began to fade from his mind's eye. The highway appeared to come into focus, to reappear out of nowhere - its golden reflectors illuminating the road in an endless oncoming stream. He didn't remember driving the past twenty or so miles and he shuddered at the thought. He glanced down at the computer display on the windshield and saw that the GPS program was still locked onto Amelia's SUV. Bold letters on the top of the screen displayed, "*ETA - 2 hours 18 minutes*". His fear and shock turned to anger, and he switched on the radio and dialed 911 from the PDA.

"Nine eleven. What's your emergency?" the dispatcher's voice came through the truck's stereo speakers.

"My wife and daughter may have been in an accident..."

Dan pressed a small button below the radio and the screen zoomed in on Amelia's location. Streets, which were not featured before, instantly appeared and the program even measured the distance between intersections and landmarks.

"Do you know where?"

“Yeah, it looks like her car may be off Gordon Road about 100 yards east of Interstate 40 between Curtis Lane and Barton’s Way. I think that’s a wooded area,” Dan explained.

“Okay. I know that area. I’ll call the Sheriff’s Department and request a patrol car. Are they injured? Does she have a cell phone or one of the emergency call services?”

“No, she doesn’t have any of those. I’m two hours away and I need the police to check on her.”

“I understand, sir. Can I get your name and phone number?”

Dan gave the information and hung up. Seconds later the PDA chimed. A new message arrived. Dan opened the message.

*“Keep the phone off. Use it only when moving 36 mph or above. They can track you and use the DEW from the cell tower to send a fatal pulse,”* the message said.

“THANKS YOU FUCKING ASSHOLES! YOU’RE TOO LATE!”

He wiped away the tears that trickled down his cheek and threw the PDA down on the passenger seat. The UWB phone came to life again and began its strange song of impending death – the high-pitched electronic squawking. Dan accelerated and within seconds the speedometer read 80 miles per hour. The phone still screamed its death ring. Then the truck started to lose acceleration despite Dan holding the gas pedal to the floor.

*“They’re messing with the fucking computer,”* he thought.

He frantically moved his hand around the seat looking for the PDA he had just thrown there not out of fear, but out of anger. He had only a few seconds at most to turn it off, he thought. They were tracking him by the PDA and if he turned it off they would lose him. He searched the entire seat, but it was gone. The truck kept losing speed. He switched on the cab lights and looked anxiously around and then stretched his neck and body closer to the passenger seat. A glint of silver reflected back. The PDA had



fallen between the seat and the door. He unlatched his seat belt and stretched his body closer to retrieve the phone, but he could barely reach it. He ripped the back off and was about to take the battery out when the truck tilted violently to the right slamming him down on the console. His ribs screamed in pain. The PDA disappeared from his hand and he pulled himself back up using the steering wheel as an anchor. He instinctively hit the brakes, but the truck did not stop - its tires slipped on the moist grass as it careened down a steep embankment heading for a stand of trees. Dan pushed the shift lever into a lower gear, took his foot off the brake and yanked the wheel to the left. The truck slowly responded sliding ever so slowly to the left. The first tree began to grow larger and larger as the truck swerved and bounced toward the tiny forest. The rear quarter panel slammed into the tree. Dan was thrown to the right again onto the console. More pain from his ribs. He grabbed the steering wheel and pulled himself back up and slammed the brakes again, but the truck continued to bump and bounce down the hill. The truck headed for another tree and Dan released the brake and turned right. The truck slowly responded missing the tree by only inches. The ground leveled out and Dan slowed the truck carefully insuring that the tires would not slip on the damp grass. Finally the truck eased to a stop.

*"That was close,"* he thought.

The PDA was on the floor, the battery cover missing. He found the battery under the seat and put it back into the phone making sure it did not turn on. He stared at the dim orange glow of the instrument panel and took a deep breath.

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When Dan entered Wilmington, he took the right onto Gordon Road from Route 17 following the red star that represented Amelia's SUV on the GPS display on his windshield. About a mile down the road, he turned left into an open grassy field and

switched the truck into 4-wheel drive. The truck bounced along hitting small gullies of stagnant water that splashed up as the tires plunged down into the muck. The pungent, rotting smell of dead foliage and black earth wafted into the cab. He turned the over-the-cab safari lights on and searched for the white Toyota Highlander. Amelia's SUV should be right here according to the GPS system in his truck, but the accuracy of the unit wasn't always perfect. Then he saw it. A flash of white about three car lengths ahead that lit up the darkness. He floored the gas pedal and all four tires whipped up continuous gobs of mud as the truck dug in and lunged forward. Then he slammed the brakes. The white flash was the shell of an old stove someone had dumped there.

"Fucking assholes!" Dan yelled. He hated when people left parts of their discarded lives anywhere they pleased instead of doing the right thing and paying to have it hauled to the city dump.

When he looked at the GPS display again, the red star had disappeared. He turned the unit on and off thinking it was malfunctioning, and initiated another search for Amelia's Toyota. Dan started his spiral dance again ever watching the screen for the red star when the UWB phone suddenly came to life again. He floored the truck and watched the speedometer until the needle hit 36 mph – the safe speed from the death pulses. He switched off his lights and raced through the darkness toward the road. A giant plume of mud and steam exploded in front of the truck and Dan slammed on the brakes. The truck slid forward then sideways as he turned the wheel away from the geyser of death and floored it again. Another geyser erupted behind the truck and sprayed mud and rocks into the pickup bed. He pushed hard again on the gas pedal and the truck bounced like an angry bull in a rodeo as its four wheels dug into the swampy, mushy earth. Dan switched on the parking lights and glanced at the speedometer - the needle danced between 25 and 30 miles per hour as the truck struggled to claw its

way out of the muck field. Finally the needle appeared to hover near the 36 mph mark. The truck climbed a small hill then plunged downward rapidly and Dan hit the brakes, but the truck kept descending until it plunged into a small pond at the bottom of the hill. Large waves of water flared out from the sides of the truck and the vehicle was surrounded by water up to its wheel wells. Dan floored the truck again, but it did not move – its wheels slipped and bounced on the slimy bottom. He immediately shifted into reverse and again the wheels slipped. The UWB phone was still squawking and Dan shifted continuously moving the truck forward and backward. The water next to him exploded upward spewing large plumbs of steam, mud, and rocks that sprayed the truck like machine gun fire. Seconds later another explosion erupted at the front of the truck and then a third at the rear. He put the shift lever in drive and held the gas pedal to the floor; the tires spun in vain and the water continued to boil all around him from the multiple pulses. Another explosion hit at the rear of the truck and lifted it ten feet out of the water as if it were a child's toy. Dan kept the pedal to the floor and when the truck came down it lurched forward out of the giant mud hole spewing rooster tails of water and mud from the rear wheels.

Dan didn't slow down when he approached the road seconds later. Instead, he quickly scanned the road left and right searching for headlights of any oncoming vehicles. Dan fishtailed onto the road casting off mud in all directions from the deep threads in the tires. The sound of the clumps of mud hitting the wheel wells faded as the truck picked up speed. Then the cab was filled with a horn blowing as lights flashed pass him from another pickup truck that zoomed around him. He instinctively veered to the right and the wheels went off the road into the lower dirt and grass, pulling the truck violently to the right. Dan yanked the wheel left and the truck slowly slid back onto the road. Dan glanced at the GPS

program displayed on the windshield and couldn't believe the red star for Amelia's SUV had reappeared. This time Amelia's SUV was in Raleigh – 150 miles north.

## Chapter 19

Thursday, May 22, 2008

As Dan drove along Interstate 40 towards Raleigh, he noticed two dots of light dance on the highway through his rear view mirror. He steered into the right lane and accelerated slightly and the lights did the same. He changed lanes again and they mirrored his movements. Several minutes later, Dan moved in front of a large tractor-trailer and watched the side-view mirror. The lights rapidly grew in size, and then passed. It was a state trooper. The trooper accelerated away until the red taillights vanished into the darkness. That was the second trooper that passed him in the past half hour. Dan looked over at the passenger seat and suddenly Amelia was sitting there.

*"It was a great day; don't you think? Kaileigh had so much fun. She loves the beach," Amelia said.*

*"Yeah, it was. I had a blast flying the kite with her. She was surprised we could fly it so high. It was funny she kept asking me to pull it back in because she was afraid an airplane would hit it."*

*"You are really good with her except when you lost track of her and the tide was taking her out to sea," Amelia added.*

*"I didn't lose track of her. I was sleeping. YOU were supposed to be watching her," Dan added.*

*"Well, how would I know to watch her when you didn't tell me you were going to sleep," Amelia said.*

*"Did I know I was going to fall asleep?"*

*"Well, you could have," Amelia, added. "You were probably staring at that half-naked girl in front of us."*

*"I WAS NOT! That girl was young enough to be my daughter," Dan jabbed.*

*"You men are all alike," she added.*

*"I WAS NOT STARING!" Dan yelled.*

*"What? What's going on?" Kaileigh said with a sleepy, tired voice.*

*"You woke her up with your yelling!" Amelia said. "It's nothing, honey. Just go back to sleep now. We will be home soon."*

*"At least you can apologize," Amelia said her voice on the verge of tears.*

*Dan was silent.*

*"I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. I'm so sorry," Dan said to the empty seat.*

He wiped the tears away and noticed the red star was still on the windshield.

"Arrival time," he told the computer and the virtual map shrunk slightly and text appeared next to the red star:

*"NC State Fairgrounds – ETD 25 miles (40.2 kilometers) – ETA 35 minutes."*

A half hour later, Dan turned into the main entrance of the fairgrounds and noticed the rolling red lights of the ambulance and the blue spinning lights of two sheriff's cars at the far corner of the parking lot. His hands shook and his chest heaved as he thought both his wife and daughter had been killed. He blinked the tears out of his eyes and aimed the truck directly for the ambulance.

Four sheriffs' officers instantly crouched behind their cars and drew their 9mm pistols. Dan slammed the brakes and the truck fishtailed to the left, its tires skidding on the asphalt before it stopped a car length from the first patrol car.

"No! NO! It can't be! They can't be dead! NO! NO!" Dan cried as he jumped out of the truck and ran towards the ambulance.

He rushed past the first patrol car and a crouching officer jumped out and tripped him. Dan landed hard on his chest. Another officer quickly fell on top and pulled his arms up behind his back. Dan forcefully rolled to one side throwing the officer off. He stumbled and fell against the patrol car and was knocked unconscious. Dan pushed the other back with both legs and started running towards the ambulance. He opened the rear doors, approached the black body bag, and pulled the zipper open. Seconds later, the officers rushed in and found Dan lying on the floor...unconscious.

## Chapter 20

**Monday, April 21, 2008**

“Hello, Betty? Could you call the new intern into my office right away?”

“Gary Stakhower? The one that started last week?”

“Yes, that’s him.”

The gray-suited man wearing a bright red tie took the Bluetooth headset from his ear and placed it down on his glass-topped desk. He momentarily looked at his pale reflection in the glass top noticing that more gray had grown in just above his ears. He frowned at the discovery and then touched the email icon on the LCD monitor on the desk. He typed “ICER” in the send to box using a wireless keyboard nearby and then turned off the monitor.

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Gary Stakhower scrolled through several hundred email accounts bored out of his mind. His boss asked him to check the list against employees who left Synertron Systems, Inc. in the last week. His phone rang and he snatched the receiver.

“Mr. Stakhower? This is Betty, Mr. Philips’ assistant. He would like to see you right away if you are not busy. Just take the elevator to the 50<sup>th</sup> floor.”



“Do you know what this is about?”

“No. He just asked to see you.”

“Okay.” He was relieved of the diversion.

On his way, he stopped into the restroom near his office cubicle, relieved himself, and washed his hands for several minutes over and over. His mother always told him to make sure he had clean hands especially when he was away from home. He left the restroom reluctantly as if he forgot something and headed for the elevator.

The elevator call button glowed a dull green and reminded him of the eerie illumination from cat eyes at night when the light reflected off the back of the retinas. *Spooky*, he thought. When the brushed steel doors slowly opened, Jeanine Braggloisi was standing by the control panel.

“Where are you going at this hour?” she asked, looking up at his emerald green eyes, her face aglow. She was his contact during his first week to acquaint him to the corporate culture and show him the building’s facilities. She pulled back her flowing black curly hair and shifted the folders she carried to reveal the shape of her breasts.

“Some guy named Phillips on the fiftieth floor wants to see me. How do they expect me to get my work done if I have walk all over the building!” he protested.

Her dark round brown eyes widened and her jaw dropped. “You, fool! John Phillips is the president of the company. Either you did something really bad or really good,” she explained. She started out of the elevator shaking her head.

“He is? Oh. I’ve got to go then.” He jammed his finger into the 50<sup>th</sup> floor button.

“Lots of luck whatever it is,” she smiled. “Call me later and let me know what happened.”

Stakhower said nothing as the doors closed. He knew he wouldn't call her; she was not his type. He liked thin girls. He thought about that for a while: did he like thin girls because that's all he has seen in the magazines and on TV growing up or did he really prefer thin woman? In his teen years, he worked in a commercial bakery and a young man about his age befriended him. The young man was from Italy and Stakhower always had to ask to him to repeat what he said because of the way he massacred the English language with his thick Italian accent and poor English. One thing he did understand was when a plump older woman passed by their work area one day, and the young Italian boy carried on like an excited chimpanzee. Stakhower was embarrassed and hid behind one of the cookie ovens occasionally peeking from the edge to watch the unfolding spectacle. He often wondered why his Italian friend liked plump, rounded woman. Was it because he grew up in a culture that adored woman with full figures or was that really his own personal preference? One thing was for sure; he knew he wasn't attracted to Braggloisi. Besides, she was too friendly, too pushy for him. She was throwing her friendship at him and he was uncomfortable with that. He liked passive girls not the aggressive types that worked at SSI. Besides, his mother always said aggressive girls are why we have so many problems in society today.

The elevator stopped at the 10<sup>th</sup> floor and a dark-skinned woman with a multicolored flowered dress stepped into the elevator. She smiled at Stakhower and pushed the button for the 14<sup>th</sup> floor. Stakhower thought about getting home to his two-room apartment and playing *Extreme Star Troopers*, a real time computer game with more than 12 million players worldwide. He had just ordered ultra high-speed wireless Internet access and now the game was even more exciting. It was a space fantasy game similar to all the medieval-themed games that were popular for the past two

decades. He had earned enough dolgemes to buy and command a fleet of 100 other space mercenaries who had to follow his orders to overtake and control a small planet. If they succeeded they would earn millions of dolgemes and could buy more ships and weapons. Tonight, he was going to take the planet, Sirius. The elevator doors opened and two tall men in dark blue suits entered. If it weren't for one of them slightly brushing against Stakhower, he would still be planning his mission to Sirius.

"Are you getting off?" one of the men asked.

"Oh, yeah."

Stakhower left the elevator and his feet sunk into sand dollar-colored carpet. He ran his fingers down the paneled teak walls feeling their varnished smoothness as he walked towards the matching teak reception desk immediately in front of him.

"Can I help you?"

"Yeah. I'm here to see Mr. Phillips."

Betty looked down momentarily and back at Stakhower.

"Gary Stakhower?" she said.

He nodded.

"Come with me."

She seemed to slip out of the round desk through an opening in the side and then led him behind the desk through a foyer and into Phillips' office. Phillips' office was round with glass windows curving around more than three fourths of the 800-square-foot space.

"Gary Stakhower. Have a seat," Phillips said standing behind his teak desk and smiling. He extended his hand and the two men shook.

"What a great view!" Stakhower said as he lowered himself into the dark leathered chair. "That's the Capitol building over there, right?"

"Yes, that's it," Phillips said sitting down.

“The BB&T building looks small from up here.”

“Yes, it does. We’re sort of the World Trade Center of Raleigh. A dozen or so companies have their antennas on our roof. TV, radio, cell phone, and microwave they’re all up there. There’s a business advantage to having the tallest building in the Triangle.”

“This building is taller than the Glen-Tree building at Crabtree Mall? I thought they were the same size.”

“Yes, Glen-Tree is forty two stories.”

Phillips put on an oval pair of tortoise shell reading glasses and looked at several sheets of paper.

“I have a special assignment for you, Gary, and I hope you will decide to take it. Is it all right to call you Gary?”

“Sure.”

“It’s not your typical job with your networking background, but it does involve your computer skills,” Phillips went on.

“Yeah. Sure.”

“You know what our company does right?”

“Sort of. I’ve scanned the web site once or twice.”

“We produce all the chipsets in ninety five percent of all the wireless devices in the world including equipment used by the military of several nations. Our chipsets are the first software-designed radio units in the world meaning that one chipset in any of our radios can assimilate any radio frequency that is available as long as the software is loaded. You can use your cell phone to open your garage door or listen to police and fire bands. You can talk on your cell phone, and then connect it to your laptop and surf the Internet at high speed while still talking. Police, fire and EMT radios are all interchangeable. One unit does it all as long as you have the software,” Phillips explained. “We found the holy grail of software-defined radio; the one elusive key that would make it all work - low-power and low cost processors that can transmit and receive any frequency with the right software.”

“We also hold the patents on all of our technology so we license the use of our chipsets and the software. Synertron Systems, Inc. is the leader in wireless technology. If its wireless, you can bet there is one of our components involved.”

Stakhower looked puzzled.

“I’m sorry if I sound like an ad. Its habit from always having to sell the company.”

“It’s cool,” Stakhower said.

“We also produced a PDA exclusively for All-Mart. They are trying to develop their own brands in the electronics market. Well, all of the units we ship them are not getting on their shelves. We have had discrepancies of one to three units now for the past three months. The number keeps going up and we don’t know why. All the shipments have RFID tags, but the individual units do not. We know the shipment gets there, but then a few units disappear. They have increased security and put up additional security cameras with no results.”

“Sounds like an inside job,” Stakhower said.

“We think so, too, and that’s why I need you to work at the All-Mart in Park Plaza Mall for a short time,” Phillips said. He paused looking at Stakhower. “Are you up for it?”

“Sure.”

“I would like you to keep it under wraps. Don’t tell anyone in the company about this assignment and don’t tell anyone at All-Mart that you work here or why. No one at the local store knows that our units have been disappearing. Is that acceptable?”

“Yeah. No problem.”

“Good. We have contacted the national manager so you will get a position in shipping and receiving. You’ll start on Monday. When our shipments come in, I need you to open the boxes, verify that it has six units, and bar scan the four codes on the outside of each box,” Phillips explained.

He picked up a four by eight inch label with four bar codes and held it up to Stakhower.

“The shipping label on each box will look like this. Make sure you scan in all four bar codes into their system. You must scan in all four codes for the system to work. This will confirm that they received the number of units we shipped them. If the box doesn’t have six units, scan only the top two codes. Then check their computer and make sure all the codes were scanned in.”

“I’ll be able to do that?” Stakhower asked.

“Yes, as the assistant S&R manager, you’ll have access to a computer.”

“S&R manager?”

“Shipping and Receiving,” Phillips replied. “Any questions?”

“You’re talking about bar code scanning, right?”

Phillips nodded, but looked puzzled.

“I thought bar code scanning went out with VCRs. Why is All-Mart still using it?”

“Do you remember that big heist two years ago in Amazon’s warehouse? Well, hackers cloned thousands of RFID tags, put the clones in empty boxes and switched the boxes with the real merchandise. They didn’t discover the theft until a week later when a clerk leaned on the pallet of empty boxes and it fell over. The thieves used an inexpensive tag reader plugged into a PDA to clone the RFID tags. Ever since that All-Mart put the brakes on their use of the tags until the retailers agree to put better security on the tags. The problem is always the same with security. If you want good security on the tags it will make them more expensive and the retailers won’t use them. It’s the same reason why everyone doesn’t have an alarm system in their homes – it’s expensive and they would rather take the chance they won’t be burglarized.”

“Sounds like an awful lot of work just to steal a few things,” Stakhower said.

“Oh, they did steal a few things mostly high definition plasma TVs, DVD players, DVD recorders. They took only expensive electronics because the tags told them where to look. It was the biggest robbery in the history of retail.”

“So why is everyone concerned about a few missing PDAs? I mean this must be a pittance compared to all the other things the company does,” Stakhower asked. “Why bother?”

“You’re right, Gary. It is a pittance. But we think someone is using the PDAs to get to our chipsets. We think one of our competitors got hold of them.”

“So why don’t they just buy them so as not to arouse any attention?” Stakhower said. “This is really strange.”

“Because these are virgin units. When you buy the PDA or any of our products you can purchase any host of customized features you want, GPS, police and fire radio reception, remote home security monitoring. The sales clerk initiates a wireless download from our servers and the unit is activated. Without the software, the units are just paperweights...useless. There is an algorithm in the chipset that allows only our software to work in the units, but we found that someone unraveled the algorithm,” Phillips explained.

“So any software can be loaded into the units,” Stakhower said.

“Yes.”

“So?”

“First, the FCC would not be happy. They would probably shut us down until we retrieved every unit. Think about how versatile our chips are. Someone can disrupt any wireless transmission with these units and the right software. They could spread viruses using worms to any computer system in the world; they could shut off electricity or water. They could cause cars to stop running,

interrupt navigation systems. They could literally stop planes while in flight...not to mention if our competitors produced similar chips and started eroding our exclusive market share, but that would be the least of our worries.”

Stakhower looked out the wall high windows at the spectacular view of the city and its cluster of buildings that slowly gave way to clusters of trees farther in the distance. The trees reminded him of a simpler and easier time.

“So what happens if they disappear after I scan the shipping label?” Stakhower asked.

“We have a process in place that will hopefully tell us who is taking them and where they go. We can also disable the chip wirelessly so the unit is useless. If they are not scanned in then it is a matter of their word against ours,” Phillips explained. “We can only use the RFID tags on a single pallet so each box has to be scanned. We believe that the All-Mart employees do not scan all the codes in. That’s why we need you there to make sure.”

“Why not use a different algorithm?” Stakhower asked. “So the thieves cannot load their software into the PDAs?”

“Already done, but it will take three to six months to test the new chipsets and All-Mart doesn’t want to wait. You know there are hundreds of PDAs out there. If we don’t deliver they’ll just buy another brand.”

“It’s a big order?”

“They plan to offer it in all their stores, plus their customer wholesale locations. They are using the All-Mart here as a test market.”

“How long?”

“Four to six weeks. Taking on this assignment will go a long way in this company. It will open doors for you.”

“Well...ah...thanks.”



Phillips stood up and extended his hand. Stakhower grabbed it and the men shook consummating the agreement.

“Thank you again for doing this, Gary. We really appreciate it,” Phillips said smiling. “See Betty on your way out. She will give you access to the All-Mart files that will explain what we just went over.”

“Thanks,” Stakhower said.

“No. THANK YOU,” Phillips replied.

Phillips turned to his computer and began typing into the email he started earlier.

*“The first phase of ICER has been initiated. I expect 100% success in the coming weeks.*

*Phillips”*

He touched the send button and the email disappeared from the screen.

## Chapter 21

**Sunday, May 25, 2008**

“Mr. Riker. Mr. Riker, wake up,” a twenty-something nurse stood at the edge of the hospital bed and tapped lightly on Dan’s arm.

“What...who are...where am I?”

“You were having another nightmare,” the willowy nurse said, a smile lighting up her narrow face.

Dan rubbed his eyes. Even the light from the florescent overhead cast a milky aura over the windowless pastel green room.

“What was I doing?”

“You kept yelling for Amelia and Kaileigh.”

“Where am I?”

“Wake Med.”

“Why am I here. I was at the...”

“Doctor Jankanovich will be in shortly and he’ll explain everything. That gentleman over there also wants to talk to you,” she said pointing to a man with a crew cut and wearing a dark blue suit.

The man stood with his arms folded watching Dan. He had a light complexion, which made him look younger than his 45 years,

and his skin was freckled. Dan looked at the man and turned towards the nurse.

“This must be the room for those without insurance. There are no windows. Am I a prisoner? I have insurance you know,” Dan said.

The willowy nurse smiled and dragged the drab brown bed curtain further towards the wall revealing a flat screen TV on the adjacent wall. She waved her hand across the lower left corner and it came on displaying a live shot of the central walking area of the hospital where patients can go to take in the exotic shrubbery and unique flowers from all over the world.

“It’s not a window, but close enough,” the nurse said.

The wide heavy wood door opened and a tall, lean man with short graying hair entered. A stethoscope bounced on his chest as he walked.

“Hello, Mr. Riker. I’m Dr. Jankanovich. How are you feeling today?”

“Okay, I guess,” Dan said rubbing his eyes. “How did I get here?”

“You collapsed from exhaustion and dehydration. You’ve been in and out of consciousness for almost two days now.”

“You’re lucky you’re not dead!” the man in the blue suit directed at Dan.

He walked to the foot of the hospital bed, grabbed the chrome bar, and smiled.

“And how’s that?” Dan fired back his fear instantly turned into anger.

“You’re lucky those sheriff’s officers didn’t open fire on you when you rushed them.”

“And you are?” Dan asked.

“Robert Trembley,” he said and turned towards the doctor and the nurse. “Do you mind while I have a word with Mr. Riker?”

“We’ll be out of your way in a second,” the doctor said.

Jankanovich turned to Dan.

“You can leave tomorrow, but your body still has a way to go before its normal again.”

Jankanovich and the nurse left; the wide wooden door closing slowly as if it had a life of its own. Dan looked at Trembley as if to say, “who are you?”

Trembley pulled out his identification and held it close to Dan’s face. “I should be dead! My wife and daughter are dead! My sister-in-law is dead! I have no one!” Dan yelled.

“No one knows that for sure. We don’t even know who we are dealing with!” Trembley explained raising his voice.

“The CIA! Who else!” Dan yelled. “Don’t bullshit me! If I hadn’t gotten involved with the fucking CIA none of this would have happened! I knew I should have stayed away from them. Now my family is gone. Just get the hell out of here!”

Dan rubbed his eyes as if doing so would make everything disappear.

“Listen, Dan. You can walk away from this now or we can work together, get these bastards, and find your wife and daughter. If you walk away, we may never get them. We need each other!”

Trembley sat down in the armchair next to the bed and leaned forward. Dan stared at the ceiling.

“People with your background are rare in the US. Companies are outsourcing our technical jobs to Asia, India, and Russia not only because it’s cheaper, but because the workforce has more expertise. Did you know that enrollments in science and technology in all US colleges has decreased steadily since the eighties? We have a critical shortage of high tech expertise in our country...”

“I don’t need a lecture on how fucked up the country is,” Dan interrupted.

“You’re a threat to them and that’s why they want to kill you,” Trembley added.

Dan turned towards Trembley. He wiped the tears from the side of his face.

“You’re from NSA?” Dan asked.

“Yeah. Jake Stone called us and said there was a major worm...”

“Jake Stone?” Dan said. “The guy that lives in a bus underground?”

“Yeah, that Jake Stone. He sort of works for us as a consultant. We use him when needed and that’s why I’m here talking with you because you had his PDA.”

“How do you know that?” Dan said.

“We can track it.”

“So you know what happened?” Dan asked.

“Yes and no. His place was completely destroyed, but we didn’t find his body. We always knew where he was when he wanted us to know because he was never without his PDA. We thought Jake was you. We were puzzled when we saw that Jake, you, went to Raleigh, Wilmington and then back to Raleigh. We figured it out when we looked at the GPS logs on your truck and they matched,” Trembley explained.

“There was an explosion. I think it was a rocket from the helicopter. Jake’s leg was broken so he sent me out through an escape tunnel. Said he couldn’t make it through the tunnel. I got out just in time. Then the whole place blew up taking the helicopter with it.”

“Yeah, we know. We found the helicopter with two bodies – no identity, nothing. I can only assume that the SUV you were tracking is your wife’s?”

“Yeah, but... Wait, how did it appear in two places at once? My GPS said she was in Wilmington, then instantly she’s in Raleigh.”

“It’s called transdeception. The military has been using it for years to hide their locations. They lock onto a GPS tracking signal and change the longitude and latitude. The real locale shows up in a different locale.”

“Then Wilmington was a trap?” Dan said.

“It was,” Trembley added. “They knew they couldn’t find you by cell phone so they used Amelia’s SUV as a lure. You’re lucky they didn’t get you.”

“So why didn’t they send a pulse to Amelia’s SUV thinking that I would find it eventually?”

“We don’t know. We’re not sure if all the devices in the cell towers are working. We only tested them once when they were installed. We think they have a glitch in their location software.”

“Who was the dead guy in the ambulance?” Dan asked.

“A homeless man. The police got a call when the horn started blowing in the car. The man died and slumped into the steering wheel. He was a local guy who wandered into the vehicle to sleep off a bottle of wine or something. People at the Person Street shelter said they have seen him there occasionally.”

“I thought it was Amelia.”

Dan sat up slightly. “How do I know you are who you say you are?”

“Call the NSA. They’ll confirm who I am.”

Dan sensed that the man was telling the truth, but a little voice inside had doubts.

“Okay, I’m in. But you have to promise me that you, the NSA, the CIA and every other goddamn agency will look for my wife and daughter.”

“They are. You’re one of us now and we take care of our own,” Trembley said.

“I’m not one of anything. Without my family I have nothing!”

“We know. No one wants your wife and daughter back more than us. We need your expertise to defeat these bastards and your wife and daughter can be used to compromise your position and your loyalties. We know you will do anything to get them back, even letting these sons of bitches win. That’s why we need to work together so you’re not in that position and we can eliminate the threat. They already control the power grid and we can’t eliminate the control virus they’re using. What’s next? Sooner or later they’re going to ask for something and we know it’s going to be big. This is cyber extortion at its grandest level except they are not threatening to shut down a couple of web sites. They can shut down the entire country.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, really.” Dan looked away and sighed.

After Trembley left, Dan pushed the nurse call button. A few minutes later, the young willowy nurse entered, her hair no longer tied in a ponytail.

“Mr. Riker. What would you like?” she said, her blue eyes sparkling.

“Do you have a cell phone I can use? I want to call to my friend to ask him to pick me up tomorrow.”

The nurse looked at the end table by the bed.

“I see they didn’t put a phone in for you. I’ll have to get it from my locker. We’re not supposed to use them when on duty. I’ll be right back.” The nurse returned a few minutes later and handed a Dan a shiny red clamshell phone.

“I like your phone,” Dan said. “Thank you.”

The nurse smiled and left.

Dan dialed 411 and asked for the number of the NSA in Fort Meade, Maryland.

“Hello is Robert Trembley there?”

## Chapter 22

**Monday, May 26, 2008 – Memorial Day**

Dan Riker looked out of the windshield of Trembley's metallic blue Honda Accord as the car negotiated the horseshoe entrance ramp to Raleigh's inner beltline, a three-lane highway that circled the city with exits to major thoroughfares.

"Where are we going?" Dan asked.

"Downtown," Trembley replied. "You should know. It's the tallest building in Raleigh."

"Synertron? They're the enemy. Are you nuts?"

Dan shifted on the seat.

"You know, I don't think I've ever been on the beltline when it's not crowded. No one ever takes their time. They all drive like maniacs. No wonder there's three accidents a day here," Trembley explained.

"Why are we going there? They're behind the blackouts!"

"Who told you that? Jake? We didn't have a chance to bring him up to speed. At first we suspected Synertron because of their capabilities and access to top-secret projects, but we ruled them out when we discovered it was the cell towers," Trembley explained. "Besides, we have a collaborative initiative with them. We helped



them develop their chipset several years ago; they helped us develop more security on the wireless networks. We share information.”

“Do you have Jake’s PDA? My wife may call it since she has the number,” Dan said. “I lost my regular phone.”

“Yes, but you can’t have it back right now. We need it. Don’t worry, Dan, you will be the first to know when she calls.”

“Where’s my truck?”

“We have it,” Trembley said.

“You know, I don’t like your answers. You’re like a wiseass – a smug one at that. You never give a straight answer!”

“Wait a minute. I’m on your side, remember? I’m trained not to give out too much information and it has become habitual. Your truck is at Synertron. I’ll bring it to you after the meeting. Now I know you’re upset...I don’t know how anyone couldn’t be in your situation, but we are all working for the same thing.”

Dan looked out the side window at the blurring concrete barriers and thought how his life was also speeding by in one giant blur.

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When they entered the city, Dan noticed the storefronts and office buildings had power.

“When did they get the power back on?” Dan asked.

“It never went out,” Trembley added.

“Really. I wonder why?”

“We don’t know.”

Trembley pulled into the entrance to the underground parking lot of the convex mirrored Synertron building and stopped at a metal security gate similar to those used on store fronts. He pressed his left thumb against a dark blue glass window about the size of a deck of cards. A sliver of blue light ran up and down inside the glass. “Clearance Approved” flashed on the glass and the gate

vanished inside a large crevice in the cement wall. After they had passed, the gate quickly resumed its place shaking and wobbling as if it couldn't wait to get back in place.

"Talk about security," Dan added.

"The R&D labs require retina scans and voice recognition to get in," Trembley explained. "Synertron also makes security equipment. That's their fingerprint scanner."

Trembley drove slowly through the narrow curving entrance and stopped in front of two brushed metal doors twice the height and width of the car. The doors slid open and Trembley drove the car into the garage-like space and turned off the engine. Dan quickly grabbed the door handle as the entire room began to move.

"What the..." Dan said.

"Executive parking. One of the perks," Trembley explained. "It's a car elevator. Takes you and the car to the top floor. There's only five for the top four people in the company. The fifth one is for clients and guests."

"What a waste of real estate," Dan said.

"I guess," Trembley added.

When the elevator stopped, two standard-sized double doors on the left slid open to a corridor filled with warm track lighting. Dan followed Trembley through the corridor to the round teak reception desk for John Phillips. No one was there.

"I'm glad you know where you are going," Dan said.

The two men moved past the round reception desk and entered Phillips' office. A dying sun cast a burnt orange glow into the room.

"Hello Dan," the man said getting up from behind Phillips' glass-topped teak desk. He towered over everyone in the room.

Dan's eyes widened.

"I thought you were dead!" Dan said. "I see you are still fond of brown suits and you have your water."

“Quite the contrary. Bullet proof vests are a good investment and of course surrounding yourself with the right people,” the man said.

“You know each other?” Trembley asked.

“He knows me. I don’t know him,” Dan said.

“Harald Friedheld. I’m vice president of Synertron. I’m sorry we had to meet the first time under such stealth circumstances.”

“Do you know where my family is?”

“Not yet, Dan, but we are working on it.”

Friedheld walked from behind his desk and held his hand out to Dan. His long thin frame appeared to flow around the furniture like a liquid.

“I’m glad your here,” Friedheld said smiling.

Dan reluctantly grabbed his hand and they shook. Friedheld motioned him towards the corner of the office where two people sat at an oval teak conference table. The man and woman stood when Friedheld and Dan approached.

“Everyone, this is Dan Riker, the wireless expert I mentioned earlier.”

“Hi. I’m Jeanine Braggloisi, Data Analyst.” She held out her puffy white hand and Dan took it.

“Mike Sanchez, head of IT Security.” He squeezed Dan’s hand hard causing it to hurt quite a bit.

“Nice to meet you,” Dan said looking around the room and feeling uncomfortable.

“Sit down, Dan,” Sanchez said.

Dan sat down in one of the six chairs corralling the table and the others did the same. Braggloisi took a notebook computer and a thin silver pen out of her soft black leather briefcase and placed them on the table.

“Mike, why don’t you start,” Friedheld said.

“Dan, we have a major virus on our hands. Something no one has seen before. We call it the Cancer Virus because it’s insidious just like the disease. Our anti-viral programs find it, destroy it and then it regenerates itself in another area of the computer. It appears to change its code with each new generation so that we are always one step behind it with our anti-viral definitions. As many times as we eliminate it, it comes back. It’s like a biological virus changing its DNA each time antibodies attack it. With a disease like that, you would never be able to develop a cure or a way to slow it down, and every time we think we’ve locked into its signature, the signature changes.

“It’s also a control virus, meaning that it doesn’t just disrupt a system or cause some annoyance; it’s a tool used to control things. In this case it’s the power grid and the microwave pulses you encountered and who knows what else.”

“There must be an algorithm that generates the random code and recreates the new virus each time,” Dan added.

“Not that we can find. That was our first assumption. We poured over the virus several times, had dozens of programmers looking and no one found anything. We think the algorithms float around the Internet or they enter the Internet when they are needed. We think the algorithms are like catalysts – they wake up the code, the code spawns the virus and then the virus takes over. We also think the code is in pieces and all over the Internet hidden in harmless files or applications and totally undetectable. Do you recall how the terrorists communicated over the Internet several years ago sending ordinary photographs to each other? With the right software each photo revealed a hidden map or instructions. We think we have the same problem here except they are hiding what appears to be harmless files that later spawn a new virus. With pieces of the code hidden in files and apps the best anti-virus software in the world will never detect it because it’s not yet a

virus until the algorithm wakes it up and creates the new virus. Does that make sense?"

"I think so. How do you know the code is hidden all over the Internet?" Dan asked.

"Because the virus has appeared on systems up and down the East Coast in computers that aren't even remotely associated," Sanchez explained. "They most likely created botnets."

"Botnets?" Braggloisi interrupted.

"Hackers impregnate computers all over the Internet with viruses or small programs. These computers become botnets or zombies on command when the hackers issue a command," Sanchez explained. "They use botnets for denial of service, where an army of zombie computers automatically sends tens of thousands requests to a targeted web site eventually shutting it down. Any computer can be a zombie and the owners would never know."

Dan shifted in his chair.

"Then there has to be a unique identifier on the pieces of code that respond to the algorithm," Dan added. "You know, something in the algorithm is locating all the hidden code and making it spring into action so there has to be something unique on that code otherwise how would the algorithm wake up the code? Find that identifier and you will be able to eradicate all the hidden code on the Internet," Dan added. "Is there a common link between all the systems that have the virus?"

"Not that we know of. But we can start looking."

"I would suggest that and to look for that unique identifier."

"We can try," Sanchez said running his hand through his black curly hair and massaging his short tanned neck.

"The bigger question is how did they get into the power grid and the cell phone networks?" Dan asked.

“That’s a good question, but we don’t have the answer yet,” Sanchez added.

Everyone seemed to ponder the question. The room was silent.

“Mr. Trembley?” Friedheld said nodding to the NSA agent.

“Well, Dan, we don’t have anything on your wife and daughter. We know as much as you do. We have the FBI, the CIA, the Secret Service and more than thirty US Attorneys General offices working on it. I had hoped to have something for you this evening, but I assure you there is a pretty big effort going on to find them as I had explained to you before.”

“I want to know what they are doing to find my family,” Dan said. “I also want to know what they know. I get the feeling I’m not being told everything. You know that stupid excuse they always use, ‘need to know.’ Well, I need to know everything.”

“You will,” Trembley said. “I’ll have the agents who are heading the investigation talk to you tomorrow.”

Dan looked down at the spotless off-white carpet and sighed.

“Okay, I think that is everything. Mike would you show Dan the logs and the data you have so far?” Friedheld said.

“Sure.”

Both men were silent as they headed towards the doorway, but Dan stopped and noticed a triangular glass case standing alone on a long narrow teak table. Inside the case were small pieces of silvered shards lying in cement colored dirt. A gold plate on the bottom of the frame was engraved with the words:

*“Don’t ever forget 911.”*

Sanchez noticed Dan looking at the plaque.

“The president of our company lost his wife and daughter on nine eleven. They never found any remains.”

“Oh.”

“I think the mayor of New York gave that to Mr. Phillips.”

“That’s a strange engraving. The author is commanding you to remember rather than suggesting we should not forget it,” Dan explained. “It’s almost like the author is angry...very angry.”

Sanchez looked at the plaque.

“I never really thought much about it,” he said.

Dan blinked quickly to hold back the tears forming in his eyes for Phillips’ loss made his even more real.

## Chapter 23

**Monday, May 26, 2008 – Memorial Day**

When he waved his ID badge over the reader, a computer-generated female voice with a British accent soothingly said.

“Name, please.”

“Mike Sanchez.”

“Stand calmly in front of the glass, please,” the voice said.

A blue bar of light went up and down his face.

“You can enter now, Mr. Sanchez,” the voice said.

“Thank you, Charlotte.”

“You are welcome. Have a nice day.”

The door jam clicked and one of the steel doors opened inward several inches.

“The voice sounds so real. I thought it was a real person at first,” Dan said smiling at Sanchez.

“It is.”

“Huh?”

“We had a voice actress recite several hundred words and sentences into the computer. The words were carefully chosen by a linguist to represent as many pronunciations as possible and the computer uses those recordings to create new words and sentences



on the fly. Sometimes Charlotte doesn't sound like herself because she's missing a pronunciation key for a particular sound."

"Cool."

"She controls everything in the building...access, heat, air, lights...everything. If you've noticed, there are no light switches in the rooms. When you enter, she senses your presence and turns on the lights. When you leave, she turns them off. There are infrared sensors in the rooms that detect your body heat and lasers that detect your movement. Nothing new really. It's the same technology that big museums and banks have been using for years. Charlotte is still a prototype, but we hope to launch her next year. We still have a few bugs to work out," Sanchez said as he swung the door open.

"I guess if you're in a hurry, you're in trouble," Dan said.

"No. You only have to go through the facial scan once. After that your badge gets you in anywhere you have clearance."

"The facial scan is revolutionary. It doesn't use nodal points, you know," Sanchez explained.

"I know that software. It's not very accurate. They use it in England," Dan added.

"Ours is ninety nine percent accurate. We worked with Kodak on the software. It numbers every pixel in an image and then an algorithm records the pixel number and assigns a value of the color for that pixel. When it scans you it looks for those values and matches the image pixel for pixel with the original one in the database. It treats the pixels like puzzle pieces."

"That would never work," Dan said. "You would have to stand in exactly the same spot each time during the scan, lighting conditions would have to be the same...what if you had a tan..."

"We took all that into consideration and programmed it into the software. It scans in three D, and then does the match. It takes into account slight variations in color, lighting, and space. It's similar

to the fingerprint matching software used by law enforcement agencies.”

“Well then I can hold up a life-size dummy of you and it will recognize it,” Dan countered.

“You would have to have the same weight and volume in addition to the exact image of my body. The scanner also measures weight by volume using a scale in the floor.”

“Really? Why don’t you just use retina scans?”

“They have been hacked. We found hackers got into some systems, copied the retina scans and used them in PDA’s or cell phones to get in.”

Sanchez pushed the door open. “Gary, you’re still here?”

“I wanted to finish my report on All-Mart. I plan to take tomorrow off,” Stakhower said.

“That’s right, you told me that. Gary, this is Dan Riker. He’s a wireless expert brought in to help us with the blackouts. Dan, this is Gary Stakhower, he’s one of our interns.”

Stakhower frowned at Sanchez.

“Well, he’s not an intern in the classic sense. He’s a full time employee, but his position is that of an intern until he’s fully trained on our systems and then, and only then if he passes the tests, he’ll move up to regular status.”

“You act like I’m never going to learn this stuff,” Stakhower said.

“You didn’t do so well on that verbal test I gave you last week.”

“Had a bad day,” Stakhower said.

“Nice to meet you,” Dan said extending his hand.

Stakhower barely held Dan’s hand and pulled back after one shake. Dan felt that familiar burst of nervousness swallow his stomach.

“Nice to meet you, too,” Stakhower turned back towards his computer monitor and Dan thought he wasn’t going to get along with Gary.

He looked around the room with its light gray-carpeted walls and soft natural light.

“This room is an octagon, right?”

“Yes, it is,” Sanchez added. “You can see we put a desk and a workstation at each wall. This layout is a highly efficient. Over there we put three programmers. They can easily collaborate on a program. Over here, we have Gary and two other IT people. The carpet on the walls keeps it quiet in here and discourages eavesdroppers. It works really well.”

Sanchez pulled out a swivel chair and sat at the workstation next to Gary. He pointed to another chair nearby and Dan rolled the chair closer.

“Give me a few moments to pull up these logs and we’ll get started,” Sanchez said typing into the keyboard and rolling the mouse.

Music started playing faintly from Sanchez’s chair. He shifted and pulled a thin clamshell mobile phone out of his pocket. The tune was the Marines’ Halls of Montezuma. Sanchez looked at the display.

“I have to take this,” he said and left.

Several minutes later, the log files appeared on the computer, but Dan could not make any sense of them. He looked at Stakhower.

“So what did you do at All-Mart?”

“It was boring stuff. I had to make sure all our bar codes were scanned in when our merchandise arrived. I thought it was dumb.”

“Bar codes? All-Mart still uses them? I thought they used RFID tags. They were the first to adopt them several years ago. Why would they put you on something so archaic?”

“Something about people stealing our PDAs to get at our chipsets. As long as I made sure all the bar codes were scanned in, they could track the devices. The RFID tags were only on the pallets and not on each unit. It was stupid,” Stakhower explained.

“How long did you have to do this?”

“About a month or so. It was soooooo boring. I had to check their database to make sure every barcode there. It was a real pain in the ass.”

“How many PDAs did you scan?”

“Oh, man, I don’t know...probably thousands. There were pallets of these things. When I thought I would have an easy day, six or seven more pallets would show up. I worked from the minute I got there to the minute I left. It sucked.”

“Why would they need four bar codes scanned for one product?”

“I think the bar codes were tracking codes. They were always the same and in scientific format.”

“Really? Do you remember what they were?”

“I have them here.”

Dan moved closer to the monitor and the spreadsheet displayed:

*1.00E+04*

*1.01E+02*

*1.00E+03*

*1.00E+07*

“What are they?”

“Beats me.”

“Maybe Mike will know.”

The door clicked and Sanchez entered.

“Sorry about that.”

“Do you know what these numbers mean?” Dan said watching Sanchez’ distraught face.

“Yeah. They are in scientific format in exponent code. What about them?”

“Gary said these codes were on every PDA that he scanned at All-Mart,” Dan said.

“Product codes. Each number means something about the production or the parts used,” Sanchez explained. “four, two, three, seven is the date the chip was manufactured. This batch was made on April twenty third, two thousand seven.”

The doorjamb clicked and Jeanine Braggloisi slowly pushed the door open and entered.

“Oh. I...wanted to let you know that my notes from the meeting are on the drive if you need them,” Braggloisi said stopping and then moving back. “Sorry to interrupt.”

“Jeanine, can you come over and take a look at these numbers for a second?” Stakhower asked.

“I’d love to,” she said.

A broad smile burst onto her face and she moved quickly towards them. Dan looked at Sanchez and both raised their eyebrows. Braggloisi stood behind Stakhower and leaned over to get closer to the computer monitor. She placed her hand on his shoulder. He turned his head slowly towards her and frowned. She took her hand away.

“Well, I think you’re all looking too hard. I don’t see anything odd about these numbers. I see four, two, three, seven, and five ones,” Braggloisi explained.

“Do you see any other patterns or hidden numbers?” Dan asked.

“Well...no. Do you think there’s something hidden there?”

“Possibly,” Dan said.

“Well, I could run them through my pattern trace program if you like?”

“How long would that take?”

“A few hours. Gary, let me drive,” she said.

She pushed Stakhower off the chair. He reluctantly moved. She opened a spreadsheet and typed in the numbers.

“Okay, you see the numbers in scientific format could be a series of numbers. While the numbers all look the same here, they could represent different values. Watch.”

She typed in several more numbers in the next column revealing the different values.

“Take the first one. This could be numbers from ten thousand to ten thousand forty nine,” she explained.

“So they could have hidden values or values assigned to them?” Dan asked.

“Maybe.”

“Mike is it possible to hide programming code in these numbers?” Dan asked.

“I don’t think so. While the numbers could represent different values, they really remain virtual because the values have not been specifically assigned. The first one represents fifty numbers, but none of those fifty have any assigned value.”

Dan stared at the numbers.

“What if there was an algorithm that knew the fifty numbers and it was programmed to pick zeros and ones in a specific sequence from those numbers and use that sequence to create the virus. Is that possible, Mike?”

“Perhaps, but they would have to have one hellva algorithm,” Sanchez replied.

Gary, were the numbers always in the same order?” Dan asked.

“No. The order was random.”

“Then the algorithm would have almost unlimited possibilities for creating the virus. I think the hidden code for the virus is in those bar code scans. Mike, can I borrow your mobile phone?” Dan asked.

Mike reached into his pocket.

Dan opened the silver blue phone and opened the text-messaging program. He pressed 4-2-3-7.

“Does ICES or ICER mean anything?”

“How did you come up with that?”

“By entering those numbers. It was one of the candidates from WordGen,” Dan explained.

“What are you talking about?” Braggloisi asked.

“WordGen is a program that generates every word possibility using the letters associated with the number on the keypad. When you press four, two, three the program generates two words, had and ice. Press the seven key and word ‘ices’ is generated.”

“You lost me there,” Braggloisi said.

“Jeanine, go out and buy yourself a phone built in the twenty first century,” Stakhower said.

“I have a nice phone, thank you. I bought it last year. At least I’m not addicted to some silly game!” she fired back.

“It’s not a silly game! I’m not addicted and at least I have something I’m really interested in. What are you into, Barbie dolls?”

“Okay that’s enough. Cut the shit both of you,” Sanchez said.

“What’s the game you’re into?” Dan asked.

Sanchez rolled his eyes and shook his head. Braggloisi did the same. Stakhower’s eyes widened and his face and hands became animated.

“*Extreme Star Troopers*. It’s an online game where you try to capture as many planets as possible using a team of star troopers. You get dolgems each time and you can buy more mercenaries to take the stronger more valuable planets. You get to search the planet and see what valuables you can find. You can also buy more weapons, bases, and mother ships as long as you have enough dolgems. I’m the commander of about a hundred mercenaries. It’s really cool.”

“I also have a program that let’s you create your own strategies to win. It’s really an expert system with some built in artificial intelligence. It plays out a scenario based on your moves. It’s like having a battle strategist standing right next to you telling you the best moves.”

“I know that game,” Dan said. “There are over four million players worldwide.”

“Dan, can we get back to what we were doing?” Sanchez said rubbing the back of his neck again.

“Yeah, sure. We can talk about his later,” Dan said.

“Okay. ICER. I was amazed you came up with it,” Sanchez said. “It was one of our earlier projects. Never got off the ground and was finally cancelled about two years ago. One of the chip designers had this idea of creating a chip that worked like a web search engine except with AI. It would ask you a series of questions and with each answer it would conduct a search. It would build upon the search with each subsequent answer until it narrowed down the search to three possibilities. The guy’s wife was a librarian and that’s how he got the idea. You go to a library and ask the librarian for help. She asks you a series of questions, you give answers and she directs you to the books you want. The concept behind the chip was the same. Since it used AI, the chip learned your search patterns and improved its searches as you used it. ICER stood for Internet Control Enhancer. Ironically, the project was code named, The Librarian,” Sanchez explained. “I think his name was John. I can see his face, but I can’t recall his last name. Brilliant guy. Always asked a lot of questions about network security. I figured he was looking to build security protocols into his chip designs and wanted to know where the vulnerabilities were.”

“John Bastille?”



“Yeah, I think that’s the guy. Anyway, he left the company a while ago.”

“Really? I used to work with him at NovaCom. Strange. He would ask me a lot of security questions, too. Friedheld told me he suspects John is in on this blackout stuff. He works for the power company now. I’m not convinced. I worked with John. He was the most personable guy I knew. He was always concerned with other people and helping them. I just don’t believe it.”

“Let me tell you something,” Sanchez said staring intently at Dan. “We live among any number of ticking time bombs. People can crack at any time. You just have to be lucky enough not to be near one when it happens. Shit. If it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it must be a duck. I’m going to check his emails.”

“So much for your faith in humanity,” Dan said.

Sanchez smirked and turned toward the monitor. He typed in several logins to gain access to the email database. A few minutes later he stopped and stared at the display.

“Shit! Look at that! Mostly normal everyday stuff, but all emails sent or received from Phillips are encrypted. I can’t read them.”

“You don’t have a private key?”

“Not on these. He had his own. My key is on this computer, but it’s not deciphering the emails. I’m going to check Phillips’ email.”

More mouse rolling, clicks, and typing.

“I’ll be dipped in shit! The same thing here! Emails to and from Bastille are encrypted. The last one he sent to Bastille was two weeks ago! Phillips is involved. We have to tell Friedheld.”

“Suppose Friedheld is involved, too? He is the vice president of the company and he worked closely with Phillips,” Braggloisi warned.

“No, he didn’t. Those two were like oil and water when it came to the business. Always on different pages,” Sanchez explained.

“Friedheld is into intelligence...that’s why we have all these security contracts, and why we make security equipment. He’s well connected with the intelligence community. Phillips handles the chipsets.”

Sanchez used the desk phone to call Friedheld. Several minutes later the door clicked and Friedheld entered. He loosened his chocolate brown tie and smoothed his hand along his wrinkled white shirt as if he were suddenly aware that other people were looking at him. Sanchez surrendered his seat.

“I think I have a key for this,” Friedheld said looking at the emails.

He began typing and clicking. Seconds later the random mix of letters, numbers, and symbols instantly vanished and a lengthy readable text appeared.

“I don’t see anything out of the ordinary here except a lot of references to ICER. It looks like he may have been thinking about restarting it,” Friedheld explained.

“Why was it canceled?” Dan asked.

“I don’t remember. It was *his* project,” Friedheld said. “Now that I think of it, I can’t really recall any reason; it just stopped. I assumed he didn’t want to put any more money into it.”

“Well, is the project dead or not?” Dan asked.

“I don’t know. From these emails it looks like it’s on again. Phillips could have revived it. He could have even gotten VCs to buy into it. There’s one way to find out...I’ll just call him,” Friedheld explained.

He dialed the desk phone and let the phone ring ten times.

“Strange. John always answers his cell phone,” Friedheld said. “He’ll call back.”

“Okay. Let’s assume he did restart the project,” Dan said. “Let’s also assume he used the programming from the chip and turned it

into a virus – the virus that is controlling the power grids. Now, Gary how would you combat a Trojan horse in your game?”

“If you have enough, you can buy this super weapon that would seek and destroy any,” Stakhower explained.

“Do you have the weapon?”

“Of course. You couldn’t survive without it. It’s the first weapon you buy after your plasma rifle and laser blaster.”

Braggloisi looked at Sanchez and rolled her eyes. Sanchez shook his head and did the same.

“Can you make a copy and bring it back here tonight? I think we need to look at it and see if it can be used to search for the virus,” Dan said.

“Oh man. I was hoping to get out of here. I have a major offensive to mount tonight and I need time to prepare,” Stakhower protested.

“The only offensive you’re going to mount is right here,” Friedheld said.

Stakhower looked at Friedheld. “Okay, if you need it, I’ll bring it in.”

“I think your nuts,” Sanchez directed towards Dan. “How is the program from a game going to help us? It’s probably proprietary and works only with the game. It probably searches for specific game code.”

“I’m not interested in what it does. I want to see how it does it. Gamers think differently from us. They’re a whole breed among themselves and they think outside the box. We could find something there,” Dan explained.

“Click! Click! Click!” The lights flashed on and off three times in intervals of two seconds. The clicking sound came from the door.

What the...” Dan said.

“It’s a lockdown,” Friedheld said. “Someone hacked into our systems. The building automatically locks down for twelve hours. Nobody gets in or out.”

## **Chapter 24**

**Monday, May 26, 2008 – Memorial Day**

Sanchez rubbed the back of his neck and mumbled to himself. Friedheld went back to the computer and typed in several passwords.

“Just as I suspected. I can’t access the system. Is there anyone else up here?”

“I don’t think so,” Sanchez said.

Friedheld approached the fingerprint scanner at the door. He pressed his thumb against the dark glass scanner and punched in six numbers. The door clicked and opened.

“We have to get to the basement where I can turn off the system. Then we can get out through the parking area,” he said. “This way.”

The group followed Friedheld towards the elevator entrance, where he punched in another set of codes and the double steel doors opened with a low hum. The elevator descended quickly and then stopped and started ascending. Friedheld quickly punched in another group of numbers using the floor number buttons and the elevator stopped and descended again. It stopped a few seconds later.

“This is going to be a challenge,” Friedheld said. He pressed another sequence of numbers and nothing happened. He folded his arms and then looked at Sanchez. The elevator started its ascent again.

“I’m out of override codes. Do you have any?”

“I have one, but I need your permission to use it?”

“By all means, do it.”

Sanchez entered a sequence of twenty digits moving both hands like a conductor orchestrating an overture. When he finished his face damp with sweat.

“It’s a timing thing. You have to enter the numbers quick enough or it won’t work. Charlotte is designed to detect any hesitation and if she does, she will lock you out.”

The low hum of the elevator’s motor started again and the mechanical sounds of cables and gears echoed down from the mirrored ceiling. Then everything stopped and the lights went out.

“I guess it didn’t work,” Sanchez said.

“I think Charlotte knows what we’re up to and she stopped us,” Friedheld said. “That code would have disconnected her from the building operations.”

He pulled a small blue LED light from his pocket and directed the beam towards the ceiling.

“You’re like a boy scout – always prepared. I can’t believe you have a flashlight,” Dan said.

“A gift from my wife. She always worried about blackouts. Had some bad experiences and insisted I carry one.”

“Well, I think it has paid off. Always listen to a woman’s intuition,” Braggloisi added.

“As long as it’s not yours,” Stakhower chimed in.

“I’d kick you, Gary where it makes a difference if I could see you,” she huffed.

Friedheld ignored them and washed the tiny blue beam along the mirrored squares making sure he looked at every square.

“Okay, there it is,” he said.

A hologram of Synertron’s logo reflected back through the glass on the third tile from the door.

“Can you boost me up a bit?”

Sanchez cupped his hands and leaned over making himself a human stepladder. Friedheld stepped into his hands and pushed up on the designated tile. It clicked twice and began moving upward. Another tile next to it moved in unison. The opening was large enough for a man to fit through and a small ladder slowly lowered and stopped about three feet from the floor.

“Pretty cool,” Dan said. “Where’d the power come from... batteries?”

“It’s all hydraulics and springs. The key tile is the release mechanism,” Friedheld explained. “Everyone follow me.”

Friedheld handed his tiny flashlight to Sanchez and started up the ladder.

“Go ahead, Jeanine,” Stakhower said with a broad smile on his face.

“I could just kill you. NO WAY! Not in this skirt even in this darkness. I’m going last,” she said angrily and pinched his arm.

“Ouch! That hurt!”

“Wimp.”

“Cut the shit! Gary get the hell up the ladder!” Sanchez yelled.

“Okay. Okay.”

The elevator shaft was damp and filled with an oily metallic odor. A single light at the top of the shaft cast an eerie red pall on the prudent group. The dim whirl of electric motors starting and stopping filled the mausoleum-like silence. Friedheld moved to the left of what would be the back of the elevator and washed his blue light on the silvery steps of the escape ladder that ran along the

back wall. C-shaped horizontal bars enclosed the steps and the bars were spaced about three feet apart enough space to climb onto the steps. The escape ladder looked like a giant vertical tube running down into the empty foreboding darkness. Friedheld climbed in first.

“Be careful getting onto the ladder. Jeanine, you follow me. Help her get inside the safety bars,” Friedheld said as he climbed onto the ladder.

Stakhower followed next, then Sanchez, then Dan. The group was silent as they slowly moved down the ladder. After a half an hour, Stakhower asked,

“What floor are we on now?”

“That’s easy, Gary. With twenty five steps per story we should be on the fourteenth or fifteenth floor,” Friedheld said. “Haven’t you been counting the steps?”

“I lost count awhile back,” he lied.

“I think we’ll stop and rest here for awhile. I think everyone can use a rest,” Friedheld said.

The group stopped and Stakhower spotted a small control panel in front of him. He could barely read the letters above the four buttons on the panel and he thought the letters spelled out “Lights.” He pushed one of the buttons and instantly a jolt of electrical current ran up his fingers paralyzing his hand. The current ran up his forearm and stopped at his elbow. When he realized what was happening, he pulled his hand away with a force that threw him backwards and his head struck the safety bar and he lost consciousness. Braggloisi screamed as Stakhower’s weight pressed against her head and shoulders forcing her to lose her grip and fall. Her weight and Stakhower’s slammed into Friedheld pushing him downward. He grabbed a safety bar stopping the trio from falling any farther.

“Hold on Jeanine!” Friedheld yelled.



Sanchez moved toward Stakhower too quickly, and slipped pushing the group farther down the escape ladder. Sanchez quickly grabbed the safety bar and stopped.

“Gary, get off of me!” she yelled.

There was no response.

“Gary, are you ok?” Sanchez yelled. No response. “I think he passed out!”

Braggloisi arched her back to take the strain off her arms.

“Jeanine, take the light and see what happened to Gary,” Friedheld handed up his tiny blue flashlight.

“Mike can you take it?” she said.

Sanchez stretched for the light and took it from Braggloisi. He moved the beam onto Stakhower’s face.

“Gary! Wake up! Gary! Wake up!” he yelled. After several shakings and more yelling, Stakhower moaned.

“Ahhhh! My head!” he said. “What happened?”

“You passed out.”

“I got shocked from the light panel. I thought I would turn on some lights,” he said.

“It’s Charlotte,” Friedheld said. “She knows where we are, but she can’t do anything to stop us and that was her best shot.”

“Gary would you get off me now!” Braggloisi yelled.

“Are you sure? You make a nice pillow.”

“Get the hell off!”

“Are you ok?” Friedheld asked.

“Yeah, just my head is killing me. Give me a few minutes until the dizziness goes away.”

“We don’t have too far to go,” Friedheld said.

The ladder deposited the group into a small room with plain cement walls. Friedheld went to the single metal door and punched in a series of numbers. The doorjamb clicked and he opened the door to a long narrow hallway with pipes and conduits running the

length of the ceiling. The air was warm and dry and smelled of plastic and ozone. Between the pipes and conduits hung single bulbs imprisoned in wire mesh that cast a stark yellow light on the barren cement walls and floor.

“This way,” Friedheld said.

He made several turns arriving at two brushed steel doors. Above the keypad and badge reader was a retina scanner – it looked like a gas mask hung on the wall. Friedheld punched in a series of numbers in the keypad and put his face into the rubber mask. Seconds later the door clicked open.

“It’s one of our earlier scanners,” Friedheld explained. He turned towards the group. “This is the central processing room of the company. Jeanine and Gary, you need to stay here and make sure this door doesn’t close. When I throw the switch on Charlotte, I’m not sure if she’s infiltrated other systems, but if she has we will need that door open to get out. Mike and Dan follow me.”

The trio moved through narrow aisles surrounded by refrigerator-sized black boxes with arrays of multicolored blinking lights illuminating their glass door fronts. The lights indicated that the 15 rows of 12 hard disk drives were operating properly. Four tubes the thickness of a florescent bulb ran continuously along the ceiling casting a blue light on everything.

“This is the heart of Synertron. These are not mainframes. They are arrays of parallel processors. Mainframes are like prop planes when compared to them. They are the space shuttles of computing power,” Friedheld explained. “We developed them here.”

“If it were any colder in here you would have ice hanging off the ceiling,” Dan said watching his breath turn into a small blue cloud in front of his face.

“Close. It’s a constant thirty five degrees in here. The computers like that temperature best,” Friedheld added.

The aisle emptied into a cleared area with four refrigerator-sized computers and a small steel table and chair in front of each one. A laptop with a single thick cable attached to the computer sat on each table. Friedheld approached the second machine on the right and moved the table to the side. He reached behind the large black casing.

“These are the four controllers. Sort of like the four horsemen of the apocalypse. Charlotte’s main power switch is back here,” he said.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Trembley said walking out of one of the dark aisles like a ghost. He pointed a 9mm handgun at Friedheld.

“I knew I should have checked into your background further,” Friedheld said.

“You wouldn’t have found anything out of the ordinary,” Trembley said. “You have to work both sides of the fence to get what you want. You should know that.”

“So what makes you a traitor to your country?”

“Not a traitor, my friend, a lobbyist...an influencer of policy because of an inept administration that is too soft on terrorism. We’re just making a convincing argument.”

“You’re not going to win and I don’t give a fuck what you are!” Friedheld yelled and he reached further behind the machine and pulled down a small lever to shut down the computer controlling the building.

“You can’t turn her off. She’s everywhere now. You would have to shut down your entire system and that would mean the end of Synertron. And I know you wouldn’t do that,” Trembley said.

Friedheld slowly turned to face Trembley keeping his right hand behind him. Dan saw him tuck something in his pants and then bring both hands forward to hold the edge of the small table.

“What makes you think that I wouldn’t?” Friedheld said.

“Because Synertron is in your blood. You are Synertron. You built it, nurtured it, and made it what it is today. We thank you. Synertron is ours now thanks to Charlotte. And that means we don’t need any excess baggage.” Trembley took aim at Friedheld. “In with the new, out with the old. What the...”

“Oh my stomach! Ahhhhhhhhhhh! It’s killing me!” Dan screamed and fell to the floor twitching and moaning.

Friedheld watched Trembley’s eyes shift to Dan. Instantly he reached behind, pulled out the small caliber gun, and fired two quick shots. The first bullet struck Trembley’s left eye. It exploded into red tissue and blood leaving a dark bloody hole. The second bullet hit his forehead above the right eye. It blew blood and bits of tissue over the machine behind him. His face was forever etched in surprise as his body collapsed backward and fell against the machine his head smashing the glass door. Shards of glass peppered his face and chest. Dan approached the body and watched the blood quickly seep from his head and form a burgundy pool about two feet in diameter on the floor.

“You had to kill him? You couldn’t have just wounded him?” Sanchez said moving next to Dan to examine the body.

“He was going to kill us all. I really didn’t want to kill him, but I had no choice. It still doesn’t make it easy,” Friedheld said his voice shaky.

He gently placed the 32-caliber Romanian Carpati pistol on the small table and stared at it in awe. Such a small thing with the power over life and death. Dan bent down and pulled a silvery object from Trembley’s pant pocket. He turned it on and the screen came to life. A few seconds later, the unit beeped and vibrated. Dan pulled out the stylus and opened the messaging program.

“The son-of-a-bitch never turned it on. Here’s a text message sent Saturday,” Dan said.

“Turn what on? His phone?” Sanchez asked.

“No, Jake’s PDA. He had it and told me he would keep it on.”

“What does it say?” Friedheld asked.

Dan opened the message.

“It says, *‘If Charlotte becomes a bitch shut her up with a blue tooth. Dial 807 555 4237 5262008.’*”

“That’s Jake’s way with words even if they were his last,” Friedheld said. “Do it.”

“It will infect all of your systems!” Dan said recalling the earlier message Jake sent.

“No it won’t. Do it.”

Dan launched the Bluetooth search program. Several seconds later it found a computer called Charlotte. He initiated the link and punched in the numbers from the text message. A window appeared with a bar gauge filling up.

The program that would stop Charlotte was traveling wirelessly from the PDA into the computer’s operating system.

“That’s it. It’s done.”

The light array on the Charlotte controller changed and the multiple lights flashed on and off and then stopped. A foot long row of red lights were all that remained on.

“We won’t have any more trouble from Charlotte now,” Friedheld said staring at the red line of lights.

“Let’s go. We have a lot of work to do. I’m convinced Phillips is involved from what Trembley said about an administration soft on terrorism. John never got over losing his wife and daughter on nine eleven. I don’t know anyone who would. I don’t know how he held up for so long...how he kept all that anger and grief in check. Now I know. He often complained that the government wasn’t doing enough on the war on terror. He would get so worked up. Whatever he is involved in is his relief valve. He was very preoccupied these past few months, and I just thought he was finally getting a handle on his feelings, and moving on. It’s hard to

believe. We played golf together...did things together with our families. That day hit us hard. John stayed with us for a while to help him forget. You work with someone for years and you think you know them, but you really don't, something deep and dark could be smoldering inside them, and then it manages to get out. Under the circumstances I don't know if any of us are free from the darkness, but luckily some of us are better at controlling it than others."

## Chapter 25

**Monday, May 26, 2008 – Memorial Day**

Friedheld glanced around his office at the light tan leather couch facing the concave windowed wall. His eyes glistened as the setting sun illuminated his grief. He lifted a crystal tumbler and drank from it.

“What were his wife and daughter doing in New York on nine eleven?” Dan asked sitting in one of the matching leather chairs.

“Shopping,” he said.

“Shopping?”

“They went to the city with a group of women who went there regularly,” Friedheld explained. “There were about twenty of them who made regular shopping trips to New York for all the expensive specialty stores like Saks and Tiffany’s. On nine eleven, John’s wife and daughter decided to go to the top of the north tower to see the view before they went shopping. After the first plane hit, we had everyone in the building trying to get through to her cell phone. I watched him squirm in agony right here as the terror unfolded. I squirmed with him; we all squirmed. We never got through. He was frantic and drove to New York. The next day he called me with the news. We all cried. Her friends told him she

went to the trade centers to show their daughter the view. John wasn't the same after that. Who would be? He became a totally different person, so different that many of us thought he was an imposter. His daughter was the spirit of his life. She was the shining jewel to him."

Friedheld looked at the others.

"I'm sorry for rambling on. Excuse me," he said.

"We all cried on that day," Sanchez said. "We all lost someone, lost some of our optimism, lost some of our faith."

Dan looked down and blinked away the tears forming in his eyes thinking about Amelia and Kaileigh. He wanted to run out of the room, run out of his body, escape the prospect that his family could be dead. There was a low knock on the door and Stakhower and Braggloisi entered.

"We found something in the bar code numbers that Gary scanned into All-Mart's system," Braggloisi explained. "Gary had the shipping department create several labels and we scanned them into my pattern trace program. We found the numbers had values hidden in them."

"Really?" Dan said snapping back.

"What are the values?" Friedheld said.

"Here. Take a look," Braggloisi handed Friedheld several sheets of paper. Friedheld looked at the papers for a long time shuffling one on top of the other.

"It's source code. It's probably the virus they are using to shut down the power grid. They hid the code in the bar codes. That's how they got all that code into the Internet without detection. They used All-Mart's massive computer structure as a gigantic botnet. We don't know for sure how they got into the grid or the cell network, but if it was All-Mart, it would make perfect sense. All-Mart is like a vast electronic octopus with its tentacles into hundreds of thousands of companies. They probably searched for



the weakest door and opened it. In this case, bar codes. Their plan was ingenious. No other company in the world has as many electronic relationships as All-Mart. It's a perfect launching site for a virus. We have to alert All-Mart and tell them there's a virus in their system."

"They won't believe us," Sanchez said.

"Yes, they will. I'm going to call CERT and let *them* inform All-Mart," Friedheld said.

"What's that?" Braggloisi asked.

"Computer Emergency Readiness Team now under Homeland Security," Friedheld explained. "They track computer threats and help protect the Internet. It is an offshoot of the CERT Coordination Center at Carnegie Mellon University, which started in the late eighties. I helped create CERT back then."

"Wow, I'm impressed," Stakhower said.

Braggloisi smiled at him.

"You learn something new everyday," Stakhower added.

"Would you excuse me while I make this call," Friedheld said eyeing Braggloisi and Stakhower. "Thanks for finding this. This was the proverbial needle in the haystack. Oh, Jeanine would you be so kind and email me this information?"

"I'll do it now."

As Stakhower and Braggloisi left, Friedheld reached down into a draw in his desk and brought out a small tablet computer about the size of a legal pad. He opened it horizontally like a wallet. Spring-loaded legs slowly released from the sides so that it could stand on the desk at a slight angle. The continuous flexible LCD spanned 40 centimeters across without a crease or separation in the middle. A red laser on the top of the LCD came on and beamed a virtual full sized keyboard onto the desk's surface. Friedheld started moving his fingers over the virtual keyboard and characters began appearing on the screen. Then he picked up a wireless

headset and hooked it on his left ear. The computer dialed Bob Wakefield at CERT.

“Hello Bob. We have a situation. I’m going to mail you something. It involves a big player so handle with utmost care. Give my best to your family. Harald.”

Friedheld began typing again. Dan looked at the numerous citations and awards Friedheld had received that covered most of the sand-colored walls. He caught the words “for service above and beyond” on many of the framed awards.

Friedheld’s phone rang – two quick short electronic tones with a soft bell resonance that seemed to be everywhere. He picked up the headset.

“Friedheld. Hi, Bob. Okay.” Friedheld listened for several minutes nodding and moving his eyes to Dan and Sanchez. “Let me put you on speaker phone.”

Friedheld typed on a few keys and the sound flowed out of two four by six inch picture frames on each side of his desk.

“Okay, Bob. Can you hear me?”

“Clear as a bell.”

“I have Dan Riker, our wireless expert and Mike Sanchez, our head of IT security. This is Bob Wakefield, a good friend of mine and head of CERT’s Anti Virus Division.”

“Hi Dan and Mike,” Bob said.

“Hello.”

“What I am about to tell you has to stay in this room,” Bob started. “The bar codes definitely hid programming codes of some sort. It is an ingenious way to get a code into a protected system and to stay there undetected. Whoever they are, they are top notch. If your calculations are accurate, Harald, there is enough hidden code in All-Mart’s system to last several years if it’s still there. I never thought that one of America’s national treasures would become one of America’s threats to national security. We’re going

to have to ask them to disconnect from the Net. If they refuse, we'll have to shut them down by force if necessary.”

## **Chapter 26**

**Tuesday, May 27, 2008**

Dan gazed upward at the gunmetal clouds that cast a gray darkness over the white sand beach. He was sweating; the kind of sweating that seems to swallow your entire body. A bright blue beam of light suddenly punched a hole in the clouds and fanned out over the rows of beach homes that dominated the shoreline. Then it vanished. A second pulse of blue light punched a larger hole in the clouds and sprayed its brilliance over the first house. The shingles instantly melted into a smooth black tar that raced downward off the sloped roofs and danced chaotically onto the white sand below. Within seconds, a chorus of wild and angry flames burst out of the roof and soon swallowed the entire house in a giant ball of fire. One by one the blue beam of white fire slowly washed over the homes and the sequence repeated. When it moved out towards the ocean, steam bubbled up from the sand, and the ocean water immediately boiled into a steamy, sticky mist that soon cloaked the beauty of the turquoise sea. The mist crawled up the beach towards the homes, and then quickly retreated as if something had scared it away. Two figures appeared in the distance - one taller than the other. The smaller one ran into the

water and then out again to join the taller figure. Dan recognized the figures. He started to run towards them, but the sand was deep and pulled on his legs. His muscles screamed in pain as he tried to run faster.

“Amelia! Kaileigh! RUN! RUN!” Dan screamed, but his wife and daughter didn’t hear him.

The blue beams of destruction moved closer towards the pair. Dan managed to get closer. The taller figure wore a wide-brimmed straw hat that shaded the eyes and prevented Dan from seeing the face. As he got closer he saw that the straw hat was the one Amelia always wore at the beach.

“Amelia! RUN! RUN!” Again they did not hear him.

Kaileigh splashed in the retreating sea and Amelia watched her. Dan thought he saw a smile on her face. He saw another blue beam melt a hole in the clouds.

“RUN! RUN!” Dan screamed.

Amelia and Kaileigh turned towards him.

“Dan! You’ve come for us,” Amelia said.

“Daddy! Daddy!”

The blue beam struck them and their eyes enlarged to the size of eggs and then burst. Their skin melted and dripped from their faces, then shriveled and turned black. Both burst into flames and fell into the sand – their arms and legs curling inward into a fetal position.

“NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

“Wake up Dan! Wake up! You’re having a nightmare!” Jerry shook Dan’s shoulders.

“We have to stop them! We have to stop them!” Dan yelled bolting upright pushing Jerry away.

“Stop what?” Jerry replied.

Dan looked at Jerry as if he saw him for the first time. His eyes were wide and bulbous; fear was etched all over his face.

“What are you...oh...Jerry...”

“You were having a hellva nightmare.”

Dan looked down at his wet t-shirt, which stuck to his body like plastic wrap.

“It topped the one from the frat party we crashed at state.”

Dan rubbed his eyes and looked around the yellow walls. He sat up in the single bed and glanced over at the alarm clock on the small cherry wood night table. He inhaled deeply.

“You still remember that?” Dan said.

“How could I forget? You woke up the entire dorm with your ranting and raving. I thought I would have to commit you,” Jerry said smiling his large white teeth dominating his mouth.

“You’re such an asshole. I don’t know why I stay friends with you. Aren’t you supposed to be at work?” Dan looked down at the dark brown floor. “The dream was about Amelia and Kaileigh.”

“Oh.” Jerry’s smile melted away.

“Want to talk about it?”

“No, not really. It was awful. What time is it?” Dan asked moving his hand through his hair like a comb.

“Nine.”

“Oh, shit! I was supposed to be there at eight thirty!” Dan said and jumped out of the bed and stuffed one leg into a pair of jeans.

“Relax. Your boss called and said you should be there at ten thirty for a videoconference. I have the day off, sucker!”

“A video conference? With who?”

“He didn’t say. He just said to make sure you get your sorry ass there at ten thirty and no later.”

“Sorry ass. You’re the sorry ass. At least I have an ass. You lost yours when you shacked up with Viky the Viking. We heard the stories about how she sat on you, you had no ass after that.”

“I never did it with Viky the Viking...” Jerry protested.

“Oh, you know you like large women...plenty to play with. Come on fess up...fess up.”

“Now you’re the asshole. Come on downstairs before I smack you silly. Karen is making breakfast. And shower first. I thought I smelled something.”

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“Hi, Dan. Ready for some breakfast - I’m making pancakes and eggs. Is that ok?” Karen said moving her brown shoulder-length hair behind her left ear.

“Oh sure. That’s great! I didn’t expect this. Thanks,” Dan said as he pulled a chair out from the small oval table in the breakfast nook.

“Oh. You’re welcome. We don’t want our guests to leave hungry.”

Dan sat next to Sara, their 18-month-old daughter, content to roll her cereal around the high chair food tray. She looked at Dan and smiled. He smiled back.

“So Jerry tells me you’re working on a project together?” Karen said placing a platter of pancakes and scrambled eggs on the small table. She slid her thin, long body into the chair next to Sara and wiped Sara’s mouth with a damp yellow cloth.

“Yeah. I need Jerry’s expertise to solve a problem we have...” Dan looked at Jerry.

“It’s ok, Dan. We don’t keep any secrets. She knows everything,” Jerry added.

“Oh.”

“I’m so sorry about Amelia and Kaileigh. I saw them on Amber Alert. I know you will find them,” she said. “I can’t imagine what you’re going through.”

Dan looked down and took a deep breath. Several moments passed.

“Thanks. I know I will find them.” His voice was shaky.

“Are you all right?” Jerry asked, lightly touching his friend’s arm. “How do you function? I would be devastated. I don’t know what I would do.”

He looked up at both of them.

“I’m just numb to it. I can’t cry anymore. I’m all cried out now. I’m mad, really mad now. There is nothing more that I want than to find these cowards.”

“Do you think you will be able to stop the blackouts?” Karen asked.

“Maybe, maybe not. How do you defeat a virus that morphs into something different each time you attack it? It would be like a real virus that changes its DNA right after the immune system starts attacking it. The immune system would not detect the morphed virus and it would be free to wreak havoc again. Imagine fighting an enemy on the battlefield that suddenly becomes invisible. That’s what we have here – an invisible enemy,” Dan explained.

“Here, help yourself, Dan,” Karen said motioning towards the platter. “Sounds like something we do with cancer.”

“How’s that?”

“We use retroviruses, adenoviruses, and vaccinia viruses to modify and weaken cancer cells so that they can be killed by the host’s immune system, chemotherapy or radiation. We can eliminate five types of cancer cells now using this process.”

“Really? How does that work?”

“Well, viruses normally inject themselves into good cells and take over their reproductive machinery causing the cell to reproduce more virus cells. When the process reaches overload, the cell wall breaks and the new virus cells are released into the bloodstream to cause additional damage,” Karen explained. She sat up on her chair and leaned on the table.

“In viral gene therapy, we’ll take an adenovirus, which is responsible for the common cold, and weaken it so it can’t cause a



cold in the host. Then the virus is modified genetically so it will seek out only the cancer cell and cause it to die or weaken. When the virus is injected into a cancerous tumor, it infects just the cancer cells and leaves normal cells intact. The virus keeps multiplying inside the cancer cell until it is destroyed.”

“I’m wondering if that same approach will work on a computer virus.” Dan asked.

“Unfortunately, it doesn’t always work in living things,” Karen added. “As for computers, I don’t have a clue.”

“How does the virus know to attack only the cancer cells and not the normal cells?”

“We isolate a unique identifier in the cells. Cancer cells are different from normal cells. They don’t know when to stop growing or when to die because they have a defective p fifty-three gene. We create a virus that looks for that defective gene found in roughly eighty per cent of the existing cancers. The virus attacks the cancer cells only and fixes the defective p fifty-three gene. Now the cancer cells stop growing and die.”

“I think we may have a unique identifier! This is great! I think we can use this strategy on the virus in the grid!”

“I’m glad I can help,” she said smiling at Dan’s excitement.

“Are you still working? I thought you were a stay-at-home mom,” Dan asked.

“I am, but I keep in touch with my friends at MSK. I like to keep up on the latest developments since this was one of my projects,” Karen explained.

She got up and went back to the electric griddle next to the stove. She flipped several of the pancakes and placed a few more eggs next to them. A broad smile formed on her narrow face.

## **Chapter 27**

**Tuesday, May 27, 2008**

“I can’t believe we’re having a video conference with the President. I will be speaking with the President! I...”

“Chill out!” Stakhower said to Braggloisi as they walked towards the videoconference room. “And be quiet.”

“Why is this door so thick?” Braggloisi said looking at the 4-inch edge of the door to the videoconference room. Stakhower rolled his eyes.

“It’s a safe room. Bulletproof, bombproof, soundproof, and impervious to any electromagnetic energy such as radio signals, tracking devices or electronic snooping,” Sanchez explained. “Take a look at your cell phones; they have no signal.”

Braggloisi and Stakhower took the seats closest to the door on the u-shaped blonde oak table. Stakhower took out his cell phone and showed it to Braggloisi. She nodded. Friedheld sat at the bottom of the U in front of laptop-sized touch screen. Dan and Sanchez sat on each side of him. In the front of the room was a wall-sized plasma screen that displayed a larger room with a long oval conference table. Several men with white shirts and ties moved around the room placing folders and checking the

microphone pods at each seat. The pods looked like giant ladybugs sprawled across the conference table.

“Look, the President is entering,” Stakhower said.

“I still can’t believe it!” Braggloisi added.

Everyone in the conference room stood as the President entered.

“Ladies and gentlemen thanks for being here. As you can see I have most of my cabinet here. Down on my left are the secretaries of commerce, energy, and justice; on my right are the secretaries of defense, Homeland Security, and the director of the CIA. We are facing two major threats – the power grid has been compromised and our directed energy weapons installed by Homeland Security are out of our control. We are battling an invisible enemy – digital terrorists. We don’t know where they are or who they are. All we know is that they are wired into the cell phone network and they can launch a pulse at anytime, anywhere,” the President explained. “In essence, they have taken control of a major part of our infrastructure. I’m hoping that all of us here can have a meeting of the minds and figure out how to neutralize these bastards.”

Braggloisi leaned over and whispered to Stakhower.

“I never heard the President use foul language before.”

“This is a not a press conference and he would never use that language in public. Now keep quiet.”

Dan raised his hand.

“Go ahead,” the President said.

“Dan Riker. Shut down the entire cell phone network. This is a national emergency.”

“We can’t.”

“Why not?”

“You didn’t hear my words, Mr. Riker. We can’t.”

“Shut down all the power.”

“Same answer.”

“They’re controlling the power plants, right?”

“No. They’re controlling the power grid. It doesn’t matter if we shut down a power plant or not. We don’t know which power plants they are pulling power from. The power is not going where it is supposed to go.”

“Take out the towers,” Dan said.

“Tried that. The next one just takes over. We would have to destroy the entire cellular network in the United States, and they are still controlling the power grid.

“We also used the NST-twelve communications satellite to send a blanket pulse across the entire country to jam the devices, but it didn’t work. They seemed to know where the signal originated, and the satellite was destroyed. Half-a-billion dollars in hardware gone in a few seconds. New York and Boston were without power for six hours yesterday and Chicago is out again today.”

“Wait a minute. They take out the power in an entire city and the cell phone towers still work? How is that?” Dan asked.

“We don’t know. I have several experts working on it.”

“Are the generators still running at the power plants?”

“Yes. But whoever is behind this is siphoning off the power from the grid, and controlling where it goes.”

“Shut down all the generators,” Sanchez added.

“It would take weeks to get them back up and half the country including Canada would be in the dark,” the President said. “Right now we only have a few cities without power. The economic impact would be devastating.”

“Besides, they wouldn’t need that much power to run a cell tower,” Dan added. “A small generator purchased in a hardware store would be enough. Shutting down the generators wouldn’t work.”

Dan stared at the wall-sized video screen as if in a daze. Then he stood up and used his fingers as a comb through his short brown hair.

“Damn!” he yelled.

“What?” Friedheld asked.

“I think I know why the cell towers have power! That bastard! He stole my idea. He was the only one who knew about it. That bastard!”

“What are you talking about? Who?”

“John Bastille. I told him about this idea I had to transmit power wirelessly over the air. He helped me with the programming and I was able to create a Bluetooth device that charged my cell phone. It wasn’t breakthrough technology – the device could only send a very small charge to the phone, too small to make a difference, and it didn’t always work. It would take a week to charge a dead battery, but I think it extended the battery power a bit. I got tired of working on it and forgot about it. I couldn’t get it to transmit more power over the air. He must have figured out how to do it. That’s how they are powering the cell towers. They are transmitting power to them wirelessly over the air and with UWB they don’t need that much power to drive those high energy pulses.”

“Why don’t we use similar pulses to bring down the cell towers?” Stakhower asked.

“It would destroy the towers completely,” Dan said.

“Then we could disrupt the power transmissions or jam them,” Stakhower said.

“Maybe, but these transmissions are carrying power. If you redirect them, the power has to go somewhere. If you jam the transmission, the power destroys the jamming device,” Dan said. “That’s what most likely happened to the satellite, Mr. President.”

“Well, do you think there is a way to stop the transmissions?” the President asked.

“I don’t know right now. I have to think about it for awhile,” Dan replied. “But, I may have something that could eliminate the virus.”

“What?” the President said.

“It’s complicated, but the idea is to create an antiviral program based on using viruses to defeat cancer in humans.”

The President looked pensive until a thirty-something woman entered the room and handed him a tiny cell phone.

“Excuse me a minute, ladies and gentlemen,” he said.

He nodded several times as he listened intently to the caller on the phone.

“Can you patch this into the conference so the others can hear, too?”

“Yes, Mr. President.”

“Bob can you repeat what you just told me for the others? Ladies and gentlemen this is Bob Wakefield from CERT. Go ahead, Bob.”

“Can everyone hear me?”

“Yes.”

“We believe the programs disrupting the grid and the cell phones were born in All-Mart’s massive electronic data system. We need to create a shrinking habitat for the virus by disconnecting All-Mart from the Net. We have asked them to disconnect their systems until we can isolate and destroy the programs, but they refused. They say it will cost them six billion a day in sales, and if we shut them down they want the government to reimburse them for everyday they are off the Net. We can’t afford to set a precedent like that. We’ll have to go in there with force if they continue to refuse. They are a threat to national security, Mr. President.”

“Yes, we can use force, Bob, but how are we going to do that with thousands of stores scattered all over the country. All-Mart is not just the world’s largest retailer; it’s the world’s largest company - bigger than ExxonMobil, General Motors, and General Electric. And that translates into a lot of power in Congress. How do you

think they will react to this? All it will take is a few well placed calls on Capitol Hill and you will have a fully engulfed firestorm on your hands. And exactly how do we do this? Send in the National Guard to unplug their computers in every store. And what if we can't stop the virus after we turn them off? You're fighting an uphill battle. You're going to have to find another way," the President explained.

"I don't think we have a choice here, Mr. President. We are going to have to force them to shut down," Wakefield added.

"I think there is another way," the President insisted. "There must be something we can negotiate with besides money. What if we eliminated all tariffs on their imported goods for a specific period of time."

"They buy mostly from countries involved in free trade agreements," added the secretary of commerce. "It wouldn't faze them in the least."

"There is another way, Mr. President," the CIA director chimed in from the far end of the long dark elliptical conference table.

Chris Roberts stood up and placed his oversized palms on the glossy finish of the table. His six-foot-four height and wide face loomed ominously over the small group.

"We tell the truth. We tell them we are going to release this story to the media. They would be insane to let that kind of negative publicity into the general public. They would have no choice but to shut down."

"Now that's acceptable," the President said. "Although it would be political suicide for this administration. Well..."

"I think it's a plan," Bob Wakefield added.

"Let's discuss this further, and don't do anything until you hear from me. I want this to be a last resort measure."

A young man wearing a dark gray suit with a bright red tie approached the President and whispered into his ear. He handed

the chief executive a yellow folder. The President sat down, opened the folder, and read the single sheet of paper it contained. Dan noticed his face darken and he appeared to age right in front of his eyes. Then the President stood up with the paper in hand, took in a deep breath and began in a low, solemn, but steady voice.

“I have some grim news. The group responsible for the blackouts wants us to nuke the mountains bordering Afghanistan and Pakistan to finally eliminate Bin Laden and his followers. They are not satisfied with our efforts to hunt him down and they believe he is there. They call themselves Justice for nine eleven. If we don’t, they will systematically turn off the power in every major city one by one. They have already showed us that they can take out New York, Boston and Chicago and major areas in North Carolina. After that they will begin to take down our commercial airliners – one for each day we delay. They claim to have taken down the two planes in Raleigh on May eighteenth. We have seventy two hours to launch the attack.”

The audiences gasped. The President’s conference room turned to chaos with everyone talking at the same time. The President stood up and raised both hands over his head.

“Harald, you and your team can have whatever resources you need and Mr. Riker I hope your anti-virus plan will work. We can deal with the cell towers later.”



## **Chapter 28**

**Tuesday, May 27, 2008**

“Justice for nine eleven!” Dan stood up and yelled. “Those hypocritical sons of bitches! They want justice? They’re worst than all the terrorists put together! They killed my sister-in-law and they kidnapped by wife and daughter! They crashed two planes! They want justice!”

“Dan! Dan! Calm down! Calm down!” Friedheld said and reached up and took hold of Dan’s arm. Dan pulled away angrily.

“Those bastards! I’ll give them the justice they want! I’ll kill every one of them! Those sons of bitches!”

“Dan! SIT DOWN!” Friedheld yelled.

Friedheld stood up, grabbed Dan’s arm, and pulled him down into the chair. Dan pushed him away and he fell backward, tripped on the chair, and tumbled onto the floor. His thin body slammed against the cushioned wall. Dan stared wide-eyed at Friedheld. Everyone cast stares that instantly froze everything in the room. Even the air seemed to be frozen in place. Dan stood motionless, his eyes empty and distant.

“Mr. Friedheld! I’m so sorry. I don’t know what happened. I lost it. I hardly remember saying those things. The whole thing is like a big blur.”

Dan reached over, grabbed his hand, and easily pulled him up.

“Consider it pay back for what I put you through at the safe house,” he said dusting off the back of his pants and smoothing his shirt. “Are you all right now? You can use the couch in my office if you like.”

“I don’t know what happened,” Dan said rubbing his hand across his forehead. He looked at the display screen, “I apologize for the interruption, Mr. President.”

“Just hang in there. We’ll get through this together. It’s tough on all of us,” the President said.

The secretary of defense shifted in his seat as if he couldn’t wait for Dan to stop his temper tantrum.

“Mr. President, we can’t launch a nuclear attack in seventy two hours. It would take at least ninety six hours or more to get the planes off the ground,” he protested.

“He’s right. It’s out of the question,” added the secretary of state. “We could start a nuclear holocaust. It would be like giving the green light to all those countries we browbeat into stopping their nuclear arms programs especially Iran and Korea. We would never get Congress or the UN to approve it.”

“We may be able to pull this off,” the secretary of Homeland Defense said. “We can tell the press the Taliban was responsible for the Raleigh plane crashes to justify the bombing. We can tell the press we used bunker buster bombs.”

“You’re out of your mind!” said the secretary of state. “Every country monitoring nuclear activity would pick up the nuclear signature. We could never pull it off.”

“I’m not sure if we have to go that route,” the President said. “Dan, do you think this virus program of yours can stop them?”

“It’s just a theory right now until we try it and see what happens,” Dan said. “We’ll start right away.”

“Okay, keep me updated.”

The President was handed another folder. He opened it and read the paper inside. He looked up at the camera.

“Harald, I’m sorry. They just found John Phillips. His body was found floating in the East River in the Bronx. A young couple in a sailboat spotted the body. It was a single gunshot to the head and the body was well decayed so he had been dead for sometime. This is definitely not a good day.”

“Oh,” Friedheld said.

“I’ll put the FBI and the CIA on it since it involves national security.”

“Thanks,” Harald said staring down into nothing.

The air became solemn like being in an empty church where one feels like an intruder. Both rooms were silent for several minutes – a tribute to Phillips, who was a stranger to most of them.

“I think it would be better to continue this meeting tomorrow,” the President said. “Ladies and gentlemen.”

The display went dark and the room was overly silent. Dan could hear Sanchez’ congested breathing.

“First his wife and daughter and now him,” Sanchez said wiping a tear from his right eye. “A whole family gone...I can’t believe it.”

“Dan, do you think you can build another one of those devices that transmits power?” Friedheld said his voice shaky.

“Yeah, I think so,” Dan said barely audible. He felt like crawling out of his skin he wanted to leave so badly.

“My idea is to redirect the power they are transmitting back into their own equipment. We will need a device that intercepts their power transmissions and then reverses its direction. The power surge should destroy their equipment,” Friedheld said.

“Won’t that destroy the power grid, too?” Sanchez added.

“Don’t know. But if it did, it would stop these bastards!”

“But that’s worse than taking down the entire cell phone network!” Sanchez protested.

Friedheld looked at everyone in the room.

“Yeah, you’re right. It won’t accomplish anything except maybe damage the grid.”

“I think your idea may work,” Dan added. “What we need to do is reverse the energy pulses so that they destroy the devices in the towers. But we’ll need to force them to send a pulse from every tower.”

“That’s simple,” Sanchez added. “When one device is destroyed it will instantly cause another to send a pulse, then that one will be destroyed. It will start a chain reaction until all the devices are destroyed.”

“Maybe, but we still need a sitting duck,” Friedheld said.

“It’s a good theory, but we won’t know if it works until we try it,” Dan said. “I’ll be the sitting duck. I’m up for it. I definitely want to do something to get back at these sons of bitches. I’ve out run their pulses before and I think I can do it again.”

“You’re out of your mind,” Friedheld said. “If it doesn’t work you may get yourself in hot water, you may become hot water, literally. You’re too valuable to risk. We need you here.”

“Your family hasn’t been kidnapped!” Dan screamed back, his eyes glaring, his hands shaking.

The room seemed to jump with Dan’s outburst. Friedheld calmly poured water from a stainless steel carafe into a glass tumbler and took a drink.

“Dan, no one here can even remotely imagine what you are going through, but without you we may not defeat these bastards and you may never see your family again,” Friedheld said slowly and deliberately containing his anger as much as possible. “You

know the most about this technology and you are most likely to come up with a way to neutralize it. I can't let you go."

"I don't give a damn! I'm going! I just can't sit here and theorize on what we should do. I have to do something and do it now!" Dan yelled. "Every minute of every day that passes is like a dagger being twisted into my gut because it is one more minute, one more day my family is not safe."

Friedheld took another drink from the tumbler, which began to sweat from the moisture in the room. The silence was crackling like electricity. Friedheld stared at Dan as if he could see right into his soul.

"Okay, Dan, but you must take my beamer. It's extremely fast and it can maneuver a lot better than your truck. I had it specially built with by-wire technology for such purposes."

"By-wire?"

"The movements of the steering wheel and brakes are interpreted by the computer, which sends signals to an actuator, which then moves the wheels or engages the brakes. The advantage is far better handling since the computer controls each wheel for different road conditions. The brakes react faster than standard ones."

Dan was silent for a long time. He lowered his head and stared at the floor for several minutes trying to regain his sanity. The others sat motionless in their seats awaiting the next firestorm.

"I'm sorry about Phillips," Dan finally let out. "I guess you were good friends. Do you still believe he was involved?"

Friedheld looked at Dan and at the others as if he were expecting Dan to say more.

"I've known John fifteen years and we built this company together," Friedheld explained. "He was like a brother I never had and always wanted. We had our differences, but that's what made this company work. Yes, I think he was involved, but I don't think

he intended to hurt anybody. I think he just wanted to light a little fire under the government to get it moving faster, but it got out of control. I think he hooked up with the wrong people and they saw an opportunity he didn't want to take so they killed him. I can't believe he would condone killing anyone for any reason. He was against the death penalty and he hated the killing in Iraq; he wanted the military to take more prisoners. He was a good guy who was in the wrong place at the wrong time. I'm really going to miss him. No one really knows what happens to a man when you take away what he treasures the most."

## **Chapter 29**

**Wednesday, May 28, 2008**

Dan opened his eyes to a bright, piercing light that caused him to squint. It was the morning sun shining through the large convex windows of the Synertron building in downtown Raleigh. He lay in a small room that had been a middle manager's office with plain light gray walls and telltale tiny holes in strategic locations where pictures or posters once hung. The single bed was fairly comfortable and smelled new, but the single brushed steel end table with a matching brushed steel gooseneck lamp reminded Dan of things found at a garage sale. Friedheld called it the guest suite. Dan called it the executive's crash room. It had the look and feel of being put together as a last minute idea.

Dan suddenly jumped as Jake's PDA began to dance on the steel end table from its vibrator. The steel table amplified the vibrating sound filling the room with the mechanical hum. He looked at the display and took the call.

"Hello, Jerry? Why are you calling me so early scaring me half the death. I nearly fell out of bed."

"Speaking of beds, where did you sleep last night under the bridge again?"

“Very funny.”

“I was concerned that you didn’t show up last night and when I called your mobile, I kept getting your voicemail,” Jerry explained.

“Sorry about that. We worked late and I had the ringer turned off. I should have called. I stayed here. They have a guest suite.”

“Only the best for you wireless gurus.”

“Well, yeah. It’s more like a large closet they decided to turn into a makeshift bedroom. Anyway, listen. I probably won’t be over tonight or the next few nights. I do need a favor though. I need you to go to my house when it’s dark. Don’t be seen. I have neighbors who’ll call the cops when a dog barks. Besides, there may be a few unsavory characters watching the house. They come and go like flies. Go through the back yard and make sure you’re not seen. Wear black. I need you to adjust my satellite dish on the roof of the deck. There is a small ladder under the deck. Use that. Here write down these coordinates. You have a pencil ready?”

“Yeah. Hold on a second. Okay, go ahead.”

Dan told him the new declination angle and apex elevation to set the dish.

“Do you have an inclinometer?”

“Yeah. You going to hit a new sat?”

“Yeah. We are going to transmit from the dish. Call me on my mobile when you’re done, but don’t let the call connect.”

“Really? Okay. Will do. So what are you doing over there now?”

“Just getting up thanks to you. I have a friggin’ cramp in my neck thanks to the luxurious bed in the executive suite here. I think I would have been more comfortable under the bridge last night.”

“Maybe you should check it out then,” Jerry added.

“Maybe, I will. I’m sure you can recommend a good spot. Always the wise ass.”

“No, that’s you. Whatever you’re doing, I hope it works.”



“Me, too. Hey and thanks again for your help. I could be putting you and your family in danger so keep your eyes peeled.”

“No problem. You’ve helped me plenty and now it’s my turn,” Jerry said.

“Don’t forget; don’t let the phones connect. Let it ring three times and then hang up. Do that twice. Then I’ll know that you changed the angles,” Dan explained. “Oh, yeah. You may see lights turn on or off in the house – that’s my home monitoring system to give would-be burglars the impression that someone is home.”

“Okay. Thanks for the heads up,” Jerry said.

There was a light knock on the door.

“I got to go. Someone’s at the door. Take care and don’t forget to call me when you’re done, but don’t let the call go through. Three rings...that’s it. And thanks,” Dan said.

“Okay. I’ll call you later then.”

Dan hung up and quickly pulled the covers over since all he was wearing was his underwear and a t-shirt.

“Yeah,” Dan yelled at the door.

It was Friedheld. His hair looked grayer and the wrinkles in his face deeper.

“Did you sleep well?” Friedheld said. “I hope you found our executive suite up to your standards.”

“Actually, it’s a very nice glorified closet,” Dan said. “Thank you.”

“I know. It used to be an office, but when we got some of the top-secret contracts, it was safer to have some employees stay until we finished parts of the program. We turned five offices into suites. Sorry, there is no room service,” Friedheld said a slight smile on his small narrow mouth.

Friedheld rubbed his eyes and yawned. “I didn’t sleep much. It’s funny, when you’re older you wish you were younger and the

past constantly creeps into your life, and when you're young you wish you were older and imagine all the things you wish you could do."

"I guess I'm still in the wishing stage," Dan said.

"I know."

"Tell me. What's in all this for you? Why do you do it? You're second in command. You don't need this."

Friedheld took in a deep breath and looked intensely into Dan's eyes.

"It's personal. Why does anybody do anything unless there's something that benefits them? Life is just one big economic proposition. I'll do this if I can get this or do that. The benefits can be anything at all, materialistic, spiritual even virtual. I met my first wife at the American Embassy in Moscow in the seventies. We both worked there. She was a secretary to one of the diplomats who turned out to be a double agent. The Russians apparently found out and tried to kill him slowly using a microwave oven converted into a directed energy weapon. They hid the device in the basement and used a remote control radio transmitter to turn it on and off. Well, these were crude imprecise weapons and the microwaves must have hit her as well as the diplomat since her office was right next to his. He got pretty sick and almost died. They discovered the device because the transistor radios many people had at their desks stopped working after a week or so.

"Well, we got married shortly after that and moved back to the states. We tried to start a family, but Cynthia kept having miscarriages. Finally, one took. It was a little boy, but when he was born he was so deformed...I'll never forget the look on her face when she saw him. He died three days later. We were devastated. Horrified. We decided to stop."

Friedheld looked out the window at the increasing traffic forming on Hillsborough Street. The city was beginning to wake up.

“She died at thirty five of cervical cancer...cancer didn’t run in her family. I’m convinced the microwaves caused all her problems. I just never felt the same about anyone else after she died. I got into intelligence so I could get back at the bad guys, get even if you will. A life motivated by revenge. I wish I never took that path because it swallowed me completely, took over my life and blinded me to what was really important. As I got older I realized I was addicted. I had some close calls. It was time that I stopped to smell the roses. Synertron was a way to stay out of harm’s way and still help to get the bad guys.”

“I’m not ready to smell the roses or push any up for that matter until I get my family back,” Dan said with a resoluteness that even took Friedheld by surprise.

“Dan, I can’t blame you. But a life motivated by revenge slowly eats you away from the inside out. I know I’ve lived it. There is no benefit as much as you would like to believe and as good as it makes you feel sometimes. It’s an emotional dead end.”

Dan looked up at him and saw the younger man he once was. Behind those cold steely blue eyes was the vibrant, hopeful young man – only his body had changed. The same determination, stamina, and aspiration were still there only stronger than ever and peppered with the spice of wisdom and experience. Dan knew he could trust this man with his life.

“I don’t know what to say,” Dan said.

“Say you won’t go down that path.”

“I don’t know. Before all this, I always backed down. Backed down from arguments, ran from conflict, froze during confrontations. I later regretted not doing more, not standing up for myself and it got worse when Amelia noticed and wanted me to be

more of a man. But, I just couldn't do it. Now, I can and I'm not backing down! I'm not giving these bastards an inch!"

"Don't do it from revenge, Dan. Do it from your need to get your family back."

"I don't know the difference now. Both are so intertwined...I just don't know."

Friedheld looked at Dan as if he were the son he never had and thought if he had had a son he would be Dan's age.

"Well, if you're hungry they serve breakfast in the cafeteria downstairs. Besides, I'd like you to meet some of the team who have developed the tools you will be using."

"Tools?"

"Yeah, you'll see."

"Breakfast is my favorite meal."

"Good. Get dressed and let's go."

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The two took the elevator to the 25<sup>th</sup> floor and entered the cafeteria. They blended in with the six other people in line and Friedheld picked up two large food trays and handed one to Dan. They placed the trays on the railing that extended the length of the serving area.

"Hey! The tray is moving," Dan exclaimed. "How is that?"

"Electromagnetism. It pulls the tray along," Friedheld said.

"Bad for your credit cards, I'll bet."

"Not really. The trays are shielded in case you place your wallet or purse down."

"Oh."

"The eggs benedict is really good and so are the Belgian waffles," Friedheld said looking through the glass shields at the steaming selections. "Try both if you want."

"I think I will. Thanks."

Dan also chose a large glass of orange juice, an English muffin, and a cup of Starbuck's coffee.

"You were right about breakfast being your favorite meal. I can't eat that much for lunch," Friedheld said as he placed a cup of coffee with a matching saucer on his tray along with an English muffin.

"And I'm not even hungry," Dan replied.

Friedheld smiled.

"Where do we pay?" Dan said. "I'd like to buy you breakfast."

"You can't. The cost is automatically deducted from a guest account we keep for visitors. The computer has been tracking everything you put on your tray."

"The computer is not named, Hal is it?"

"I hope not."

"Well, thank you," Dan said and moved toward to end of the serving line.

Dan looked at the open tables in the center of the large room; all covered with white tablecloths, silverware and cloth napkins.

"Where do you want to sit?"

"We're in the UWB room over there," Friedheld said.

"That's appropriate," Dan said smiling.

"I thought you would think so."

Friedheld led Dan to one of the ten small rooms that lined the left side of the large room. The walls were all glass and each room was named after a wireless acronym like RF, GSM, WiFi, UWB, or 3G.

"A lot more than eating goes on in this cafeteria and we wanted to make it very comfortable for that to happen," Friedheld explained. "The rooms cut down on the overall noise from the open area and the glass allows the light in from the outside so no one is deprived of the atmosphere or a view."

"Very nice. I wouldn't mind working here."

“Well, you are now.”

“I am?” Dan said his eyes wide.

“Of course. You’ll do more good here than with the CIA and we’ll pay you the same.”

“Six thousand plus a week?”

“Yes, but it can’t be tax free.”

“I don’t care. I’m not concerned about the money. I want my family back.”

“So do we.”

When they entered the UWB room where four people sat at a round table, everyone went silent.

“Hello everyone. I would like you to meet Dan Riker. Dan, this is Takara Akemi and Chip Motega. You know Jeanine and Gary. Takara and Chip I take it you are acquainted with Jeanine and Gary.” They both nodded.

Dan put his tray down next to Takara’s and held out his hand. Her small, delicate hand melted into his and he thought he was holding a piece of fine silk. He looked into her bright dark eyes surrounded by white pristine skin and long black shimmering hair.

“Hello...nice to...meet...you,” Dan said. The words stumbled out of his mouth and were barely audible. He was suddenly out of breath.

She smiled and shook his hand. Dan did not feel the motion of her handshake only the fine silky hand against his.

“Hi. I’m glad to meet you finally. You have some really great ideas about this virus. I think we can make it work,” she said. “I’m looking forward to working with you.”

“Thanks, me...too,” The words continued to tumble awkwardly out of his mouth. He still held her hand.

“And this is Chip Motega,” Friedheld said looking at Motega. Motega stood up.

“Nice to meet you. I think your power transmitter is going to revolutionize the power business.” He raised his short thick hand and extended it towards Dan. The two shook briefly and then everyone sat down.

“Dan, let me bring you up to speed on what’s going on,” Friedheld said as he sat down. Dan took the seat next to Takara. “Takara is our software and logistics expert. She and her team are working on the anti-virus you mentioned – getting it to work in a similar fashion to a biological virus. She can be stubborn sometimes, but she’s brilliant and she’s often right.”

He smiled at her and she smiled back. Dan watched her in amazement as if he had never seen a woman so beautiful.

“Chip is head of our hardware team. He and his team have been working on your power transmission device. They have it working in reverse as we discussed, but we still can’t get it to transmit more than two amps. Dan this will be your number one priority. We must knock out the DEWs first; we can deal with the virus later. I think they knew we would eventually unravel their virus and take back the grid...but the DEWs...they have the entire country hostage. They can control whatever they like whenever they like. The real danger of these weapons is that the pulse can easily penetrate doors, walls or metal, literally anything. In addition, none of the narrow band frequencies such as TV, radio, police or fire disrupt its power. When a pulse is generated it behaves like a concentrated microwave – water turns into explosive steam; anything living is cooked from the inside out and all electronics are fried. All of this power is generated with very little electricity that they transmit over the air using your power transmission device.”

Friedheld took a sip of his coffee and then looked at Braggloisi.

“Jeanine is our information guru. She can track down and dig out all kinds of information very quickly. She’s a real asset with data. You know Gary our IT and systems expert. Mike

unfortunately couldn't be here. You have to push Gary most of the time, but once he gets going there's no stopping him. He will keep going until it's done. His mind works like a computer. He mostly sees life in black and white rather than gray. If he sees that a program should perform a particular function and it doesn't, he will get it to work no matter how long it takes. He's the kind of person who will follow the directions implicitly and just as easy break the rules to make it work. And if there is an error in the directions, he'll get really pissed and let you know. He's a perfectionist and perfect for what he does and we are lucky to have him."

Motega lifted a soft black leather briefcase to the table and pulled out a flat plastic bag the size of a laptop. He took a black cloth out, carefully unfolded it, and then held it up. It was a black mesh body suit that had the look and texture of panty hose.

"I didn't know you were a cross dresser," Stakhower joked.

Braggloisi pinched his arm; Motega smirked and ignored him.

"Some sense of humor, eh?" Stakhower whispered to Braggloisi. She scrunched her face and narrowed her eyes.

"This is the reverse pulse device. It's a body suit made of a strong and highly conductive copper and plastic alloy. The suit is the antenna that detects the pulse and then deflects it. You wear it under your clothes and connect this transducer."

He took out a small PDA-like device, found the USB connecting cable from a small pocket in the suit and plugged it into the transducer. "Make sure the transducer is always in this pocket or it and you will get fried.

"Just run your finger over the front of it and the heat from your finger turns it on. It'll run about eight hours on a single nine volt battery," Motega explained. "When a pulse hits the suit, it senses the frequencies and then calculates how much power it needs to reverse the pulse. It happens in nanoseconds."



“We came up with the idea for the body suit so that the wearer wouldn’t need to know the direction the pulse is originating.”

“Ingenious!” Friedheld said.

Dan stopped glancing at Takara.

“Are you sure I’m protected? I won’t get fried?” Dan asked.

“Not as long as you wear the suit with the black side against your skin. If you don’t you’re going to look like a steak that has been on the grill too long,” Motega explained. “The black side is made of the same copper plastic alloy, except it has a reversed polarity and shields the wearer from its own transmissions. Since UWB can penetrate almost anything, the only effective shield is another transmission that disrupts the incoming pulse. In essence, the suit is like a giant net – it catches the pulse, and then hurls it back to where ever it came from.”

“What about my hands and head? I don’t see that the suit covers those areas.”

“There are special metal rings sewn into the cuffs and the collar. They protect your head and hands. It’s similar in principle to those halo dish collars vets put on dogs to prevent them from scratching or gnawing a cut. The rings create a halo that surrounds your hands and head,” Motega went on. “One other thing - it won’t protect you unless it’s turned on and you can’t wear any metal jewelry because the metal will heat up and burn your skin severely. The transducer has a dim green light to indicate that it’s working. If it’s off you better run like hell.”

“Have you tested it?” Dan asked.

Motega looked at Friedheld for an answer.

“Yes and no,” Takara replied. “We’ve thrown every frequency of microwave at it, but we are not finished with the UWB frequencies. We have a quad processor generating a UWB pulse every half-second and still it will take three days to get through all

the frequencies. So far the suit has held up to every pulse we've fired at it. We are about a third the way through the frequencies."

"So I can get fried?"

The room was silent. Friedheld spoke first.

"Listen, Dan. You don't have to do this. I know your family is important to you. We'll find another way," Friedheld said.

Dan looked around at everyone one by one as if he needed to garner their reactions before he spoke.

"No. I'll do it. I'm just not going to take any chances or get overly confident about the suit."

"We think the suit will cause a chain reaction as one DEW is destroyed, another will replace it and then it will be destroyed until all the towers in that area are gone," Takara added. "We think the range for a DEW is about twelve miles based on the information from the military."

Braggloisi was writing in a shorthand pad. Then she looked up at the group.

"DEW?"

"Directed energy weapon," added Stakhower. "Get with the program."

"I knew that," she snarled at Stakhower. "That means you can take out twelve to sixteen towers in any given location."

"How did you come up with that number?" Stakhower asked taking a sip of his black coffee.

"Each cell tower covers about a four mile radius. So in a twelve-mile radius there should be sixteen towers."

"More or less," Dan added. "Depending on the population of phone users, and the physical layout of the area, there could be forty towers or one tower. There are no hard fast rules for tower placement. The FCC regulates where you can transmit your signal so it doesn't interfere with others. You may be forced to put up another tower two hundred yards from another one to provide

coverage. Or there might be a building or a mountain blocking the signal, so you have to put up another tower very close by.”

“Yes, but not every tower has a DEW. And we know they are sprinkled throughout the US in key areas such as the capitol, New York and other major cities,” Friedheld said. “We are getting a map of all the towers that have DEWs from Homeland Security so we are not shooting in the dark.”

“When do we start?” Dan asked placing the last piece of the English muffin in his mouth.

“Tomorrow morning at three,” Friedheld said. “Takara will go with you. She will run the tower location software and make sure the suits are working.”

“One more thing, Dan,” Motega interrupted. He dug in the front pocket of his computer bag and pulled out a silver-gray anti static bag.

“This is for you. It’s a communicator we have been working on for some time now.” He slid the bag over to Dan.

Dan opened the small bag and pulled out a continuous silver band 3 millimeters thick and 12 millimeters wide with a 50-millimeter diameter. Dan rolled it over in his fingers looking at it from every angle.

“Looks like an expensive watch band without the watch,” Dan observed.

“Try it on,” Motega said.

Dan slipped it over his hand. The metal band stretched as easily as a bungee cord.

“Wow. I didn’t think it would stretch enough to fit over my hand. Whoa, it’s getting tighter and it tingles!”

Dan tried to pull it off, but the device seemed to know and constricted even tighter.

“It won’t hurt you,” Motega explained. “The heat from your body causes it to constrict. The tingling you feel is the device

connecting to your neural system. This device sends communications over your nervous system directly to your brain. The heat from your body keeps the battery charged. To turn it on just hold two fingers on it for three seconds. Tap it once to contact us here; tap it twice to contact the other communicator; tap it three times to create a conference call. When you're connected, it should sound like a voice in your head. It will be very distinct, but you won't know who it is until the speaker identifies themselves. You just have to whisper for us to hear you. The frequency is untraceable and comes across the radio spectrum as white noise. The unit also has a specialized GPS chip so we can track your location, but they can't. To take the unit off, hold two fingers anywhere on the unit for five seconds or more. It will release itself from your nervous system and become flexible so you can slip it off."

"Wow," Dan said.

"We can test it later in the lab so you can get acclimated to the *voice* in your head."

"Won't the pulse fry it?"

"No. It's made out of the same stuff as the suit. It will deflect the energy from the pulses," Motega said.

## **Chapter 30**

**Wednesday, May 28, 2008**

Jerry closed the door to his Nissan and the solid, thick sound sparked the word quality in his mind. He was glad he bought a Nissan and not the Buick his father had suggested when Sara was born. His father said over and over that he should have a large safe car because he had a family now. His father always bought a Buick. The 1985 LeSabre was the model he learned to drive on and it was the car he took to the prom amid the smirks and whispers when he pulled up to the gym with thin, willowy Mary, the only girl who said yes when he asked.

He carefully scanned all around him – the wind rustled through a few trees standing guard over one of the cookie cutter look-alike houses that were common in the ubiquitous cul-de-sacs that dotted Raleigh like an epidemic of crop circles. He stood by his car pretending to be looking for an address so as not to arouse any suspicion from the neighbors Dan said would call the police if they heard a dog barking. He decided on the yellow house since it was not fenced and it had a clear path to the adjoining cul-de-sac. He sprinted past the front lawn into the darkness from the shadow of the house, through the backyard, into another and stopped directly

across the street from Dan's house. It was dark and dead – no life, no lights and even the small scrubs in the front didn't sway from the persistent wind that took hold of the air and danced through the neighborhood like a five year old at Disney Land.

"Damn," he said as he surveyed the six-foot stockade fence that surrounded Dan's backyard like a bunch of giant ice pop sticks glued together for a school project.

He struggled as he hoisted his 195 pounds up the fence and worked his way around the top to get to the other side. *I have to get back to the gym*, he thought straining to pull his weight up. He dropped down into the yard with a thud and headed for the enclosed deck. He found the ladder Dan mentioned and put it up ever so gently near the satellite dish. He took out a penlight and slowly climbed the ladder as stealth and silent as a cat. He adjusted the dish to the angles Dan had requested fearful that someone would see him. Then the deck flooded with light. He remembered that Dan mentioned the lights might go on at any time. He was almost finished when he thought he saw movement in the kitchen window. He ignored the thought and continued adjusting the dish. He had a hard time reaching behind the dish base to loosen one of the nuts that held the dish in place so he stretched around to secure a small wrench. The wrench slipped off and flew out of his hand, bounced a few times on the shingles like it was celebrating its freedom, and then disappeared into the darkness. It hit a drainpipe near the ground and the amplified sound was so loud Jerry nearly slipped off the ladder. The door opened and a bearded man in a black leather jacket walked out. He looked around for a few seconds and then went back inside. Jerry waited a few minutes, and then slowly inched his way off the roof sweating like he just ran a half a mile despite the coolness in the air. When he finished adjusting the dish, he saw another figure slide past the window in one of those rare surrealistic moments where he questioned the

accuracy of his senses. He quickly slid down the ladder, ran to the back of the yard, and hid next to several bushes. He watched the French doors for a few moments and then pulled out his cell phone.

“Dan! I just saw Amelia. She’s in your house!”

“Oh my god! Are you sure?”

“Yeah, and, well I saw her...”

“What?”

“She was holding this guy and then she kissed him.”

“No. Can’t be. Not Amelia. Had to be somebody else,” Dan persisted.

“I saw her clearly through the porch doors. What do you want me to do?”

“Couldn’t be. Where are you now?”

“In your backyard.”

“I’m coming there.”

There was a loud crackle in the phone like the sound from a fax machine but only much slower.

“Oh shit! Jerry, ditch the phone and run like hell! Get out of there now!”

“But I just got it!”

“Get out of there NOW! They know you’re there!”

“Hey, your grass is starting to ripple like there is something under it.”

“Jerry! RUN! JERRY!” The connection went dead.

Jerry threw the phone at the house and raced towards the fence. His short, out-of-shape legs had a hard time carrying his 195-pound frame and he struggled to reach it. He hoisted himself to the top and managed to push off, but then he just hung there. He pushed again and still hung there. He looked around and saw that a tree branch had tangled into the inside lining of his jacket holding him to the fence. He reached over to pull the branch away and then

pulled his arm back quickly. The increasing, burning pain moved up his arm rapidly. He screamed it was so intense. The sleeve of his brown bomber jacket bubbled and melted, and began to drip onto the ground. He pulled his arm out and thrust himself over falling to the ground and landing on his side. He heard something crack and then the pain raced up his chest. More pain. His jacket hung on the tree branch when he picked himself up and ran into the woods holding his burnt arm. As he ran the air became hot and thick and he couldn't get enough air. He was nearly out of the small wooded section and he could see his car now through a silky white fog that enveloped his vision. He could no longer feel his feet touch the ground, but he told himself to keep running. The pain in his arm lessened, but now his chest and lungs burned. He felt his chest and stomach grow larger as if he was being inflated like a balloon. Everything moved in slow motion. His nose began to run, and the blood was hot and burned the inside of his nostrils as it dripped down his face. A black chunky liquid shot out of his mouth and slowly descended to the ground, splattering on his jeans and sneakers. It took on a syrupy, burgundy luminescence. The car slowly faded and he saw his wife, Karen, with their daughter, Sara, sitting on the front steps of their house looking for him - their faces sad and worried. Then Karen said, "Jerry, where are you?" and began to cry. They slowly faded into flashbacks of milestone moments in his life like a slide projector on fast-forward. There was his father wheeling his new mountain bike from the garage on Jerry's 11<sup>th</sup> birthday and his mother sitting there with an angry face; there was Marsha telling him it was over during a teen dance at the high school and his best friend, Frank, holding her hand; there was his boss saying he couldn't raise his salary because of budget restrictions while David Strathmore, his coworker, was looking at his bonus check smiling ear to ear. And then it all stopped as if someone had suddenly turned off the projector and



the room of his mind went black.

## **Chapter 31**

**Wednesday, May 28, 2008**

The tall thin man with straggly hair just touching his shoulders walked quickly into the Cheesecake Factory Restaurant at Durham's Streets at Southpoint Mall and approached the reservation desk at the busy entrance of the popular eatery. The pricy, upscale restaurant chooses its locations carefully, and typically opens in high-income areas where there is a proclivity for dining out. The restaurants are fairly large with floor to ceiling Egyptian columns, French limestone floors and walls covered with detailed murals all warmly lit by the golden glow of multiple hanging hand-blown chandeliers reminiscent of the glory days of the Titanic.

“Excuse me, sir. I’m looking for the O’Farrow table?” the man asked.

“Just a moment,” the reservationist replied from behind the crescent-shaped station wrapped in brass trim.

Several minutes passed and the man wiped down his navy blue sports jacket smoothing out wrinkles he imaged may be there. He approached the station again and at that moment a short young girl with a round puffy face approached him.

“This way, sir,” she said.

She led the man through several curving aisles that brought them to the second level of the restaurant and pointed to a recessed booth large enough to comfortably seat six. The four people in the booth – two men and two women - stopped talking and looked up at the man.

“John! We’re glad you can make it,” the gray haired man said. He got up slowly struggling to move his round large body out of the booth. Once out, he extended his hand and they shook.

“Doug Jarvos?” John asked looking intensely at his wide round face.

“We finally meet. It’s good to put a face with the voice. Here, sit here,” he motioned for John to move into the booth. The three people all moved over in unison.

“You heard about Phillips?” Jarvos asked.

John nodded.

“I’m sorry. He was a good man. There are always martyrs in any cause and ours is no different. He died for a good cause.”

There was a moment of silence, of awkwardness and the three people looked away from John. Jarvos was oblivious to the emotional change.

“Well, let me introduce you. This is Lucy Gates,” he gestured to a woman sitting next to John in her early 40s with striking straight red hair that curled inward at the base of her long neck. She wore a white, silky, sleeveless dress with a mesh v-neck that went down to her navel. She smiled weakly, but kept her emerald eyes focused on John.

“Next to Lucy are Bill and Pam Garrison,” he moved his hand towards the older couple sitting close together. The man raised his gold-ringed hand slightly to acknowledge John. His Italian dark blue suit was decorated with a wrinkleless white shirt and a silver striped tie with a tiny red logo of some kind repeated in every other

stripe. The woman wore a simple strapless black dress. Her neck was accented with a platinum necklace with a row of ten diamonds the size of small marbles. She was much younger than her husband.

“They are all new members of our group and will help support our efforts,” Jarvos said smiling. “And this is John Bastille, our technology guru who made this all possible...with your help of course. Welcome to ICER, John.”

“Nice to meet you all,” John said and then he turned towards Jarvos. “Who’s O’Farrow?”

“He doesn’t exist. That’s the name we use to organize all of our meetings in case they are on to us they will be chasing a ghost,” Jarvos said. “Is everything in place?”

“Oh...yeah, except for one minor problem that should be taken care of by the end of tomorrow.”

John felt his head get warm and he thought a trickle of sweat rolled down the side of his face. He sensed Lucy Gates was staring at him.

“That’s good. If you need anything at all let me know,” Jarvos replied.

“John, what’s in this for you?” Lucy Gates asked her face brightening as she asked the question.

He looked at her as if he knew she would ask him this question.

“I lost my sister-in-law on nine eleven and my brother has never been the same since. Samantha was the life of the family – everybody loved her. My brother never got over it. He lost his job – his pain is very deep and it eats me up to see him suffer so much. I don’t feel the government is doing enough to find the cowards who did it. The CIA, FBI and Homeland Security are still inept organizations that continually fail to do their jobs properly. That’s why we were able to take over the grid and the cell network.”

John picked up the sweating tumbler of ice water near him and took a sip.

“As a nation we are so technologically advanced over the rest of the world, yet the majority of government agencies refuse to embrace that technology to its fullest capability. How hard would it be to link every computer to every police station in the country, link all the immigration and customs computers, the FBI, CIA and NSA to a central database in Homeland Security so that when a suspect is arrested and his description and name are in the database as a suspected terrorist, a priority communication is sent alerting them to hold the suspect. It doesn’t happen because you have all these idiot bureaucrats who won’t allow the technology to be put in place because they are afraid it will infringe on their power or they fear technology itself. Why is it that every major credit card company can deny a purchase anywhere in the world instantly if you have reached your limit or didn’t pay your bill? They have had theft detection software in place for years that automatically detects out of the ordinary purchases and alerts the bank and the card owner. This technology has existed for decades, yet it is not used by law enforcement.”

Jarvos shifted in his seat and turned his head as if to alert John that he was talking too much. John took another sip of water.

“Look what happened on nine eleven – the police, firemen and EMTs couldn’t communicate with each other and they couldn’t talk to anyone once they were in the towers. It takes a disaster to get these idiots to do anything and that’s what we are doing.”

“That’s just your opinion,” Gates jabbed back. “I want to know what *really* motivates you.”

John looked intensely at Gates as if he were scanning her – her well kept French nails, perfectly styled natural red hair, the warm glow in her large green eyes begged for something more.

“Do you really want to know?”

She nodded slightly. The others watched John with trepidation. He picked up the sweating glass again.

“Okay.” He put the glass down and sighed.

“I designed an intelligent chip using a combination of silicon and carbon nanotube techniques – the first of its kind with smart artificial intelligence. The chip could learn patterns and trends and it organizes that data into human-like intelligence much the same way our brains work. It had limited cognizance at first, but the more it learned the more cognizance it acquired. I designed it at home in my spare time. My wife gave me the idea. She’s a librarian and when a patron came in looking for information she would ask a series of questions to narrow down the search. When she knew she had enough information she would direct them to the appropriate aisle – she had made a decision. The chip works the same way and then decides where to best find the information,” John explained in a quieter, defeated voice.

“Sounds like an expert system,” Bill Garrison added.

“Yes, it does, but today’s expert systems are limited to the specific set of rules and truths programmed into it. You have expert systems for filing your taxes or running airport runways, but they cannot learn additional things that are needed to make a truly human decision. When other elements change or additional data is presented, the system fails and requires a human to make the final decision. My chip uses web spiders to comb the Internet to learn so that it could make a human-like decision,” John explained, picking up the tumbler again. “It takes the information from the web, indexes it and correlates it looking for patterns, trends, and relationships using Bayesian statistics. Granted, all of the world’s information is not on the web, but a majority of common everyday knowledge is.”

Lucy moved closed to the table.

“Let’s say you lived in an area that was tornado prone and you created a program to send a message to your cell phone if the winds blew over fifty five knots and if it’s visual sensors detected a funnel cloud shape on the horizon. Suppose one day the winds picked up and blew over fifty-five knots and a small dust devil formed a few feet from its visual sensors. The chip would send out a message that a tornado was approaching – a false positive. My chip would know that dust devils exist and that there is a fifty percent chance that what it was detecting could be either a tornado or a dust devil. It would apply information it obtained like there is an eighty five percent chance of dust devils forming and only a fifteen percent chance of tornadoes. My chip would conclude it was a dust devil based on probability logic. There’s a lot more going on inside the chip, but this is a simplistic view of how it works.”

The short young girl with long black hair appeared at the table holding a small palm-sized PDA and a stylus.

“Are you ready to order?” she said.

“Anyone ready to order?” Jarvos asked of the group. They all shook their heads.

“Can you give us ten minutes,” he told the waitress and she disappeared as quickly as she appeared.

Everyone turned back to John.

“Well, I took the idea to the president of the company I was working for and they agreed to fund the project and give me a third of the revenue once it was commercialized. After all, they were footing the bill for its development and commercialization,” John explained. His deep, mellow baritone voice took on a sonorous quality and the words seemed to float out of his mouth like fine velvet.

“The president and I became good friends. We played golf together; I was promoted. Life was good. Then a year later when

the first prototype was done and we tested it, they realized that they had something really unique, really powerful. Funny things started happening. I wasn't invited to certain meetings anymore; I couldn't access files I always had access to; No one seemed to be reading my emails, and certain people weren't as friendly as they used to be. I stormed into the president's office one day demanding to know what was going on and he immediately called in two security guards. He told me I was fired and that I would have to leave immediately. I couldn't believe the words coming out of his mouth. I was in shock."

"What did you do then?" Gates asked slowly caressing the sides of her half-filled wine glass. John watched her delicate ring less left hand move seductively around the bulbous glass.

"I was mad as hell and hurt at the same time because I couldn't believe he could do that to me."

"Don't they own the chip?" Garrison asked. "Did you design another one for our project? Isn't this the chip we are using?"

"Yes and yes," John replied. "I did what every red-blooded American would do – I took them to court. Even though I had a signed agreement for the royalties to the chip, the judge ruled in their favor citing a clause about corporate property and performance rights. I appealed, of course, but after putting up the house and losing a second time, I also lost the house. Lawyers got it. Soon after that, I lost my marriage. Now I was really angry, so I started designing another chip, the next generation. As luck has it, I discovered a major flaw in the original design that inhibited the chip from learning beyond a certain level. I had suspected this could happen, but I wasn't sure at the time. The good thing is that I knew immediately how to fix it. I also improved a few other areas so that our chip is more advanced."

"What happened to their chip?" Pam Garrison asked.



“I don’t know. I do know they don’t know about our chip and I really don’t care what happens to them,” John said. “I believe what goes around comes around, and stealing my chip came back and bit them.”

“Are you a religious person?” Gates asked her green eyes brighter than ever.

“A practical person.”

“John can you demonstrate what the chip can do?” Jarvos asked.

“Sure.”

John took a small PDA from a belt case, took out the stylus and started tapping on the screen. After several minutes, John looked up at his small audience.

“Here goes,” he said.

He tapped the PDA, the lights went out in the restaurant, and the dim emergency lights turned on providing a candlelight-like atmosphere.

Gates slid her hand up along the inside of John’s thigh and stopped at his crotch. John turned towards her and a mischievous smile spread across her dimly lit face. He tapped the PDA again and the lights came back on a few moments later.

“You can control the power in just this building?” Pam Garrison asked.

“No, not really. The neighborhoods around here probably went out with it. It depends how the substations are set up,” John explained.

“But it’s obvious we can control the power grid from anywhere using a PDA,” Jarvos explained.

“The chip does that?” Garrison asked.

“Yes. It controls the weapons on the cell towers and the virus,” Jarvos explained. “We just tell it to seek and destroy a specific cell phone and it continuously searches until it finds it. We also

programmed it with a self-survival algorithm. This is where it's AI and cognizance really pays off. It can learn to defend itself and launch a counter attack."

"So you can direct these weapons to a specific person?"

"Yeah as long as they have their cell phone connected to a call. It can't find them unless they're on a call," John explained. "We can also target larger areas by inputting longitude and latitude or street intersections and addresses.

"The chip also maintains the virus that allows us to control the power grid." John added. "When an antivirus attacks, it learns the antivirus code and builds a new virus that is immune. So whatever they throw at us, we can overcome it."

Garrison stared into nothingness, his eyes blank, and his mind reeling in thought. John took another sip from the sweating tumbler.

"What do mean by destroy?" Pam Garrison asked.

"Disable anything electronic by frying the components or reprogramming the software. We can disable anything, cars, planes, computers, anywhere. The pulse is harmless to people," John said.

"Well, I think we should order. They are going to charge us rent," Jarvos said.

"If you'll excuse me," John said.

Jarvos stood up to let John out of the large booth and then looked around for the waitress.

"Don't be long," Gates said smiling.

John turned towards her, her porcelain skin glowing warmly from the sunset lighting.

"Just as long as it takes," he said and left.

He walked down the curving aisles to the main dining room and looked along the walls for a rest room sign. He spotted one on the far side next to the bar. He wove his way through the maze of

tables and people and entered. He looked under all the stalls to make sure they were empty and then took out his cell phone.

“Hello Doug. This is John. We have a flaw in the chip. It seems that it finds the right number, but it almost always sends the pulse to the other phone and we lose the location. Several times we missed locating Riker because it sent the pulse to the person he was talking to.”

“Can you fix it?”

“Working on it. But, I think it’s developing a mind of its own.”

## Chapter 32

**Wednesday, May 28, 2008**

After dinner, Jarvos raised his wine glass for a toast his thoughts reeling at what they had accomplished and what they continued to accomplish. He was finally going to be a rich man – something he wanted all his life, something he always struggled to be, but could never attain. The people at the table were not people, just numbers with dollar signs preceding them. After three divorces with kids scattered all over the United States, the things that mattered to him as a younger man no longer mattered now. The divorces, the lawyers, the settlements had numbed him to practically everything in life except money, Money was all that mattered; money was power, freedom, happiness, although it had been years since he was truly happy about anything. Finally, he had something to be happy about.

“For a better tomorrow,” he said and thrust his glass forward to the center of the table his short, stubby fingers barely wrapped around it.

The small group touched glasses, the hollow melodic clang sounded flat and insincere to John. Jarvos quickly downed what was left in his glass and announced that he had to leave. Bill and

Pam Garrison did the same and soon the group was standing in the front of the restaurant saying their goodbyes.

“The next wave of funds will be wired this week,” Garrison said. “And I’m confident now about the project.”

“I’m glad,” Jarvos said with a deep smile, something he rarely did.

The two men shook hands and left. John and Lucy remained standing there not sure what to do next.

“Well...it was nice...” John said.

“You know. I’d like to know how you designed that chip,” Lucy said her face as bright as the full moon that dimly lit the nearly empty parking lot. “We can talk about it at my place...I live in Cary. You can ride with me. I’ll have your car picked up later.”

“You’re the first woman I’ve come across that is interested in my work,” John said. “Are you related to Bill Gates?”

“Do you celebrate Bastille Day every July in France? Everyone asks me that sooner or later,” Lucy said. “Fortunately, I’m not; whole different tribe. My late husband’s name was Weisenhauer and I was never comfortable with it so I always used my maiden name.”

The two walked to a black S-class Mercedes coupe with cream-colored leather seats. The door locks made a low thud and John opened the door.

“Smells new,” John said as he slid into the luxury car.

“It’s not. My late husband was a chemist and he invented this material that time releases the odor for five years. GM bought it and installed it in all their Cadillacs. He put it in this car three years ago. It’s the floor mats.”

“It smells brand new,” John said.

“That’s the idea. He patented the material and started his own company from it.”

They drove into the Preston Woods section of Cary, an exclusive area of estate homes starting at a million dollars with one-acre plus lots. The power brokers of the area lived here – the presidents and vice presidents of the large biotechnology and software firms in Research Triangle Park, the owners of the mega supermarket chains, the commercial land and housing developers. Anyone who was anyone lived here with quasi-celebrity status.

She made a left and drove for about a half of a mile past a continuous three-foot high brick wall with an ornate wrought iron fence on top.

“That’s Jim Goodnight’s house,” she said.

“The owner of SAS?” John said.

“The one and only. He has the largest piece of property here. We’re good friends. Karl and I often had dinner with them. Jim was very interested in Karl’s work.”

“Did Goodnight finance the floor mats?”

“He did. Invested his own money, not the company’s, but it wasn’t enough. He wouldn’t invest the company’s money because it was not related to his core competencies. As the rest of the business world was moving towards diversification, he concentrated on improving his core business and it paid off.”

Lucy stopped the car at a tall iron gate with two round white columns each with a sculptured bird with narrow wings spiraling upward into the black sky.

“Nice sculptures,” John said noticing the solid turquoise birds lit from the tiny spotlights below them.

“My husband was a modern day alchemist – always pushing the envelope, looking for that elusive substance that would benefit mankind forever like aluminum or plastic. He wanted something that would represent that elusiveness, so he had the birds made,” Lucy explained. “The wings moving upward represent that elusiveness, always there, but just out of reach.”

She took out her cellular phone and pressed four buttons on the keypad. A few seconds later the gates slowly slid open, and she drove onto a cobblestone driveway that led to a large multi-gabled house about 200 yards away.

“My husband also developed a pheromone that really worked for ninety percent of the population. Most on the market today are a hit or miss because pheromones only work if two people have a similar genetic makeup. He went deeper into the genetic code and discovered how to make them work with a larger segment of the population,” she explained.

“Is that what you’ve used on me,” John said.

“I wouldn’t do that because to me it’s fake like those push up bras that give the illusion of larger breasts. After you stop using the scent, you may find you weren’t attracted to that person at all. It has to be genuine for me or I don’t want it.”

Sitting next to her, she suddenly became familiar, a part of him. He could see the little girl that was now the beautiful woman. She was no longer that strange stranger. The cobblestone driveway ended in a circle in front of the house. Within the circle was a Koi pond with an illuminated floating fountain that randomly displayed a different color every 15 seconds. They got out of the car and stepped up to three crescent-shaped steps made of gray flagstone. Three white pillars supported a crescent-shaped roof that mirrored the shape of the steps. She took out her phone again, pressed a series of numbers and the solid teak door clicked and whirred as several dead bolts slid back.

“Where’s the moat?”

“Very funny,” she said. “F. Scott Fitzgerald said the rich are different and they are. You have a whole new set of problems that you never imagined.”

“I think they would be good problems compared to having to work your ass off for every penny,” John said.

“I wish. I didn’t come from money nor did my husband so we learned the hard way.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ll tell you one day. It’s a long story.”

They walked into a foyer the size of a small bedroom and lit from a hanging lamp similar in shape to the birds’ wings. The wings slowly grew brighter and cast a warm glow on the cherry wood floor. The scent of fresh roses immediately filled the room.

John turned towards Lucy and was about to speak.

“It’s a smart house,” Lucy said. “We designed it together to do various things including incorporating atomizers that scent the room when you enter.”

They walked to the end of the foyer into a large square great room with a full sized flagstone fireplace to the right and a large bay window on the left. Two crescent windows on each side of the bay window revealed a small pond in the back. Indirect lighting hidden in the crown molding near the ceiling came to life creating a warm, inviting glow in the large room. A faint musk smell filled the room.

“Sit down,” she said waving her hand towards a white Hepburn sofa facing the fireplace. “I’ll get some drinks. Is red wine ok?”

“Sure.”

She faced the fireplace and said, “Fireplace on,” as if it were a loving pet and the gas ignited with a faint whoosh into several undulating flames that licked the split oak gas logs. She returned a few minutes later with two round wine glasses on long thin stems and sat down next to John.

“I think you are still in love with your husband,” John said taking a wine glass from her. “I can tell the way you talk about him.”



“I am. I will never fall out of love with him. He was everything to me. Life could not have been better. There is a lot of him in this house.”

John looked towards the dancing flames in the fireplace, each one repeating its unique, precise movement over and over again. Lucy watched him closely.

“Isn’t that painful?” John said. “I mean living here with all those memories?”

“Sometimes, but mostly it’s comforting recalling the good times. That’s why I stay here. I still have him...in this house. I have my memories...he was...”

Her eyes glazed and she took a deep breath.

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to sound like a gushing teenager. I want you to know that what I’m feeling for you now is like nothing I have ever felt before. My husband is gone and I’m just now able to move on with my life.”

“Are you sure?”

She took a large gulp of the wine and a tear escaped from her eye.

“He died on nine eleven,” she took another sip from the wine glass.

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to,” John said.

She looked at the large bay window into the darkness.

“He was in New York that day to secure funding for the pheromone and he was meeting with a brokerage firm in the south tower...” her voice trailed off to a whisper.

“I’m very sorry,” John said taking hold of her hand.

“He called me and we talked until...the end. They never found him.”

“You don’t have to say anymore,” John said.

“Now you know why I’m involved in this craziness,” she said.

She leaned over and pulled a tissue from a small box on the end table and patted her eyes.

“You’re the first man that I have been attracted to since. You are so much like him.”

John moved closer to her and kissed her lightly on the lips. She welcomed the kiss and pulled him closer pushing her tongue into his mouth. They kissed for several minutes, and then she grabbed his hand and led him to the upstairs master bedroom. Two candlestick lamps, one on each night stand on each side of the canopy bed lit when they entered the large room; the gold acanthus leaves design on the shades cast a warm glow throughout the room. The air filled with a soft baby powder scent with a hint of vanilla. The bedroom had a crescent shaped alcove in the left corner that contained a large roll top desk and a small white makeup table with a crescent mirror. She gently pushed him down on the king size bed and began unbuttoning his white shirt. He struggled to get out of his blue sports jacket. She moved down to his belt and unlatched it. Then she slipped out of her dress like a swan taking flight for the first time.

The room, the smells, the lighting all seemed to vanish and John saw only her fleshy perfect body on his. Her skin and face seemed to take on an ethereal glow that was a beautiful, warming, comforting aura that exuded from her like a soft warm light. His consciousness vanished into the aura until Lucy said, “It’s been so long, I’ve almost forgot how good it could be.”

“It was good for me, also,” John said barely finding the words as he slowly descended from her aura.

She turned on her side and faced him.

“Can I tell you something?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m thinking of pulling out of this whole thing. I’m not comfortable with killing innocent people, and I don’t want to spend the rest of my life in jail for conspiracy to murder.”

“What are you talking about?” John sat up in bed.

“Pam Garrison was telling me in the ladies room something about how the pulses can effectively eliminate people as well as electronics. She wasn’t sure, but she thinks she heard her husband talking on the phone one day to Jarvos about it. She’s worried for her husband.”

“The pulses aren’t strong enough to kill people,” John said. “All they do is descramble software, fry a few chips. They’re as harmless as a cell phone signal.”

“What if you’re wrong?”

“I designed the system. I should know,” John said raising his voice a bit.

“What if they figured a way to make it more powerful?”

“It’s possible, but...well...okay,” John said with that scratch-your-head look. “We’ll test it. Do you have another working cell phone?”

“My husband’s spare. I never cancelled his account since my phone is on his account.”

“We need a lot of space,” John said twisting to look out the crescent shaped window above the headboard.

“That small dock is perfect. I will also need a bucket,” John said looking out over the small pond.

“A bucket?”

“Yeah. I’m going to fill it with water, and if the water boils and turns to steam then we will know that the pulse can kill.”

John quickly got dressed and Lucy opened a drawer in a tall cherry wood lingerie chest and handed John her husband’s spare cell phone.

“There’s a bucket under the sink in the kitchen,” Lucy told him. “You can go out the back door there.”

John left with the cell phone. He returned about ten minutes later after he left the phone on the dock next to the bucket filled with pond water.

“What’s the number?” he asked Lucy. She told him from memory.

He dialed the number into his PDA and Lucy stared at the dock illuminated by two rows of six solar garden lights knee high on each side. John tapped the screen of the PDA.

“Okay. The phone should be useless now. See, I told you it was harmless...”

Within seconds, the water around the dock began to boil and geysers of steam shot upward around the dock creating a large cloud of steam the size of a small house. The dock was lifted upward about ten feet into the air as if it weighed nothing. When it slammed into the water, it broke into several pieces that floated towards the shore as the water calmed down.

“I can’t believe it!” John screamed. “I can’t believe they would do this!”

“And I lost my dock!”

“Maybe, it’s just a glitch. I need to see what’s going on.” He began tapping on the PDA screen to connect to the servers that controlled the cell phone network and the pulse weapons. He scrambled around the floor looking for his jacket and pulled his wallet out of the inside pocket. He took out a clear plastic card and held it near the PDA.

“What’s that?” Lucy asked.

“My ID card. It’s an RFID tag that sends my password to the network.”

The PDA emitted a low two-toned beep. He tapped on the screen several more times then waited. The device emitted the same sound again.

“Damn. I’m either locked out or there is something seriously wrong,” he said.

He dialed Jarvos’ number. A high-pitched screeching sound blared out the PDA’s tiny loudspeaker and the windows in the house began to vibrate as if they were being battered by hurricane force winds.

“What’s that?” Lucy screamed.

Slowly the windows turned into opaque panels of white bluish light so bright they both had to turn away and shield their eyes. John threw the PDA on the floor and smashed his heel into the display over and over like a child having a fit. He grabbed Lucy’s hand and pulled her out the door. She grabbed her lavender silk robe, and they ran through the house and into Lucy’s car. The house immediately went dark. Lucy started the car and floored it.

John looked back at the house.

“Oh my god!” he shouted and began to shake uncontrollably as he watched the roof rip open by an angry mob of flames that quickly began to swallow the house. The shingles instantly melted into a shiny black liquid that ran off the roof and poured into the gutters. The car lurched forward, wheels screeching and smoking on the hard to grip cobblestones. The Mercedes fishtailed and splashed into the pond, the wheels spinning gravel and water into the air as if it were some weird new fountain for the pond. John was about to open the door when a giant mushroom of steam blew up out of the pond and swallowed the car. The windows fogged instantly and the force of the blast pushed the car forward out of the pond. It bounced and fishtailed as if it were a spooked steed galloping towards the gate.

Lucy glanced into the rear view mirror to see her house in flames.

“Shit!” she said.

She aimed the car as best as she could at the center of gates and lifted her foot off the gas pedal. The front of the car passed through, but both side view mirrors hit the gates and slammed against the car doors. The mirror on John’s side flew upward and slammed into the window turning it into a spider web mosaic that undulated inward like a graceful wave. John continued to shake out of control.

When they were several miles away on Interstate 40, Lucy looked over at John.

“Are you ok?”

“I think I’ve created a nightmare,” he said still trying to shake off the shaking. “And I don’t know why we’re still alive.”

## Chapter 33

**Wednesday, May 28, 2008**

“I have to go! Amelia is there!” Dan yelled at Friedheld. “I have to help Jerry! It’s my fault he was there!” Dan had just put on the reverse pulse suit and now he was trying to get out of it.

“It’s too dangerous! We can’t afford to lose you or anybody for that matter!” Friedheld shot back. “We haven’t finished testing the suit.”

“I don’t care! I’m going with or without the suit!”

Friedheld looked intensely into Dan’s eyes. Dan held his stare as he continued to struggle with the suit.

“Leave the suit on, Dan. Take Takara with you to make sure the suits keep working. Takara you wear the first prototype we built,” Friedheld said. “My car is in Lift two. You’ll need this.”

Friedheld reached into his pocket and pulled out a remote keyless device.

“This will override the fingerprint scanner so you can start the car. Just snap it in place over the scanner on the console and push the button. The car will start. Push the button again and snap it out to turn the car off. The car won’t shut off until you snap it out.”

“I’ll drive,” Takara said.

"I would rather drive," Dan said.

"I said I'm driving. Now let's go." She picked up the transducers for the suits and grabbed the electronic key from Friedheld. Dan hesitated then followed.

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Dan pulled out Jake's PDA as they exited the underground parking lot onto Hillsborough Street.

"What are you doing?" Takara asked.

"Let me know when we are going over thirty-six miles per hour," Dan said.

"Why?"

"They can't lock onto the phone's signal and cook us with one of their pulses."

"Oh. That's good to know." Takara smiled.

"I didn't think these suits would itch in areas I can't reach. I feel like a cross dresser," Dan explained.

"Get used to it. I had to dress like a man once to get into a security conference in Washington. They would only allow men with certain security clearances."

"Well, it's a good thing you're not a man," Dan said.

"I agree."

"Go to Capitol Boulevard and then to the interstate. We can go over thirty-six there. I need to check something before we get there," Dan said.

"I know. I live here too remember? By the way, we are going forty now," she said smiling.

Dan turned on the PDA and linked the device to the computers in his house. He ran the recorded video from his security cameras back 60 minutes and played it on the PDA. About halfway through a black SUV pulled into his driveway. The woman got out of the passenger's side unassisted. The screen was too small to see their



faces, but the woman had the same frame and hair as Amelia. The woman opened the rear passenger door.

“That can’t be her! She would never cooperate with them,” Dan said.

A young girl got out of the car. The woman took her hand and they walked into the house.

“Oh no, no...”

“Are you talking to someone?” Takara asked. “Is there someone else in the car I don’t know of?”

“No. Let’s just get there.”

Dan was silent for the rest of the short 20-mile trip.

“Something bothering you? You’re quiet.”

“No. Just worried. I think my wife is cooperating with them, but I can’t believe it.”

“Maybe, they forced her? Told her a story about how they would kill you if she didn’t cooperate.”

“Yeah, maybe that’s it. You sure know how to make a guy feel good.”

Takara smiled slightly and did not look at Dan. When they approached the entrance to the subdivision, Dan shifted in his seat.

“Go to the next subdivision. We’ll walk through the woods in case they’re watching the house,” He said. “Turn here and make a left into that cul-de-sac.”

“Are you sure? Shouldn’t we go closer to your house?”

“I’m sure. There are people watching my house and the neighbors are paranoid.”

Takara followed Dan’s directions and she slowed the car down as they entered the circular cul-de-sac.

“Oh no. Jerry’s car is still here!” Dan said. “Drive past his car and park near the main street so we can get out quickly if we need to.”

She turned the car around in the bulb and parked. They got out and ran toward Jerry's car.

"Oh my god!" Takara screamed.

Dan bent down and felt for a pulse.

"He's still alive! Call nine one one!"

Jerry was face down next to the car, streaks of blood and vomit covered the window and door. Dan rolled his friend over on his back so he could breathe easier. His eyes bulged from his head and his face was red and flush.

"Jerry! Jerry! Wake up! It's me, Dan. Wake up!" Tears streamed down Dan's face.

Jerry moaned then slipped back into unconsciousness.

"This is my fault. I shouldn't have involved him." Dan cried tears rolling down his face. "I don't know how much more I can take of this!"

"What the hell are you talking about? You have a family and that is your hope, your light in the darkness," Takara said. "I wish I could say I had one. You have to be strong, Dan. You have to find them and get them back. This is the unfortunate collateral damage that goes with doing something that really matters...something that is for the good of everyone. This is what heroes do. This is what you do."

"How could I be a hero when I practically killed my best friend?" Dan managed to get out between tears.

"He's not dead Dan and you're not to blame." She leaned down and put her arm around Dan's shoulder. She looked into his eyes, "Your wife is a lucky woman. I wish I could find a man half of what you are."

Dan looked through the distorted reality formed by his tears into Takara's eyes and a calming seemed to wash over him. He felt that everything was going to be all right with her by his side. He stood

up and saw a large black mass slowly approach the cul-de-sac. He wiped the tears out of his eyes.

“Get down!” he said and he thrust himself onto to the ground. She did the same moving close to him. The SUV slowed then moved past them like the black threat that it was.

“They’re looking for Jerry. They know he was here. Where the hell is the ambulance?”

“I didn’t call one. I called Friedheld. He will send help. He told us not to use the police because they couldn’t be trusted. He suspects this organization is large and may have people everywhere.”

“Shit!” Dan said.

“What?”

“Look.”

The SUV had turned around and was heading in their direction. It was going too slow to be a local resident coming home from an errand or a night out.

“Can you stay here with Jerry and make sure he gets help? I’m going to try to lose them,” Dan volunteered.

“See, I told you, you were a hero,” Takara said smiling. “Here’s the transducer and the key.”

He held her hand for several seconds and again she felt like fine silk, except her hand was warm, alive, and seemed to send something that made his stomach flutter and his mind drift away.

“Make sure you put it inside the pocket on the suit.”

She moved closer and kissed him on the lips quickly. Dan’s eyes widened.

“I’m sorry, but I think...”

“Thank you,” she said. “Now get going before it’s too late.”

Dan connected the transducer, placed it in its special pocket, and turned it on. He took a deep breath to shake off the kaleidoscope of feelings swirling around inside him and started

walking down the street towards the car. The SUV pulled next to him. The window smoothly rolled down with a shadow peering out at Dan.

“Excuse me. We’re looking for Spring Lake Court.” The man stroked his black, short beard as if he were pondering what Dan would say.

“Sorry, I don’t live here.”

“Well, do you have a cell phone? The battery went dead in ours. We can call our friends and get directions...” the man said. Dan looked at the shadow sitting in the passenger seat – blackness, pure blackness.

“Sorry, I don’t have a phone with me,” he replied and continued walking.

Dan got into the car and slowly drove away. The SUV kept a distance, but followed. Dan made a left out of the subdivision and glanced several times into the rear view mirror watching for the SUV. The vehicle appeared to hesitate at the intersection and then made a quick left and accelerated. Dan punched the gas pedal and the car lurched forward pinning his head against the headrest. He headed for the main road and saw the digital speedometer flash 88 in red on the inside of the windshield. The small car was extremely responsive – it felt like the tires were glued to the road – not once did the tires screech or slide and the car moved quickly and gracefully in any direction. Once on the main road, Dan instantly saw that he had made a wrong move. The two-lane thoroughfare had too much traffic and he was quickly coming up to a car going under the 45 mph speed limit. He glanced in the rear view mirror and saw the SUV quickly gaining as he braked to avoid colliding with the slow moving car. *Just a little more to go*, he thought before he could make a right onto a long narrow two-lane road that cut through the rows of meticulously cared for land of several small farms. The road was never peppered with more than one or

two cars and he knew there was a sharp turn that cut through an old ravine formed by the beginnings of the Neuse River. *Hurry up! Hurry up! Move!* The driver of the older car appeared oblivious to anything going on around him and he continued on his turtle-like pace. The SUV was closer – its obnoxious large headlights lit up the inside of the car making it difficult for Dan to see ahead. He floored the accelerator and passed the turtle-like car and then cut in front to make the turn down the narrow road through the farmland. The driver of the turtle car slammed on his brakes and blew his horn, but Dan was already a good distance away. Dan's car began to slide and he turned in the direction of the skid to bring the car back onto the road. The car straightened out almost instantly and Dan was amazed how quickly the car responded with very little effort.

Dan floored the car and within seconds the digital display raced to the 120 mph mark. Seconds later, the SUV's lights appeared as two ominous eyes on the blackened road. When he approached the tight turn of the ravine, he slowed and the SUV quickly caught up, then he accelerated as he went into the turn and the SUV did the same. Dan's car slid slightly from loose gravel on the road, but he easily compensated and clearly negotiated the turn. The SUV also lost traction, and slid sideways. The truck slid to the edge of the road and tumbled into the deep ravine and disappeared. Dan slowed and thought about turning around, but thought it was better to keep going.

Suddenly, he heard a rush of air all around him and his wrist tingled. He looked to see if any of the windows were open or broken. Then he heard the voice inside his head.

"Dan, this is Friedheld. Where are you going?"

He touched the wrist communicator Motega had given him earlier and began talking.

“I had to play decoy with a black SUV that showed up looking for Jerry. Jerry was hit with a pulse. We found him unconscious by his car.”

“Is he alive?”

“Barely.”

“Oh, my god! Are you bringing them in now?”

“No.”

“They’re not with you?”

“No.”

“Where are they?” Friedheld asked. “I’m not getting a fix on Takara.”

*“Orange Blossom Court. It’s the cul-de-sac behind mine. Didn’t Takara call you?”* Dan said, but he didn’t whisper this time.

“No. I’ll send security team now,” Friedheld added. “Are they still chasing you?”

*“No. I managed to lose them...rather they took a wrong turn,”* Dan thought.

“Slow down! You’re talking too fast, all your words are running into one another. Maybe, the communicators are not working properly.”

*“I’m not talking...I’m just thinking what I want to say.”*

“What?”

*“I’m just thinking my words and they’re transmitting. It started a few minutes ago.”*

“Neural transmitters. Damn, who would have thought they would be that sensitive. This is beyond our wildest dreams. Chip will be ecstatic. Well. Are you coming in now?”

*“No,”* Dan thought. *“I’m going back to make sure Takara and Jerry are ok.”*

“It’s too risky, Dan. They are probably waiting for you this time. I’ll take care of it. You should come in.”

*“Too late. I’m on my way,”* Dan thought and tapped the bracelet to disconnect Friedheld.

Dan tapped the bracelet twice and the same gushing air sound he heard before swirled around in his head.

*“Takara? Are you there?”* he thought.

*“Yes...who is this?”* she whispered.

*“Dan. Are you all right? How is Jerry?”*

*“Same as before. Where are they? Where are you? Are you ok? Did you lose them?”*

*“Yes...”*

Dan could not keep his thoughts straight – a fog seemed to materialize in his mind taking his every thought. He felt like he was floating in nothingness and then it came – an overwhelming sentient emotion that completely intoxicated him. The emotion was not his, not originating from the deepest depths of his heart and soul. It was something he never felt before, something completely alien to him. It took hold of all of his subtle and varied emotions and set them ablaze all at once, but with that maelstrom came a clarity of understanding so clear and so genuine that it frightened him, yet he loved it all the same.

*“Hello, Dan. Are you there?”* Takara said.

The emotional hurricane intensified and within seconds he realized that this tender, warm, uncompromising, unconditional love, this suppressed fear, intense desire, unbroken passion, and true fearlessness that flowed into his heart and soul was coming from Takara through the neural bracelet.

*“Yeah. I got distracted. I’m coming back,”* Dan thought. He felt breathless again like the first time he saw Takara.

*“I thought I lost you,”* she said.

*“Where’s the damn security team? They sure are taking their time,”* Takara thought.

*“They’re not there yet!”* Dan thought.

"I didn't say anything," Takara said. "How did you know they weren't here?"

*"I heard your thoughts. You were thinking that they are taking a long time to get there,"* Dan thought.

"Wait a minute. You can read my mind? How is that?"

*"The neural bracelets. Just think freely and your words flow,"* Dan thought. *"Try it."*

Several seconds passed and Dan heard nothing.

*"Takara?"*

Dan heard a short squeaky sound that he thought was a laugh.

*"I can't believe this!"* Takara thought. *"I just giggled like a teenager. Dan is this for real? What is happening between us? We just met and I now feel that I've known you all my life. I can feel what you feel...your misery, your sadness, your fear, your loneliness, your love for your wife and daughter. I also feel this incredible attraction to you that I have never felt for any man and I shouldn't. I'm falling in love with you almost instantly. You're married and I would never compromise my integrity by interfering in that way no matter what I felt."*

*"The same happened to me. A flood of your emotions overwhelmed me and I felt this incredible love for you because I can feel everything you feel, but I had to shut it off. It was too addictive,"* Dan thought.

*"Oh, shit!"* Takara transmitted.

Her fear immediately coursed through his consciousness like the electric current it was.

*"What's the matter?"* he transmitted back.

*"Another SUV and they're circling the cul-de-sac. Shit. They stopped at the entrance. They're parking!"* she transmitted. *"Oh, no. There's another one on the main street, and there's another one. They're all over the place. They are definitely looking for Jerry or you. I gotta go!"*



*"I'm a few minutes away,"* Dan thought.

*"Stay away! You'll never get out if you come!"*

*"Damn sons of bitches!"* Dan let out.

*"I got that."*

Takara struggled to push Jerry under the car and then squeezed next to him.

*"Listen. Call me on your cell,"* Dan thought.

*"Are you nuts? You'll get fried in a split second."*

*"Not if I'm going over 36 miles per hour, and if they didn't fix a little glitch in their location software,"* Dan thought. *"Dial my cell, and as soon as you hit send, toss the phone over to the parked SUV, and then run like hell to the entrance and I'll pick you up."*

Takara took out her cell phone and dialed Dan's number and tossed it towards the SUV. The tiny phone danced on the street like a reluctant participant, and then snagged on the manhole cover in the middle of the road, about ten feet short of its target.

"Shit!" she let out and started running towards the entrance of the subdivision. A bluish white wave of plasma about four feet in diameter came out of the black sky like a giant white snake and struck the phone. The manhole cover blew off with a geyser of steam following it upward. The large metal disk landed on the windshield of the SUV smashing the glass down to the dashboard. The man in the passenger seat opened the door and fell out, his face a checkered field of blood from the tiny pieces of glass that shot out from the pressure of the falling manhole cover. The man in the driver's seat did not move. His head slowly slid downward as his body cooked from the inside from the pulse. His skin melted, bubbled, and browned like cheese on a pizza. The other man spotted Takara and pointed a small laser towards her.

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Dan approached the entrance of his subdivision and turned off the lights on the car.

*“Takara! Where are you?”* Dan thought.

*“Running towards the entrance. I don’t see you?”*

Dan looked down the slight hill and saw her small svelte figure moving quickly like a shadow in the dimly lit street. Dan moved over and unlatched the passenger door for her, but he didn’t open it because it would have lit the dome and floor lights in the car.

*“Hurry up,”* he thought.

*“I am!”*

As Dan watched her run towards him, another wave of emotion filled his consciousness. It was desire and longing, warmth and love flowing into his heart from Takara through the neural bracelets. There was resolution, a resolution to reach him to be safe, to be saved, to be loved, to be accepted. Dan let himself be swallowed by her torrent of emotions, by her onslaught of intense ethos. He wanted to embrace them, to accept them, but then they suddenly stopped as if she had instantly turned them off. An excruciating flood of fear filled his consciousness for a split second and then disappeared. He looked upward and his eyes widened. Another bluish white wave of plasma materialized out of the black sky and moved downward following the thin red laser line that ended on Takara’s back. The death pulse pushed her forward and she fell, tumbled and rolled on the pavement out of control. Instantly, the pulse coalesced into bright blue phosphorescence that splashed all around Takara like a stream of water hitting a brick wall. It pinned her to the pavement. The phosphorescence gathered up into a single beam of light and quickly reversed direction moving across the sky like an escaping firebird. As it passed through the tops of trees the leaves instantly shriveled, turned brown and ignited into an angry firestorm. When it reached its source, a cell phone tower about 100 yards away, the pulse enveloped the structure with a golden glow for a few fleeting seconds and then burned white hot. The antenna array on the top

exploded like a July 4<sup>th</sup> firework showering sparks all the way to the ground. Takara slowly stirred, and then sat up. She coughed from the thick ozone in the air. Dazed, she spotted Dan's car and started running.

"The suit worked!" she yelled as she slammed her body covered only in the thin transparent mesh of the suit into the car seat and closed the door. Dan moved his eyes over her thin curvy body.

"I hope you didn't wear your good clothes," Dan said.

"Funny."

A second pulse came from the opposite direction and lit up the sky piercing the pavement where Takara had been and exploding into a cascade of liquid asphalt, stones and dirt.

Dan floored the car and they took off.

"Look! It worked!" Takara said. "There's a second pulse just as we thought would happen. We can destroy all the pulse weapons with these suits. It's great!"

She looked at Dan with a smile across the entire width of her narrow, doll-like face. The smile soon ran away and the light in her eyes went out. She grabbed her stomach and bent over putting her head between her knees.

"I don't feel so good," she moaned.

## Chapter 34

Thursday, May 29, 2008

“Now do you believe me?” Lucy Gates fired at John as they drove east along Interstate 40 towards the center of Raleigh.

John Bastille had stopped shaking and stared out the window at the distance lights of a lone office building. He had not said a word since they left Lucy’s burning house.

“I can’t believe they did it,” John said. “They probably killed Phillips – he would never go along with this, and that’s why they tried to kill us, too. They must have figured if we got together the cat would be out of the bag, and I would shut them down.”

“Would you?”

“In a heartbeat! I never intended for anyone to get hurt. I did this for my family and others like me because I wanted our inept government to do more, to be better, to show more muscle, to stop being the politically correct jackass that it is, always worrying about what the rest of the world thinks. Like Nike - just do it, just do what is right.”

“Who do you think *they* are?”

“I don’t know. Probably Jarvos and Garrison. Maybe others,” John said.

“Jarvos is the ice man cometh, but he picks up on every nuance,” Lucy added. “I sensed that immediately. He’s one of those guys that can predict how you will react even if you don’t know. I should have invested my money more wisely.”

“How much did you give them?”

“A pledge of five million, but they only got a million so far and that’s all they’ll ever get. I wish I could take it back.”

“A pittance for what they needed to pull this off. They have bigger money behind them.”

“Really?”

John looked ahead and saw a hint of light change the color of the horizon slightly. The highway was sprinkled with only a few cars. The sun was coming up.

“What happened to my house?” Lucy said.

“They shot a pulse at it after I dialed Jarvos’ number; that’s how the chip knew where to direct the energy, but I don’t know why we’re not dead. Maybe, all the wiring in your smart house saved our butts.”

“It’s all wireless.”

“That wouldn’t have stopped it.”

“I remember when we had the equipment installed, Karl was concerned about leakage. I had no idea what he was talking about, but I remember he had something installed in the attic. I never saw what it was, but Karl said an old Army friend of his helped him get the equipment and not to mention that it was there,” Lucy explained.

“An RF jammer! That’s what saved us. It jammed the pulse for a short time and then failed. It probably overheated and caught fire. Your husband probably had the unit configured to prevent anyone eavesdropping on your wireless network in the house.”

“If you say so.” She looked at him with raised eyebrows. “What’s an RF jammer?”

“Radio frequency jammer – available only to law enforcement and the military to jam a frequency with white noise or some other sound so that the enemy can’t intercept your radio transmissions.”

“You know, you’re such an expensive date. First you destroy my dock and then my house. I should watch the company I keep.”

She smiled warmly at him, her face bright with new admiration.

“I’ll try not to break any more of your toys. Can we play nice now?”

They both laughed.

“By the way, where are we going?” Lucy asked.

“Downtown. We don’t have a choice; we have to find Dan Riker if we want to survive. He’s probably the only guy on the planet that can stop this madness.”

## Chapter 35

**Thursday, May 29, 2008**

The rising sun cast angular bars of orange light that streamed across the convex windows of the Synertron building and appeared to slice through the 21<sup>st</sup> century building like giant orange lasers.

“Pull in over there,” John said pointing to the underground entrance of the building.

Lucy drove into the dark entrance and stopped in front of the metal mesh security gate.

“Hello. Can I help you?” A rumpled voice of an older security guard came out the dark blue glass window that served as the finger print scanner.

John leaned over closer to Lucy and directed his voice out the window. Lucy kissed him lightly on the cheek.

“We’re here to see Dan Riker. My name is John Bastille.”

The guard was silent. Seconds later his voice crackled over the tiny speaker.

“We don’t have a Dan Riker here. Are you sure you have the right building?”

“He may be working as a consultant so he would not be on your employee list,” John added.

“What did you say your name was?” the guard said.

“John Bastille.”

The glass went silent again.

“Okay. When the gate opens, go in and make a left. Someone will meet you there.”

A low hum of an electric motor filled the quiet space and the gray mesh security gate wiggled its way open.

“You’re name must be a magic word like open says me,” Lucy said smiling. “It had that effect for me.”

“It’s more like dirt these days.”

Lucy moved the car slowly through the narrow tunnels and turned left. The tunnel poured them into an open grid area with several hundred parking spaces. Three guards greeted them each wearing six-inch thick flack jackets and holding Uzi machine guns.

“I told you my name was dirt,” John said.

One guard opened the door for Lucy; John opened his own door. They got out and were led to an elevator nearby. Inside, the elevator smelled of metal, oil and sweat from the guards. It stopped on the fiftieth floor - Phillips’ office.

“Mr. Bastille. There are a lot of people who want to talk to you,” Friedheld said as the group entered the office. The room smelled of freshly brewed coffee.

“I’m sure and there’s a lot more who don’t,” John said.

“And this is?”

“Lucy Gates,” she said.

“A relative of the billionaire?”

“No, luckily.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Harald Friedheld,” he said holding out his hand. “I see you are dressed for the occasion.”

Lucy took his hand and they shook briefly.



“Have a seat,” Friedheld said and motioned them to sit in the two tan leather chairs in front of his desk. The guards moved to the back of the room. “Would you like some coffee? I just made it.”

“No, thanks. My stomach is in enough turmoil,” John said.

Lucy shook her head.

“I’m rather surprised to see you here,” Friedheld said.

“So am I. I’ve made a major mistake. I gave my technology to a group of criminals. I thought I was doing something good for the country, something to end of the wars in the Middle East, something to put in real dent in terrorism like they did to us on nine eleven. Unfortunately, I was wrong and now innocent people have died,” John explained.

His eyes glistened slightly. Lucy noticed and put her hand over his.

“So now you want to help us? Why should I trust you?” Friedheld said picking up a white cup from its matching saucer on the desk. “You can be here to sabotage everything.”

“Listen,” John said his voice rising. “These sons of bitches just tried to kill us! We barely got out alive. I was used, led to believe my expertise was going to be used to help people and now all I want is to stop these bastards!”

The guards stirred to John’s excitement like guard dogs trained to attack with the slightest movement.

“I can help you destroy the pulse weapons and eliminate the virus. I designed them for Christ’s’ sake!” John was nearly shouting now.

Several tears dripped down his face. Lucy squeezed his hand.

“You’ll never stop the virus,” John said. “It runs by a sentient chip I designed that thinks more strategically than Big Blue. You don’t have to micromanage it like you do with other programs. Just tell it what you want, and it will figure out how to do it with the resources available. It probably has learned the entire anti virus

strategies from the Internet by now so anything you throw at it is useless.”

“The chip runs the pulse weapons the same way. You tell it to find a specific cell phone number and the chip monitors the networks until it locates the phone. Then it destroys it. It can only find the phone when it becomes active on the network, but I imagine it’ll figure out how to locate an inactive phone soon enough. It will use all of its resources to find the phone using the path of least resistance just like lightening.”

“We can outsmart it. Shut down the system it’s on. Physically destroy the chip,” Friedheld said.

“You can’t stop it,” John said and began to shake again. “It lives...it lives...on the Internet. It feeds on the Internet twenty four seven. It will reach the intelligence of a seven year old in about eight days, and it’s been feeding for four days now.”

“So it’s growing exponentially. It will be a teenager in twelve days or less. There has to be a way. There’s always a way,” Friedheld said.

“The chip has a defense algorithm that works the same as our survival instinct only better. It will do whatever to survive and perpetuate its existence. Its code is hidden all over the Internet that’s why you won’t be able to stop it,” John said shaking more violently than before.

John put his hands over his face and began to cry. Lucy hugged him.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t realize that it would morph into a monster,” John said tears flowing.

He looked at Lucy’s sympathetic face and Friedheld’s deep thinking eyes. His eyes darted around the room and his breathing increased. His entire body shook.

“John! John! Listen to me! You’re not to blame. How were you to know?” Lucy said. “How were you to know these men had evil

intentions? You were just trying to help people. Make things better. John, you're better than all of them. Don't blame yourself!" she said her arm draped around his shoulders.

"You can blame me!" Lucy added. "I funded their damn project and was duped just like you were. I lost a million dollars trying to avenge my husband's death and now I realize none of it was worth it. It didn't make me feel any better. I'm not a better person for it. Revenge doesn't pay."

"I'm really scared for all of us," he said. "This is the worse case scenario. The terrorists couldn't have done better."

"They *are* the terrorists, digital terrorists," Friedheld said. "Instead of using bombs, they are using computers and they are more effective than a thousand bombs. Many people in this country have not had to live under the threat of war, the threat of death. We've been lucky. But when these threats exist, the color of your whole world changes. Everything changes. You go outside and instead of seeing a bright beautiful day with flowers and trees and birds, a shroud of darkness hangs over everything you see and do. You feel wounded, weak, and vulnerable. Nothing seems right. You look at everything and everyone as a threat. You avoid areas where someone could be hiding. You hear or see something different and a wave of fear washes over you, but the fear doesn't drain away minutes or hours later like it does with most fears, it permeates your inner being, your spirit, your hopes, and your dreams. You are a prisoner to that fear. It rules you... And until you take a stand, decide you are not going to live this way you will never grow, move forward, and live your life."

Friedheld hurriedly poured water from a brushed steel carafe and drank it as if it was his last.

"If you're serious, you're going to have to help us. You cannot operate a computer unless someone is with you. You will be

escorted everywhere and you will stay in your rooms at night,” Friedheld explained. “Is that acceptable?”

John nodded and Lucy did the same.

“Okay. We’ll get you some clothes. Size four I presume?” Friedheld said.

“I like this man already,” Lucy said looking towards John and smiling.

“I imagine you’re hungry? We will...”

The concave windows that surrounded most of the room instantly blazed with the same bluish white light that struck Lucy’s house earlier. A loud boom swallowed every sound in the room, and Lucy watched John’s face turn from fear to anger. His jaw moved up and down quickly, but she could not hear anything he said. The gray metallic odor of ozone filled the air and everyone squinted from the intense light. John grabbed Lucy’s hand and pulled her towards the doorway shielding his eyes with his other hand. Friedheld remained at his desk.

“Come on!” John screamed, but he might as well be whispering since Friedheld could not hear him over the roar of the concentrated energy ramming the building.

The bluish white light coalesced into pulsating, thick plasma that slowly grew out of the window into a snake like shape three feet in diameter. It moved towards Friedheld, but he was unaware furiously typing into his computer.

“RUN!” John screamed. “RUN!”

John ran back towards Friedheld, slammed into him. Both landed on the floor with John on top. A whoosh of air replaced the loud boom and the plasma snake instantly disappeared along with the bluish light in the windows. The room reeked of ozone.

“What the hell were you trying to do? Kill yourself?” John yelled. “The plasma was inches from your head!”

“Then your timing was perfect,” Friedheld said.

John got up and grabbed Friedheld's hand and pulled him to his feet.

"I had to increase the RF jamming around the building or there would be a lot of cooked people around here, myself included. It probably won't withstand another pulse so we better get to a lower level where there are no windows."

"That was way beyond anything I designed for them," John said. "I don't know how they could concentrate that much power into a single pulse."

"Didn't you say the chip was learning at a geometric progression with a common quotient of two?" Friedheld asked.

John's face scrunched up. "The chip is coming up with this stuff and it's getting worse. Lucy, did you bring your cell phone?"

"No. I barely had time to grab this robe."

"How did they know we were here? How did they know to send a pulse here?" John asked.

"Looks like they are tracking something you're wearing or your medical ID implant," Friedheld said. "We better head for the lab and see if you're bugged."

"Medical implants! I thought they couldn't track them!" John said.

"Six months after they were released, two hackers figured out a way to do it," Friedheld said. "It's just a matter of time with any technology. You know that old adage, no matter how good a lock you build, someone will figure out how to pick it. As long as we keep building better locks and better security, then we will be ok. Look at this way. You wouldn't put an old skeleton key lock on your front door today. They were good enough in the nineteenth century, but when people began picking them, they became useless and they had to come up with an improved lock."

John walked over to the window behind Friedheld's desk.

“Wow. That pulse really blackened the window. You can’t see out of it anymore,” John said. He looked around at the other windows.

“It burned them all.”

“They are the LCD panels that you see. The windows on this floor have LCD panels between the glass. I can darken or lighten the panels like a window shade. They probably helped to keep the pulse at bay.”

Friedheld heard a slight ringing in his left ear. He pushed a small button on the Bluetooth headset inside his ear.

“You go ahead. I have a call,” he said.

Lucy and John left – the guards escorting them.

“Dan is that you? Where are you? Is Takara with you?”

*“Takara is with me, but she’s not doing so well. She got hit with a pulse and the suit reversed it just like it was supposed to, but ...”*  
Dan thought.

“Bring her here immediately!” Friedheld shouted. “You have no time to spare.”

*“But she needs to go to the hospital!”*

“We have a facility here that’s a thousand times better. The medical staff is already here and they know what to do. Now get here as fast as you can!”

*“What about Jerry?”*

“The security team has him. They are bringing him here.”

## Chapter 36

Thursday, May 29, 2008

Takara opened the window and stuck her head out. She watched as the vomit flowed from her mouth and was taken away by the moving wind. What she ate for dinner earlier was now on the side of Friedheld's high tech BMW.

*"That didn't feel so good. I felt it,"* Dan thought. *"You're much better now."*

*"Sorry about that. Maybe we should talk instead of thinking,"* she thought.

*"Actually, I like what I'm feeling from you. It's like being on a natural high aside from the vomiting."*

*"I know I can feel it, too. We think the same, almost have the same feelings about things,"* she thought. *"But you, I sense that you're holding something back."*

*"I am. I shouldn't be feeling this way about you,"* Dan thought. *"I'm in love with my wife and I feel guilty about having these feelings."*

*"You have nothing to worry about, Dan. I've sensed her and the love between you from the very beginning and it is something so strong and so real that no one can ever take that away from*

*you. I don't think what you're feeling is romantic love; I think you are so lonely without her, so desperate that you are using me as a surrogate. You are wishing I was her and I can never do that or would I even try. In many ways, I remind you of her and you are so distraught, so not yourself that you feel this love for me when it really is your love for your wife. I wish I could find a love like yours or something even close to it; I would do anything to keep it and I would cherish it forever."*

"*Thank you for that,*" Dan thought and wiped tears from his eyes.

*"I think we can love more than one person, but when we love them is what is important,"* She thought. *"One love doesn't replace the other – they are as different as snowflakes. Seeing what you have has restored my faith in love; I had given up on finding what you have and I no longer believed a love like yours could exist; it was only a fantasy, what romance novelists write about; what most people dream about, but never have. Now I believe there is a person out there for me who is like you, Dan, and I will find him."*

She shifted on the seat as if it was difficult for her to think her next thoughts.

*"I think everyday living has a tendency to insulate us from our true feelings, our true selves,"* she continued. *"We need to tear away that insulation and feel again, feel our true self...our true emotions...decide what we are made of...what we are capable of... what we really believe in and what we really want. You did that for me tonight. You showed me who you are and the love you have for your family. You helped me tear down the insulation so I can feel again, and I'm forever grateful to you."*

"*I didn't know,*" Dan thought.

*"None of us really know,"* Takara thought. *"Each and every one of our lives is like that single rock you throw into a pond. It*



*makes ripples that span out in all directions and ultimately affect the ripples of other rocks that have been thrown into the pond. The ripples collide and complement each other, embrace and entangle each other, swallow and defeat each other, make others larger, some smaller, others more powerful, some weaker just like our lives. There is no rhyme or reason, no equality or fairness – it just happens like life. If you embrace these things, embrace change, then your life will be full and rich, peaceful and loving.”*

Dan suddenly felt a sharp burning sensation fill his consciousness and he turned towards Takara. The light had disappeared from her eyes and her mouth was twisted in an odd formation.

*“I don’t know what’s happening. Dan help me,”* streamed into Dan’s consciousness.

He quickly pulled the car to the side of the road.

*“Dan help!”*

He grabbed her arm and released it immediately. It was hot to his touch. She lost consciousness and slumped down in the seat.

*“Oh god...no!”* Dan thought.

*“Dan, I feel your fear and I don’t want you to be scared, but I don’t know what is happening. You know...my god you know!”*

*“We have to get you back!”*

He floored the accelerator and the car fishtailed onto the highway. He quickly shifted through five of the seven gears and within seconds the speedometer needle shot up to the ninety mph mark. He eased off the accelerator and tapped the neural bracelet to contact Friedheld. He told him about Takara as he watched the horizon grow slightly lighter with a definable orange hue that resembled a brushstroke. Interstate 40 had only a handful of cars – early morning commuters who had service jobs or those who wanted to beat the stop-and-go rush hour. He easily weaved between lanes to get around the few commuters and then he

spotted the flashing blue lights in his rear view mirror. Two state trooper cruisers were gaining on him. He floored the accelerator and shifted through the last two gears and weaved between five cars like a professional racecar driver. But still the cruisers gained on him. He accelerated again and the speedometer needle reached the one hundred thirty mph mark. Seconds later, the first cruiser passed him and quickly pulled in front to slow him down. The second cruiser moved up close behind him. Dan tapped on the neural bracelet and contacted Friedheld.

*"I have two police cars boxing me in. Can you do something?"*  
Dan thought.

"I already have. They're your escorts," Friedheld said. "Now just get here."

*"I should have known."*

Dan kept the speedometer needle at one hundred miles per hour and the police cruisers maintained their positions. Another wave of fear and pain washed into Dan's consciousness and this wave was more powerful than the last one.

*"Takara! Takara!"*

*"Dan, I think you know nothing matters now."*

*"No, please hang in there. We're almost there."*

*"I'm not in control anymore," she thought. "I saw what happened to your sister-in-law, Heather from your thoughts. I'm so sorry."*

Dan reached over and held her small thin hand— it practically vanished into his. A flood of emotion streamed into his consciousness when he touched her, more intense and more complex than before. It was like he was completely inside her experiencing everything she was experiencing. Snapshots of her life as a child streamed into his mind, of her family and their house in California, of her as a preteen and a teenager going to her first dance, of her life in high school and prom night, college, her best

friend in college, her first job interview, her first car, her first experience with love and rejection, her first encounter with sex. All of it flashed into his mind in an unending sequence of images each swirling with a kaleidoscope of diverse and unique emotions mostly driven by intense fear. The rush of another consciousness into his was highly euphoric almost intoxicating and Dan's hand slowly slid down to the lower part of the steering wheel. He was staring straight ahead but he didn't see the road. The car drifted into the opposite lane and then hit a dip in the highway and the front wheels lifted off the road. Dan's hand flew upward off of Takara's and the spell was broken. The dip propelled the car to the right onto the grassy shoulder. Dan pulled the wheel hard, but the tires slipped on the wet grass and the car struggled to respond moving forward and sideways at the same time. He feared the car would flip and burn at that speed. Then one of the front wheels reached the pavement and the car wobbled violently as the other tires found traction. The police cruiser behind him flashed its lights as if to congratulate Dan on his driving skills.

The fear and anxiety seemed to drain out his body and feelings of fear and pain from Takara turned into a succumbing, addictive peace. He realized what was happening to her.

*"No, Takara! Remember you still want to find the love of your life. He's out there and you will find him,"* Dan blasted into her consciousness. *"But you have to live to find him."*

*"I've found more. I have all I need now. Goodbye Dan."*

*"Takara! WE NEED YOU HERE! YOU CAN'T LEAVE NOW! PLEASE DON'T GO!"*

*"I can't help it. It is so wonderful and it's taking me, swallowing me so beautifully. It is everything I ever wanted and more. I don't have any control over it. I can't stop it; I don't want it to stop."*

*"Takara! Takara!"*

The intensity of her emotions, her thoughts, and her ambiance slowly dissolved from his consciousness. Dan suddenly realized he was at the entrance to the Synertron Building. The police cruisers drove away and he turned left into the underground parking area and was immediately greeted by several men pushing a gurney. The gate was open and the men approached the car. They lifted Takara out of the seat, placed her on the gurney, and rushed her to the elevator nearby. Dan quickly got out and grabbed her hand. It was still warm, but the torrent of emotions he felt earlier was almost nonexistent.

## Chapter 37

Thursday, May 29, 2008

They took Takara to the medical floor, the floor just above the basement. Friedheld was there and quickly pushed Dan back into the elevator. The elevator started going down.

“Why can’t I stay with Takara?” Dan said.

“You’re needed here and we’re running out of time. We have to stop these bastards by tomorrow. Besides the medical staff doesn’t want you hanging around. It’s not a goddamn hospital with visiting hours and cute, friendly nurses,” Friedheld said.

The elevator stopped at the basement and Dan reluctantly walked out.

“Why are we in this dismal, ugly place with no windows?” Dan asked. “What were you thinking painting it puke green? It even smells like someone urinated here for the past five years.”

“This dismal, ugly urine-soaked place is going to save your ass,” Friedheld said. “They must have tracked John and Lucy here because they directed a pulse at the building. Luckily, our RF shield was turned up enough to contain it, but I don’t want to take any chances,” Friedheld said. “Yes, the color is ugly, but it keeps out all electromagnetic energy except cell phone signals, and the

smell, well, it's here every time it rains. It's now the War Room, *our* war room. The other teams are also here. I don't want anyone in any of the offices with windows."

The large room had a conference table in the middle and several computer workstations along the walls. Dan and Friedheld approached the group sitting at the table.

"Where is Lucy?" Dan asked Bastille.

"She left for her sister's in Chicago," he said.

"The suit worked, eh?" Sanchez said patting Dan on the shoulder. "It took out three of the tower weapons."

"Asshole! If it worked Takara wouldn't be dying!" Dan shot back.

"That's enough!" Friedheld said. "Mike, I'm sorry I didn't tell you. Takara may not make it. The suit protected her initially, but some radiation must have gotten through because she started to have organ failure shortly afterwards. The suits don't work as well as we thought."

"Oh mi dios." Sanchez made the sign of the cross, and bowed his head for a few seconds.

"But my idea about the chain reaction is correct, right?" he asked.

"Yes, but it may not work again," Bastille added. "The chip learns from its mistakes and next time it won't let several towers go down again. The reason the suit took out three towers because the chip had to use three towers to triangulate Takara's position. Next time it'll use GPS."

"Really? What do we do now?" Sanchez asked.

"I'm hoping John and Dan will come up with something," Friedheld said.

Dan looked over the long oval walnut table with its dents and dings and worn varnish at Bastille.

“Why the hell did you sell out the entire country? How does it feel to be the worst traitor on the planet?” Dan directed at him, his eyes red with anger.

“Listen, I’m no happier about it than you are. I feel very bad about what I did, but I wanted to do something more. I was tired of my flat lined, non-eventful life sitting at a computer producing code like a drone. I wanted to make a difference and simply put a fire under the government’s ass and get it to act more responsibly against terrorism. No one had any intentions of hurting anyone. It was merely a political statement like someone who decides to attend an anti-war rally. Now it has perverted into something really evil and I don’t know what these people want.”

“We do,” Dan said slamming his fist down on the table breaking the quiet in the room.

“Damn you, John! Did you once ever think when the chip would stop learning? Did you program anything into it that would tell it to stop? It’s not only learning about the best things on the Internet, it’s also learning about the worst. Did you ever think of the consequences of something this powerful on the Internet? How are you going to control it when it’s out of control? You guys are all the same – brilliant in your field, but nearly retarded when it comes to common sense and the real world around you!”

“You’re out of line, Dan!” Friedheld fired at him.

The anger on Dan’s face suddenly melted away and his eyes went blank as if he were in a trance.

*“Dan. I will always remember what you did for me and I will always be with you. Good bye.”* Takara’s thought stream slowly diminished.

“No! No! No!” Dan screamed. “You have to hang in there! Don’t give up!”

Dan was suddenly overwhelmed with an intense feeling of cosmic peace. Everything made sense and everything fit together

like the precision pieces of one giant jigsaw puzzle. The inner contentment and overwhelming unity of everything in the world was nearly orgasmic and it kept Dan in a trance-like state. When the feelings stopped, the stress of his world slammed him like a giant weight. A wave of sadness took over for he knew that Takara was gone. He knew it like he knew his most intimate thoughts and desires. He stood up and walked into a corner of the room, trying to suppress the primeval scream that was erupting from the inner most depths of his being. Tears rolled down his face. He turned, his eyes narrowed, and his brow strained.

“You son of a bitch! It’s your fault!” he yelled.

His hands hit John’s neck knocking him off his chair and down onto the concrete floor, where they wrestled like two high school boys fighting over the most popular girl. Then Dan locked his hands around John’s neck and squeezed with all his strength.

“It’s your fault, you bastard!” Dan yelled.

John slammed his fist into Dan’s cheek. Dan blinked and shrugged off the assault off as if it were a mere slap on the face. John followed with a punch with to Dan’s nose, but it was ineffective. Sanchez rushed Dan, knocking him down, but Dan still held John in his death grip as the threesome tumbled on the floor like little boys horsing around. John punched again and missed Dan striking Sanchez in the chest stopping him momentarily. Then Sanchez grabbed Dan’s arms and pulled them back to release his grip on John, but Dan did not let go. Friedheld rushed into the melee.

“DAN! STOP! STOP!” Sanchez yelled.

John lost consciousness, and then Dan fell limp and unconscious on top of him. Sanchez moved Dan off John and put his mouth on John’s and blew air into his lungs. He also pushed on his chest with a closed fist, but John did not respond. Seconds later



John started breathing on his own. Three security guards rushed into the room and ran over to Sanchez.

“Call medical now!” Friedheld told the guards.

Friedheld looked at Sanchez and said, “What the hell just happened?”

“We’re cooked now. The only two guys who can stop this thing are out of commission.”

## Chapter 38

**Thursday, May 29, 2008**

Harald Friedheld and Mike Sanchez stood close to a laptop computer in the software lab on the fifth floor. Only the industrial florescent light that hung over the workstation was turned on in the auditorium-sized room filled with similar workstations. The clear blue smell of disinfectant floated in the air from the cleaning crew, who left their supplies in the nearby bathroom when the first pulse hit the building. Kari Serano, Takara's programming team lead and a natural blonde with a tall willowy frame, had one hand on the keyboard and other on the mouse moving it nervously in random directions. Chip Moteaga, the hardware design engineer, stared at a PC monitor nearby lit with a live map of the UUNET Internet connections for the entire United States. UUNET, an acronym for UNIX-to-UNIX Network, was the first commercial Internet service provider (ISP) created in 1987 by Rick Adams, one of the original developers of ARPAnet, the network originally designed for the military to maintain communications in the event of a nuclear war. When ARPAnet was eventually released to the scientific community, it metamorphosed into the Internet. UUNet is one of the handfuls of organizations that maintain the ultra high-speed

connections to the Internet – the superhighway of the network similar to the interstate highways that connect the states.

“This is the final version,” Serano said still moving the mouse unnecessarily. “We debugged it and it still has some kinks, but we think it will work.”

“How will it get past the NAPs and backbone routers?” Sanchez asked.

“We copied their method. All the code flows out into the Internet as harmless data, then the compiler forms and starts compiling the code. The code is designed to seek out all of ICER’s code with the unique identifiers of the virus and eradicate it. If it works, it should find all of the elements of the controlling virus and eliminate it. We should be able to regain control of the power grid in about twelve hours or less.”

“How will we know it works?” Sanchez asked rubbing the back of his neck.

“When our program finds their code and destroys it, it sends us a single packet with its location. That’s why Chip is monitoring the UUNET. It will show where the code is,” Serano explained.

“Okay, are we ready to launch it now?” Sanchez said.

“Yes,” Serano said.

Friedheld turned and stared at the other workstations in the darkened lab. Motega noticed and approached him.

“Something is gnawing at me about the software. I can’t quite get it, but something...” Friedheld said.

“Do you think it won’t work?”

“I don’t know, but I have a bad feeling about it and I can’t figure out why. It’s too easy. If we take out the virus and regain control of the power grid what does that matter to them – they still have the pulse weapons and that’s the real power.”

“Do you think it’s a ruse, a big deception?” Motega asked.

“Should we launch now?” Sanchez asked.

“Yes,” Friedheld said. “It could be a diversion so we would pay more attention to the virus rather than the pulse weapons.”

“Okay, Kari. Do it,” Sanchez said.

She looked at Sanchez and reluctantly pressed the “Enter” button on the laptop while still moving the mouse needlessly.

“There’s something more sinister behind that virus and we have to find out what it is,” Friedheld said. “DON’T LAUNCH!”

“What!” Sanchez yelled. “You just told us to do it!”

“NO!” he yelled.

Friedheld pushed Serano aside, grabbed the laptop, and slammed it onto the floor. He smashed the keyboard with the heel of his shoe repeatedly, and then did the same to the display stomping the machine until it shattered into several pieces.

“Did it get out?” Friedheld asked.

The group stared at Friedheld for several moments, their faces frozen in shock.

“Did it get out?” Friedheld asked again staring at the befuddled group.

Motega went over to the PC monitor and stared at the UUNET map. The others followed and gathered around him.

“That was a perfectly good laptop,” Sanchez said not directing his words at anyone in particular. “We just got it last week.”

“Don’t know yet,” Motega said. “Nothing’s happening. Oh, wait...something’s happening with the hub in Richmond. I think it’s working!”

A series of multi-colored squares over Richmond, Virginia began to turn red one after the other until all of them were one large red square.

“Oh shit!” Sanchez said. “The hubs are going down. Richmond just lost its Internet connection to the world.”

“Yeah. And there’s our green indicators showing that our program is working except it’s taking down the Internet instead of the virus!” Motega added. “Damn!”

Another series of squares on the map turned red slightly north of Richmond.

“Oh my god. Fairfax just went dead!” Sanchez said. “This is worse than the Y two K doomsday scenarios.”

“Son of a bitch!” Friedheld yelled. “Those bastards implanted their identifiers in the hubs so that when we launched our antivirus, it would take out the Internet.”

“Shit! It’s moving fast!” Motega said. “There goes Washington and Atlanta. Philadelphia and New York are next. How do we stop it?”

“Call CERT!” Friedheld yelled.

Sanchez and Friedheld started dialing on their mobile phones.

“Move over,” Serano told Motega and pushed him off the office stool and sat down herself. She started typing.

“I can’t get through,” Friedheld said.

“Me neither,” Sanchez added.

Friedheld picked up the phone on the workstation and started pushing buttons.

“What are you doing, Kari?” Motega asked.

“I learned from past experiences that when you let something loose on the Internet you had better have a way to stop it. We developed an antidote,” Serano explained.

“You mean an anti antivirus?”

“Yeah. It will eradicate our antivirus,” Serano said raising her arms to fix the hair band on her blonde ponytail. “I’m sending it now.”

A window appeared on the computer screen with a horizontal bar that filled slowly from left to right with a dark blue color.

“A few more seconds and it should be uploaded,” Serano said.

Motega and Serano watched the bar fill with great anticipation. Friedheld put the phone back in its receiver and also watched the bar; Sanchez stood next to him. When the bar reached 99 per cent, it stopped. Motega gasped.

“It’s catching its breath,” Serano said. “That’s what I call it when the computer is probably checking the validity of the packets just sent and it stops uploading.”

The group stared at the blue bar as if mesmerized, as if it held an awesome power that would reveal a soul-searching revelation. Sanchez broke away from the group trance and looked at his watch.

“It’s taking too long,” he said. “It should have finished by now.”

Serano clicked on an Internet monitoring program and the window opened with a series of red blinking squares.

“We’ve lost our Internet connection!” she said.

“Impossible!” Friedheld yelled. “We’re on Internet II, the next generation. We are not connected to the public Internet directly. Two carefully filters and evaluates everything that gets in. We should not be disconnected. Check the program again.”

She moved the mouse around and clicked on several icons.

“Still disconnected.”

“Check the UUNET map.”

Serano clicked and the map appeared.

“That’s working. How is that?” she said.

“Hurry up, because it’s getting really bad. Philadelphia and Orlando just went down! New York is next!” Motega said watching the squares turn red.

“Upload from another server,” Friedheld said.

Serano moved the mouse and clicked several times and typed in a series of web site addresses and passwords.

“Done,” she said and raised her hands off the computer into the air.

Motega watched the map for several minutes and scrolled and clicked, scrolled and clicked.

“That did it, everybody!” he yelled. “We did it! The hubs are no longer going down!”

“Great job,” Sanchez said patting Serano on the back multiple times.

“They must have blocked our upload at the last few seconds stopping that last one percent of code,” Serano explained.

“Why didn’t it find the other server?” Motega asked.

“That’s our secret weapon,” Serano explained. “It’s buried behind several firewalls and phantom addresses, yet it can receive and send to the Internet just as fast as a front line server. Several graduate students from NC State designed it and we helped them build it. It’s one of our primary backup servers now.”

“You’re giving away the company secrets, Kari,” Friedheld said smiling.

Friedheld’s mobile phone rang and he touched the button on his wireless earpiece. He walked away from the group to get away from their noisy carrying on.

“What do you say we all celebrate later at Slim’s Downtown? I’ll buy the first round,” Sanchez said.

“I’m in,” Serano said. “I like that place and the upstairs loft. We can chill there from the noise downstairs.”

“Okay, let’s go then,” Motega added. “Let’s ask Harald when he gets off the phone.”

Several minutes later, Friedheld ended his conversation and walked over to them, his face a stone and his shoulders slightly drooped.

“That was the President,” Friedheld said, his eyes moving slowly from person to person. “They didn’t make arrangements to

bomb Afghanistan because they were confident that we would have defeated the virus by now. I had to tell him what happened. Even if they plan to launch now, it would take seventy-two hours to initiate the bombing and it is unthinkable that we would kill innocent people that way. I need you all here until this is over. We have only fourteen hours to stop these bastards.”



## **Chapter 39**

**Thursday, May 29, 2008**

Bill Garrison parked his Jaguar Super V8 on West Jones Street so that no other cars could park on either side rather than use the public parking lot nearby. He looked into the side view mirror to check for oncoming cars, and then opened the door and got out. He pressed the lock button on his key remote and walked towards the entrance of a wide covered plaza that ran between the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences and the NC Museum of History. The sun was high and the air smelled warm and tasty from hot dogs cooking in a vendor's cart near the plaza entrance. Garrison walked to the history museum and stopped in front of the bronze statue of Frederick Augustus Olds, the early 20th century collector and journalist who collected close to 30,000 artifacts from all over the state and opened a museum in 1902 to display his findings. Many of his artifacts are in the modern museum today. Garrison examined the richly detailed, accurate sculpture noticing the fine wrinkle lines just above the fingernails. He walked a little further into the plaza and sat down on a green park bench with plastic slats. The slats gave a little as he lowered his weight down giving a cushiony feel. Garrison looked around at the men and

women dressed in business suits leaving the Legislative building at the end of the plaza for their lunch hour. He spotted a large round man who walked towards him carrying a cardboard tray with two cups. As the large man struggled to move his frame closer to Garrison, Garrison lifted his right hand slightly as if he were summoning a waiter at a restaurant.

"I hope you like hot dogs," Doug Jarvos said slowly lowering himself next to Garrison on the bench. "Oh, I'm getting old."

"Not particularly," Garrison said. "But I'll survive."

"Help yourself," Jarvos said moving the cardboard tray towards Garrison.

Garrison took one of the four hot dogs covered with mustard and sauerkraut and Jarvos handed him one of the drinks.

"Why did you want to meet here?" Garrison said. "And why are we meeting?"

"I like the hot dogs; we blend in perfectly with other people around us; the sun is warm and there is less chance that we are being bugged. I'll get to why we are meeting later. Let's eat first."

"I don't like being kept in the dark," Garrison said.

"That's exactly why we're here."

"Do you think they will go through with it?"

"No. They couldn't bomb Afghanistan if we held their families hostage. They couldn't justify it, and if they were stupid enough to do it, it would ultimately bring down the US as the rest of the world registered their outrage and disgust at us. The world would isolate us and our economy would collapse."

"Really?"

"We have the ultimate weapon. We have the US hostage. Did the transfer go through?"

"Yes, it did. This morning," Garrison said. "That should complete our arrangement."

“Good. You now own forty nine percent of the company,” Jarvos said and stuffed the last third of his first hot dog into his mouth, chewed for a few seconds and swallowed. He brought the super-sized plastic cup up to his lips and tilted it back drinking down large gulps as if he hadn’t had a drink in days.

“You won’t be sorry, Bill. My carbon fiber alloy is disruptive technology. I can manufacture it faster than anyone and it is stronger and lighter than anything produced. It will make the current carbon fiber manufacturers obsolete; they will have to invest in all new equipment and upgrades and I own the patents on all of it. The only problem is that the FAA won’t allow me to sell it to the aviation industry. They said it was unproven and needed more testing. Even the Aircraft Manufacturers Association approved it saying it was as revolutionary as the first flight, but still those bastards shot me down. You know, what it really boils down to is that my pockets are not as deep as the big dogs. I don’t have lobbyists in Washington and you know right after I left Washington, Lockheed Martin called and wanted to buy my technology. You know where I told them to go.”

“Is that why you want to take the planes down to force them to use your manufacturing?” Garrison said, taking a sip from his drink.

“Yes and I also want revenge. I’m tired of all the unfairness. I have a proven, successful product and manufacturing process. I’m tired of being pushed around, mocked, and rejected. I’ve been overweight all my life and I’ve had enough. It’s my turn now, time to get even. Besides, we’re going to make billions on this.”

“But you’re going to kill innocent people who have never done anything to you. Isn’t there a less drastic way to do this?” Garrison said. “We have become the very people we want to destroy.”

“Killing is the only thing that really gets peoples’ attention. It really makes them sit up and pay attention,” Jarvos said talking

another large gulp from his cup. “Do you think the Rockefellers, the Vanderbilts, the Mellons got rich by being nice guys?”

“What *do* you want the government to do?”

“You’re a businessman. Life is just one big economic transaction. No one does anything for anyone unless there is something in it for them, and that something is usually money. I want them to let me sell my product to the aviation industry. They’ll do what I want because they will lose the aviation industry if they don’t.

“Why are you so naïve to think that we are doing this to get the government to step up their hunt for terrorists? I don’t give a damn about either of them,” Jarvos said.

“Why not let the market determine your success? If you have a better product it will sell.”

“It won’t happen! They will find a way to discredit my technology unless they can have it for themselves! I’m fighting secret societies here that manipulate the press, buy off people, and do whatever it takes to get their way,” Jarvos said in a raised voice. “I want my product to sell! Not be buried by some conglomerate because it doesn’t fit into their business plan. I’ve worked on this for twenty years. I’ve been waiting all my life for the big payoff and now it’s here.”

Jarvos bit into the second hot dog taking a third of it into his mouth. After a few seconds of chewing, he took a drink, and then spoke while still chewing.

“I’m really not clear why you became an investor. You don’t look like you need money.”

Garrison took a sip on his straw and frowned.

“I’m not rich, my wife is. Her family owned most of the land downtown in the late 1700s when Raleigh was developing. When they decided to move the capital to Raleigh, her ancestor, Joel Lane, sold the state 1,000 acres. He took his fortune and bought up

large tracts of choice land around the city and held onto them until the highest bidder came along. It made the family so wealthy, that it became the family creed passed down from generation to generation. Today, they are one of the largest land developers in the country.”

“You sound like a history book. How do you remember all that crap?”

“Oh believe me, it’s a requirement to pass down the family history to every new member and to make sure they remember it,” Garrison said and took a bite of his hot dog. “These are good. And I don’t particularly like hot dogs.”

“They are Nathan’s Famous from Coney Island. You’ve never had one?”

“No. Is that where you’re from?”

“No. New Jersey,” Jarvos said tilting the cup up to get some crushed ice. “I still don’t understand why you would need to invest.”

“With that much wealth, there were prenuptials. Her father insisted on it.”

“So you’re thinking of divorce?”

“Well, let’s just say things aren’t going so well and at least if it did happen I would get half of this investment.”

“You’re preparing for the future, whichever one it is. I like a man with vision. Welcome aboard. Obviously, your wife is not on board?”

“She doesn’t know the whole of it...if she did, well.”

Jarvos nodded and looked over at the facade of sculptured white cement and glass that made up the face of the Legislative building.

“I knew things weren’t right with your life. You don’t look as good as you should for a man of your means,” he said.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Shit! If I had your money, I’d be smiling all the time, traveling around the world, having a good ole time. You look miserable most of the time. You should lighten up and enjoy life a bit.”

“Been there, done it,” Garrison said. “After you’ve traveled to every spot on the earth that you want to see, after you’ve bought everything you could possibly want, you get bored, you feel empty, useless, material things don’t make you happy – they have no value when you can just pick them off the shelf or make a phone call and they get delivered. Shit, I don’t even have to go to the damn store. You want something more and usually that is power or recognition or something that makes you feel alive again, makes you feel something. I want something of my own.”

Garrison looked away and saw that more people were returning to the plaza, many carrying bags of fast food or cardboard trays from the hot dog vendor.

“Money *is* power,” Jarvos said. “Money is freedom; money is what our democracy is based on. I see that you need your own money so you can feel the power directly. I like that.”

“You seem to be the founding father of all of this,” Garrison said taking another bite of his hot dog.

“I just put it together. I was approached by thirty eight families who lost a loved one on nine eleven, who were very unhappy with the current state of affairs and the government’s efforts fighting terrorism. Most of these people were the ones who pressured the administration to create the nine eleven Commission for crying’ out loud. Some were angry that their loved ones’ remains were found after five and six years, yet they continued to build on Ground Zero. The administration and Congress are good at creating a lot of smoke and mirrors, but the reality is that we are not much safer than on nine eleven. This is common knowledge. Look at the polls. These people were desperate, so I saw an opportunity for myself and for them – a win win for everyone. I’m an

investment banker and I knew how to put this together financially.”

“What did you tell them?”

“That we would do something that would scare the government into action, not harmful to anyone – a broad statement that would be heard everywhere. They went for it. And then I heard about John Bastille. His family was one of the thirty eight and everything changed. It was his idea to take control of the power grid and to use the pulse weapons to mess up people’s electronics. So we formed ICER, using the acronym from Phillips’ old project.”

Jarvos finished the second hot dog and took another gulp from the oversized cup. Then he picked up the third hot dog and ate it very quickly.

“But, let me tell you my friend, ICER is just another name. The people behind it go back centuries since the birth of our country with the same goals in mind. There are levels to this organization that even I don’t know about,” Jarvos explained.

“A secret society?”

Jarvos looked at Garrison as if to say don’t go further and looked away.

“You made the right investment. Finish your hot dog and let’s take a walk,” Jarvos said. “I want to fill you in on our change of plans.”

## Chapter 40

**Friday, May 30, 2008 – 2 am**

Dan awoke to a veil of white. The light overhead was white, the walls were solid and white, even the metal bar gates on each side of his bed were white and the straps that held his wrists and ankles to the bed were white. He didn't notice the straps until he tried to get up and realized he could move only a few inches. He pushed hard with his legs and brought his entire body up into a bowed position like a giant rubber band, but the straps did not give. He let his body fall back down. There was a whoosh and one of the wall panels slid into the wall. A short, meaty-armed man entered wearing dark green scrubs and a matching surgeon's cap that fit tightly around his shaved, round head.

"Where am I?" Dan said.

"Medical. I'll get Friedheld. We were waiting for you to wake up."

The man looked at the bed as if he had lost something and then left. The door made a short sucking sound and closed blending in perfectly with the panels on the wall. A few minutes later there was another whoosh and Friedheld entered wearing what he



always wore – a wrinkled white dress shirt and chocolate brown dress slacks with brown tasseled loafers.

“Why am I here?” Dan asked.

“You had a nervous breakdown and passed out. You nearly killed John Bastille,” Friedheld said.

“I did? My god, I don’t remember any of it.”

Friedheld raised an eyebrow. “Well, do you feel better?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know if I can take this anymore. I don’t know what I’m going to do,” Dan said his voice breaking. “First, my sister-in-law, then my wife and daughter and now Takara. All I think about is my family. Are they alive or dead? Where are they? Are they suffering? Will I ever see them again? Will they ever be found? When is this going to stop? How many more people are going to die?”

Dan turned his head away. Friedheld slowly and methodically began to release the straps.

“Takara’s not dead, Dan,” Friedheld said.

Dan looked back through watery eyes.

“She told me goodbye,” Dan said. “I sensed it.”

“What? Oh...the bracelets. She may have just lost consciousness.”

“That doesn’t matter, we can still communicate. Go away. I just want to be left alone.”

Friedheld pressed the button on his Bluetooth earpiece activating the voice recognition feature.

“Call medical,” he said.

The phone in his pants pocket dialed and a man’s voice came on.

“Jim, I need to know what’s going on with Takara. What’s her status?”

Friedheld’s shoulders drooped and he appeared to shrink.

“Oh. No. When? I’m sorry. I know you did your best.”

Friedheld pushed the button again on the earpiece and ended the call.

“Dan, I’m sorry. We lost Takara. Her heart just stopped. I...I’m very sorry.”

Friedheld placed his hand on Dan’s shoulder. He sat down in the white metal chair next to Dan’s all white bed and his eyes began to water.

“This has been rough,” he said. “You’re not alone in this and if we want to beat these sons of bitches we have to work together and not place blame on anyone. I’m really sorry about Takara. She was very special.”

Friedheld wiped the tears from his eyes. Dan did not stir.

“Do you know what her name meant in Japanese? Precious object, bright and beautiful, yet she was adopted.”

Dan turned towards Friedheld and rubbed his eyes.

“I wish she had never come with me. I wish we had more time to test the suit. I wish this was all over!”

“Don’t blame yourself, Dan. We never expected Takara to get hit with a pulse. We all believed the suit would work.”

“I guess. I’ll apologize to John. Is he ok?”

“He has a crushed larynx and won’t be talking for a while.”

“I just don’t know what came over me. It was like something just took over,” Dan said. “I don’t remember any of it.”

“Why don’t you take a shower and join me for breakfast in about an hour in the war room?”

“Maybe,” Dan said.

“Well, you have about an hour,” Friedheld said and pulled a small keychain remote out of his pocket and pressed one of the buttons. The door opened.

“We’re going to launch a new search and destroy program for the chip and I’d like you to be there.”

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Dan was awoken by the familiar sadness that started in his heart and quickly spread to the rest of his body. It had a mind of its own and deliberately rushed out to every atom of his being. It only left him when he slept and sometimes even then the horror of his family being held or tortured or even killed haunted him in a nightmare that covered his entire body in sweat. As his eyes focused, he saw a set of fresh clothes neatly folded on a small metal table nearby. His blue and white Nike sneakers were under the table neatly placed side by side. Jake's PDA, and the neural bracelet were next to the clothes. Dan dressed quickly. He picked up the bracelet and turned it in his hand. He stared at it for several moments thinking about the intense joy and equally intense pain it had caused him when he was connected to Takara's essence. He quickly stuffed it into his shirt pocket and pressed the small white button on the wall. The door opened with its familiar whoosh. He peered out into the barren corridor, looked in both directions, and started running.

## **Chapter 41**

**Friday, May 30, 2008 – 4 am**

Dan ran through a series of white corridors with white overhead florescent lights until he found the gray brushed steel double doors of an elevator. He pushed the request button and waited. Odors of rubbing alcohol and cleaning fluids floated in and around where he stood and then vanished. He shifted side to side on his feet as if he were trying to keep warm. When the doors opened he rushed in and pushed the button for the underground parking garage. He thought about Takara and the neural bracelets and he had wished he could experience the same completeness of being with Amelia. He missed that, knowing Amelia's every thought, every feeling, every attitude, and every notion. Still it was not as complete as with Takara and the bracelet. He felt a tinge of guilt just thinking about Takara. The elevator stopped and the doors opened slowly to the dank, cool smell of damp cement. The florescent lighting was spotty being sucked in by the darker walls. He pulled out the remote to his truck and pushed the panic button and then listened. Nothing. He walked farther into the garage past twenty or so parking spaces and pressed the button again. Nothing. He placed the remote under his chin so that his entire body would

act like an antenna and boost the signal. He pressed the button again and listened. Then he heard a faint horn blowing and he immediately started running towards the sound. He ran past thirty or so parking spaces, and then he saw his truck – horn blaring and lights flashing. It was parked in a corner of the garage – a light coating of brown dust covered the entire truck. He pushed the unlock button on the remote and the truck went silent. He bent over a few moments and sucked in large gulps of air, a technique he learned when running track in high school. It was easier to suck in more air when in that position. He stayed that way for several minutes breathing in the unmoving, metallic air often found in underground parking garages.

He climbed in breathing quickly and started the engine. He pulled up the rug behind the passenger seat and slid the floor back revealing a large storage area. He lifted his backpack out and took a micro drive from a special compartment in the backpack. He slid it into the card reader slot under the radio and brought the onboard computer to life. The entire computer operating system and all of his files were on the card drive as thick as three credit cards piled on top of each other. He was glad Big Blue had thought up such a convenient method to keep data mobile and secure. He barked a series of commands at the voice-activated computer to access his video logs from his house, but the computer could not connect to the servers in the basement. He sent another command to see if the blackout generator was running and still nothing came back. He put the truck in drive, but did not lift his foot off the brake. He stared at the empty spaces in the lot and thought about what Friedheld had said earlier that he couldn't beat these bastards alone – it had to be a team effort and that everyone had to work together. He placed his hand on the shift lever ready to put the truck in park again, and then lifted it off when he thought of the white straps in the white room. He pressed hard on the gas pedal and the truck

pulled hard, tires screeching and engine roaring. He went up the exit ramp to Hillsborough Street and headed north towards his house in North Raleigh.

When he was close to his house, he turned into the subdivision next to his and parked on a street that ran parallel to his own. He got out and quickly disappeared into the narrow wooded section that separated the two housing developments. He approached his house from the back, just as his friend, Jerry, did two nights earlier. He stopped at the stockade fence and listened. The generator wasn't running and the house was completely dark. He quickly climbed over the fence and lay flat on the ground watching the house. He felt something under his right leg and moved aside to get a look at it. It was Jerry's brown, leather jacket, horribly distorted into grotesque shapes and bubbled and burnt from the pulse weapon. He crawled out of the wooded area and quickly moved across the 40 or so feet of his lawn until he reached the base of the enclosed deck. Lying on his stomach, he intently listened for any sounds in the house. All he could hear was the light wind rustling the leaves on the oak and birch trees in his backyard. His breathing seemed to get louder. He took in shallow breaths and then moved toward his gas grill standing at the edge of the gray stone patio. He reached under the black plastic cover, located the bottom shelf, and pulled out a key he had hid in the hollowness of the shelf. He crawled up the four steps to the deck, slowly opened the screened door and lay flat on the deck floor. He reached up to the knob of the French doors and slowly pushed the key in and turned. He turned it very slowly so it would not make any sound. He opened the door slowly, and just enough to crawl through, and entered his house for the first time in almost a week. The familiar smell of new wood and fresh carpet were gone. Instead, an acrid, burnt plastic smell permeated the inside similar to when an electrical device short-circuits and burns. He crawled away from

the French doors and stood up making sure no one could see him from outside. He stood silently for a few moments listening again for sounds in the house. He could hear only his rapid and shallow breathing and the silence of the motionless air.

He moved through the short hallway and opened the door to the basement. He felt along the wall for a small flashlight hanging on a row of hooks. When he reached the bottom of the steps, the acrid burnt plastic smell was even stronger and different – it was foul. He did not hear the familiar hum of the hard drives and cooling fans in his computers. He twisted the switch on a small gooseneck lamp on the desk, but the room stayed dark. He tried the start buttons on each of the three computers, but nothing happened. He went back up the stairs into the garage to the circuit breaker box. He found all the breakers were in the off position. He put his fingers under the main breaker switch and pushed it up slightly. Then he hesitated – maybe the lights in the house will come on giving away his presence. *Screw it*, he thought, and pushed the switch up. A small red indicator light came on indicating that power was entering the junction box. He started moving down the first row of smaller breaker switches pushing them hard to the right one after the other. He stopped about halfway down and listened for any electric motors from any of the appliances. There was only the sound of his breathing.

He went back into the house and listened again. The house was unchanged – dark, silent and dead. He tried several light switches in the kitchen, the dining room and the living room, but they did nothing. Then he heard the low whine of a car engine and the slam of a door. He fell to the floor and moved like a cat towards one of the windows in the living room. He raised his head up slowly to the sill and peered out through the mini blind. A dark SUV pulled out of the driveway and Dan bolted for the French doors. He hid behind a cluster of small bushes in the backyard. He waited several

minutes and then climbed over the fence and worked his way along the back of the house next door until he could see his driveway. The SUV was gone. He went back to his house and cautiously entered listening like a cat for any sounds in the house. He went into the basement and over to the rack that held the computers and the analyzers. He splashed the light in the back where the miles of cables flowed from the equipment. All the cables were melted together in one black, burnt mass of odd shapes tied around a blackened, shriveled body. The body was the same height as Amelia.

“Nooooooooooooooooo!” Dan screamed. A firestorm of fear raced through his body and he shook uncontrollably.

When he unconsciously lowered the light, its beam hit an object on the floor and Dan stopped shaking. Attached to what used to be a foot was a man’s black shoe. He ran out tears blurring his vision as he vividly remembered the burning end of his sister-in-law, Heather.



## Chapter 42

**Friday, May 30, 2008 – 4:30 am**

Dan got a glass of water and sat down on his couch in the darkness of his living room. The water seemed to calm him a bit and he wiped his eyes on his shirt.

He went over to his desk in the sitting room and stared at the old AM Emerson Bakelite tube radio that reminded him of the times with his grandfather and when he showed him the basics of early electronics. He turned the small volume knob, it clicked on, but nothing happened. He lifted the radio and saw that it was not plugged in. When he plugged it in, its round dial of numbers lit up with its faint golden glow. A burst of static blared out of the tiny single speaker sounding like an explosion in the extraordinary quiet of the house. He turned the tuning knob and heard a talk show discussing the ongoing blackouts. He looked inside through the cooling holes in the back at the glowing orange vacuum tubes and his face lit up as bright as the tubes.

He fetched the neural bracelet out of his shirt pocket and put it on. It made his skin tingle, and then it slowly tightened connecting to his nervous system. He held two fingers on it and then tapped it twice.

*“Friedheld! Friedheld are you there? Friedheld,”* he thought.

All he heard was his own quickened breathing.

“Friedheld! Friedheld! Are you there?” he whispered.

A few seconds passed.

“Dan is that you? Are you trying to get yourself killed?” Friedheld shouted.

“No, but someone did. They are in my basement, overcooked like a hot dog left on the grill too long.”

“Is it...your...wife?”

“No. She doesn’t own a pair of black featherweights.”

“What the hell are you doing in your house?”

“I’m sorry. But I had to get to my house. I need you to call my brother, Alex in Wilmington and ask him to round up as many old vacuum tube radios he can find.”

“What are you talking about, Dan?” Friedheld said.

“Vacuum tubes...used in old radios.”

“Tube radios? You’re kidding, right?”

“No, just do it. They hit my house with a pulse and destroyed everything. Nothing works except my grandfather’s old tube radio, which means the pulses don’t affect vacuum tubes. Now I need to concentrate and design the prototype.”

“What prototype?”

“A prototype anti pulse weapon that is immune to the DEWs.”

## Chapter 43

**Friday, May 30, 2008 – 5 am**

Friedheld pushed the tiny button on his Bluetooth earpiece to terminate his conversation with the President. He turned and faced the small group now seated in the dismal War Room. The urine-like smell had dissipated and was replaced with the tasty aromas of egg and sausage biscuits, home fries and steaming coffee – fast food brought in by the security team. The stark white overhead florescent lights cast an ugly light on everything. Bastille, Braggloisi, Motega, Sanchez, and Stakhower were seated at the worn conference table picking through the white paper bags. They looked up when Friedheld approached the table.

“The President has launched two fighter jets to destroy the cell towers in Washington. Since we were not able to stop the virus, he had to think about national security and all that crap.”

“I thought we were supposed to get a list of all the towers that had the weapons?” Braggloisi said putting down a small foam cup filled with tea.

“No one can determine which list was implemented. The NSA, CIA, and FBI all had their own versions of which towers should have the weapon, but no one seems to remember which list was

implemented so they have to destroy all the towers,” Friedheld explained. “Typical government bureaucracy.”

“Fighter jets? Isn’t that like using a gun to kill a fly?” Sanchez said taking a large bite out of his egg sausage biscuit.

“The jets are equipped with a experimental DEW that can send a pulse over a ten-mile swath and destroy anything electronic. We educated the weapon with the help of John and Chip here to search and destroy only electronics that transmit a certain frequency at a certain signal strength,” Friedheld explained.

“Let me guess – that certain frequency is limited to cell phone towers only,” Sanchez added while still chewing.

Friedheld nodded and then he frowned slightly.

“Won’t it destroy all the cell phones, too?” Motega asked.

“No. Each tower has a unique transmission signature so the DEW will search and destroy only the towers.”

“Then no one will have cell phone service in Washington? That’s pretty bad,” Braggloisi said. “How many towers are there?”

“About two hundred. The carriers have assembled an emergency team of tower experts who will replace the equipment,” Friedheld explained. “They should have the main towers online by tomorrow and the rest online by Sunday.”

“What kind of jets?” Stakhower asked.

Braggloisi shot him a “Why are you asking such a stupid question?” look.

“Harriers.”

“Cool. We use a similar fighter ship designed after the Harrier.”

“Is that all you think of?” Braggloisi said to Stakhower.

“No. I frequently think about what a pain in the ass you are,” he said. “Now get a life.”

“You’re the one who needs a life...you and that stupid game!”

“Okay. Stop, please,” Friedheld said. “You can argue all you want after this is over. Right now we need to focus.”

Friedheld sat down at the head of the oval table and filled a small tumbler with water from a brushed steel bottle with a thick black plastic top. Sanchez handed him a closed foam dish and a plastic knife and fork.

“Are these my pancakes?”

Sanchez nodded while placing a home fry into his mouth.

“Okay. We are going to launch another attack, but this time we are targeting the chip itself and not the virus. What we hope to do is find the chip and destroy it wherever it is. We’re thinking that once the chip is destroyed the virus will just stop,” Friedheld explained. “This thing is like Medusa with her many snakes coming out of her head. If we cut off the head, then the snakes die also, the snakes being the virus.”

Friedheld looked down the table and saw an extra white bag and frowned.

“Would someone call Dan? I wanted him here for this.”

“I’ll call him,” Chip volunteered and took out his PDA.

“And how is the program going to find the chip? You might as well be looking for a single grain of sand on the coast of Baja,” Sanchez chimed in.

“You know, Mike, I knew you were going to ask that question and there is only one person here that has that answer.”

Friedheld looked at John Bastille with his blackened eye and white neck brace scrunched against his chin. Bastille nodded slightly and Friedheld spoke for him.

“John designed the chip, he used a one hundred and fifty nanometer node to fit all of the required circuits. When you are designing a chip that small you use a tool called parasitic extraction, which creates a virtual electrical model of the physical connections of the circuits before you manufacture the chip. The tool creates a trial run of the chip so that you can detect any problems in the behavior of the circuits before you invest millions

and a year of your time manufacturing the chip. Luckily, for us he still had the original extraction because all the design files for the chip mysteriously disappeared. From the extraction, we created a program that will look for a chip with that specific design. When it finds it, it will destroy the chip,” Friedheld explained.

“Won’t it find other chips that are similar and destroy them also?” Braggloisi asked.

“There is only one chip in the world like this one. There are no others.”

“Dan’s phone is not turned on,” Motega said still holding his PDA up against his ear.

Friedheld shook his head.

“How long will it take?” Stakhower asked.

“Don’t know. We don’t even know if it will work. It’s all we have now,” Friedheld said. “If this doesn’t work, then we are... well...we just don’t have anything else. This is our last stand.”

“I hope it works,” Braggloisi added. “Just remember the myth of Medusa. Perseus killed her by cutting off her head, but then the giant Chrysaor and Pegasus sprang forth from her dead body.”

“Aren’t you the Greek mythology expert,” Stakhower said.

Braggloisi shot him an acid look that could burn through anything. Stakhower cowered and shifted in his chair turning away from her.

“Jeanine and Gary!” Friedheld said. “I think you guys need a break. I want you to go to Dan’s room and ask him to come down here – and chill out.”

The two looked at each other.

“And Gary, take this and put it on.”

Friedheld handed him Takara’s neural bracelet.

“This way we can keep in touch and know where you are.”

“I don’t know about that. You sure this thing won’t mess up my brain?” Stakhower said.

“Your brain is already messed up, but in a good way. Now go.”

As the two left, Braggloisi turned at the door and smiled. “Thanks.”

“I don’t know what gets into them sometimes...they fight like cats and dogs, yet there is something between them,” Friedheld said.

“*Están en amor* – they are in love,” Sanchez said. “But they don’t know it.”

Friedheld rolled his eyes and Motega smirked. Bastille raised his eyebrows.

A low, short chime went off and Motega reached for his PDA lying on the table.

“It’s a breaking story from CNN. Oh, shit! Two military jets just crashed in Washington, DC,” Motega said.

“You’re kidding!” Friedheld said.

“Are those...oh my god!” Sanchez said.

Motega got up and walked over to the 42-inch flat panel monitor and turned it on. Then he clicked on the TV tuner icon and the screen changed into the CNN cable broadcast. An older blonde woman with large blue eyes and tanned skin appeared.

*“A report just in from the capital, two Harrier military jets crashed in Metropolitan Washington, DC a few minutes ago. We have Jeff Chandler live. Jeff?”*

The screen changed to a rectangular faced man in his late thirties with short brown hair standing in front of the capitol building.

*“Hi Marcia. It appears two Harrier jets on a training mission crashed here a few minutes ago. We are working to get video as soon as possible. One jet crashed in Lady Bird Johnson Memorial Park near the George Washington Memorial Parkway and the other went down in the Landover Hills section striking the*

*Recreational Center off Annapolis Road. We don't know if there are any fatalities or injuries and it doesn't appear the pilots ejected. We don't know if this was a terrorist act or pilot error. We'll have more on these terrible crashes as soon as we can. This is a Jeff Chandler live from the nation's capital."*

"I can't believe it! It's up to us now! We have to stop these bastards!" Friedheld said slamming his fist onto the wooden table.

"Chip, tell the software team they have less time than we thought. They have to finish the program within the hour."

"An hour? You're asking the impossible!" he said.

"Then we have to do the impossible," Friedheld said.

"What really happened to the jets?" Sanchez asked wide-eyed.

Bastille hobbled over to one of the computers against the wall and began typing. He motioned the group to come over and they gathered close to the monitor and read the text.

*"The chip figured out what the jets were doing and located them by reverse triangulation using the source of their weapons. Then it sent a death pulse hitting both jets. I'm sure the pilots didn't eject."*

Friedheld's phone rang. He touched the answer button on his Bluetooth earpiece and walked away from the group. He paced back and forth and nodded his head several times as he listened. His lips moved sometimes, but the group could not hear what he was saying. After fifteen minutes, he walked back.

"The president will declare a state of emergency in the next two hours or less. He is going to down all aircraft like he did during nine eleven until we can neutralize the tower weapons. He won't jeopardize the life of any American."

A low rumble came from the ceiling and then it changed into several loud booms and the building shook slightly; dust cascaded down from the exposed pipes and conduits. Several seconds later, the rumble and booms came again.



“Chip, get Jeanine and Gary back here and call Dan again!” Friedheld yelled. “We need them here – they will be safer here. Mike, do you have the RF jammers at full strength?”

Sanchez nodded his eyes wide and glaring with fear.

“Change the frequencies and make sure everyone is in a safe room. I think the chip figured out a way to override the jammers.”

Everyone headed for a computer and clicked and typed, clicked and typed.

“I’ve contacted Dan. He just put the bracelet on,” Motega shouted across the room. “He’s still at his house.”

“Put him through my headset,” Friedheld said.

“Dan? We need you here now! What are you doing?” Friedheld shouted. “We think the chip has figured out how to override our RF jammers! It won’t be long before we’re defenseless or dead! Dan?”

There was only silence in Friedheld’s headset.

## Chapter 44

**Friday, May 30, 2008 – 6 am**

Dan tried to reconnect the bracelet to Friedheld several times. He went back to assembling the last anti-pulse device and soldered the last few wires on a tube socket under the chassis. He placed all the devices in his backpack along with dozens of vacuum tubes and left his basement.

Dan left his house as he had entered making sure no one had seen him. He moved through the small wooded sections behind the house to get back to where he parked his truck. He opened the door and noticed that the dome light did not go on. The inside smelled of the same acrid, burnt plastic odor he encountered in the house.

“Oh, shit!”

He pressed the start button on the small remote and nothing happened. He twisted the knob on the directional stem to turn on the headlights, but the lights did not come on.

“No! No! NO!” he screamed and pounded his hands on the steering wheel.

A wave of pressure seemed to push on his chest from the inside and he felt nauseous. His hands shook slightly and then he heard the rushing wind.

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“Mr. Friedheld, I have Dan online again. I’ll transfer him,” Motea announced.

“Dan, what happened? Are you ok?” Friedheld said.

“I don’t think so. They fried my truck. It’s dead...I just tried it.”

“Good thing you weren’t in it!”

Dan was silent.

“Hello, Dan. Are you still there? Dan!” Friedheld said.

“I’ve lost everything now - my family, my house, my truck. I might as well be dead,” Dan garbled out between tears and a breaking whisper. “I have nothing. Why bother doing anything. I can’t do this anymore. Let them win. We can’t beat them. They are too...”

“Dan! Dan! Pull yourself together! We can beat them. We will win one way or the other,” Friedheld said. “I’m not going to be defeated by a goddamn computer chip!”

“Everything has failed.”

“Dan, listen. If you give up now, you will never see your family again. You have to do this for them. Wouldn’t they want you to do everything you could to get them back? Isn’t that who you are? They’re depending on you. You have the most to lose for Christ’s sake!”

Dan was silent for several seconds.

I guess so,” Dan said his voice calmer now.

“I’ll send Gary to get you. Go up to the supermarket by your house and stay there. It will be a lot safer. Gary will pick you up there. Don’t worry; we’re going to win this. Just come in and we’ll regroup and figure out what we need to do.”

“I guess.”

Dan rubbed his eyes and went through the debris on the floor of his electronically dead truck pushing aside fast food paper bags, tall plastic cups and used napkins. He pulled out the green

camouflage anti-infrared suit the dying CIA agent Merritt had told him to wear to escape being spotted at night. He closed the truck door and put the suit on. He walked back to his house, opened his garage door about three feet and crawled in. He unlocked his slate blue Guru custom built road bike from the mounted bike rack and gently brought the \$2,700 bicycle down onto the cement floor. Amelia had given him the bike last Christmas and he could barely believe his eyes when she rolled it into the living room with a large blue bow tied onto the slender leather seat. She had also purchased the optimum force-tracking computer, which was developed in Research Triangle Park by a small startup company run by his neighbor across the street. As the user rode the bike, the computer would track the user's most efficient peddling force and rate, and then the computer would maintain that efficiency by shifting into one of the 27 gears as the bike approached an upgrade or descent in the road. To the user the force and speed on the pedals was constant no matter what the grade of the terrain. Dan stood there in the dark reliving Christmas past. Tears fell from his eyes and turned into small wet spots on the hard dry floor. He rolled the bike close to the door and lifted the large door with one hand while holding the bike with his other. He rode quickly down his street – the wind in his face and hair reminded him of better days – and headed north – the opposite direction of the supermarket where he was to meet Gary Stakhower.

Dan rode for several miles – the fresh cold wind numbing his face and his feelings; his breathing was steady and his legs moved effortlessly. His body was in unison with the rhythm of the bike – moments he enjoyed most about cycling. He turned right onto a rural road where a house would appear every half-mile or so. He stopped and opened a small pouch that hung under the seat and took out a small light that clipped onto a bracket he had fastened to the handlebars. He switched the light on and started peddling

again. The small headlight lit about 15 feet in front of him enough to show he was on the road and enough to avoid any potholes or objects. He knew this road – he had ridden on it many times before. It was full of curves and small hills and cut through a thickly wooded area just outside of the burgeoning subdivisions that went up all around the area. This was an area protected from developers – the people who lived here owned large tracts of land and no one was selling. He rode about two miles or so on the left side of the road looking for a narrow dirt road that cut through the thick forest. The dim light of the new day was slowly making its presence changing the color of everything around him, and it made it easier for him to see. When he came up to the entrance, he dismounted and walked the bicycle down the road – the eroded and rocky surface was no match for the narrow high-pressure tires. After a few minutes, he stopped in front of an eight-foot chain link fence with three rows of straight barbed wire running horizontally along the top of the fence. The beam of his headlight landed on a square yellow sign with big black letters that said,

“CAUTION

*“Do not enter beyond this point – radio frequency fields at this site exceed FCC rules for safe human exposure.”*

The fence enclosed a small gray metal shed and behind the shed was a large thick gray pole that towered above the height of the trees by twenty feet or more. The gate was secured with a one half inch steel chain wrapped several times and a round silver padlock the size of a man’s fist. Dan walked to the back of the enclosure and took off his backpack. He opened it and pulled out a red handled set of bolt cutters. He cut two straight vertical lines along the fence about two feet apart. Then he cut along the bottom and pushed the cut fence forward. He squeezed through and approached the small shed. He placed the bolt cutters on the small silver lock on the metal door and squeezed the red handles.

Nothing. He tried again. Nothing. He put all his strength into the squeeze the third time and the lock snapped. He took the lock off and placed it in his pack back and then opened the door and entered. Racks of electronic equipment lined the walls on each side of the shed – the communication brains of the cell tower. He knew all the equipment, what it was for, what it did. He took off his backpack, un-zippered the top and pulled out a metal chassis with six multi-pinned sockets – the remnants of his grandfather's tube radio. He carefully pulled out a vacuum tube from its cardboard box and pushed it into one of the sockets on the chassis until all six sockets had a tube. He connected the device to one of the computer racks against the wall. The twelve tubes slowly came to life like a sunrise – dim at first then gradually growing brighter into a hot orange glow. He smiled slightly and then picked up his backpack and left. He pulled a padlock out of the backpack, and placed it on the hasp on the door. He locked it and left.

## Chapter 45

**Friday, May 30, 2008 – 8 am**

Dan slipped the neural bracelet on his wrist and tapped it twice to contact Stakhower. Then he crawled out of the small hole he made earlier in the chain link fence that surrounded the control shed of the cell tower.

“Hello. Hello, anyone there? This is Dan,” he whispered. His breath formed a small cloud in front of his face and vanished as quickly as it had spawned.

“Dan is that you? This is Gary? Where are you? I’ve been here about half an hour. Friedheld is freaking out.”

“Sorry, I had to do something first.”

“Are you coming?” Gary said.

“Chill out. I’ll be there in about fifteen minutes.”

Gary sighed and looked down at his neural bracelet.

“These bracelets are pretty cool aren’t they?” he said.

“Yeah, they are.”

“What happened to your house? I heard it was destroyed.”

“You could say that. They hit it with an energy pulse probably an EMP that fried all my electronics, melted power cords together and cooked everything. Nothing works. I’m going to have a hellva

bill replacing everything. But my grandfather's tube radio still worked."

"What's a tube radio?" Gary asked.

"Oh man. It's the kind of radio they used in the thirties and forties – it ran on vacuum tubes. They used tubes before the transistor and ICs were invented in the late forties. Haven't you seen those big old fashioned radios in those big wooden boxes with round dials?"

"Oh, yeah, I guess."

"Well they all run on tubes. They don't use them anymore because transistors and ICs work more efficiently with less power and less heat. Tubes burned out all the time and had to be replaced."

"What's that got to do with the price of tea in China? That technology is long gone, right?"

"Wise ass. Because the pulses don't affect tubes only transistors and ICs. I've built an anti pulse device using the tubes and some radio chassis' I had. I used to build tube radios when I was a kid with my grandfather using his World War II schematics manuals. I used some of them to design this device. He's the reason I'm an RF engineer."

"What will it do?"

"It will reverse the energy of any pulse it detects and send it back to its source, destroying the pulse weapons just like the suits did, but this time the pulses cannot destroy my device – it's immune. The only drawback may be the tubes. They may burn out after one strike."

"Do you have more tubes?" Stakhower asked.

"Friedheld is getting them. I should call him now. I'll see you in a few minutes."

"Okay."

Dan tapped the bracelet once and waited.



“Hello Dan. This is Friedheld. You were supposed to meet Gary at the supermarket. What the hell are you doing?”

“I had to do something; I’ll fill you in when I get there. I’m heading for the supermarket now.”

“Are you skate boarding down a hill or something? You’re moving pretty fast.”

“I have my bike.”

“That explains what we’re seeing on GPS. Luckily, the pulses stopped. We haven’t had one in over an hour.”

“Did you get in touch with Alex?”

“No, he must have turned off his phone. All we get is his voicemail. But we did send him an EMT.”

“An EMT? He’s not sick!” Dan said.

“Emergency Media Transmission. No matter what he turns on he will get the message. A GPS satellite will send our message to any receiving device in the house. If he turns on his cell phone, a text message will appear; if he turns on a radio, a voice transmission will come on; if he turns on his TV, the message will scroll across his screen. The message will only go to his house because the satellite knows the coordinates of his house. He should be in touch.”

“Really? Pretty cool stuff,” Dan said.

“Not in this day and age. They should have had this technology in place years ago. It’s not that difficult to implement. There were some people using it years ago, but I can’t say who.”

“Let me guess...our clandestine friends from all those three lettered organizations,” Dan said.

“I’m not saying another word,” Friedheld said.

Dan entered the parking lot and then stopped under a large, 50-foot tall Bradford Pear tree to turn off the bracelet. The mini mall was named after the tree, which was reportedly the oldest Bradford Pear tree in Raleigh surviving over 35 hurricane seasons. The

tree's longevity was uncanny since this species suffers from severe branch splitting due to the narrow angles of the branches. As the trees get older and larger, they split in half and die an early death. Dan slipped the bracelet off and he placed it in his shirt pocket. He spotted Friedheld's blue BMW parked a few spaces from the supermarket entrance and started peddling towards the car. The bike picked up speed rapidly when the blue stream of light appeared in the sky from behind him. The pulse struck Friedheld's car instantly and the vehicle burst into flames along with two cars next to it. Dan felt the bike move violently as if someone had picked it up and threw it forward. He felt himself falling and then his shoulder and hip struck the hard asphalt and scrapped along for several feet. The bike fell on him pinning him to the ground and then there was the pain.

"Oh my god!" Dan yelled. "Gary!"

He untangled himself from the bike and struggled to run to the car but his leg was numb. He stopped when he felt his face grow very hot and he couldn't breathe. Dan cried uncontrollably, the heat increasingly seeping into his chest, arms and legs. He was about to collapse when two men ran over to him and pulled him away from the fire.

"It's only a car," one of the men said.

"My friend..." Dan mumbled.

"There's someone in the car?" the other man said.

"I don't see anyone!" the first man said.

"Oh man. This looks like Baghdad," the other man said.

A third man came out of the supermarket and ran over to Dan.

"Gary...I thought you were..."

"I went in to get a soda," Stakhower said looking at the burning car. "Holy shit!"

"Yeah," Dan said.

He wiped his eyes and walked back towards his bicycle. Stakhower followed. People rushed out of the stores and stood watching the burning cars. The morning rush hour traffic slowed to a crawl as drivers rubbernecked to get a glimpse of the giant black column of smoke that billowed from the three burning cars.

“A pulse?” Stakhower said.

“Yep. I don’t know how they knew to hit Friedheld’s car. Maybe, the chip can detect our transmissions from the bracelets? Let’s not use them for awhile,” Dan said.

“That cop got here awfully quick,” Stakhower said turning to watch the patrol car pull up with its lights and sirens screaming.

The state trooper got out of the car quickly leaving the door open.

“He’s coming over. I think I’ll get another soda.”

“Stay,” Dan said grabbing his arm.

The state trooper approached them in a hurry; his large tall frame towered over Stakhower and he held one hand on his holstered 9mm pistol. His thick black boots made a low repeating thud on the asphalt as he ran towards them.

“You’re all going to have to move back!” the trooper said firmly, his dark small eyes intensely focused on the small forming crowd.

“Brandon is that you?” Dan asked looking closely at the trooper.

“Dan Riker! I haven’t seen you since high school. How are you?” Brandon slapped Dan on the arm.

The trooper continued to move the growing crowd away from the fire. Two additional highway patrol cars pulled into the parking lot followed by a Wake County Sheriff’s car.

“Good to see you, too,” Dan said.

Brandon moved behind Dan.

“Ma’am, you’re going to have to move back.”

He gently extended his large hand in front of the young woman, who held the hand of a small boy with her left hand. The small radio on Brandon's belt crackled to life and he pulled it free and put it close to his mouth.

"Code six a. I have a ten twelve. There's a nine oh four c at Bradford Pear Plaza. Call Durham," he said.

"Ten four," the voice on the radio said.

"Look at that...a BMW. I don't feel sorry for the sap that owned that car. He'll probably have it replaced tomorrow," Brandon said looking over at Friedheld's car now completely engulfed in flames.

"That's our boss' car," Dan said.

"A bolt of lightening hit the cars. I saw it," one of the men volunteered who had pulled Dan away from the burning cars.

"Bam! Bam!" The crowd gasped and instinctively moved back when two tires blew out and began burning. A large plume of black, acrid smoke larger than all three cars rose up into the sky about 100 yards or more.

"That's your boss' car? Let's move over here," Brandon said and directed them away from the crowd and next to a shopping basket drop off.

"I was here a few minutes ago running a plate check on that very car. There have been a rash of cars stolen in the area mostly BMWs. When I left the parking lot, I heard the explosion. Did you see anything?"

Dan looked at Stakhower with raised eyebrows. Stakhower shrugged.

"No. I was coming here to meet Gary and the car blew up. I didn't see anyone near it if that's what you mean."

The radio crackled to life again. This time a small red light glowed near the tiny speaker. The trooper quickly stepped several

feet from Dan and Stakhower and put the radio near his ear like a phone. After a few moments, he returned to Dan and Stakhower.

“Sorry, Dan, I have to go. It was good seeing you again. Give me a call and let’s have lunch sometime,” Brandon said and reached in his shirt pocket and pulled out a business card.

Dan looked at it quickly and squeezed it into his pocket. Two fire trucks pulled up and stopped on each side of the burning cars. Several firefighters jumped out of the trucks and scrambled opening doors and unraveling the large hoses. Two firefighters pulled the hoses close to the fire and within seconds there are two large streams of water arching over the parking lot onto the burning cars.

“What do we do now?” Stakhower asked.

“Call Friedheld and tell him,” Dan said.

Dan went into his pocket for the neural bracelet.

“Oh shit!” he said. “I lost the bracelet. Help me look for it. It must have fallen out when I fell. Over here!”

Dan and Stakhower looked around the fire truck, which stopped in the area where Dan fell earlier.

“Damn, I don’t see it,” Dan said.

“Chill out,” Stakhower said. “We’ll find it.”

Dan moved closer to the fire truck and looked under it. Then he moved towards the rear of the truck and looked by the double rear wheels. The firefighters were on the other side of the truck with the pumper controls.

“Holy shit!” he said. “Here it is!”

He bent down and grabbed the bracelet, but it wouldn’t move; it was wedged under one of the tires. He spit on his index finger and rubbed the saliva on the tire and around the bracelet. He used his wet finger to gently pull the bracelet free. Stakhower stood near him watching.

“Another inch or so and it would have been history,” Dan said as he stood up with the bracelet in hand. “I hope it still works.”

He slipped it on and nothing happened. He twisted his mouth into a smirk and frowned. Then a few seconds later, it began to tighten and connect to his neural system. He tapped it once and it connected to Friedheld.

“Hello. This is Dan. Can you hear me?”

“Yes,” Friedheld replied.

“Your car was hit with a pulse and destroyed...”

“Is Gary...?”

“He wasn’t in it. He went to get a soda.”

“Thank God.”

“I think the chip has hacked into the major communications networks including the police, the DMV and who knows what else. A trooper did a plate check a few minutes earlier and the chip must have figured out where the car was located,” Dan said.

“It can do that?”

“It gets smarter by the hour,” Dan said.

“I don’t care about the car. What’s important is that you two are all right. We’ve got to stop this now, Dan!” Friedheld said his voice cracking. “The pulses are destroying planes at every major airport. Raleigh just lost five planes, Newark lost fifteen, JFK lost seventy five and Ronald Reagan lost one hundred four. They’re hitting a plane every four minutes!”

## **Chapter 46**

**Friday, May 30, 2008 – 9 am**

“I hope this doesn’t turn out like our anti-virus program,” Sanchez said to the small group huddled in a tiny break room next to the War Room. The break room contained a coffee vending machine and six beige plastic folding chairs with light grease stains on the backs and seats surrounding a metal table. The HVAC workers used the room for short meetings or to take a break.

Kari Serano had her long thin fingers on the keyboard of a laptop and moved the mouse unnecessarily. Friedheld and Sanchez sat next to her. Braggloisi and Bastille sat at the far end of the long metal table with open laptops in front of them. Motega was stationed in the War Room at the remaining working computer monitoring the Internet. Half of the ceiling had fallen in the War Room – fallout from the pulses hitting the building earlier. The debris destroyed two PC monitors along with the large 42-inch flat panel plasma monitor. The break room took on a solemn almost religious feeling that something sacred was about to be unleashed. Kari pinched her nose to get rid of the dry, dusty feel of the stale air.

"I'm not sure. We didn't have the time to fully debug it so there are no guarantees," she said. "We need more time."

"You don't have it," Friedheld said.

"I know," she said.

Kari moved the mouse a bit and clicked on the launch icon for the parasitic extraction program.

"I'm ready to launch," she said.

"Do it," Friedheld said.

She clicked on the "Yes" box and the program was launched into the Internet. The program would enter hundreds of computers connected to the Internet, and scan their operating systems looking for the ominous computer chip that was running the power grid and the pulse weapons in the cell towers. Friedheld got up and stood in the entrance to the room and yelled over to Motega.

"Is it working?"

"Don't know yet. It's still compiling. Any minute now...there it's started. It's at the first domain. It can check an entire domain in about two to three minutes depending on how many computers are on it. It's at a hundred scans per second, two hundred, three hundred. It's really cranking now," Motega said. "Hold on let me do some calculations."

Motega picked up a small desk calculator and began punching the keypad.

"How long before we know?"

"At three hundred machines per second, it will scan over one million machines in an hour. We should know any minute now," he said.

Friedheld went back into the small room.

"If this doesn't work then it's up to Dan," Friedheld said.

He was about to sit down next to Kari when the room shook and the plastic folding chair slid a foot or so out of his reach. A low rumble came out of the ceiling and cascades of dust fell onto the



table. Several loud booms reverberated through the room shaking everything like a major earthquake.

“Everyone under the table!” Friedheld yelled.

The small group awkwardly rushed to get under the table taking their laptops with them and trying not to get tangled in the power cords. Braggloisi got under first and Bastille handed her his laptop. Then he scrunched down lower, but couldn’t get his head under; the neck brace prevented him from bending his neck. He sat down on the floor and scooted under, but again he couldn’t bend his head enough to clear the table.

“Lay on your back!” Braggloisi yelled.

Bastille turned around and lowered his head to floor. He grabbed a table leg and pulled himself under. Braggloisi put her hands under his arms and pulled him farther. His face suddenly contorted and twisted as another piece of ductwork fell. He screamed, but no sound came out. He grabbed her leg and squeezed it with all of his strength and she instinctively jumped back and up and slammed her head against the top of the table. Friedheld and Sanchez quickly crawled over to them.

“Oh my god!” Sanchez screamed.

Braggloisi lay on the floor unconscious and Bastille continued to writhe and squirm like a bug that was just sprayed with bug killer.

“Something fell on him,” Sanchez said.

He moved closer to Bastille to get a better look.

“Oh my god,” he said. “A large piece of ductwork fell on his legs!”

“Can you move your legs?” Friedheld yelled over.

“No...the pain. Oh shit! Help me! Help me!” Bastille screamed, but it came out as a tiny raspy whisper.

Friedheld moved closer.

"I think they're broken," Friedheld said to Sanchez. "Come on help me get the duct off his legs." They crawled out from under the table and stood on each side the duct. They grabbed and lifted.

"Oh, man is this heavy," Sanchez said struggling to lift the five foot long duct that contained a heavy fan motor and blade.

They moved it a few feet away and put it down. Friedheld went back to Bastille and gently moved his pants up and examined his legs. Another boom reverberated through the building.

"One is broken; the other is badly bruised with several cuts. Mike call nine eleven; we're getting out of here."

"I'm not calling with a cell phone. I might get zapped."

"Then use one of the desk phones! And see if Chip is ok."

Sanchez worked his way out of the break room and walked over to Motega. He was sitting at the metal workstation watching the monitor.

"You ok?" Sanchez said.

"Yeah," Motega said. "These workstations are pretty strong. I ducked underneath."

Motega typed a few short commands and waited. Sanchez picked up the phone on the workstation and frowned.

"Shit!" he said. "The phone's dead."

He reluctantly pulled his cell phone off the clip on his belt and opened it. He dialed 911.

"Imagine that? Nine eleven busy!"

"There it is! There it is!" he yelled. "It's on a computer right here in Raleigh, just like John said it would be!"

What the chip?" Sanchez asked. "Is it going after the chip?"

"I don't know yet," Motega said watching the monitor like it was a spectacle of some sort and waiting for the final kill.

"It's working! It's working!" Motega yelled.

Friedheld came out of the small room and approached them.

"It's working?"

“Yes!” Motega said. He continued to watch the monitor.

“No. No. I can’t believe it! Damn!”

“What?” Sanchez said.

“It started its attack and then the chip disappeared from the net,” Motega explained.

“That means it could be on a wireless connection, a PDA or a laptop,” Friedheld said.

“And it instantly disconnected itself from the net,” Sanchez added.

“Or it was destroyed by our program,” Motega said. “But the program would have told us the chip was destroyed.”

“That’s great, but we have to get John to a hospital. Mike did you call for help?” Friedheld said.

“It’s busy,” Sanchez said. “Can you believe that?”

“Okay then we’re getting out of here. Help me get John and Jeannine.”

Friedheld and Sanchez entered the room and crawled under the table. Motega monitored the progress of the chip program.

“My head is killing me,” Braggloisi said as the men approached.

“Can you walk?” Friedheld asked.

“I don’t know. I haven’t stood up yet. I can move my legs if that’s what you mean?”

“Kari are you ok?”

She nodded.

“Good. Stay under the table until we get John out. We’ll all go together.”

Braggloisi crawled to the far end of the table to get out of the way, and the three men crawled towards Bastille. Kari helped push Bastille while the men dragged him out from under the table.

“He’s unconscious,” Sanchez said.

Friedheld lifted Bastille’s eyelid.

“He’s in shock. Come on we have to get out of here now!” Friedheld said.

There was a loud cracking sound followed by a rumbling that sounded like a lot of large objects were tumbling through the building, and then the ceiling came down. A large object struck the table crushing the table onto Sanchez and Friedheld pinning them to the floor. Another object hit the far end of the table crushing the table completely. Braggloisi screamed, but it quickly turned into a violent hacking cough as she inhaled the suffocating dust that filled the room like an ominous, encroaching fog.

## Chapter 47

**Friday, May 30, 2008 – 9 am**

Dan and Stakhower watched the skeleton of Friedheld's BMW slowly appear as the firemen extinguished the fierce, black smoke fire that consumed the car along with two others. The twisted burnt metal was now black and gray from the intense heat and nothing remained that resembled the once sleek blue metallic sports car.

"What do we do now?" Stakhower asked.

"I've got to set up one last device in a tower about eight miles from here," Dan said.

"Well, I can go home. I live over there," Stakhower said pointing north towards a large colony of garden apartments about a half of a mile away. "We can keep in touch with the bracelets."

"Okay. But don't use it unless you have to. This chip gets smarter by the minute and we just don't know when it will be able to track our transmissions," Dan said.

Stakhower nodded and then walked towards the cluster of apartments. Dan watched his boney frame float inside his oversized worn jeans and his straggly brown shoulder length hair dance in the slight wind. Dan put his arms through the backpack and pulled it onto his back. He mounted his bicycle and rode in the

opposite direction. Thirty minutes later, Dan arrived at the cell site located behind a veterinarian and pet-grooming center. He coasted into the parking lot that dipped down lower than the road and rode towards the tower in the back parking lot. He slammed on his brakes when he saw a white van with no markings parked near the tower. He suspected the worse. He knew this was an Inviscom cell site and that their trucks were highly decorated with an orange and blue logo and photographic renditions of happy people talking on Inviscom phones. When Dan inched past the van to get closer to the gate, a large burley man with a shaved head came out of the equipment shed and looked directly at Dan.

“Hey Sam!” he yelled.

Sam ran out of the equipment shed holding a black box that looked like a computer and the burley man ran towards Dan.

“That’s him! They said he might show up!” the man with the shaved head yelled.

Dan peddled up a steep hill just past the cell site and stopped at a row of high thick bushes. He got off his bike and pushed it through the only thinned out area in the row, cracking the small dead branches.

“Hey you!” the man with the shaved head yelled as he ran up the hill.

Dan pushed the bike through the bushes harder and faster, but the farther he got the thicker the bushes. The two men slowed down about half way up the hill; both were breathing as if it were their last breaths. Dan pushed the bike harder and the bushes seemed to push back as the tiny stiff branches seemed to ensnarl the bicycle’s spokes. The man with the shaved head sloppily reached the top of the hill first and stopped to suck in large gulps of air, his face in agony from pushing his body too fast, too far. He moved the bushes aside and lunged at the bike grabbing for the rear wheel as he fell forward. Dan pushed the bike with all his

might and the wheels broke free from the tangle of branches. The man fell and was swallowed by the scratchy bushes.

“My nose!” he screamed. “My god my nose!”

Blood streamed out of his wide nostrils and down his face flowing off his chin and disappearing into the brown earth. Dan fell forward slamming down on his stomach and slid down the tall hill. When he stopped, he was in the parking lot of a large town house complex. He mounted his bike and peddled furiously away from the two men now clawing their way out of the thick bushes towards him. Dan rode along a long curving road passing rows of white townhouses that led to the exit and the main highway. He rode for several miles effortlessly, the optimum force computer allowing him to pedal at the same speed and force no matter what the grade of the road. He occasionally looked behind him for a white van, and then he turned right into a small subdivision, and followed the road through the center of the housing development. The traffic-less road brought him back to the two-lane highway and the cell tower, but from a different direction so he could see if the van was there. He rode past the building to make sure the van was not parked nearby and then entered the parking lot. He entered the open gate and found that the equipment shed was also still open. Inside, he took out the two radio chassis that made up his makeshift, anti-pulse weapon. He plugged the different-sized glass tubes into their appropriate sockets occasionally glancing at the entrance to make sure no one was coming. He opened the last box and noticed a crack running down the side of the tube.

“Shit!” He pulled the neural bracelet out of his shirt pocket.

“Hello Gary? Are you there?” he whispered. Nothing.

“Gary are you there?” Still, Stakhower did not answer. Dan turned the cracked tube in his hand for several seconds looking at it intensely. He tapped the bracelet once to contact Friedheld.

“Hello, Harald are you there?” Nothing.

“Yeah. What’s going on?” Stakhower answered.

“Is that you, Gary?” Dan said.

“Yeah.”

“Why didn’t you respond right away?”

“I didn’t have it on and I was in the middle of an intense battle with the Arachicians and then the power went out for a few minutes. They are an old race that modifies old technology to defeat the new technology,” Stakhower explained. “They are hard to beat because the new weapons don’t work on theirs sort of like your tube thing. Hey this is really cool.”

“If it works,” Dan said. “Have you tried to contact Friedheld?”

“He’s not answering?”

“Or he can’t because the building collapsed on him,” Dan added.

“Oh...I hadn’t thought of that.”

“That’s because you were playing that damn game!” Dan said.

“Don’t you realize how serious this is?”

A few moments passed.

“Gary, are you there?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry,” Dan said.

“I know that the pulses stopped and the planes are not being destroyed anymore. They had it on the news. You’re not supposed to go outside because there is a state of emergency.”

“Whatever. Listen, One of the tubes cracked and this last device won’t work without it. Do you know anyone who is into short wave or ham radios?”

“No,” Stakhower said.

“I used to work with a guy that was into radio. His name was Frank...ah...Frank. You know, I can see his face perfectly and if I saw him on the street I would remember his name. Frank... Frank...Delgato! That’s it, Frank Delgato. Google him and tell him



our situation and that I need as many six BE sixes he can find. You got that?"

"Yeah, Frank Delgato, tube six BE six, Google," Stakhower repeated back. "Hold on. Got him."

Stakhower picked up his cordless phone and dialed Frank Delgado's phone number from the Google listing.

"It's a good thing he doesn't have an unlisted number," Stakhower said as he listened to Delgado's phone ring.

"I'm hoping it's the same Frank Delgato," Dan said.

"He's not home. I'm getting his answering machine. I'll leave a message," Stakhower said.

"Call my brother, Alex. Ask him if he has any of these tubes. Friedheld left messages for him, but I haven't heard from him. Look up his number. I don't want to give it over the bracelet. I'm going to keep trying Friedheld."

"Okay."

Dan located the transmission rack and opened the glass door. He looked around the inside for several minutes thinking he just didn't see it. The rack containing all the circuit boards that initiate and control the cell tower transmissions was gone. He couldn't connect his tube device to the cell tower because it needed the transmission rack to reverse the pulse. He tapped on the bracelet again to contact Friedheld.

"Dan! Dan! The Synertron building partially collapsed and the police have the entire area blocked off. It was on the news. They're searching for people in the building now."

"Harald?" Dan replied.

"No, this is Gary."

"I was trying to contact Harald. I hope they're not injured or dead."

"I hope so, too. Frank Delgato called and said he has five of the tubes. He'll leave them at the Norwood Firehouse on Parkwood

Avenue around noon. He's a firefighter there so just walk in and ask for them. He knows Alex and said Alex has been trying to contact you all morning."

"Okay. That's great. There's a cell site near there that I can put this last device in and I'll need you there to turn it on."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"You're going to have to be there and turn it on the second we launch our counterattack because I think the chip detected the device I put in the last site this morning. I ran into two thugs there and they removed the transmission rack. Now, why would they remove it? The tower is totally useless without it. I'm going to check the first device and make sure it's still there. I'll meet you at the firehouse at noon," Dan explained.

Dan gathered up his backpack and noticed movement in the doorway. It was the man with the shaved head that had chased him through the thick bushes. Dan moved back slowly and the man walked towards him with a smirk on his scratched and dirty face. Dan hit the back wall and stopped. The man made a fist and raised his arm; Dan ducked and the man's fist slammed into the wall creating a fist-sized dent in the metal shielding.

"You son of a bitch!" he screamed in pain and grabbed his hand.

Dan kicked the man in the groin and he instantly fell to the floor squealing in pain. Dan kicked the man again between the legs when another man came running in - he was older and moved slower. Dan quickly moved to one side and stuck out his foot. The man fell and landed on the other man and then tumbled off to the right slamming his head on the hard cement floor. Dan ran out, grabbed his bike and quickly took off for the Norwood firehouse ten miles up Leesville Road. He looked back and saw the older man wobble out of the shed holding his head and looking dazed.

## Chapter 48

**Friday, May 30, 2008 – 12:30 pm**

Dan turned into the wide driveway of the Norwood Fire Department and rode up to the four bay doors of the Wake County firehouse that served the northwestern section of the county. Two spotless fire trucks – an engine and a tanker – had their noses nudged out of the bays; the two other bays were empty. Firefighters were scampering everywhere loading equipment onto the trucks, checking the pumping systems, hoses, and hydraulics. The cement driveway was wet and the air smelled of diesel exhaust. A short, red-faced firefighter in full uniform with a close shaved head, and penetrating, friendly eyes approached Dan.

“What can I do for you?”

“I’m here to pick up a package left by Frank Delgato,” Dan said noticing he beads of sweat on the man’s face.

“Oh, yeah. Frankie boy. He was here a few minutes ago. You just missed him. He waited, but had to get back to work. You’re Dan, right?”

Dan nodded.

“I have the tubes inside. Come on in. Frankie is a real riot – always playing a practical joke on someone – he’s a lot of fun to

have around,” the firefighter said as he led Dan inside the fire station. As he entered, the thick air was warm and smelled of just cooked spaghetti sauce.

“He was like that when I worked with him a few years ago,” Dan volunteered. “Are you going to a fire?”

“Already went to one. Sent seven trucks to the airport. Terrorists blew up a bunch of planes there and the governor declared a state of emergency. Haven’t you heard the news? This is worse than nine eleven – they’re blowing up planes all over the country. We’re under attack. The whole east coast is out of power. I’ll be working a triple shift.”

A klaxon thundered, it’s howling so loud it seemed to be everywhere. Dan shuddered as the firefighter ran into the kitchen, grabbed a small cardboard box off the table and shoved it into Dan.

“Here they are. We have to go!” he said and ran to the truck.

He disappeared inside the truck melting in with the others who were already in their positions. Dan ran past the truck, grabbed his bike, and jerked it away from the front of the truck, which had already started to move. The engine roared out of the bay and shot down the road sirens screaming and lights on fire. All four bay doors slowly descended and Dan looked at his watch – it was 12:45. He tapped twice on the neural bracelet.

“Gary? Where are you?”

“I’m a few minutes away. I lost track of time and then I couldn’t find the firehouse. I’m on Leesville and heading there now.”

Several minutes later, a rusted, dented 1980s faded yellow Toyota pulled into the driveway and Stakhower got out of the passenger side pushing a sea of soda and beer cans away from his feet. The door creaked as it opened and a plumb of light blue exhaust smoke floated in the air around the car.

“Who’s that?” Dan asked motioning toward the mass of black hair behind the steering wheel. “He looks like an evil Chewbacca.”

“Gene. A gaming buddy of mine who just happened to be home when I called.”

“You mean he was home all the time and felt like giving you a ride at the moment you called,” Dan said.

“Well, yeah. Gene’s all right.”

“He just reminds me of a person I didn’t like very much,” Dan said.

Dan entered the backseat and pushed away more empty cans to make room for his feet. Stakhower did the same when he sat in the front.

“Sorry, about the cans, man,” Gene said. “I haven’t had a chance to get rid of them. I didn’t think I had that many.”

They drove to the city landfill, where a cell site was located just behind the dump.

“Go to the recycle area over there,” Dan said. “Park in front of the container to the left, and start getting rid of the cans. Take your time. I’ll head for the tower and install my device.”

“What about the fence?” Stakhower asked.

“This tower is inside the fence,” Dan said.

Stakhower and Gene removed the cans one by one and threw them into the six-foot high metal container. Dan stood on the side of the container and waited for the compactor operator to look away and then ran for the tower carrying his bolt cutters. He quickly snapped the small lock on the shed door, entered and closed the door.

“I don’t think your friend likes me,” Gene said.

“He’s just bummed out.” Stakhower said. “Just blow it off.”

An oversized SUV pulled up behind Gene’s car and waited. After several minutes, a short, overweight man wearing a blue baseball cap got out and approached Gene.

“Hey, can you guys hurry up? I have a lot of stuff,” the man said.

“Blow it out of your ass!” Gene said.

“What did you say?”

“He didn’t say anything. He was talking to me,” Stakhower said.

“I don’t think so. I think he was talking to me.”

“I said blow it out of your ass, asshole!” Gene shouted.

“Are you nuts?” Stakhower yelled.

“We were just leaving,” Dan said as he appeared from the side of the container. “We’re sorry if we caused you an inconvenience. Guys, let’s go.”

“I think he owes me an apology,” the man said.

“I just apologized for him, like I said, sorry for any inconvenience.”

“No. I want him to apologize,” the man said rushing towards Gene.

“Okay now I’m scared,” Gene said.

Dan rushed towards the man, grabbed his right hand and bent it up towards the man’s shoulder. The man immediately landed on his back. Dan continued to exert pressure on his hand.

“I said we were sorry for any inconvenience. Now if that’s not good enough for you, I can just keep bending your hand until your wrist breaks,” Dan said.

“Okay! Okay!” the man said. “Let go!”

Dan released his grip and the three of them got into Gene’s car and left. The man stood there rubbing his wrist.

“That was pretty cool, man,” Gene said to Dan.

“Yeah, blow it out of your ass,” Stakhower said and he and Gene laughed.

“I don’t have time for assholes,” Dan said smiling. “Yeah, blow it out of your ass!”

They all laughed.

“Head back to the firehouse,” Dan said. “We have one more tower to fix.”

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The road had thick tall pine trees on each side that seemed to swallow the vehicle as it rumbled down the not so perfect dirt road. After a short distance the trees ended and the road was surrounded by neat rows of tobacco plants, each about 3 feet tall with broad floppy leaves. A wooden mushroom-capped water tower stood a quarter of a mile ahead past a small white house with a tin roof. The cell phone antenna array was attached to the wooden support frames just below the water tower. The trio drove up and Dan got out with his backpack of tools.

“Gary, come with me. I need to show you how to set it up,” Dan said.

“I won’t get fried will I?”

“No, you won’t get fried. Think of it as one your conquests for a planet.”

“Yeah, but this is for keeps, this is real.”

“That’s the fun part,” Dan said.

Stakhower reluctantly exited the car.

“Hey, I think we’re in deep shit,” Gene yelled through the window.

Dan and Stakhower turned and looked at the rapidly approaching rust colored pickup truck bouncing in their direction. The truck stopped behind Gene’s car blocking it between the cell tower and the road. A large pot-bellied man in blue overalls and a soiled khaki baseball cap got out and pointed a double barreled shotgun at Dan and Stakhower.

“You’re trespassing on my property. I have the right to shoot you,” the tobacco farmer said. “Now git.”

The farmer waved the gun in the direction of the road.

“Hello, sir, we’re sorry were on your land, but I’m here to check on the tower. I’m working with Inviscom and the feds.”

“How do I know? Ya’ll could make trouble like the last two rascals that done come here,” the farmer said.

“Well, that’s why we’re here. There are looters trying to steal the tower components with this blackout and everything. I have to install an anti-theft device in the control shed,” Dan explained. “I’m working with Synertron.”

“Got proof?”

Dan took out his wallet and handed the farmer a business card. It was the only business card in his wallet. The farmer stared at the card for a few seconds then moved it at arms length.

“Can’t read it,” he said. “Don’t have my glasses.”

“I’m Dan Riker.”

“Where’s your van?”

“All out. We’re lucky we got a ride here.”

The farmer looked at the rusted Toyota and Gene’s wide eyes staring back at him with his black, scraggly hair down to his shoulders and an equally scraggly beard covering most of his face.

“You’ll have to get off my land. Now turn that car of yours around and git.”

The farmer raised the shotgun and pointed it towards the car.

“But we have to get to the tower to install the device,” Dan insisted.

“I said git,” the farmer replied, his frown more pronounced, his mouth twisted.

“Shit,” Dan said.

They got back into the car and left. When they reached the tall treed section of the road, Dan told Gene to stop and he got out.

“He can’t block all of his land. We’ll make a wide circle and approach the tower from behind on foot. Gary, you have your bracelet on?” Dan said.



“Yep.”

“Then let’s go.”

“Oh man, I have to walk,” he said.

## **Chapter 49**

**Friday, May 30, 2008 – 1 pm**

Chip Motega sat in the dry, dusty darkness with his knees up to his chin and his arms wrapped around his legs. His head was scrunched down to fit under the metal computer workstation that ultimately saved his life. He breathed through his shirt to prevent inhaling the fog of dust that filled the room immediately after several floors collapsed into the basement floor. He pulled a small black metal flashlight off the mountain climber's hook that held his keys and directed the beam in front of him. He saw a metal desk on top of the workstation he was under and a large leather office chair next to the desk. A darkened and cracked computer monitor with its single large hole where the glass used to be stared ominously back at him. He gingerly moved from under the workstation careful not to disturb any of the debris and shown the light upward. He could see up through three floors – an eerie black hole strewn with multi-colored dangling wires, white specks of floating dust, twisted and bent metal wall beams and jagged shards of sheet rock and floor boards. The room had a dry feel with odors of cement, acrid burning plastic and metallic ozone mixed among the floating dust.

“Hello!” he yelled. “Are you guys all right?”

Nothing.

“Harald! Can you hear me? Jeanine? Mike? Kari? John?” He pronounced each name slowly fearing he would not hear a response.

Nothing.

He moved towards the small break room, shining the light upward to make sure nothing was about to fall as he made his way through the debris. Then he heard it – low, soft aching sounds that were hardly human - moans coming from the small HVAC break room. He moved faster pushing fallen chairs and pieces of office furniture out of the way until he reached the doorframe. He pointed the light upward and stared into the dark hole and then sprang backward as a large desk crashed down, splintered and ripped apart into a distorted pile of broken wood, splinters and distorted metal.

His small light revealed that Friedheld and Sanchez were pinned under the long conference table. A large metal square box about five feet square with round plastic tubes protruding from each side lay on top the table. More office furniture was on top of the box and it made a pile of broken and bent debris about ten feet high.

“Harald and Mike...you’re alive!” Motega said as he spotted them lying face down with the table up to their waists. “Can you move?”

“No,” Friedheld said in a low voice. “Can’t feel my legs. Check on the others.”

“Hang on. I’m going to lift the table. Crawl out when I do.”

“You can’t,” Friedheld said barely audible.

Motega grabbed the edge of the table and struggled to lift it a few inches.

“Now,” Motega said barely getting the word out.

Friedheld slowly crawled out and Motega slowly lowered the table.

“Phew!” Motega said. “I couldn’t hold it any longer.”

Motega put his arms under Friedheld’s boney armpits and lifted. Friedheld wobbled to his feet like a marionette.

“We have to get Mike out,” Friedheld said spitting dust out of his mouth.

“Are you ok?” Motega asked.

Friedheld felt along his legs to make sure they were still there and then looked at Motega with a funny smile.

“I guess. I still have my legs,” he said. The two men bent down and lifted the table and then Friedheld grabbed Sanchez under the arms and pulled him out. Sanchez was motionless. Friedheld put his fore finger on Sanchez’ neck and held it there for several seconds.

“No pulse. I don’t know how I’m going to face his family.”

“Let’s turn him over,” Motega said. “He may not be...”

Motega immediately bent down and put his mouth on Sanchez’ and blew into his lungs. He did this several times pushing on his stomach to work his diaphragm. The stout Mexican-American did not stir.

“Keep trying,” Friedheld said. “I’m going to check on the others.”

Friedheld took out his tiny pocket flashlight and worked his way towards the back of the small room carefully picking his way through broken chairs, gnarled filing cabinets and shattered computer monitors. He crawled under the table that was still standing and found Kari Serano. He gently put two fingers over her eyes and brought the lids down. A low moan then came out of the darkness a few feet behind him. He shown the light and saw Braggloisi’s hand move. He quickly went over to her.

“Jeanine. Jeanine, what hurts? Don’t move. We’ll get you out of here,” Friedheld said.

“You sound...like my mother,” she said between coughs. “I’m fine if I can get out of here. What happened?”

“The floors collapsed on us. We’re lucky to be alive.”

“Where are the others?”

“They’re here. Are you ok?” Friedheld said.

“Sore, but I don’t think anything is broken. Everything seems to work. Where’s John?”

There was a moan in the darkness. Friedheld moved the tiny beam of light and it landed on John’s face. His eyelids drooped, and his mouth moved, but there was no sound.

“Chip! Over here! I need your help!” Friedheld yelled.

Friedheld stood up and directed the light towards the doorway. Motega stood up.

“We need to get John out.”

When Motega approached, he was out of breath.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “...About Sanchez.”

“Oh no! He was a good man. I just don’t know how his wife is going to handle this. I’m sorry I got you into this,” his voice breaking.

“Are you kidding? I would’ve been insulted if I you didn’t ask me. I’m honored. I want to get these creeps as much as anybody else.”

“Thanks. I appreciate that,” Friedheld said. “But two people are dead and one is just hanging on.” Friedheld bowed his head and rubbed his eyes.

“Kari?”

“Yes.”

“Damn! I can’t believe it! Why her?”

“We need to get out of here, now!” Friedheld said.

“How?”

“Same way we came in by the elevators.”

“They still work?”

“They’re supposed to. Specially designed for survival... reinforced concrete, titanium shell, separate power source. They were a prototype designed after nine eleven to withstand bomb blasts, building collapses,” Friedheld said. “I hope they work. They were tested in a simulation, but not in a real building.”

Friedheld moved the light onto John’s eyes and then turned to Motega.

“He’s in shock,” he said. “We have to get him out now.”

“How do we do that?”

Friedheld moved the light around the room then stopped it at the doorway.

“There. We’ll use the door as a stretcher. Help me get it off the hinges.”

The door hung by two of its three hinges. Motega grabbed the top of the door and pulled down. The wood creaked and cracked as the door was torn off its hinges. They carried the door over to Bastille and placed it next to him and gently dragged him onto the door. Motega then reached into his pocket and pulled out his PDA.

“I’m getting a message,” he said.

He turned the PDA around and stared at the display.

“Damn! This thing is smart. It’s using its zombies to fight off our program, but as more and more are activated it’s slowing down the Internet. We’re gonna have a massive denial of service on the entire Internet.”

“What are you talking about?” Braggloisi said.

“The chip. Our program has it on the run and the chip is activating all its zombie computers to help fight off our attacks.”

“What computers?” she asked.

“The ones in its botnet. The infected computers are trying to defeat our program and it is slowing down the Internet.”

“Will the Internet...you know just stop working?” Braggloisi asked.

“You can bet on it,” Motega said.

“Then we have to pull our program back,” Friedheld said.

“We shouldn’t,” Motega said. “If we do, I’m afraid the chip will have time to decode our program and create an effective defense. Now it’s on the run and very busy. We should just let it play out.”

“But, everything will stop,” Friedheld said.

“So will the chip and maybe then it will give us our chance to destroy it.”

## **Chapter 50**

**Friday, May 30, 2008 – 3 pm**

Hildy Grummenweurkes parked her 1994 Toyota Corolla in the designated parking spot in front of her apartment and shut off the engine. She quickly put on a pair of green rubber dishwashing gloves, got out, and went behind a large bush where she had placed a 25-foot extension cord. She brought the cord back to her car, threaded it through the driver side window, and plugged it into a battery charger that was connected to the cigarette lighter. She closed the car door, and rushed up the five steps to her apartment door, and quickly unlocked it. She slammed the thick wood door shut, and turned the knobs on the two dead bolt locks, and then checked the doorknob to make sure it too was locked. She was breathing rapidly, but relaxed a bit now that she was inside. She had returned from working a double shift at the paper mill, where she operated the finished paper roller – a giant motorized roller that wound the completed newsprint tightly onto an eight-by-six foot roll. Her 1994 Toyota needed a new alternator and most of the time the battery just had enough power to get her to work and home again - a 15-mile roundtrip. She couldn't afford the \$350 for a new alternator, so her neighbor, Henry, showed her how to



charge the battery using a \$15 battery charger that plugged into the car's cigarette lighter. Without the alternator maintaining the charge in the battery, the battery slowly discharged from the running of the engine and its electronics. Eventually the engine would stall and the car could not be restarted. She found this out last week when visiting a friend after work and the engine stalled about three blocks away. Luckily for her, she was able to walk back to her friend's house and get help.

Inside her apartment, she turned on the 19-inch TV and then took off her rubber gloves and looked in the refrigerator for something to eat. The half-gallon of milk had only a sliver left and there was a half bowl of tuna fish that she made that morning for her sandwich at lunch. She took out the bowl and opened a loaf of bread and took out two of the three slices. She dropped them into the nearby toaster and pushed the lever down. A white hot flash of electricity as large as the bread slices jumped out of the toaster and the power went out.

"Oh, I'm so tired of this!" she said.

She looked around for her rubber gloves, slipped them on and headed towards the laundry closet. She opened the white folding shutter doors and then opened the battleship gray door of the main circuit breaker box. She immediately put her finger on the third switch from the top and flipped it back and forth. The lights in the kitchen came back on. She went back to the toaster and took out the bread slices – they were black from the electrical backfire. She took out a plate, put the blackened bread on it and made her tuna fish sandwich. The remaining slice of bread would be her lunch the next day. She noticed one of the checks that her granddaughter, Nancy, had sent her was on the counter and that reminded her that she had to get to the bank soon. She deposited the monthly checks in a joint account with her granddaughter, but refused to use the money, asserting her independence that she maintained throughout

her life. She didn't need much to get along anyway. She took her sandwich, and a small glass of milk, and sat down on her couch. She flipped through the channels and every channel had a news anchor reporting a state of emergency and that National Guardsmen were swarming into every city, and that there would be a 10 pm curfew, and that power was out in select cities from Boston to Richmond, and that aircraft were randomly exploding at every major airport on the East coast. Hildy settled on one channel and watched the news with her eyes slowly closing. The anchor kept repeating what she already heard and soon she could not comprehend what the anchor was saying.

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Friedheld pressed the round request button on the wall next to the security elevators and listened closely for the low hum of the elevator motors. The silvered doors opened a few seconds later and he quickly moved forward struggling to maneuver the door into the elevator.

"It won't fit," Motega said. "We'll have to take him off and carry him in."

"You're right," he said.

They backed out and slowly lowered the door onto the floor. John Bastille was still in shock and moaned slightly as the door was lowered. Motega grabbed him under the arms and pulled him towards the elevator; Friedheld and Braggloisi got on each side and helped Motega drag the limp Bastille into the elevator. Friedheld pushed the street level button, the doors closed, and the elevator slowly started to rise.

"I thought we would be safe down there," Braggloisi said.

"We should have been. Someone has a lot of explaining to do," Friedheld said. "At least now we can get John some help. I hope this elevator doesn't turn out like our war room."

There was a low short electronic sound followed by three long tones and two short tones. Friedheld reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a tiny Bluetooth headset. He pressed the device into his left ear.

“Hello, Mr. President,” he said. “I’m sure glad to hear from you.”

Friedheld nodded several times as he listened to the president. Braggloisi watched him intensely.

“I understand. I lost three of my team and I’m not able to contact two others. Oh no. I think you should tell my team yourself. I’m going to put you on speaker phone.”

Friedheld pressed the button on the headset three times and the call was transferred to the speaker in the ceiling of the elevator.

“Hello everyone. I want to be upfront and honest about all of this. We’re screwed unless you can stop this. A group called ICER is claiming responsibility for the blackouts and the pulse weapons. We’ve lost over a hundred commercial jets at various airports and luckily no one was killed or seriously injured. They want three billion dollars and here’s the weird part, they want us to award a certain company a government contract for 99 years to build all of the military’s commercial aircraft out of carbon fiber alloys. They said the company is not involved in any of this and that this is a donation to them. It’s ludicrous.”

“What are you going to do? Braggloisi said.

“Nothing yet. We have to get the Internet back. It’s so slow now sending mail by the post office is faster,” the president said.

“That’s because of our program,” Motege added. “We have the chip on the run and it’s using its botnet to keep our program at bay. One of the pluses is that CERT is able to identify each computer that it’s controlling and eventually disable it. It will run out of zombies sooner or later and then our program will get it.”

“I hope so,” the president said. “The data recovery firms are inundated with calls from businesses in every sector asking for help. Wall Street has closed early and many major banks had to stop all transactions because they lost connectivity. There are major gasoline and diesel shortages because of the high demand from generators and looters are running rampant in the blackout areas. This is worse than nine eleven and Hurricane Katrina put together. I desperately need you to stop this now!”

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Hildy opened her eyes and quickly looked from one side of the room to the other. She could barely see her furnishings in the darkness. She stood slowly and felt her way to the laundry closet occasionally bumping into an end table. She opened the circuit breaker door and ran her hand up and down the rows of switches feeling them to determine their position. They were all in the “on” position. She carefully worked her way to the front window and raised the white plastic shade. She looked up the narrow street in both directions. None of the apartment windows were lit. A small group of her neighbors stood in the parking lot talking. One man held a gas lantern and soon others joined and the group grew into a small crowd. Her breathing became rapid and shallow, and she grabbed the gold candlestick lamp for balance and lowered herself into the nearby rocking chair that belonged to her mother. She continued watching the crowd outside and saw her neighbor, Henry join the group. She screamed when she saw the bulb in the candlestick lamp glow dimly. She jerked her hand away and the bulb went out. She stared at the lamp in disbelief. Slowly she reached for it and closed her hand around the narrow neck. The bulb came to life. She took her hand away and the bulb went off. She touched it again and the bulb came on.

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The elevator suddenly jerked to a stop and everyone nearly lost their balance and fell.

“Oh no!” Braggloisi said.

“What’s going on?” Motega shouted.

“I don’t know,” Friedheld said.

A low hum came from the ceiling followed by a random crackling sound and the inside of the elevator grew warmer.

“We’re going to die! I know it!” Braggloisi screamed and wrapped her arms around Motega squeezing the air of him.

“Jeanine, please! Calm down!” he yelled struggling to get out of her death grip.

Friedheld reached up to the mirrored ceiling and was about to push the trap door tile when he saw a glint of blue pulsing light.

“Everyone on the floor!” he screamed and pushed Braggloisi down by her shoulders. There was barely enough room for everyone to squat with John lying diagonally from corner to corner.

“Oh, god! I don’t want to die! I don’t want to die!” Braggloisi screamed.

Motega leaned against the metal wall and then jerked his elbow away.

“Wow! That wall is hot!”

“It came down the elevator shaft,” Friedheld said. “Must have figured out how to track my calls with the President.”

“Why aren’t we dead?” Motega said.

“I don’t know. The elevator is all metal; one of the RF jammers could still be working. Something is blocking it. But, we’re not out of this yet. Phew, is it getting hot in here.”

The elevator started to slowly rise, as did the temperature inside the tiny metal box. Friedheld stood up, quickly opened a panel above the emergency phone and pushed several buttons on a small keypad. The elevator stopped and then slowly started descending.

The heat seemed to subside a bit and seconds later, the elevator moved upward again. The temperature went up and the crackling increased along with the low constant hum of the plasma pulse.

“Stop the elevator! Stop it!” Braggloisi screamed.

Friedheld’s fingers danced on the buttons in the panel; each time he input a new override code something canceled his efforts. Sweat poured down his forehead and he had to keep wiping it away from his eyes. Three tones from his Bluetooth headset went off and he instantly knew who was calling. He ignored the call and kept pressing the buttons with both hands now. After five rings, the phone automatically connected to his surprise.

“Harald!” the President said.

“Don’t call now! Hang up! Hang up!” he screamed and pulled the headset from his ear and threw it down.

The elevator increased its ascent. Braggloisi passed out from the heat and fell alongside of John. Motega wobbled struggling to stay away from the searing walls.

Friedheld frantically pushed more codes into the keypad and then slowly slumped into a ball in the corner of the elevator and passed out.

When the elevator doors opened to the garage level, several firefighters ran towards it.

“Are we glad to see you,” Motega said and fell onto Bastille.

“What the hell are you doing in the building for crying out loud!” the firefighter with “Chief” on his front of his helmet said. “We’ve had orders to clear the building hours ago.”

The chief picked up a microphone attached to his shoulder and requested a medical team. Within minutes four EMTs showed up with a stretcher and several red equipment bags. They slowly and carefully placed Bastille on the stretcher and slid it out of the elevator. Another EMT placed an oxygen mask on Braggloisi’s face and the other helped Friedheld and Motega out. Motega

handed Friedheld the Bluetooth headset and Friedheld placed it back in his left ear. Two other EMTs appeared with another stretcher for Braggloisi.

“We were trapped in the basement!” Friedheld said.

“Are there others?” the chief asked.

“No. Everyone is out who is alive,” Friedheld said looking down. “There are two down there.”

Friedheld’s Bluetooth headset went off again.

“Hello, Mr. President,” Friedheld said.

He looked down and frowned, and then he walked away from the group. The firefighters and EMTs hurried the group up the ramp to Hillsborough Street and Friedheld walked behind them.

“You’ll have to move along, sir. We don’t know if the building is stable enough,” said one of the firefighters.

When the group reached the street, the firefighters quickly escorted them past the large shards of the building’s convex façade that had fallen to the street. They were ushered past the police barricades that surrounded the building and taken to an ambulance nearby. When the EMT closed the back doors, Friedheld moved forward and motioned the group to get closer. Braggloisi opened her eyes and sat up.

“Things have turned from bad to worse. The president said the terrorists plan to send a pulse to poor sections of the city unless their demands are met within the next hour. He and his staff are going to the East Wing shelter for protection. Chip, do you think the program will stop it by then?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know the size of its botnet. It could happen in the next minute or it may take days. I don’t think this chip is going to give up very easily. “

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Hildy rushed out of her apartment and headed towards the small crowd in the parking lot. She immediately approached Henry and hugged him.

"I'm so scared Henry. We have no electricity and the National Guard has been called out. What is happening?" she said looking up at Henry's large round brown eyes.

He hesitated, but then felt the fear flow out of her eyes, and he put his large arms around the small, thin woman he had befriended, and who he enjoyed helping occasionally.

"I don't know Hildy. Sure looks like we're in for something," he said staring down at the woman's blonde-gray hair tied into a small bun on the top of her head.

"Look at that!" someone shouted from the crowd.

A blue wave of light that extended the entire length of the western horizon moved towards them at an increasing rate. The wave looked like a weather front moving extremely fast with undulating illumination from within. Another blue wave instantly appeared on the northern horizon and then another started from the east. Within seconds, the plasma waves coalesced into massive illuminated blue clouds covering the entire sky.

"Hildy you best get inside," Henry said. "We should all get inside! Come on!"

Henry grabbed Hildy's hand and they ran towards her apartment. The crowd dispersed in all directions and then a flash of intense, blinding, white light caused an Artic-like whiteout. Hildy looked at Henry and saw him grab his stomach and fall as if his legs were suddenly taken away. She watched his black skin bubble, split, and ooze blood and raw flesh. His eyes grew larger and larger until they burst leaving black, bloody holes. She grabbed his hand and tried to pull him towards her apartment, but his hand began to burn and she immediately let go. She watched Henry's face fill with agony as all of its emotion drained away into a bloody,



smoking mask of horror. Her legs collapsed and she felt herself falling, but couldn't put her hands out to break her fall. She landed on her side, her head slamming against the hard pavement. Her arms, legs, and torso jerked uncontrollably in an epileptic seizure, except she was aware of it all.

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The ambulance carrying the Synertron group pulled up to the emergency entrance to Wake Medical Center and the EMTs pulled Bastille's stretcher out. It instantly disappeared into the bowels of the medical center amid the sea of nurses, doctors and EMTs. The others were led into curtained exam rooms, examined, and led to the waiting area.

"What do we do now?" Braggloisi asked.

"We wait," Friedheld said.

Braggloisi settled into one of the beige lounge chairs and picked up a fashion magazine. Motega stared at the screen of his PDA.

"Aren't you afraid you'll get zapped by using that?" she asked him looking up from an article on how to land the man of your dreams.

"Nope. I'm using the same technology as the neural bracelets so, hopefully, the chip can't locate me."

"But, maybe it can," she said. "Aren't you worried?"

"I don't give a shit. Right now all I want is to get these sons of bitches."

Friedheld went into one of the soundproof cell phone booths on the other side of the waiting area. Braggloisi and Motega could see his head moving in various positions as he spoke. Occasionally, his hands would fly into the air in a gesture of disapproval. Friedheld came out and sat next to Motega. A few minutes later a dark blue SUV with blackened windows pulled up to the entrance and Friedheld stood up.

"Let's go," he said.

The group followed and got into the truck. Friedheld briefly spoke with the man in the front passenger seat.

“Who are these guys?” Braggloisi whispered to Motega. “They don’t look very friendly.”

“They’re not.”

Where are we going?” she asked.

“My house. We’ll be safe there for now and we can access the Synertron systems from there,” Friedheld said. “My house is one of the back up portals. Data is backed up every hour from the main building.”

Friedheld’s cell phone rang. It was the familiar sequence of rings and tones that labeled a specific caller. He pressed the call button on his Bluetooth earpiece.

“Good work, Harald. Whatever you did it worked.”

Friedheld looked puzzled.

“Wait. Let me put you on speakerphone so the rest of the group can hear. I have Jeannine and Chip with me,” Friedheld said.

He pushed the call button three times and the call was transferred to the SUV’s stereo system.

“Go ahead, Mr. President.”

Hello everyone. We have good and bad news. They sent a pulse over the Temple Hills section of the city, and eight of the weapons were destroyed. It hit a low-income apartment complex and more than a thousand people were killed. I’m saddened by that...but one survived.”

“Did you say one survived?” Motega said.

“Yes, a middle-aged woman. She was pretty hysterical when they found her, but she is stable now.”

“She couldn’t have survived,” Motega said. “Nothing living can survive a direct hit. She must have wandered into the area after the hit.”

“She was found right outside of her apartment lying next to a few of the bodies or what was left of them.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. President, I don’t want to sound disrespectful, but no one can survive a hit from these weapons. She must have been inside out of range and came out afterward,” Motega said.

“Well, we found severe burns on her wrist from her watch and on her neck from a chain, and she kept asking for her rubber gloves.”

Friedheld and Motega looked at each other.

“Mr. President. You have to get this woman to us immediately,” Motega said. “We don’t know how, but we think she may have helped to destroy the cell tower weapons.”

## Chapter 51

**Friday, May 30, 2008 – 3 pm**

“You know, I hate the woods,” Stakhower said as he and Dan struggled to make their way through the densely wooded area to the farmer’s cell tower. “Spider webs in your face, sticker bushes grabbing at your legs, bugs!”

“You’re like an old lady...always complaining about something,” Dan said jokingly. “Didn’t your father teach you anything?”

“I didn’t have a father,” Stakhower said.

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“Died of lung cancer when I was a baby. Smoked three packs of cigarettes a day.”

“Did your mother remarry?”

“No. She said she could never love another man like she did my father.”

“Any brothers or sisters?”

“No, just me.”

“Where are you from? You don’t have a Southern accent.”

“New Jersey.”

“I thought so.”

Dan stopped at the edge of a well-worn dirt road that cut through the thick woods. The water tower was straight ahead.

“Come on. This is the access road to the tower.”

“What if someone comes up the road?” Stakhower asked.

“Then we jump into the woods and lie low. Shit! Someone *is* coming up the road. Over here!” Dan yelled and dragged Stakhower by the arm.

They ran through a thick field of thorny bushes and immersed with small red lines of blood drawn haphazardly over their arms and hands.

“Now you see why I hate the woods!” Gary said rubbing the cuts. “Damn!”

“Just keep running,” Dan said out of breath.

They approached a cluster of towering pines and dropped down on the soft bed of pine needles under the trees.

A black SUV with blackened windows slowly moved up the road towards the tower.

“They could be CIA,” Dan said as he watched the vehicle bump and move by.

“Then they could help us,” Stakhower said.

“Or kill us. Stay put. I’ve had enough trouble with the CIA to last a lifetime.”

They waited several minutes and walked to the road.

“Where’s the SUV?” Stakhower said.

Dan looked around.

“I don’t know, but we don’t have time to baby-sit them. Let’s go.”

They walked to the other side of the tower where the equipment shed was located. The shed was surrounded by a chain-link fence topped with curled barbed wire.

“Gee. What do they have in there, gold?” Stakhower said looking up at the barbed wire. “You would think there is something valuable in there.”

“Think about it. There is something valuable in there – communications. What if vandals got in there and destroyed the equipment? This area would have no cell phone coverage and what if you were in a car accident nearby and needed to call nine eleven? You wouldn’t have a signal.”

“I guess.”

They entered the tiny building and Dan took out two chassis’ and several vacuum tubes from his backpack and spread them on the floor.

“Take the tubes out of the boxes and plug them into the sockets. Don’t force them; they only go in one way. I’ve got to find the transmission rack.”

Gary sat on the floor, opened one of the boxes, and stared at the small glass vacuum tube with a dull gray metal cylinder inside.

“So this is a vacuum tube? I’ve never seen one before. What’s inside?”

“The electrodes, an anode, a cathode.”

“Never mind,” Gary said. “Sounds like weapons from my game.”

“The tubes will generate an oscillating frequency that will capture the pulse weapon frequency. Once we know the frequency, then the weapon will be destroyed.”

“Along with the cell phone tower, right?”

“Yeah, unfortunately, but it’s better than destroying all the towers. This way we get only the towers with weapons,” Dan explained.

Gary looked up through the partially opened door and spotted the black SUV coming towards the shed.

“They’re coming back. Let’s get out of here!” Stakhower yelled and stood up.

“Who?”

“The SUV!”

“Shit! Get all the tubes in! Hurry up!”

Stakhower quickly pressed all the tubes into the sockets and picked up the device. Dan looked around frantically.

“Damn. Do you see an outlet anywhere?”

“Over here there’s one,” Stakhower said and peered out the door again.

“They’re getting closer!”

“Just plug it in.”

Stakhower put the device down and quickly pulled the wire towards the outlet.

“It won’t reach!” Stakhower yelled. “We’ve got to get out of here!”

“Sonofabitch!” Dan yelled.

Dan slid the transmission server out of the rack and disconnected the Ethernet cable from the back. He snaked the cable through the back of the rack on the side closest to the outlet and plugged the cable back into the large circuit board.

“Try it now,” Dan said.

Stakhower pulled the power cord towards the outlet and plugged it in. The tubes did not light.

“Did you turn it on?” Stakhower said.

“There’s no switch. It just goes on. Press down on the tubes. Maybe one is not in all the way.”

Gary pressed on the tubes and suddenly they lit slowly with their unique bright orange glow. Dan gently slid it behind the server rack. He took Jake’s PDA out of a zippered pocket on his camouflage pants, punched in a series of numbers, and waited for the signal indicator to appear on the screen showing that the tube

device was working properly. When the indicator appeared, he slipped the PDA back into the watertight pocket in his pants.

“Let’s get out of here!” Dan yelled.

Dan peered out the door and spotted the SUV coming towards them from the right. A few trees stood between the SUV and the tower blocking the SUV’s line of sight.

“Let’s go!” Dan said.

He ran out towards the right and Stakhower ran left towards the open gate. Dan quickly grabbed Stakhower’s shirt and pulled him towards him.

“They’ll see you! This way!” Dan shouted.

“But we have to get out! We can’t climb the fence with that barbed wire.”

“We’ll hide behind the shed until they leave.”

“Suppose they look back there. We’d be sitting ducks. I’d never put myself in a situation like that in my game. There must be another way.”

“We’re not playing a game. This is reality! It’s our only option! Now, come on!” Dan yelled.

They ran to the back of the shed and waited. Stakhower noticed a makeshift ladder made of two by four pieces of weathered wood nailed to the support beams of the water tower.

“Look. There’s a ladder to the top of the tower. We can hide on the roof. They would never spot us there. I’m going.”

“No! Damn!”

Stakhower started to climb the four stories to the top; Dan reluctantly followed. Within a few seconds, Stakhower slowed his climb.

“Hurry up!” Dan yelled. “We need to get to the top before they get here!”

“I’m going as fast as I can and the trees should hide us from view.”



Stakhower climbed faster and Dan mimicked his movements.

“Crack!”

One of the steps collapsed and Stakhower’s foot slammed onto Dan’s hand. Dan instinctively pulled his hand away nearly losing his grip.

“Oh, god! My hand!” Dan yelled.

Dan slowly worked his fingers despite the pain.

“Oh, shit! I got splinters in my hands!” Stakhower yelled.

“Quit complaining and keep going!” Dan said. “I hope my hand is not broken.”

They reached the top and slid onto the roof lying side by side.

“I’ve never seen a water tower with a shingled roof. Aren’t they usually made of metal?” Stakhower said.

“I don’t know. This one could be really old. Let’s hope they don’t stay long.”

“Yeah.”

Stakhower lifted his body up slightly and crawled closer to the peak.

“Crack! Crack! Crack!”

Dan watched the shingles break away and Stakhower vanish into the dark belly of the tank.

“Gary! Gary, are you all right? Gary!”

“Help! I can’t swim! Help!”

“Kick your feet!”

Dan quickly took off his belt, wound it several times around his wrist and lowered it down to Stakhower.

“Grab my belt! I’ll hold you up!”

“I’m trying. I can’t reach it!”

Dan leaned over the hole and lowered his arm farther into the water tank.

“Try now.”

“Got it!”

“I can barely see you. Hang on. Phew! The water stinks! It must have been here since they built the tower.”

“Just get me out!”

“I will. I will.”

“Craaaaaaaaaaaaaaack!”

Dan felt the brackish water swallow his body as he fell head first into the morass. He quickly surfaced next to Stakhower, who was grabbing for him.

“Go behind me and hold on to my shoulders! You’re going to drown us both!” Dan sputtered.

Dan felt thick slime pass between his fingers and around his arms as he treaded to keep from sinking.

“I’m going to throw up,” Dan said and turned his head and vomited.

“How are we going to get out?” Stakhower said.

“I don’t know which is worse, the vomit or this water,” he said pushing the vomit away. “Maybe, I can hook my belt on the roof somehow and pull myself up to the edge of the tank.”

“Okay. Try it!”

Dan bunched up the belt in his hand, raised his arm out of the water and threw the belt up. The belt buckle hit the jagged wood and came back down. He did it again and the belt just fell back into the foul water. He tried again.

“Got it!” Dan said.

The buckle wedged between two supports in the roof.

“Now, if it will only hold me. Gary, try treading water. Kick your feet as if you were running in the water and move your arms sideways through the water like this. You should stay up.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes! Didn’t you ever take swimming lessons?”

“No.”

Dan shook his head and then slowly pulled himself up; the buckle began to slide through the pieces of wood. When he reached for the edge of the tank only a few inches away, the buckle slipped out of the crevice and Dan plunged back into the rancid water.

“Almost had it,” Dan said.

He bunched up the belt again and threw it upward.

“Why is the water suddenly getting warm?” Stakhower said.

A flash of blue light instantly lit up the inside of the tank and a thundering boom numbed their hearing.

“Oh, shit!” Dan yelled.

“The water’s getting warmer. It’s getting hotter! HELP!” Stakhower screamed.

The tank shuddered and then tilted to the right its wooden support beams screaming as the wood twisted and cracked under the unbalanced weight. The shifting water tossed the two men around as if they were caught in a wild wave at the beach. The tank abruptly stopped and a tree trunk suddenly burst into the middle of the tank. The foul water poured out pulling Dan and Stakhower with it. Dan grabbed onto one of the smaller tree limbs and caught Stakhower’s arm. The tank filled with smoke and Dan immediately kicked the side of the tank where the tree had come through to widen the space between the tree and the tank wall. The wood would not break and more smoke entered the tank. Their eyes burned and they had difficulty breathing.

“Kick the side of the tank!” Dan yelled.

Stakhower raised his leg, but it never struck the wall as he began to cough uncontrollably from the smoke. Dan’s kicks were weakening and his eyes and throat burned. He stopped kicking and stared at the tank wall in a smoke-induced daze. The roof exploded from the tank’s weight against the tree and splinters of wood

rained down on them. The wall bent inward, broke off and fell away.

“This way!” Dan yelled.

He reached around the tree trunk and pulled Stakhower around towards him. They squeezed out of the tank hugging the tree like Koala bears. The cool, fresh air seemed to wash over them like a waterfall. Dan’s dizziness went away and Stakhower stopped coughing. Dan descended placing his feet carefully on each branch making sure he had a secure footing. Stakhower could not move as he stared at the ground some 80 feet below.

“Come on!” Dan yelled. “We have to get down!”

“Can’t move,” Stakhower whimpered.

“Don’t look down and pretend you’re on a step ladder.”

“How can I not look down? I have to see the branches.”

Dan climbed up so he was right under Stakhower’s feet.

“Just look out and pretend you’re on that stepladder. I’ll guide your feet onto the branches.”

Dan took his left foot and placed it on a lower branch.

Slowly, Stakhower placed his weight on his foot.

“Okay?”

“Yeah.”

Dan looked down and saw that the fire had spread from the tower to the tree. A large flame snuck out from under the tank and licked the side in an act of defiance.

“We’re going to have move or we’re going to be cooked,” Dan said.

“Oh, god!” Stakhower screamed.

“You can do this, Gary!”

They moved slowly. Dan directed Stakhower’s feet, but Stakhower was stiff with fear and reluctant to move. The fire had completely swallowed the tank and small smoking pieces of wood fell past them.

“Crack!”

A large piece of the flaming tank broke off and soared past Stakhower missing him by inches. The flames singed his hair and eyebrows. It hit the ground scattering bits of smoking wood in every direction and starting small fires on the forest floor.

“The tower’s going to collapse and take us with it!” Dan screamed.

Stakhower looked up at the fireball just above him and quickened his pace.

“Hey, watch my hands!” Dan yelled as Stakhower stepped on one of them.

“Go!” he said.

The two moved down the tree quickly and jumped to the ground from the last branch. Seconds later the flaming tower crashed down spewing pieces of smoking wood in all directions.

“We made it just in time,” Dan said.

“What about the guys in the SUV?” Stakhower yelled.

“We don’t have to worry about them anymore,” Dan said.

They stopped at the end of the access road where it meets Norwood Road and Dan called Friedheld on the neural bracelet.

“Dan! Dan! I thought the worse. Is Gary with you?”

“Right here, Harald,” he whispered.

“Wonderful! I’m glad you are both ok. Where are you?”

“On Norwood Road by the access road to the Inviscom tower or what’s left of it,” Dan whispered.

“Okay,” Friedheld said. “I’ll have the security team pick you up and bring you here.”

Dan tapped the bracelet to end the call. Stakhower sat down in a small clearing near the road and looked up at Dan.

“I’m exhausted,” Dan said and sat down next to him.

“I can’t believe we’re still alive. We could have died in that tank,” Stakhower said, tears rolling down his face. “This is real.

You can really die. People are really trying to kill us. This is no game. You can't just turn it off and walk away."

"I wish I could sometimes," Dan said. "I wish I could."

Stakhower put his hands up to his face and cried uncontrollably.

## **Chapter 52**

**Friday, May 30, 2008 – 5 pm**

The SUV pulled into a short narrow concrete driveway. The small gray stone cottage in the Glenwood-Brooklyn Historic District of downtown Raleigh had two large oaks on each side spilling its expansive branches over the roofs of the houses next to it. The grass in the small front yard was neatly manicured and a single row of colorful impatiens ran along the front on each side of the door.

“You live here?” Braggloisi said as she released her seat belt.

“It’s so small. I thought you lived in a mansion in Wake Forest,” Motega said opening the SUV door.

“It might as well be a mansion – it cost as much, but we love the historical district. The house has been here since they founded Raleigh in the seventeen nineties, and it’s all the space Cate and I need,” Friedheld explained.

The trio walked through the front door into a small room with a large stone fireplace on the right. The room was decorated with simple country style furniture and farm antiques.

“We always thought we would own a farm one day, but that’s not going to happen now,” Friedheld said. “This house is plenty to take care of.”

They walked towards the back of the house through the tiny kitchen and through a short narrow hallway that opened to a larger windowless room with a desk at every wall.

“This is my office away from the office. The computers are connected to various systems at Synertron. We added this room shortly after I joined the company.”

“There are no windows,” Braggloisi said.

“Because the room is underground.”

“How’s that?” Motega asked. “It’s on the same level as the house.”

“There’s a large hill in the back and this room was built into the hill and buried. When you close that door, the room is safe from hurricanes, blackouts and EMPs.”

“The air...it smells fresh and clean like a spring day,” Motega said inhaling deeply.

“The room has a self-sufficient, independent ventilation system and carbon dioxide scrubbers.”

“It’s a panic room?” Motega asked.

“You could say that,” Friedheld added.

“Is your wife home?” Braggloisi asked.

“No. I sent her to her sister’s in Texas; she’ll be safer there. Let’s go back to the living room. I ordered some food for us. You are all probably starving.”

The trio went into the living room and Friedheld brought in sub sandwiches from the kitchen and bottles of water. They ate quickly. No one said anything. Friedheld’s watch vibrated and a tiny icon of an envelope appeared on the small display below the face. He pressed one of the side buttons on the watch and a text message slowly streamed across the display.



“Excuse me,” he said.

He stood up and peered through the tiny hole in the front door and then opened the door. Four men stood on the tiny brick porch.

“Dan and Gary! I am so glad you are all right.”

Friedheld ushered them into the living room. The two security officers went back to the SUV.

“Yuk! You guys stink! Where have you been in a toilet?” Braggloisi said and put her sub down on the small wooden coffee table.

Stakhower was about to say something, but Friedheld raised his hand.

“Maybe you guys should shower first,” Friedheld said. “Whatever you got into doesn’t smell good. Dan, you can use the bathroom down here. Gary, the one upstairs. You’ll find everything you need. I have some clothes I think you’ll fit into.”

When the two rejoined the group, Dan wore a red flannel plaid shirt with baggy blue jeans and Stakhower wore a brown flannel shirt with rolled up black work pants.

“Sorry, for the clothing, but those are all I had for now. I’ll have the security team get you some new clothes in the morning.”

“Thanks,” Dan said.

Stakhower nodded.

“Sit down. I have subs for you,” Friedheld said.

Dan sat in a small rocker in the corner of the room and Stakhower sat next to Braggloisi on the loveseat.

“You smell a lot nicer,” she said to Stakhower.

He smiled at her and then picked up a turkey sub off the small coffee table. She watched him eat as if she saw him for the first time.

“So what happened?” Friedheld said frowning. “Did you get your devices in place?”

“Yes and no,” Dan said. “We got the last one installed and several guys in an SUV approached so we hid on top of this water tower. Except the roof collapsed and we both landed inside the tank with this disgusting, fouled water that must have been in there for years. They must have sent a pulse to the tower because there was a bright blue flash, a sonic boom and the water got hot very quickly. I think the water saved us from the pulse or we would have been cooked like the guys in the SUV. It acted like an insulator.”

“Oh, it was hot even if it didn’t boil,” Stakhower interrupted. “I thought we were going to die!”

“Then the tower caught on fire and slammed into a giant oak tree next to it,” Dan explained. “That split the tank open and we were able to grab onto the tree and get down.”

“You are so lucky,” Motega said. “You could have been killed several times over.”

“I never thought we’d get out alive,” Stakhower said.

“So where are we with your devices?” Friedheld asked.

“Two are in place and we need a third to set the triangulation in place with the satellite network,” Dan said.

“What are you talking about?” Motega said. “Did I miss something here?”

“I must have missed it, too,” Friedheld said.

“I didn’t want to reveal the plan over the air. So I’ll tell you now. I’ve designed the devices to send the anti-pulse signal to my house. Another vacuum tube device will transmit the signal to the Iridium satellite network. As each tower fires a pulse, the satellite network will locate the tower and send the anti-pulse destroying the weapon,” Dan explained.

“So why do you need your devices in three cell sites. Why not just transmit the signal from your house?” Motega said.

“Because each pulse weapon uses a different, randomly-generated frequency each time it transmits a pulse. That’s why the suits failed and Takara died. The suits were not immune from all frequencies and one or two got through and killed her,” Dan said. “That’s why the radio jammers at the Synertron building failed because it couldn’t jam them all. The three devices will capture the frequencies of any pulse weapon when it is fired and transmit it to my house and on to the satellite network. I wanted three devices so that two can confirm the frequency and one is a backup for the other two. The chip is sentient and I wouldn’t be surprised if it sends a dummy frequency to thwart our efforts.”

“But, won’t they have to fire the weapons from the towers with your device,” Motega said.

“No. That’s the beauty of the system. We’re using the cell phone network, and it’s global. When you place a call to a cell phone, a unique signal goes to every cell phone tower in the network looking for your cell phone. When the tower nearest your phone identifies you, the tower connects and the call goes through,” Dan explained. “The same happens with the pulse weapons. The chip generates a random frequency and sends it through the entire cell phone network with an identifier for the pulse weapon it wants to fire. So even if they fired a weapon in Arizona, my devices will capture the unique frequency, transmit it to the sat network and the satellite nearest the weapon in Arizona will destroy the weapon. In essence, we are using the cell phone network against them.”

“How do the satellites work?” Friedheld said.

“The Iridium system consists of sixty six low earth orbiting satellites that circle the earth every one hundred minutes providing continuous coverage to every spot on the earth for voice and data. Each satellite is linked to four others so that it can bounce a phone call to the satellite that is closest to the sat phone. It will bounce

the signal from satellite to satellite until the one closest to the pulse weapon is found. The anti-pulse causes the weapon to backfire. The energy has no where to go.”

“How do you know all this stuff? My head is spinning,” Braggloisi said. “You’re like a walking encyclopedia.”

“I worked on the Iridium project for Motorola. That’s where I got the idea. I remembered the network was still in place after the phones failed to sell, and I still had my files on the project. The network is used today by a lot of different industries, the military, and emergency disaster organizations who need instant worldwide communications.”

“Do you know it will work?” Friedheld said.

“No, but it’s all we got right now. I think they had to light several pulse weapons to destroy the planes at the airports. If they do it again, my devices could take out ten or twenty of the weapons, maybe more depending how many are lit.”

“Okay, so what about the last device?” Friedheld said.

“I have one left and there’s a tower about three miles from here towards downtown,” Dan said.

“I’ll call the security team and they can take you. This way you’ll stay out of trouble,” Friedheld said smiling.

“I have two problems. I don’t have the uplink frequencies to the satellites or the encryption keys.”

“I’ll call the president.”

## Chapter 53

**Friday, May 30, 2008 – 7 pm**

“She’s not coming,” the president said. “I’ve decided to keep her here on the doctors’ recommendations; she’s too unstable and can’t make the trip.”

“What?” Friedheld said.

“I’ve told them they could have the equivalent of a portable hospital with her, but they think it’s too risky.”

“Really?” Friedheld said. “She could be our secret weapon. We won’t know unless we can perform some tests on her. What does her family say?”

“She has no family except for a granddaughter who is with her now.”

“Oh.”

“Can you run the tests remotely from down there?” the president said.

“Hmmm. That may be a possibility. I’ll talk to the team and see if they have any ideas. Miss Hildy G may make history after all.”

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“I don’t know how we can run any tests if she’s in Washington and we’re in Raleigh,” Motega announced to the group.

“What if we don’t do any tests,” Braggloisi said. “Just do whatever you’re going to do without them.”

“That’s a good point,” Friedheld said. “What *are* we going to do?”

“We think she may have extraordinary brain waves at a frequency that appears to disrupt the pulse weapons. We won’t know for sure until we connect her to an EEG and capture the frequencies.”

“Then what do we do?” Braggloisi said.

“Send them up to the satellites!” Stakhower said. “I did something similar when I needed to destroy all the anti-ship weapons on a planet I was trying to take over.”

Braggloisi shook her head and rolled her eyes.

“Great idea, Gary,” Friedheld said. “But, we don’t know for sure until we do the EEG. We’ll ask Dan. He should be here any minute now.”

Friedheld’s watch vibrated and the familiar tiny blue envelope appeared on his watch. He walked to the front door, peered out of the peephole, and opened it.

“It’s all set now. If they fire a pulse anywhere, the devices will send the frequency to the satellites and the weapons will be cooked,” Dan said as he entered.

“Good. We have another small problem. The doctors at Walter Reed won’t release Hildy Grummenweurkes so she won’t be coming here. We have to run our tests remotely from here. Chip thinks her brain waves have disrupted the pulse weapons and Gary thinks we should send the frequencies to the satellite network,” Friedheld explained. “What do you think?”

Dan thought about the question as he followed Friedheld to the back office. When they entered, Braggloisi, Motega, and Stakhower were seated at the computers.

“It’s impossible. The pulse weapons operate on an ultra wide band frequency in the range of two point four gigahertz to ten gigahertz. Brain waves are three to forty Hertz. Even if you knew nothing about frequencies, you can see from the numbers that brain waves and the pulse weapons are on opposite ends of the spectrum. It’s like comparing the speed of a bicycle to that of a jet,” Dan explained.

“Then how is it that she survived the pulse weapon and everyone around her died. She even has burn marks from the metal jewelry she wore, just like Takara did,” Friedheld said.

Braggloisi looked up from the computer screen.

“She’s probably a SLider,” she said and pushed her black curly hair away from her face.

“A what?” Dan said.

“Wasn’t that a TV show about four young people who ‘slid’ to parallel worlds through a worm hole?” Friedheld said

The group looked at him with questions on their faces and Friedheld realized the group was too young to remember the show.

“Never mind. I must have been thinking of something else.”

“SLiders are people who believe that every time they pass a street light, it goes on or off. SLI stands for street light interference and most of us have experienced this, but these people claim it happens to them on a regular basis,” Braggloisi explained. “They also have trouble with electrical devices – they can’t wear battery-powered watches because the batteries go dead quickly; they touch credit cards and they become inactive; they turn lights on and the bulbs blow every time; they crash computers all the time and they often wear rubber gloves to overcome their problem.”

“You think Hildy G may be a SLider?” Motege asked.

“She seems to fit the profile, but there is no scientific proof of the phenomenon, only personal stories and anecdotal evidence.

There is no way to test her to see if she's a SLIder. We'll have to talk to her."

"So it seems these people produce additional electricity like an electric eel," Friedheld said.

"I don't believe it. Maybe, these people harness more static electricity than the rest of us and that's what screws up the electronics," said Motega.

"There's something else going on here," Dan said. "If she did repel a pulse then I think we need to figure out a way to channel her electrical essence to the weapons. We all know no one can survive a hit from the pulses and she did so she may have been responsible for destroying several of the weapons."

The group was silent for several minutes and then Motega spoke.

"The neural bracelet – that's how we can get her energy to the weapons. We receive the transmission here and then send it to the sat network."

Friedheld's Bluetooth earpiece rang with the three tones identifying the president as the caller.

"Excuse me."

He pressed a small button on the headset.

"Hello, Harald. They're planning another attack on the entire city unless we give them the three billion dollars by midnight. We're doing our best to evacuate, but we can't even get the word out because we have no power. There are over a half million people in Washington; I can't even imagine what the death toll will be like. We don't even know how to protect people from this. Please tell me you can stop them, please!"

"We have two plans in place, but we are not sure they will work. We have a certain amount of confidence they will, but anything can happen. We are dealing with new technology here. I



also need to send one of my people to that woman you have and we need him there as soon as possible.”

“Have him at your airport in the next twenty minutes. I’ll send a fighter jet from Pope. He’ll be here in less than an hour.”

## **Chapter 54**

**Friday, May 30, 2008 – 9 pm**

“When do you think Gary will arrive in Washington?” said Braggloisi while watching Motega scan the search program for the chip controlling the pulse weapons and the power grid.

“Any minute now,” Friedheld said. “He’ll contact us when he gets there.”

“I hope he didn’t throw up in the cockpit. He was pretty nervous about flying in a jet,” she said. “Did you see the look on his face when you asked him to go? I thought he was going to cry,” Braggloisi said smiling.

“Seems to me he’s had his head in that game too long, and now he is getting a taste of reality, and it scares the hell out of him. He can’t just walk away from a difficult situation or turn off the computer,” Motega added. “I hope that third bracelet holds up. It was the first prototype we built.”

“He does know computers,” Friedheld said. “And he has a tenacity to stay with a problem until he can solve it. I’ve never seen such resolution.”

Motega began typing furiously on the keyboard and clicking the mouse rapidly.

“Bingo! I got the IP address of the computer with the chip!” Moteaga yelled.

“How?” Dan asked.

“I was able to knock out five of the botnets simultaneously and that allowed me to capture the IP address. Before that I could only get the first four numbers. I’m running a locator program on the address now. Here it comes...come on...just as I thought. The computer is using a node in Morrisville just north of RTP. Jeanine can you run your tracer program against the IP database to get the exact address?”

“Sure,” she said and hurried back to her computer.

Dan ran over to Braggloisi’s computer.

“Here it is,” said Braggloisi. “It’s an office park on Aviation Parkway. The address is...twenty one hundred.”

Dan stared at the satellite view of the office park memorizing the land features around and near the building. Braggloisi noticed.

“See something?” she asked.

“Oh. No. I was just thinking,” Dan said.

“Oh. I thought you were going to burn a hole in the monitor.”

“No, just thinking.”

“I’m really sorry about your wife and daughter. I can’t imagine what you are going through. I don’t know what I would do if I lost my parents right now.”

“Thanks, Jeanine. Sometimes I don’t know how I get through it. The thought of losing them forever...I just can’t deal with it. I never knew how deep my love was until now. It’s like you yearned for something all your life and then you finally get what you want. You are so grateful and you enjoy them immensely every day, and your desire for them increases, gets richer, more complete, and more whole. All your restlessness seems to vanish and you are finally at peace with the world because you have all that you need, all that you ever wanted. And then, it is all taken away in a split

second and you squirm inside desperately trying to think of where they are, are they alive, and how to get them back, but you have no information...nothing. And you squirm inside a little more and the pain just eats you away. I have to really try hard not to think about it."

"You are really brave, Dan," she said. "I hope I can meet someone like you someday."

Dan's eyes glassed over and he looked away. She reached over, squeezed his hand momentarily, and smiled.

"Thank you," he said seeing her for who she really is. "I have to go."

He left the room and ran into Friedheld in the small hallway to the kitchen

"Need something, Dan?"

"Bathroom."

Friedheld entered the office and went over to Braggloisi.

"Shouldn't we call the FBI or Homeland Security since we know the location of the chip?" Braggloisi asked.

"No. I asked the president to keep them out of our hair because I believe there are insiders involved," Friedheld said. "Otherwise, they would be on us like flies on..."

"You can say it," Braggloisi said.

"That's ok. You know what I mean."

"Damn!" Motega said.

"What's the matter?"

"We're at a stalemate."

"What?"

"It disappeared again...the chip. Our extraction program will never get it. We can't beat this damn chip. It's like the chip creates zombies on the fly and they slow down the Internet so that our program can't get near the chip. Then the chip disappears and reappears later at a different IP address blocked by more firewalls

and zombies. It's like hide and seek on the Internet. There are over one billion users on the Internet and about twenty five per cent of those have firewalls. That leaves the rest fair game for the chip. It just keeps recruiting new zombies. Our program couldn't stop it in several years."

"Then we should pull it," Friedheld said. "At least the Internet will get back up to speed."

"I thought for sure our program would get the chip," Motega said.

"Ironic isn't it. The Internet was originally designed so the military and the government could maintain communications in case of a nuclear hit and now we are the very people who disabled it when most of the communications around the country are not working."

"You want to stop the program?" Motega said looking at Friedheld with questions in his eyes.

Friedheld nodded. Motega typed a series of commands that would stop the search and destroy program. When he pressed the enter button, a brilliant, blinding white blue light flashed on the display and lit up the entire room as if a dozen camera flashes went off simultaneously.

"Oh my god! I can't see! I can't see!" Motega screamed.

"Keep your eyes closed! It should pass!" Friedheld yelled.

"What was that?" Braggloisi said and rushed over to Motega.

"He'll be all right. Give him a few minutes."

"Look the screen is cracked," Braggloisi said.

"Let's bring him into the living room where it's dark."

They led Motega into the small living room and placed him on the sofa across from the fireplace. Friedheld went into the kitchen and returned with an ice pack in a soft velvet bag.

"Here, put this over your eyes for a few minutes."

Braggloisi took the ice pack and placed it on Motega's eyes.

“What happened?” Braggloisi said.

“I will venture to say the chip figured out the path Motega’s commands took over the Internet and followed it back to the computer here and then sent a pulse to kill us,” Friedheld said. “Our firewalls and security protocols probably weakened it or we wouldn’t be standing here.”

“Then the chip must know where we are,” Motega said holding the ice pack over his eyes.

“Our location is untraceable,” Friedheld said. “We have several firewalls and parallel addresses so that even the best IP tracers come up with a null reading.”

Friedheld’s watch vibrated and he looked down at the face. A small blue envelope appeared on the small display indicating that a text message was sent to his phone. He walked over to the door and peered out of the peephole. Two security team members stood on the porch. He opened the door.

“Excuse us, sir, but Dan just took off with the SUV. He said he came out for some fresh air, and then we heard a noise in the back. When we returned, he was gone.”

## Chapter 55

**Friday, May 30, 2008 – 10:30 pm**

Stakhower shivered slightly and his legs wobbled as he climbed out of the cockpit of the F18 Hornet after it landed at the Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport. The front of his pants was wet.

“What did you think?” said Captain Kevin Yarsh of the 43d Airlift Wing of Pope Air Force Base, a tall, muscular man with beady, dark eyes and a round shaved head.

“Never again.”

“Consider yourself one of the lucky few. How many people get to ride in a fighter jet on a presidential order?” he said.

A portable stairway was wheeled up to the jet’s wing and clamped on. Three men in black suits stood at the bottom of the stairway.

“After you,” said the Air Force captain.

Stakhower held on to the railings on both sides of the yellow metal stairway as he made his way down on unstable legs. A slow, cold breeze blew off the runway, but Stakhower did not feel the cold. The three men in suits escorted Stakhower to a black limousine parked on the runway a few feet from the jet. One man

got into the driver's seat; the others sat on each side of Stakhower in the back seat.

"We have a change of clothing for you when we get to the hospital," the man with the crew cut said.

"Thanks. I'm going to need them."

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Hildy Grummenweurkes slowly opened her eyes and saw a long face with long brown hair and emerald green eyes.

"Oh!" she said startled. "Who are you?"

Stakhower was not sure what to say.

"You're in a hospital and I'm Doctor Jacobs," said the middle-aged man standing at the other side of the bed. "I'm a neurosurgeon. We found you lying on the ground outside of your apartment. Do you remember how you got there or what happened?"

"No, I don't remember. Where's Henry? We were running from something...then there was a flash...lightening I think."

"Who is Henry?"

"My friend and neighbor. He always helps me. He showed me how to keep my car charged so I wouldn't have to get a new... whatever you call it, a thing-a-ma-jig. Why are all these wires here?"

She followed the trail of wires from her head to a computer-sized box on a small stand next to the bed.

"Nancy," she said recognizing her granddaughter standing by the bed. "Why do I have all these wires? Oh my."

"We're running some tests, Mrs. Grummenweurkes," Jacobs said. "The wires are connected to an EEG machine to monitor your brain waves. When we found you, you were having a seizure."

"It'll burn up, I tell you!" she said. "You better take it off. Nancy tell them."

"It's ok Nana. The tests are harmless."



Jacobs looked at Stakhower. Stakhower already had a bad feeling about the doctor from the tone of his words as he spoke to Hildy. He couldn't pinpoint what he didn't like, but he felt intrinsically there was something he didn't like about Jacobs.

"I want you to meet Gary. He works with the president."

"You do? I thought you were a hippie or something like that."

"I have to ask you a few questions," he said sitting down in the chair next to the bed. Jacobs looked at Stakhower carelessly.

"Do you find that every time you walk or drive past a street light it turns on or off?"

"No, I don't think so. It did happen once, but not after that," she said.

"Do you know who is calling before you answer phone?"

"Absolutely. I just look at my caller ID."

Stakhower smiled.

"Okay. I have a bracelet I would like you to try on. It's really like a phone and you can talk to other people..."

"You better not put that thing on me," she said looking suspiciously at the neural bracelet. "It'll short circuit and burn up. Every time I touch something with electricity it burns up."

"Well, let's just try it. It will adjust itself to your wrist and you will feel a tingling for a few seconds."

Stakhower lifted her left hand and slipped the bracelet around her thin, boney wrist.

"It does tingle," she said smiling.

Stakhower placed two of her fingers on the bracelet to turn it on. She raised her chin and her mouth opened and then her eyes rolled and her pupils disappeared. Her body began to shake and convulse and her arms and legs flailed wildly.

"TAKE IT OFF!" Jacobs screamed.

Stakhower grabbed her wrist, but each time she pulled away and he lost his grip. Hildy continued thrashing on the bed as if she were

trying to get out of her body. Jacobs grabbed her shoulders and held them down while Stakhower tried to get hold of her wrist again. As he moved closer, her knee jerked up and caught him in his right temple. He swaggered and fell to the floor grabbing hold of the bed rails to break his fall.

“NURSE! NURSE!” Jacobs yelled.

A tall, large-boned nurse with short black curly hair ran in and immediately grabbed Hildy’s legs and held them down. Jacobs leaned over and put his weight on the woman’s shoulders. Stakhower got up, grabbed both of her hands and held two of her fingers on the bracelet. It disconnected and she immediately stopped convulsing. He slid the bracelet off her wrist.

“My god, what have you done?” Jacobs said.

“Are you trying to kill her? What is that thing?” Nancy shouted.

Stakhower heard a rush of air all around him. He looked around and then heard a voice.

“Gary, this is Harald. What did you do? We got her signal and sent it, but nothing happened.”

Gary moved to the far side of the room and began to whisper.

“She went into a seizure so we had to take it off.”

“We have to get this to work. You’ve got to figure out how to stop her seizures and you’ve got to do it by midnight or Washington is going to be cooked. We don’t know if Dan’s devices will stop a pulse that large.”

“What time is it now?”

“Eleven forty.”

“Oh, shit!”

Stakhower walked back to Hildy’s bedside and turned to Nancy.

“Your grandmother is strong,” he said noticing her sky blue eyes and blush red hair.

“She was a gymnast most of her life and still stays in shape as much as she can.”

“I know first hand.”

Jacobs watched the EEG machine and ran his hand over the little hair on his head.

“I don’t think we will be doing any more testing tonight,” Jacobs said. “Your device nearly killed her.”

“We have to. My boss said it’s critical that we get the bracelet back on and working,” Stakhower said.

“I don’t think so. The EEG spiked over 80 Hertz. I’ve never seen it go that high – it’s unheard of. She couldn’t sustain that much brain activity for very long. It would kill her.”

“We have to try,” Stakhower insisted. “Maybe, the EEG machine in combination with the bracelet caused her seizure.”

“How could that be? All it does it record electrical activity in the brain.”

“I don’t know. It’s just a suggestion since she has this weird affect on electronics.”

“We just gave her a sedative. She needs to rest now.”

“But, I really need to get this to work.”

“I said no!” insisted Jacobs, a single vein in his wide forehead prominently showing itself.

“Then hundreds of thousands will die including us.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Trust me. I wasn’t sent here by the president for my health.”

“What about her health?” Jacobs fired back.

“We have to decide to save one or the many,” Stakhower said.

“We have to save them all,” Jacobs said.

“We can’t. We have to make a choice.”

“What kind of cold-blooded bastard are you? I’m not going to let this woman die so you can conduct some hair-brained experiment. I’m not going to be responsible for her death!”

“What, you didn’t pay your malpractice insurance? Is that what you are afraid of?”

“You’re out of line!”

Stakhower grabbed Hildy’s wrist and slipped the bracelet on. Then he grabbed her other hand and held her index and middle finger on the bracelet.

“What are you doing?” Jacobs yelled.

“Saving the country.”

Jacobs pulled Hildy’s fingers off the bracelet, and Stakhower grabbed his wrist and bent it inward remembering Dan’s move from the garbage dump. Jacobs immediately went down as Stakhower exerted pressure on his wrist. Then Stakhower let go and put Hildy’s fingers back on the bracelet to turn it on.

“You son-of-a-bitch!” Jacobs said and swung his arm back and punched Stakhower in the face.

Stakhower immediately rushed around the bed and tackled Jacobs to the floor. The two wrestled and rolled and Stakhower managed to return the punch.

“My nose! My nose!” Jacobs screamed and rolled away from Stakhower holding his face.

Blood poured out like an open faucet and splattered on Jacob’s white jacket. The nurse with black curly hair rushed in along with two of the men in black suits who had escorted Stakhower to the hospital. Stakhower, still on the floor looked up and noticed an Ethernet connector in the back of the EEG machine.

“Can you hook this machine to the Internet?” he said.

“I don’t know. But we can connect it to the hospital network so other doctors can see the data,” the nurse said.

She opened a metal door on the stand that held the machine and pulled out a blue Ethernet cable. She plugged it into the machine and then into an Ethernet connector in the wall.

“That’s all there is to it. The machine is now connected to the hospital network,” she said.

“Great. What time is it?” Stakhower said.

The nurse looked at her watch.

“A few minutes after midnight.”

“Oh, shit!”

Stakhower heard the rush of air all around him and then there was a voice.

“Gary, this is Harald again. Dan’s devices worked and knocked out hundreds of towers in Washington. We stopped it, but we think his devices may have been destroyed in the process. I have the security team checking them. There’s another pulse building in the west and this one looks like it will hit most of the East Coast from New York to Atlanta. We’re talking about millions dead and every electrical device becoming a useless paperweight. You’ve got to get that bracelet on her! We don’t know if Dan’s devices are still working. You may be all we got now.”

“Oh, shit!”

As Stakhower got up, two Washington police officers entered the room.

“Arrest him!” Jacobs yelled pointing the officers towards Stakhower.

The officers moved towards Stakhower and the two men in black suits stepped in front of them.

“Hold on there,” one of the men said holding out a billfold with Secret Service credentials.

“This man is here under orders from the president. He has to finish what he is doing. It is a matter of national security. Now if you would kindly leave.”

“He tried to kill that woman!” Jacobs yelled over the ice pack he held against his nose.

“I did not!”

“We’d better stick around until we can straighten this out,” one of the police officers said.

“That’s your prerogative,” said one of the agents. “But you cannot interfere with this man.”

“Dr. Jacobs, I think we don’t have to use the bracelet. If her EEG readings are on the hospital network, then I can send them over the Internet,” Stakhower explained.

“Why should I help you? You sonofabitch! You nearly killed her!”

“It would be in your best interest,” one of the agents said.

Jacobs looked around the room – all eyes were on him.

“We never did that before. The readings are just on our network.”

## Chapter 56

**Friday, May 30, 2008 – 9:30 pm**

Dan spotted the Aviation Parkway Office Park entrance sign and turned left into the entrance lined with small cherry trees.

*“That’s an original name,”* he thought of the sign. The office park was named after the street.

The flat, square buildings with glass windowed fronts and doors were identical on each side of the street and identified only by letters. The “2100” was the address for the entire office park.

He drove slowly looking for buildings that had more than security lights on inside. He noticed Building C had several lights turned on. He parked by Building D and opened the hatch of the SUV. He lifted the floor revealing the spare tire and rummaged around for the tire iron. He slipped the iron down the back of his pants and so no one would notice it. As he approached the door to Building C, a short woman with leathery skin and an equally short man with similar skin pushed a cart filled with brooms, mops, and cleaning supplies. The two people were arguing in Spanish. Dan held the door as the woman pushed the cart out. She looked at him with a dour face.

“Gracias.”

When the cart was out of the doorway she turned to Dan with a questioning look on her face. “*Oh shit,*” he thought.

“You have key?”

Dan held up his keychain and nodded. The woman and the man vanished into the parking lot.

Dan looked around the small area and spotted a door behind the reception desk. He slowly opened it and entered a hallway with large rooms on each side filled with cubicles. The air was thick with odors of cleaning fluids. He could hear the faint sound of a man’s voice conversing with someone. He listened for a few moments for a second voice. Not hearing one, he moved quietly towards the voice and then stopped and listened near the door to an office.

“If they don’t wire the money, then Washington is toast,” the man said. “Everything is set. I’ve done everything you asked. When will you wire my money? Okay. Nice doing business with you.”

Dan slowly took out the tire iron from the back of his pants and quickly entered the office with the iron raised.

“Where’s my family?”

“Who the fuck are you?”

“How did you get in here? What...”

“I want my family back!”

“Listen I don’t know what you’re talking about? If you need help, I can call the hospital...or anybody you like.”

“Stop playing games! I know you are part of ICER and this phony Justice for nine eleven group.”

The small, thin man looked at Dan closely and then his eyes flared in fear.

“I’m still not following you. I’m just a businessman trying to make a living,” the small man said.



Dan moved closer to the man's desk threatening him with the tire iron. The man backed away.

"Let's see what your emails say."

Dan turned the flat panel display in his direction and scanned the emails quickly.

"So Doug Jarvos, I know you hired John Bastille to hack into the cell phone network to gain access to the pulse weapons he designed for Homeland Security, and I also know that you are using his chip design to control the weapons and the power grid. The chip is code named the Librarian because it uses advanced artificial intelligence to scan the Internet and learn from it. The chip is sentient and has a mind of its own, but it listens to your commands. I also know you are holding the government hostage for three billion dollars."

"Sounds like you would make a good novelist with all that fiction," the man said his hands shaking slightly. "Now whatever you want, take it and leave, please."

"I want my family you bastard!" Dan yelled as he raised the tire iron higher. "Where are they?"

The man took out his wallet and offered it to Dan. His hand shook violently.

"Here, take my wallet!"

"Put your wallet away, Charles."

A large, overweight man entered with a PDA in his hand. His body seemed to be bursting out of the gunmetal gray suit he wore.

"Dan Riker," the large man said. "We finally meet. If you ever want to see your family again, I suggest you put down that barbaric weapon."

"You know where his family is, Doug?" the thin man asked.

"I've been helping to get them back for him, Charles. Now, if you don't mind, we have some things to go over," Jarvos said.

“You’re a liar!” Dan screamed. “You’re the one who took them!”

Charles quickly picked up several papers on the desk and left with questions in his eyes.

“I’ll fill you in on this whole mess tomorrow. Good night,” Jarvos said and moved out of the doorway to let Charles pass.

“Don’t bother. I’d rather not know. Good night, Doug.”

Jarvos was silent until he heard the door shut behind Charles.

“Now if you want to live, you should lower that tire iron. All I have to do is push one button on this PDA and you will be cooked instantly like a piece of meat in a microwave,” Jarvos said.

“You’re full of shit!” Dan fired back.

“Do you want to find out? There are scanners that captured the number on the phone you are carrying the second you entered the building. The chip knows your location and when I push this button, a pulse will hone in on you and you alone.”

“Where’s my family?”

“It’s simple, Dan. It’s been in front of you the whole time. Stop and your family will be ok. You may even see them again, alive and well. Keep fighting us and well, I can’t say what would happen.”

“So you would kill innocent people to get what you want, you son-of-a-bitch! People like you give the human race a bad name!” Dan yelled.

“It’s not up to me, Dan. I’m just a player in this game. I don’t call all the shots. This is bigger than you and I. You have no idea what’s behind it,” Jarvos said. “This is the end of the American government as we know it. Now, it’s going to do our bidding, and it’s time for us to get a piece of the American pie instead of all those useless bastards in Washington.”

“So where’s my family?”

"I'm sorry to say that even I am not privileged to that information. I have no idea."

"You're a fucking liar!" Dan shouted. "I'm going to do everything I can to stop you and get my family back. You're an infection on the human race."

"You know, Dan, I think I've had enough of you. Goodbye, Dan," Jarvos said and pushed the send button on the PDA.

"Don't do that!" Dan screamed.

The walls rumbled and the ceiling shook and instantly a pencil thick beam of luminous blue plasma appeared and struck the PDA in Jarvos hand. The beam burned through the PDA and then pierced Jarvos' chest burning a clean hole right through to the wall behind him. His eyes bulged and he threw up chunks of red flesh and bits of his stomach. He collapsed like a wounded animal, falling slowly to the floor like a large ball of jelly. His body writhed in its throes of death as the pulse burned out his nerves and cooked him from the inside out. His face turned red, and then the skin bubbled and turned a mottled brown. His skin split and cracked and red, meaty flesh oozed out. His chest burst open and his organs cooked in a pit of his blood as the blood rapidly boiled into red steam.

Dan stared at the boiling, bubbling, cooking mass of fat that was once Jarvos. Then he sat down in front of Jarvos' computer and looked through his emails while holding one hand over his nose.

"It's a good thing John never fixed that glitch," Dan said to himself as he read several emails.

## Chapter 57

**Saturday, May 31, 2008 – Shortly after Midnight**

Dan quickly read through the first ten emails on Jarvos' computer and had to stop to because he felt nauseous from the odors of burnt flesh and cooked intestines. He covered his nose. He got up after reading several more – the horror of it all was hitting home. He was about to leave when he noticed movement on the computer screen. He looked at the screen and saw that a new email had just arrived. He sat down and quickly opened it.

*“moving the librarian, lost hundreds of lights in Washington. need new loc asap at mtso = 45”*

Dan stared at the email for several seconds and then clicked on the header - ICER10 - to reveal the sender's full address. When the window appeared, all the fields were blank. He figured the email came from a mobile device since none of the words were capitalized and the punctuation was incorrect – the sender was in a hurry to get the message sent.

Dan dug into his pocket, and pulled out the neural bracelet, and slipped it on.

“Hello, Harald are you there?”

“Dan! Do you have a death wish? We knew as soon as you left where you were going. We’re in this together remember. Why didn’t you take the security team with you? You could have been killed.”

“I know. I know. I guess I just got caught up in my emotions and I wasn’t thinking. I didn’t want to hear you say no. This was the first solid lead we’ve had on these bastards and I was hoping Amelia and Kaileigh were here.”

“Are they?”

“No, but I think I found where the chip is; they’re planning to move it ASAP because of something that happened in Washington.”

“Your tube devices took out hundreds of towers in Washington!”

“Fantastic!”

“But, we think they were destroyed in the process,” Friedheld explained. “I have the security team checking on them now, and there’s another pulse developing in the west. We think it has enough energy to fry New York to Atlanta. Gary is trying to get Hildy G’s EEG readings sent to us so we can send them to the sat network. We don’t even know if they will disrupt the pulse.”

“The bracelet didn’t work?” Dan said.

“It did, but she went into convulsions that would have killed her in a short time. So we think her EEG readings might destroy the chip.”

“Sounds like it’ll work, but I would say it won’t. You may have to use the bracelet.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because the bracelets transmit more than words – it transmits a person’s essence. I don’t think the EEG readings capture that,” Dan said.

“We’ll have to see. So where is the chip now?”

“I think it’s located at MTSO forty five. Can you have Jeanine find the actual location?”

“What’s an MTSO, a military base of some kind?”

“Ha! Ha! Ha! Excuse my laughing, Harald. I keep forgetting not everyone is a wireless expert. It stands for Mobile Telephone Switching Office and it is the central control area for the cell towers in a given area. The MTSO connects your phone to the nearest tower and then connects the call to the landline network or another cellular phone. Forty five is the number of the MTSO; she can use that to find the location in the MTSO database I stuck on her computer.”

“Okay, wait. I’ll ask her now.”

“Pretty ingenious of them to put the chip in an MTSO. It could monitor the entire cell network, go on the Internet only when it needed to and fire the pulse weapons,” Dan said.

“Do you think that’s why it kept disappearing and reappearing somewhere else?”

“Could be.”

“Okay, Dan. She has it. It’s on forty eight hundred Globe Road, a few miles from you. Do you know how to get there?”

“Yeah. I know exactly where it is. Send your security team and I’ll meet them there.”

“Dan, be careful; wait for the team. These people are not playing games.”

“I know.”

Within 30 minutes, Dan was on Globe Road looking for an inconspicuous place to park the SUV. The road was bumpy with many asphalt patches indicative of an industrial park, where heavy trucks coursed in and out with all kinds of heavy equipment and supplies. The MTSO was the next entrance on the left so Dan turned right into the parking lot of another company and parked

there. Dan had been to this MTSO many times because it was the main switching station for North Carolina. Any call going outside of the state or coming in had to pass through MTSO 45. Hundreds of thousands of calls were routed through this station each day and Inviscom had over one hundred employees at the site. The complex had a self-contained employee cafeteria and tennis and basketball courts in the back. Employees stayed overnight sometimes. It was the only two-story building at the industrial park.

Dan crossed the street and cautiously made his way to the MTSO. The wooded area around the building helped to conceal his presence, as he got closer. The building was set back from the road about a quarter of mile with an impressive field of healthy grass and mature crape myrtle trees all the way to the road. Lights burned on both floors – not unusual since the site has employees working around the clock. Dan was about to make a run for the parking lot when he heard wind rushing all around him.

“Dan, this is Harald! We sent the EEG data to the sat network and nothing happened. We think the pulse will hit the East Coast in about fifteen minutes. You have to find the chip and destroy it!”

“I’m not even in the building yet. You’ll have to use the bracelet!” Dan said.

“It will kill her!”

“It’s either her or millions. You decide. I’ll try to get the chip.”

“I can’t make a decision like that!”

“Someone has to.”

The connection broke off and Dan heard the sound of rushing wind around him again and then it too vanished. He tapped the bracelet to reconnect, but the connection was not made.

Dan ran to the nearest parked car and hid behind it. He made his way closer to the entrance running from car to car. When he was close to the entrance, he saw three black SUVs parked in front of

the building with blackened windows. He was about to run to one of the SUVs when several people came out of the entrance pushing a wheeled table with several computers. A large antenna about four feet tall was attached to the table. The back of the hatch of the last SUV opened and the men carefully loaded the computers into the back of the vehicle. They moved the boxes slowly as they connected and disconnected cables to the computers and the vehicle. The bracelet connected again. This time there were two voices.

“Dan! This is Harald.

“This is Gary.”

“We haven’t put the bracelet on Hildy G yet because we lost the uplink signal to the sat network!” Harald said. “The uplink station went down and we can’t send the signal.”

“Use another station!”

“The nearest one cannot connect for at least fifteen minutes. We have less than five minutes before the pulse hits!”

“Send the signal to my PDA and I’ll direct it to my dish at my house! Wait until I connect to your servers.”

Dan took out Jake’s PDA and opened two programs to receive the signal from Hildy G’s bracelet and to connect to the vacuum tube transmitter at his house.

“Okay, I’m all set,” Dan said.

“I’m putting the bracelet on her now,” Gary said. “Go!”

Dan stood up with the PDA in one hand and his thumb on the send button and moved out from behind a small compact car. The doors on two of the vehicles swung open and four men emerged with assault rifles instantly aimed at Dan.

“Hey, assholes!” Dan said. “If I push this button, it will destroy your entire weapons network and the chip that runs it.”

“Who the fuck are you?” one of the men said aiming at Dan’s chest.



“Blow him away!” another man shouted. “Nothing can stop us now!”

“You lost hundreds of towers in Washington. This program will take the entire network!” Dan shouted.

He moved the PDA behind him so they could not shoot it out of his hand.

“Blow this asshole away, I said!” the other man said.

“I can push the button before I’m dead. Do you want to find out?”

A tall, slim man with graying hair and wearing a black suit stepped out of the second SUV. He reached into the SUV and pulled a woman out with short blonde hair. A little girl followed.

“Amelia!” Dan shouted.

“Dan!”

“Daddy! Daddy!”

Dan’s eyes welled up. He quickly wiped his eyes and started running towards them. The men with the rifles reacted like guard dogs called to attention.

“Dan Riker. Stop!” the man shouted his cold dark eyes penetrating Dan’s. Dan kept running not hearing the man until a shot was fired and it grazed Dan’s left shoulder. He tumbled to the ground like a bag of rags. Amelia screamed and Kaileigh started crying.

“Son of a bitch!” he yelled grabbing his shoulder and watching his shirt spot red. He still held onto the PDA and raised it quickly to show them he still had it.

“Looks like both of us have something each of us wants. The PDA for your family.”

The man approached Dan and held out his hand. Another short, heavy man pulled Amelia and Kaileigh further out and held them against the side of the SUV aiming a 9mm handgun at Amelia’s head. Dan began to sweat and the pain in his shoulder dulled from

the anger that convulsed through his body. He stood up with renewed energy and flashed the PDA again. And then the rushing wind filled Dan's head.

"Dan! What's wrong? Send the signal! We don't know how long Hildy will last and we want to save her if we can!" Harald screamed in his head.

Dan gritted his teeth and whispered without moving his lips.

"Take her off now."

"The pulse is less than five minutes away!" Harald shouted.

"Stop the pulse!" Dan said to the man.

"That's what we're trying to do!" Harald said.

"Oh, that. The chip decided that's what it needed to do. We have nothing to do with it," the man said. "Lucky for you it won't hit this state. Now, the PDA."

"You're a fucking liar! Stop the pulse and let them go or your network is toast!" Dan yelled.

"I assure you, Dan. If you push that button, your wife and daughter will be dead before you're able to get to them. Now toss the PDA."

"Stop the pulse!" Dan said.

"Okay, I lied," the man said. He nodded to one of the men who loaded the computers into the SUV. "Do it."

The man disconnected a few cables from one of the computers and nodded.

"It's done. The PDA, please."

"The pulse stopped moving, Dan!" Harald said inside of Dan's head. "What's going on?"

"How do I know?" Dan said.

The man got into the driver's seat of the SUV and turned up the radio; the announcer said the illumination in the sky had stopped moving. Dan stared at the man for several moments and then

reluctantly tossed the PDA. The man stepped back and the device hit the pavement and several pieces flew off in several directions.

"Oh, sorry. I forgot to tell you I was never good at sports," the man said.

The shorter, heavier man pushed Amelia and Kaileigh back into the SUV and slammed the door.

"Hey, you son-of-a-bitch!" Dan yelled and started running towards the man.

"Sorry, Dan. We're keeping them as insurance. Goodbye, Dan," the man said and disappeared into the SUV.

The men with assault rifles lifted their weapons and Dan watched the weapons point at him in slow motion and he knew he wouldn't make it, but he had to try. Then there was gunfire and one of the men slammed against the SUV and fell to ground. He grabbed his arm and rolled on the ground in pain. The first two SUVs took off towards the entrance and Dan ran behind a parked car nearby. The wounded man managed to get up and flop into the SUV as it started moving. The door closed and the three SUVs turned right and headed across the large field. Flashes of gunfire flew from all the vehicles as the security team chased the black SUVs across the field towards the road.

"Dan! Dan! The security team is there and they're engaged," Harald said to Dan through the bracelet. "What's going on?"

"I know, god damn it! I'm in the middle of it!"

"The pulse is moving again with less than a minute to impact! You have to send the signal!" Harald shouted.

"Oh, shit!"

Dan ran towards the front of the building where his PDA landed. He scooped up the device and ran around looking for the battery. Only the light from a single spotlight lit the area.

"Dan, were putting the bracelet back on Hildy G. Are you ready?" echoed in his head.

“No! Wait!”

“You’ve got less than thirty seconds!”

Dan moved around the area where he thought the pieces might have scattered like a hungry animal foraging for food. He found the battery cover, but couldn’t find the battery. He looked at the narrow path of grass that ran adjacent to the sidewalk and then got down on his knees and ran his hands across the thick grass.

“Dan! Fifteen seconds!” Harald said.

Dan moved like a cougar sizing up its prey when his hand bumped into something solid. He moved his hand away and there was the battery. He pressed it into the back of the PDA and pushed the on button.

“Come on work. Come on!” he said to himself.

“What did you say, Dan?”

“Put the bracelet on Hildy now!”

The screen flickered to life even with the small crack on the display. Dan quickly launched the two programs that would retrieve the signal from the Synertron servers and send it to his uplink device at his house. They took longer than usual and the seconds seemed like hours. When the programs were ready Dan hesitated, swallowed in thought of Amelia and Kaileigh. *“Would he be killing them or would he save them? Should he save millions or them?”* The pain of this decision burned through his body like acid in his veins.

“Dan! It hit!” Harald screamed into his head.

Dan tapped the uplink icon that would initiate the final sequence and destroy the pulse weapons. The pain in his shoulder burned as if someone held a blowtorch to it, but he didn’t feel a thing.

Dan looked across the grassy field and saw the caravan of the escaping SUVs and the security team close behind them. He continued to watch them when a white blue beam of plasma

suddenly lit up the sky, shot downward, and hit one of the moving SUVs. The vehicle instantly turned into a fireball and flipped over when the gas tank ignited. A second beam streamed downward and lit up the SUV in front of it.

“NOOOOOOOOOOOO!” Dan screamed. “What did I do? I killed them! I killed them! Oh, no! Oh god! NO!”

Another beam streamed out of the sky and struck the building. It exploded into a giant fireball, spewing debris everywhere. Dan turned to look at the building and then started to run.

“Dan! Dan! What’s going on! Dan!” Harald screamed. There was no answer.

## Chapter 58

**Saturday, May 31, 2008 – 1 a.m.**

When the EEG machine spiked to 90 Hertz, Jacobs ran over to Hildy Grummenweurkes, grabbed her wrist and frantically tried to pull the neural bracelet off the convulsing woman.

“I’ve had enough!” he screamed.

Stakhower instinctively pulled his hand away from the woman’s wrist. Jacobs pushed Stakhower with his other arm and Stakhower careened backwards into a chair and slammed down hard on the tile floor. He did not get up. The two Secret Service agents rushed Jacobs and wrestled him to the floor. One of the agents pulled out a set of handcuffs and clicked them onto Jacobs’ wrists.

“You’re killing her! You’re killing her!” Jacobs yelled as they dragged him away from the bedside.

“Take it off her!” Nancy screamed.

An older nurse with short blonde hair rushed to Hildy’s bedside. The nurse with the black curly hair watched Hildy’s vitals on the EKG.

“You have to get that bracelet off!” Jacobs screamed. “She has a few minutes at most!”

The nurse with the black hair pulled on the bracelet.

“How do you get this damn thing off? It won’t budge!” she said.

The other nurse took hold of the bracelet and both pulled. It did not move.

“He’s the only one who knows how to get it off,” said Jacobs motioning towards Stakhower. “Wake him up!”

The black-haired nurse bent down and gently slapped the sides of Stakhower’s face.

“Wake up! Wake up! Do you have smelling salts on you,” she said to the other nurse.

“No. Move out of the way.”

She picked up a plastic pitcher of ice water and hurled it at Stakhower’s face. He squirmed and blinked as the water cascaded down his face and soaked his army green t-shirt. “Oh, my head,” he said in a sleepy voice.

“How do you get that bracelet off?” the dark-haired nurse asked.

“Wha...”

An ear-piercing shriek filled the room from the EEG and a red light flashed next to the display.

“It just spiked past ninety five,” the blonde nurse yelled. “That’s fatal.”

“The bracelet!” the other nurse yelled and shook Stakhower’s shoulders. “How do you get it off?”

“Two fingers. Hold her two fingers on it,” he said.

The nurse rushed over to Hildy, grabbed her hands, and pressed her two fingers on the bracelet. The bracelet expanded and she slipped it off. Hildy immediately stopped convulsing and her body settled down into the bed.

The EEG readings scaled back to 40 Hertz and the EKG machine showed her heart rate falling. The rushing wind sound swirled around in Stakhower’s head again.

“Gary, it worked!” Harald screamed. “Get the bracelet off Hildy!”

“Done.”

“Is she alive?”

“I think so...she’s moving her arm.”

The small, middle-aged woman slowly opened her eyes and looked at Nancy and the two nurses standing by her bedside.

“Oh, I’m so tired,” Hildy barely got out.

“You need to rest now,” said the dark-haired nurse.

“Who are all these people? Wait, I know these people,” Hildy said and her face brightened. “There’s my mom. She looks young again, and Tom, my husband. They’ve come for me.”

“Don’t talk. Don’t use your energy.”

“Oh, Nana, don’t leave me,” Nancy said as she held her hand.

The taller Secret Service agent held a hand over one ear and nodded occasionally. Several minutes passed and then he went over to Hildy.

“Hildy, the President wants you to know that you are a hero. You saved millions of lives.”

“She did?” Nancy said.

Hildy’s face brightened again and a small smile formed.

“I’m glad,” she said in a sleep-filled, raspy voice. “I always wanted to do something to help people, you know.”

She closed her eyes and fell into a light sleep.

The agent turned to Stakhower sitting in the corner lounge chair holding an ice pack on the back of his head.

“Gary, the president wants to congratulate you and your team. He said the problem has been resolved.”

“That’s cool. Now, if this headache would only go away.”

Hildy awoke with a start and looked up at the nurses.

“My neck...head hurts...I can’t see...”



Hildy closed her eyes again and took a deep breath. Her forehead wrinkled into a frown and then a small smile formed on her mouth. Her small frame rose slightly on the bed and then slowly settled back down and did not rise again. The EEG spiked past 100 Hertz and exploded. Smoke oozed out of the machine and the green pulse line on the EKG machine flat lined.

“You fucking murderers!” Jacobs shouted. “She had a brain aneurysm! I knew that would happen!”

“Get him out of here!” the agent said.

The other agent escorted Jacobs out of the room. The nurses stared at Hildy’s peaceful face and tears ran down their faces. Nancy cried uncontrollably and one of the nurses put her arm around her.

“I’m so sorry,” she said.

Nancy felt dizzy and began to drift. She grabbed the EKG machine to steady herself and instantly the screen went out and the machine sizzled to its death. Small wisps of acrid smoke snaked out of the device.

“Oh my god!” she yelled.

Stakhower locked eyes with her and they knew immediately what it meant. She had inherited her grandmother’s powers. Strangely, the TV on the wall switched on to Carson Douglas of CNN standing in front of the Palomar Observatory in San Diego County, California.

*“Authorities believe this week’s blackouts and strange early morning electrical failures were the result of a new type of solar flare on the sun that is invisible to our current solar telescopes,” Douglas said. “The strange blue illumination in the skies seen in eight states from Kentucky to Pennsylvania and from West Virginia to New Jersey was also caused by the flares when the electrical energy hit certain gases in the atmosphere.”*

*“Police were flooded with calls early this morning as the plasma turned night into day and awoke thousands in the eight state region. One man said the occurrence looked like a monochrome Northern Lights show.*

*“The flares also caused more than twenty thousand cell towers in the eastern part of the country to explode and light up the skies like giant roman candles. The towers also caused several forest fires in remote areas, which were quickly contained. Officials from all four major cell phone companies said they are working around the clock to restore service. Meanwhile, there will be vast areas without cell phone coverage and officials are warning not to depend on your cell phone as your primary means of communication. Authorities are unclear on why the flares affected only cellular phone towers.*

*“Trenton, New Jersey appears to be the only area that suffered damage by the solar flares. Officials there reported that every electrical device from computers to stop lights suddenly stopped working just before one am. The city is still without power and officials estimate the damage to be in the billions.”*

Stakhower raised his eyebrows.

“That chip was pretty smart.”

## **Chapter 59**

**Sunday, June 8, 2008 – 9 a.m.**

The nine-passenger Hawker 1000 jet slowly rolled towards the black limousine parked on the tarmac of runway 47 at the Raleigh Durham International Airport. The high-pitched whine of the engines slowly decreased in pitch as the engines were shut down. The mid section hatch directly over the right wing opened and the pilot emerged with a portable set of stairs that he attached to the wing. The stairs easily expanded to the ground. The chauffeur got out of the limousine and opened the rear doors on each side of the car. The NovaCom group emerged and walked towards the small jet.

“This is great!” Braggloisi said to Stakhower as they walked hand in hand towards the aircraft. “Lunch with the President and First Lady. I can’t wait to get there!”

“Yeah, it’s cool,” Stakhower said noticing her bright smile and excited eyes.

Harald Friedheld, Chip Motege, and Dan followed with Mrs. Sanchez, Mike Sanchez’ wife, between them. Two Secret Service agents trailed behind the small crowd.

Inside the plane, Braggloisi and Stakhower sat on the open couch seat in the rear and Mrs. Sanchez sat in the leather seat across from them. Friedheld, Motega, and Dan sat in the seats forward. The slim captain followed.

“Make yourselves at home. We have coffee and bagels here in the front and the bathroom is through that door in the rear,” the captain said. “The flight should take about forty minutes; maybe less if we catch a tailwind. Please fasten your seatbelts until we are in the air. We’ll take off in a few minutes.”

Dan stared out the window. Motega looked at Friedheld.

“Dan, I’m really glad you are able to make this trip,” Friedheld said. “And that you came out of that coma. We were pretty worried about you. Luckily, you weren’t closer to the pulse when it hit the building.”

“I wish I had been,” Dan said.

“You saved a lot of people’s lives and the country for that matter,” Motega added. “I don’t know how the country would function with every electronic device destroyed from New York to Atlanta.”

“But, I couldn’t save my wife and daughter. I killed them!”

“We don’t know for sure. They couldn’t identify the bodies in the SUVs; they were too badly burned...”

“I saw the pulse hit their SUV! They’re gone!” Dan interrupted, his eyes welling up.

He gazed out the window at the runway, a sea of asphalt that disappeared into the horizon. The engines revved up and the plane began to move onto the runway. It stopped momentarily and then the aircraft vibrated and rumbled, the engines roared, and the plane took off.

“Your friend Jerry will be out of the hospital in a few weeks and we were able to save his arm,” Friedheld said hoping the news would lift Dan’s spirits a bit.

“What about John?” Dan asked.

“He’ll be charged as a domestic terrorist, but since the press doesn’t know any of this, I’ve asked the President to pardon him since he helped us save the country,” Friedheld said.

“We at least stopped them for now,” Motega said.

“What do you mean, for now?” Dan said.

“The code is still out there on the Internet floating from machine to machine. We can’t find it. It just sits out there as a potential threat until someone figures out how to compile it into working software,” Motega explained.

“The code is still out there?” Friedheld said.

“Yeah. The chip controlled the virus and the chip is gone so the virus is inert, but it’s still out there. And if someone finds it and figures out how to compile the code, the virus can be brought back to life.”

“Shit!” Dan said. “I thought we got it all.”

“So did I,” Friedheld added. “We are making every effort the find it. CERT is actively looking as well as the NSA, the National Communications System under Homeland Security, and InfraGard, the FBI’s cyber terrorism division. They are also looking for your wife and daughter, Dan.”

Dan frowned.

“I have to admit that chip design was pretty ingenious,” Motega said. “I call it the mobile chip, probably the first of its kind in the world. The physical chip resided in ICER’s computer, but its functionality was mobile, meaning it could move from machine to machine and perform everything it was designed to do.”

“What do you mean?” Dan asked.

“Imagine that you have a chip designed to access all the weather data for hurricanes in the last 100 years and forecast the number of storms for the following year. Only the computer with that chip installed can do those forecasts. Now imagine that the chip’s

functionality – what it does – can move virtually from the main computer to say a laptop. Now the laptop can do those forecasts. That's how ICER's chip could roam the Internet and learn from it. The sentient aspect of the chip was a virtual 'mind', but the 'mind' could only roam the Internet when the physical chip was connected to the Net. Think of it as an out of body experience. Your mind could travel anywhere in the universe, but your body stays in one place. The chip's 'body' stayed in the ICER computer, but its 'mind' could roam anywhere on the Internet."

"Phew. I love technology, but you're making my brain hurt now," Friedheld said. "I need some water. Anybody want anything?"

"I'm good," Motega said.

Dan shook his head. Friedheld got up and took a bottle of water from the small refrigerator in the front of the plane. He walked to the back of the aircraft and sat with Braggloisi, Stakhower, and Mrs. Sanchez, dressed in black.

"It's been a hellva week," Friedheld said and twisted the cap off of the clear plastic bottle.

Stakhower rubbed his chin and nodded.

"Why did this happen?" Braggloisi said while snuggling up against Stakhower.

"Because no one believed it could, just like no one believed nine eleven could happen. The warning signs were there, but no one paid attention," Friedheld explained. "The more interconnected devices we have, the more opportunity for hackers to get into a system. As we connect our PDAs, MP three players and cell phones to PCs, the easier it is for hackers to use those devices as stepping stones into the bigger systems."

"What happens now?"

"The government will develop a joint initiative with private industry to better secure the country's major infrastructures so this

won't happen again," Friedheld said. "They plan to combine CERT and the National Cyber Security Division under Homeland Security as the central contact point when an attack occurs on any of the nation's infrastructure. The new organization will be fully funded by Homeland Security and they want all of us onboard."

"Wow," Braggloisi said.

"Really. I'll believe it when I see it," Stakhower said.

"They should be very motivated because of what happened and because ICER is still out there. A group as wealthy and sophisticated as ICER is not composed of a handful of players. They may rear their ugly head again and the President told me he is making it a top priority to hunt them down."

"Who are they?" Stakhower asked.

"ICER is a group of home grown terrorists no different from Al-Qaeda. ICER solicited donations under a false pretense – to fight terrorism. Al Qaeda does the same claiming they are helping poor and disadvantaged Muslims everywhere, but in reality the money is funding terrorist acts all over the world. ICER did the same. They got mostly the surviving families of nine eleven victims to donate saying that the money would be used to put a fire under the government to step up its fight against terrorism and capture Osama Bin Laden."

"Do you think they really wanted to stop Al Qaeda?"

"No. They're in it strictly for the money and the power just like Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda uses the Muslim religion as an excuse to do what they do, when in reality all they want is to control the world and impose their perverted version of Islam. They are the biggest group of hypocrites in the world."

Friedheld took another drink from the bottle.

"What about the bombing?" Braggloisi asked. "Did we ever do that?"

“They knew the government would never do that, so they used it to force the government to fulfill lesser demands to avoid the bombing. But it didn’t work – the government gave them nothing.”

Stakhower stretched his arms and yawned.

“Why did we have to get up so early just to have lunch?” Stakhower said. “We could have left later. I could barely get up this morning.”

Friedheld looked intensely at the young couple.

“We’re not just going for lunch. It’s another debriefing and a funeral. The President will announce what happened to enlist the entire world in the hunt against the remaining members of ICER. He will also declare Hildy G., Mike and Kari national heroes and we will attend their funerals in Arlington Cemetery.”

“So the President is going to admit that the solar flares story was really a cover-up for what really happened?” Stakhower said. “I don’t believe it.”

“No. The white house didn’t put that story out. As far as we know it’s true. There is no cover-up. It’s a hellva coincidence.”

“Really? That’s hard to believe. The public is still going to think the government tried to cover it up.”

“We’ll just have to see,” Friedheld said and sat back in his seat.

The scratchy, electronic voice of the captain’s voice filled the small cabin. It was barely audible over the din of the air stream and the engines.

“Please be seated and fasten your seat belts. We are starting our descent.”

“That was quick. I didn’t even get a cup of coffee,” Braggloisi said.



## **Chapter 60**

**One month later – July 2008**

Dan Riker still could not shake the guilt that ripped at his heart that he was responsible for his wife and daughter's death. The endless therapy sessions with doctors with endless letters behind their names meant nothing. Now he was going back to his true womb, his true mother. He decided to end it here.

He watched an emboldened sandpiper skitter across the smooth sand a few yards in front of him as an anxious wave withdrew from the beach taking whatever it wanted. The tiny bird stopped as if to study the wave and then ran down the beach and vanished. The azure cloudless sky reminded him of perfection – seamless, flawless, and perfect in every way – unlike his life now. The beach was naked with only the remains of a bustling crowd temporarily etched into the sand in the form of hundreds of footprints and strange indentations as far as one could see. As the July sun slowly made its way behind the houses with their many uniquely shaped gabled roofs, he took a deep breath drinking in the moist, comfortable air wondering if he had not taken the chance, not reached for the golden ring, not tried to be better would his family still be alive. Should he have been grateful for what he had instead

of reaching for more? Should he have been content with his life the way it was – endlessly safe, guarded and insured? A tear ran down the left side of his face, dropped off and merged into the water of the endless ocean and was forever lost. He loved the sea its never-ending motion, its thick syrupy smell that seemed to wrap him in a secure, perfect blanket of contentment. It was the only thing he truly loved now. It was where he felt most comfortable and so he thought his life should end here. His life no longer had any purpose – he had lost what he loved most in the world. He had lost his purpose as a man.

He looked out at the arrow straight horizon, thinking that once the water was over his head he would take in one last breath drawing in as much water as possible and then it would be over. He wondered how drowning victims felt in their last moments of life when they knew their fate and the sheer terror of the next few moments overwhelmed them. He would have no such terror. He was so pained to the prospect of life that he knew there would only be peace in death.

He walked up to the remains of an ancient piling sticking up out of the sand and placed his PDA and wallet on top. He looked around at the peaceful beach once more and started his dead man's walk into the sea. Memories of his childhood flooded into his mind as he pushed through the small waves – wonderful memories of weekends spent at the beach with his brother, Alex, with neighborhood friends, and his loving parents. When the water reached his chest and his whole body felt buoyant, a great peace overwhelmed him so intense and so complete that he knew he was doing the right thing. He spotted a building wave approaching much larger than the previous ones. It was like an old friend, smiling and so happy to see him again. He greeted the wave like a love lost and started to swim moving his arms and legs in a slow steady rhythm.

An hour later, he could barely see the gables of the expensive houses that lined the beach like sentinels guarding the shore. Yet, he continued his steady death rhythm. His mind began to play the video moments of his life in a constant stream of memories of Amelia and Kaileigh. The fatigue was setting in. He knew he couldn't turn back. He was out too far. Yet, he continued swimming. He knew he had to keep swimming because it would bring him to Amelia and Kaileigh. He was swimming to them now. His arms ached and his legs barely moved – the water was colder - but he kept up the pace knowing he would be with them very soon.

When the last light of the day finally faded, the water and the sky became one and he could only feel the water now. The videos in his mind were brighter and clearer. Suddenly, he saw Amelia and Kaileigh standing on the beach holding their hands out to him. He knew he would see them again. He swam harder extending his right hand to meet theirs, but the harder he swam the farther he drifted away. He felt himself gag and wondered why he would gag trying to reach Amelia and Kaileigh. And then they were gone.

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Dan's PDA suddenly vibrated, alone and abandoned on the top of the ancient, decaying piling. The caller ID displayed "Harald Friedheld."

"Daddy! Daddy! Where are you? Say something."

The little girl handed the phone to Friedheld and he placed it by his ear.

"It must have gone to voicemail. Dan, this is Harald. We have them...Amelia and Kaileigh. They're safe with us."

THE END

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anthony Samuel Policastro has been writing all his life.

The publication of his first novel, *Absence of Faith*, is the pinnacle of his work having previously published articles in *The New York Times*, *American Photographer* and other national, regional, and local publications.

Policastro was the former editor-in-chief of *Carolina Style* magazine, a regional lifestyle publication similar to *Southern Living* magazine. He was a former journalist, photographer, and webmaster.

The author's background is in technology, business intelligence, and communications.

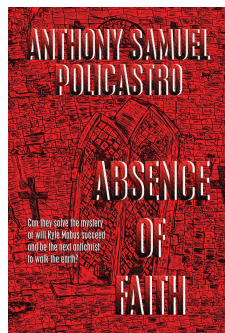
He has two BA degrees - one in Creative Writing, and another in American Studies from Penn State University, both of which have greatly enhanced his writing career.

He and his family live in North Carolina.

### Other works by Anthony S. Policastro

**Absence of Faith** – A medical mystery involving near death experiences, New Age concepts, and the dire predictions of Nostradamus.

Available in paperback at Barnes and Noble, Amazon.com, Lulu.com, and on the Kindle and in several e-book formats at Smashwords.com, <http://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/aspolicastro>



What readers have said about **Absence of Faith**:

“If Tim LeHaye and Michael Crichton had ever gotten together to write a book, it would probably end up being something like Anthony Policastro's *Absence of Faith*. It's part medical mystery and part religious thriller all rolled up in a plot of Christianity, Unexplained Phenomenon, New Age Beliefs, and Satanic Occults. It's a white-knuckle read that would probably drive a Baptist preacher to an early death, and probably have Stephen King saying, "Now why didn't I think of that?"

**Shannon L. Yarbrough – St. Louis, MO**

“*Absence of Faith* is a chilling story of good versus evil, as friends become enemies and citizens grow more terrified by events beyond their control. There's a lot to admire about this book. Author Anthony Samuel Policastro's well-paced plot steadily builds the suspense until it's impossible to stop reading during the last one hundred pages. The story also addresses some uncomfortable questions such as what does a Christian do when he's convinced God has abandoned him? And what happens when a doctor's faith in science is up against religious fervor.”

**Debra Purdy Kong “mystery writer” – Port Moody, BC**

“All of the time I was reading this book, I kept thinking about what an incredible movie it would make. The special effects wizards would have a field day with this! Like *Poltergeist*, *Absence of Faith* lingers on in the uncertain recesses of my mind, a dark black shadow in a quiet corner of my thoughts. Was it real? Could such a thrilling but monstrous tale really occur? I wonder.”

**Ann B. Keller – Cleveland, OH**