



OFF THE Grid

a novel by

DAN KOLBET

contents

Title Page

A world without wires

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

Chapter 37

Chapter 38

Chapter 39

Chapter 40

Chapter 41

Chapter 42

Chapter 43

Chapter 44

Chapter 45

Chapter 46

Chapter 47

Chapter 48

Chapter 49

Chapter 50

Chapter 51

Chapter 52

Chapter 53

Chapter 54

Chapter 55

Chapter 56

Chapter 57

Chapter 58

Chapter 59

Chapter 60

Chapter 61

Chapter 62

Chapter 63

Chapter 64

Chapter 65

Chapter 66

[Chapter 67](#)

[Chapter 68](#)

[Chapter 69](#)

[Chapter 70](#)

[Chapter 71](#)

[Chapter 72](#)

[Chapter 73](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

Off The Grid

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OFF THE Grid

a novel by

DAN KOLBET

Off The Grid

Luke Kincaid is a model employee at the only company in the world that can deliver wireless electricity. He's engaged to the CEO's daughter and is quickly becoming the go-to corporate spy on its behalf. But Luke would rather tear the company down from the inside. The company killed his parents and it must pay. Threatened by a secret that could destroy him and any chance of revenge, Luke sets off to find the true origins of wireless electricity, but discovers a vast deception that will

change the world forever.

For Allison and Felicity

NOVELS BY DAN KOLBET

Off The Grid

Don't Wait For Me

IMPORTANT NOTICE

At StuTech, our vision is to provide wireless energy that drives human progress.

Unfortunately, your home or structure is not located close enough to one of our power towers.

Therefore, we regret to inform you that you are now on your own.



IT'S DARK WITHOUT US.

A world without wires

In 1901 Thomas Edison's rival, Nikola Tesla, a largely forgotten scientist, inventor and genius envisioned a world without wires, where power was sent to homes and businesses not through power lines but delivered innocently through the air like radio waves. Today, one company has made it happen. Electricity is cheap and efficient, but this wonderful new wireless system leaves thousands of American towns and millions of people in the dark and off the grid.

Prologue

10 Years Ago

Mill Creek, California

If Luke Kincaid had known tonight was the last time he'd see his parents alive, he wouldn't have nodded off in the backseat of the sedan. The highway was dark and he couldn't keep his eyes open. Muddy soccer cleats rested on top of the gym bag next to him. His father Henry was driving. Eleanor, his mother, was in the passenger seat. She slipped off her seatbelt and turned around so she could see Luke as she spoke.

"You did good today," she said, waking him. "I know coach Miller was

impressed, too.”

Luke, an 18-year-old high school senior, had scored two goals despite his team’s loss at a regional soccer tournament. The week prior he’d accepted a full-ride soccer scholarship to Stanford. His future coach had come out tonight to watch him play.

“I just wish we would have won,” he said.

“You can’t do everything on your own, Luke,” Henry said. “You have teammates for a reason.”

Henry rode Luke hard to be the consummate team player – to think of himself only after giving others the chance to shine. Luke rarely disappointed his father.

“You’ll be playing with the best next year,” his mother said. “I just know you’re going to do great things. I’m so proud of you.”

“Thanks mom.”

“I mean it,” she said. “You need to make the most out of this opportunity. The world is a different place now. The blackout isn’t going away thanks to StuTech and you’ve got a chance to escape all this and make a difference out there.”

“I know, mom,” he said. “I heard you the last 10 times you told me that too.”

“As long as it’s sinking in, honey,” she said. She turned back around in her seat, content that her message had at least been received.

They were only a few miles outside of town. Luke took out his cell phone from his pocket hoping for a text message from one of his friends. But he forgot, no reception. It was the second day of the blackout. He felt so isolated. No one in Mill Creek had power because StuTech's wireless towers couldn't reach the town. They all knew the blackout was coming, but in reality no one was prepared.

Luke dropped the phone when the sudden wail of the sedan's horn pierced the quiet car for a split second before the blinding headlights of the oncoming semi-truck forced Henry to look away. The truck was headed right for them. On instinct Henry yanked the steering wheel

to the right to avoid a collision, but it was too late. The truck slammed into the driver's side of the car, spinning it around twice before the car toppled over a highway guardrail and landed on its roof.

Luke could immediately taste blood in his mouth. He spit out a mouthful before attempting to free himself from the seatbelt that kept him dangling upside down. He smelled gas and could hear a dripping sound. He tried to use his legs and arms to push himself back into the seat to release the seatbelt. It didn't work.

The car was quiet, except for his struggles.

“Mom? Dad?”

No answer. The car must have rolled into a ditch, Luke thought. His eyes couldn't focus in the darkness.

Then he remembered the cell phone.

He picked up the phone resting on the ceiling and flipped it open. The faint light revealed the dripping sound. A pool of blood was collecting under him. He didn't know what his injuries were and he didn't care. He turned the phone toward the front seat. His father's legs were smashed against the underside of the steering wheel.

"Dad, wake up!"

Nothing.

Luke pointed the phone toward the passenger seat. His mom was not there.

He suddenly became aware of a sharp

pain in his shoulder - the origin of all the blood. A piece of chrome window trim had sliced into him. He tried to cover up the wound with his hand, but dropped his phone in the process.

The realization of what had happened finally set in. Everything went black as he passed out.

When Luke woke up he was strapped to a bench against the wall of a moving ambulance. A bandage was wrapped around his shoulder. A canvas belt held him down, but he could still turn his head.

“Clear!” shouted a paramedic.

Inches from Luke, his father’s bare chest accepted a jolt of electricity from a defibrillator and jumped. The paramedic

then pumped his fists on Henry's sternum and counted out loud. A heart monitor beeped with every thrust.

"Come on, damn it. We're almost to the hospital," the paramedic said. "Stay with us just a little longer."

The ambulance came to an abrupt halt. The driver jumped out and flung the back doors open. The red flashing lights of the ambulance illuminated Mill Creek Medical Center's darkened sign.

A doctor in scrubs emerged from the building carrying a flashlight.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he asked. "We're completely offline. The backup generators went dead two hours ago. You've got to take them to where they have power."

“We don’t have that kind of time,” one of the paramedics said. “He needs help now.”

“We don’t have anything here that can help this man.”

The anguish on the paramedics’ faces quickly faded as the heart monitor stopped its rhythmic beeping and Henry flat-lined again. They worked for another 15 minutes, but without the hospital’s machines, he was already gone.

Henry Kincaid died before his son’s eyes in the medical center’s dark parking lot.

“Where’s my mom?” was all Luke managed to say after the men stopped their efforts on his father.

“She was thrown from the car and died before we arrived on scene. I’m sorry.”

Tears and blood stung his eyes. Thirty minutes ago the world was a scary place, but his future was bright and his parents were by his side. Then somebody pulled the plug on all of it.

The truck driver’s name was Brian Overland. A church in Los Angeles had hired him to deliver fresh water to towns impacted by the blackouts. He’d been on the road making deliveries for 14 hours straight before the crash. Luke didn’t blame the truck driver for his parents’ deaths. He didn’t blame the paramedics either. They thought the medical center had back-up power and tried to save his

father with everything they had.

No, it wasn't the truck driver or the paramedics who killed his parents. It was StuTech, the company that caused the blackout.

Chapter 1

Portland, Oregon

Luke's running shoes bounced off the rain soaked pathway of Mainfair Park. This would make his sixth pass around the park today. His shorts and T-shirt were soaked through with light rain and perspiration, which had begun to sting his eyes quite some time ago. The sting in his eyes was familiar. He glanced at his GPS watch. Five miles. He also noted that it was 10:30 a.m., three hours before the interview.

The campus of MassEnergy was situated just off the park's winding perimeter. The company employed more

than 1,100 people at last check and that number was on the rise. Luke's frequent runs in the park over the last two months allowed him to see a steady stream of well-dressed young men and women entering the main building carrying briefcases or shoulder bags, then exiting after a few hours. These job seekers stood out markedly from actual employees who were dressed-down in jeans and T-shirts. Engineers were that way. They just don't teach fashion sense in Standards of Electrical Generation. The hiring boom was on and that was exactly what Luke was hoping for.

He stopped at the edge of the park overlooking the Willamette River and valley below. To the north was the

vibrant international hub of Oregon's largest city, that over the last few years had grown at an astounding pace as the tech center migrated up from California's Silicon Valley to Oregon and Washington. Just outside of the downtown core stood gated and guarded communities, their bright lights created halos in the overcast morning.

The main parking lot of MassEnergy was completely full and shuttles intermittently dropped off employees near the main entrance. The covered shuttle stops and the exterior of the main lobby were filled with eager job candidates, killing time before their all-important personnel meetings. Just last week it was Luke huddled under those

awnings, drawing the attention of his competition. He had hoped to blend in as just another sheep in the flock, but his six-foot-three frame, broad shoulders and a chiseled jaw line wouldn't allow it. He stood out a bit from the other engineers who could be described at best as – probably smart. The terms pasty and slight were practically written into the electrical engineer's handbook. Nonetheless, his Stanford education and practical work experience made him more than qualified for the engineering candidate class – whatever that was. The exact job duties had yet to be explained to him and to his knowledge, any other candidates either.

Luke removed his phone from his

waistband and held it up, feigning an attempt to find a cellular signal while taking a breather from his run. Sliding the on-screen switch to video, he pointed the device at several individuals under the awnings and hit record. The camera zeroed in on faces, just long enough to capture a clear image of everyone in the crowd. It took just seconds. He saw several familiar faces. With a few taps on the screen, the video was uploaded and today's first of two tasks was accomplished.

He set off in the opposite direction from the corporate campus through a residential neighborhood. Less than a block away he stepped into a puddle as deep as his ankle, and felt the cold

stream of water seep under his toes. The water would undoubtedly destroy his \$200 shoes – the only luxury he had allowed himself to buy in the last 11 months. There's no chance StuTech will approve that on my expense report, Luke thought.

He made it the two miles back to his tiny studio apartment in less than 12 minutes and took the three flights of stairs two steps at a time. Six minutes a mile was better than most and not particularly slow for him, and counting the rain, soggy shoes and traffic lights, it wasn't bad. This gave him just enough time to shower, dress and go over his mock interview questions and topics for the hundredth time. His one charcoal

gray suit hung on the far left side of his paltry closet next to hooded sweatshirts and above piles of gym shorts and faded blue jeans. He slipped on a burgundy silk tie that was sitting on the Murphy bed.

He slathered peanut butter on a two-day-old bagel and downed it with a glass of weak orange juice made from concentrate. He could touch both walls of his kitchen at the same time. He was alone in the drafty apartment. No family or friends to speak of. The life of a corporate spy, he thought. Well, almost a corporate spy.

The rain had stopped, so he left his overcoat on the hook by the door and descended the three flights of stairs to

the street level. The neighborhood was quiet – the rain having driven most people indoors and they'd yet to return. A large pawnshop anchored one end of the block, followed by an always-empty French café and a secondhand clothing store. Not exactly Rodeo Drive.

He walked back to the MassEnergy campus, this time more careful to avoid any puddles that might ruin his only pair of leather loafers that had come courtesy of the secondhand store on the corner.

He thought he was a lock to get the job and this third interview was more of a formality than anything else. He'd already been tested on his grasp of wireless electric system design and transmission, plus built mock-ups of

urban networks more complex than most in existence today. His skills couldn't be questioned.

If MassEnergy didn't select Luke for this job, it would be a shock. Unfortunately, Luke thought as the campus came into view, hiring me means every person working here will soon be kicked out into the cold.

Just after the popular adoption of affordable all-electric vehicles, well-funded activists in the United States pushed forward legislation that banned the burning of nearly all fossil fuels on American soil. Gasoline for cars and coal in power plants were the key targets. Energy independence is an American right, they argued, but it's also

our duty to ensure our practices don't kill our planet.

Man-made climate change, once considered questionable science, became a mainstream belief. True or not. Only drastic action could possibly save Mother Earth.

Ending oil imports from foreign countries enabled the continued development of more sophisticated electric vehicles, which drove up the demand for electricity. A massive gap was created. Nearly 50 percent of the country's electric generation had once come from coal power plants, which now sat idle. Much of the South and the Eastern seaboard were devastated. There just wasn't enough power to go

around.

Yet, the ban on fossil fuels continued – for the sake of the planet, most believed.

So, over two decades ago when a brilliant scientist from Cornell University named Warren Evans introduced a wireless electricity-delivery system that would replace aging power lines, lower energy prices and bring the country back from the brink of economic disaster, he was heralded as a conquering hero.

Evans formed a company, called StuTech, which quickly became the largest electric-transmission company in the country, responsible for delivering wireless energy to half of the U.S.

population. But the company's growing monopoly didn't benefit everyone.

A checkerboard of electric utility companies across the United States simply folded, leaving their copper wires and transformers attached uselessly to an antiquated wire grid. Cities and towns, situated long distances from any electric generation facilities went dark, pushing their residents into urban centers, where life was "the way it used to be," for the most part.

Some chose to stay in these forgotten worlds of 1850s living, isolated from the digital demand of the day, while reluctantly accepting their fate as forgotten relics.

StuTech's monopoly may have saved

the country from certain collapse, but it also ensured that thousands of cities and towns would stay off line for good.

Chapter 2

A large female security guard named Frankie waved Luke through the metal detectors at MassEnergy after directing him to place his briefcase on a conveyer belt to be scanned. A few dozen people stood in line behind him in the main lobby of Building 1. She leafed through his bag mindlessly.

“Looking for anything in particular?” Luke asked.

“Sweetie, there’s nothing we’re not looking for,” she said. “With all you newbie’s crawling around in here today, I’m never going to get a break.”

A sign posted at the security desk listed prohibited materials. No phones, laptops, tablets, pocket computers, flash drives, scanners, cameras or recordable discs were allowed inside. Behind the desk was a room with a set of shelves full of devices from people who obviously didn't read the sign first.

Luke flashed her a knowing smile, noting that he understood her pain if only for the 35 seconds he was expected to interact with her.

"I'm not a newbie yet, but I hope to be soon."

She looked up from the bag and gave him a quick once-over and then went back to her tasks and didn't look up again.

Luke and 40 or so others were ushered into a small auditorium. He took a seat in the back. A man Luke recognized from Human Resources mounted the stage.

“Thank you all for coming for your third interview. I know this isn’t the quickest process, but we think it works. You’re going to be divided into groups of eight and will be talking to a member of our executive team one at a time. You’ll all get the same set of questions and will be evaluated on your previous skill tests and how you answer today’s inquiries. Any questions? No? Good.”

He then called out the names of the first group.

To Luke’s left was a dark-skinned

man, who looked to be of Middle Eastern descent. He pulled out a set of headphones and fumbled with a device in his jacket and started to tap a rhythm on the chair in front of him. The tapping became more animated as the man waved both arms above and around his head banging on the seats around him. The commotion started to draw the attention of others in the room who turned around and stared at the man, who had his eyes closed. He swung his arms as if he were playing a set of air drums – symbols and all. He was completely oblivious to those around him.

Quickly all eyes went to Luke, who was sitting directly next to him. The collective stares asked – are you going

to do something about that? Again, not wanting to call attention to himself, Luke placed a hand on the man's arm to get his attention and possibly calm him down. The movement, which stopped the impromptu air-drum show, caused the man to violently twitch in his chair and flail his arms as if being awoken from a bad dream.

Luke tapped his ears indicating the man's headphones.

"Oh, yeah," the man said without a breath, "Sorry about that. I tend to do that when I'm bored or nervous or bored and antsy and nervous."

"Don't worry about it."

Once the show in the back row was over, those remaining in the room went

back to studying their papers or staring at the back of the head of the person in front of them.

“How’d you get those in here, anyway,” Luke asked, pointing to the music player the man had pulled out of his jacket. “Security seems pretty tight around here.”

“No secret. Did that big security guard frisk you too?”

Luke nodded.

“No sneaking anything past her,” the man said. “Let’s just say that according to her I’m probably the only deaf engineer in the room today. Every security system has its flaws. Most of the time, it’s the humans that run them. I think she likes me anyway.”

“I got the same feeling.”

“Name’s Amir,” he stuck out his hand. Luke grasped it and introduced himself.

“Must have been a good song,” Luke said.

“The what? Yeah it was. Helps keep me calm.”

The man’s leg began bouncing up and down, vibrating the row of seats. Droplets of sweat were forming on his forehead and he quickly wiped it away with his shirtsleeve.

“Maybe you should turn it back on. You seem pretty nervous.”

“Nah, I’m not nervous. I’ve got a job. Don’t need another job. Two jobs? Man, that’s rough. One job will be just fine. Well maybe I am. Nervous, I mean.”

“What’s your specialty? I like to size up my competition.”

“Mechanical engineering. Jet engine fabrication mostly. Working aerospace now. High Earth atmosphere flights.”

This guy needs to lay off the caffeine, Luke thought. But his particular set of skills might come in handy for a team of engineers when social skills weren’t a requirement. In fact most of the candidates he’d spoken to over the past several weeks had a wide range of skills very different from his own.

The HR rep was back, calling for more interviews, “Luke Kincaid, Elizabeth Caton, Amir Ghorbani...”

Suddenly questioning his own abilities, Luke stood, brushed the

wrinkles out of his suit pants and followed the group down the hall.

James Beckman, MassEnergy's VP of Development was a pointy-headed bald man who carried a spare tire around his middle, which flopped over his belt. His secondhand tie rested comfortably on his massive mid-section. He leaned on the front of his desk, nearly toppling over a potted plant on its corner. He rolled up the sleeves of his white dress shirt, opened a blue file folder and began to read.

One of his office walls was completely covered, floor to ceiling, in beige filing cabinets. Several lower drawers remained open, revealing densely packed paper files with colored

tabs. The mass of cabinets seemed out of place for a large corporation on the forefront of the digital world.

Luke sat in a small chair in front of Beckman's desk, just feet from the man.

"You've got quite the resume, young man," Beckman said, still reading from the file. "First Team All-Pac 12 in soccer. You run marathons as a hobby. Of course this isn't an athletic club, so those aren't very practical here. Stanford grad with honors, commendations from several professors. Wireless Network Technician at StuTech. How long were you there?"

"Five years. I took a position there right after my college graduation. I worked on residential network design."

“I see. And you were fired?”

Luke shifted uncomfortably in his chair. While he knew this question would come up – as it had during his previous two interviews, he had yet to come up with a satisfactory answer for why he left one of the largest and most profitable companies in the world to take a job at a tiny start-up in California the previous year. Nothing ever seemed to satisfy his questioners, but he needed his cover story to be clean.

“No. I simply didn’t find the work challenging any longer. It was time for a change,” Luke said confidently.

Beckman didn’t look up from the file.

“And you’ve been with Millennium Optics in California for just 11 months

now. I suspect you've found this work beneath you as well?"

"No sir, its actually very interesting work, but our VC funding is nearly up and I'd like to find something with a bit longer time horizon."

"This company was launched with venture capital dollars as well. Have you no faith in your leadership?"

Luke flashed back to his prep materials. Saying anything disparaging about your current employer was a big red flag for potential employers. Beckman was obviously baiting him.

"Actually, I'm hopeful that Millennium Optics' new system design software will hit the market by next fall, as we've announced publically, but I

expect by then we'll be competing with large firms, possibly even this one, for market share."

"So, you're bored easily and like to job hop. Tell me, why is MassEnergy interesting to you - at least this week?"

Luke knew MassEnergy was founded just six years prior and had yet to produce or sell anything of value, but rumors were the company was on the verge of a game-changing wireless breakthrough, thus the hiring spree.

"I think there is great potential in offering products to fill the gaps created by the current state of our electric delivery web. As you know, never before has one company been given such monopolistic powers over the

transmission of energy. StuTech shouldn't be the only game in town. Tailoring operating services that can enhance electric reliability, such as MassEnergy's Neighborhood Repeater concept goes a long way to real competition with StuTech."

"And you think that's what you'll be doing here? Taking on StuTech?"

"I believe so, yes."

Beckman scrawled something on a form and handed it to Luke.

"Take that to HR. If you want in, you start tomorrow. Welcome to MassEnergy."

Chapter 3

*11 months earlier
Seattle, Washington*

Warren Evans' estate sat on the misty waters of Washington's Puget Sound. Another recipient of the nation's technological migration west was the city of Seattle and the surrounding area, which had nearly doubled in population in the last 20 years. The region was not new to billionaires in residence, but with an estimated net worth of more than \$7 billion and sole control of StuTech, one of the most powerful companies in the world, Evans was the big dog by anyone's measurement.

The compound was surrounded by a private nine-hole golf course, a Japanese garden, amphitheater for holding charity events and all forms of athletic courts. The main house was located about a half-mile from the public access road that was guarded night and day by a private security firm. The 13-bedroom, 15-bath home had just one permanent resident, 70-year-old Warren Evans, who padded around the marble-floored hallways in slippers and a bathrobe. He only used his cane on the bad days.

Evans had always been an inventor. As a professor at Cornell University, he would go weeks without attending his own scheduled lectures while he was in the middle of some side project. His

passion for science and experimentation led him to develop the world's first efficient wireless electricity-delivery system.

The concept of wireless transmission was not a recent discovery. In the early days Evans used to compare wireless to a simple magnetic field. He said if a small building is wired for electricity, but not properly grounded, the electricity can jump – wirelessly – to a nearby chain-link fence, causing a slight shock or burn to anyone who touches the fence. It was a rather slimmed-down explanation.

Evans had solved the key problem with wireless transmission – efficiency. In the early 1900s Nikola Tesla tested

wireless transmission, illuminating a bulb miles away, but the amount of power needed to send a signal was absurd. Simply throwing waves of electricity in the air, like a broadcast radio tower, didn't do enough to power anything. Tesla's experiments were a waste. Evans experimented with thousands of combinations of elements and minerals that would effectively conduct electricity over greater and greater distances. An avid traveler and adventurer – in his hay day at least – Evans would collect mineral and plant samples from exotic locations around the globe. His collections became the basis for his wireless research.

His genius and his wealth came from

self-financing his research, thus owning the process, scope and proprietary nature of its inner-workings. So when it came time to market his wireless devices to the world, he became ridiculously wealthy. The device that came to represent wireless transmission he called a stub – a 24-inch cylinder, with a narrow shaft that sat atop a building to receive electricity from large towers nearby. Evans named his company StuTech after its quintessential component, the stub. His placement of 250-foot StuTech towers around the country allowed electricity to flow efficiently to homes and businesses with stubs.

On the flat screen tablet at the granite

slab table of his kitchen, Evans swiped his finger through the pages of the financial publications he so valued. He remembered the days when his fingers would turn black from holding and folding his daily paper. Printed pages - resource hogs he called them. The energy required to make ink, paper, print plates and then deliver a product that only one person would use before discarding, was an outrage. Of course, if he could benefit from selling energy for the process, then maybe it wasn't so bad after all.

The markets were up in North America and Asia this morning. What a great way to start the day.

A member of his kitchen staff

delivered a plate of egg whites and toast to the table. She set a small cup of espresso next to the plate and left the room as quietly as she'd entered. He quickly drank the coffee, savoring the caffeine kick, one of his few vices.

Evans rarely left his estate. He preferred the solitude that it afforded him. He rarely saw anyone he'd prefer not to. Yet he held court every weekday in his oversized kitchen with select members of StuTech's leadership. Most of them were ungrateful idiots who didn't know their thumbs from a hole in the ground. Yet, the alternatives weren't much better – and yes – he'd looked.

No sooner than he'd given up on his bland meal and downed his second cup

of espresso, did his first guest arrive. Steve Lunsford was a hulking mass of a man with a protruding brow and perpetual scowl. His thinning and speckled gray hair was crisply parted to the side. An unfortunate amount of white spittle residue formed at the corners of his mouth as he spoke.

Lunsford was StuTech's Security Chief and had the unique distinction of being the only member of its senior leadership to not hold the title of president or vice president. Evans claimed that he chose to keep his friend's title understated, so as not to show favoritism. Lunsford for his part never asked for any further recognition. His actions spoke for themselves, though

he often encountered resistance among his peers due to his informal, albeit elevated status.

“What’s the word from the front?” Evans asked.

Lunsford touched a small square object, roughly the size of a matchbook, to the sensor on Evan’s touch screen, syncing the day’s security reports to the device.

“Nothing significant to report in the last week,” Lunsford said. “We’re watching an archeological dig in France conducted by the University of Munich, but so far its pretty quiet.”

“What are they looking for?”

“It’s an expedition uncovering artifacts from the First World War. The

site was a camp for the German Army for some period of time. The depth isn't a concern. Surface work, but it's along the same longitude parallels we're watching."

"Might it be in our interests to persuade the university to search elsewhere?"

"I could have a team in place by the weekend. Make it look like vandals. Scare them off."

Evans grimaced at the suggestion.

"That's not exactly what I meant. These are academics. Sending in your goons to rough them up may halt the expedition for a short while, but they would just resume work with added security."

“So, what do you have in mind?”

“Let’s not forget about the power of financial enticement.”

“Pay them off?”

Evans wondered about his old friend’s capacity to think beyond violence and bribes. The men had known each other since Vietnam when Lunsford commanded their platoon. They’d lived through the most deplorable conditions together and come out strong men, but even stronger friends.

“I’m thinking a sizable donation to the university to start another dig elsewhere immediately, might be enough to keep them occupied for significant length of time. Let’s say \$10 million.”

“They would just start up again at a

later date.”

“But in the meantime we ensure that their dig posed no threat to us.”

“That works,” Lunsford said.
“Consider it done.”

“What can you tell me about Millennium Optics?” Evans asked.

Millennium Optics was the shell company Lunsford oversaw, but had no official connection to StuTech. The independent company worked on “energy related issues,” according to tax records. Publically the company was a think tank that employed academics and bright young engineers. Its products were always in development, but never released.

“We’re fully staffed and we’ve

slowly let it slip that our VC funding is drying up.”

“That’s good to hear. I need you to make room for one more.”

“Who?”

“Luke Kincaid.”

Lunsford looked at his friend thoughtfully, “You sure? Rachel’s not going to be happy.”

“It’s not really up to her, now is it?”

Rachel Evans wore only an oversize sweatshirt that extended to just above her trim and tanned thighs. She paced in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows of her penthouse condo overlooking Lake Washington in Bellevue. Her dark hair was pulled back into a ponytail. Luke marveled at how effortless his fiancée’s

beauty was even when she was rather upset with him.

“Of course you told him no,” she said. “You’re not a spy. You’re an engineer. I’ve never heard of Double-O-Engineer, with a license to chart and graph. The nerve of that man for even asking.”

“You make it sound like you don’t think I could do it,” Luke said.

“Yes, you could do it, I’m sure you would be great, I guess, but why would you? You have a perfectly nice career going right here. You’re talented - everyone knows that. You’d be throwing it all away.”

Earlier in the week Steve Lunsford had made an appointment to meet with Luke. Being a Saturday, Luke knew it

was unusual, but you don't turn down a private meeting with one of the power players at the company, no matter the time or place.

The gig was simple. Get a job at MassEnergy and report anything interesting back to Lunsford. Rumor had it that MassEnergy was working a project to boost the distance of wireless transmission signals. This technology was called a Neighborhood Repeater. If it existed, it was a direct threat to StuTech's future, Lunsford had told him. StuTech had a strict monopoly in the field that had yet to be challenged by anyone - yet.

"Doing this isn't throwing away anything," Luke told Rachel. "This is a

huge opportunity to finally make a name for myself. I've been here five years and what have I accomplished that's significant? Nothing. I've submitted papers to StuTech's Advanced Analytics team every year and gotten nowhere."

"You just expect that you'll be welcomed back with open arms?" Rachel asked. "I've got some pull, but not that much."

And that was the heart of it. As the lone daughter of Warren Evans, Rachel didn't have to work – ever. But instead of sitting on her trust fund and living the life of a debutante, she earned Advanced Accounting and Finance degrees from New York University. Post college, she was in high demand, but only from

companies that wanted to be in her father's good graces. Instead of taking insincere offers, she returned home. She didn't trade on her name and demand a high-ranking position at StuTech as some expected she might. She accepted a position that was fitting for her abilities and rose quickly through the ranks.

Despite her desire to be just another StuTech employee, the simple fact remained that she wasn't just any other employee. Her father founded and still controlled the direction of the company. Telling Rachel no, meant telling her father no, and nobody wanted to do that.

She and Luke had been a couple for three and half years. He moved into her place six months earlier after they got

engaged. They loved each other, there was no question about that, but Luke also didn't want to be her sidekick for the rest of his life. The money Lunsford offered when the job was complete was insane – ten times what he made in a year. It didn't come close to what Rachel had in her bank account, but it provided some peace of mind.

The money was security that Luke hadn't had in some time. All throughout her life, Rachel was accustomed to being served meals by waiters in black ties. Luke was more familiar with holding the silver tray. One of his many making-ends-meet jobs at Stanford was as a server for a catering company. The tips were good and the hours allowed

him to hold other jobs at the same time. The downside came when the star soccer player at the university had to serve tapas to his wealthy friends and their families. It's tough to go back to a level playing field after the party ended.

"I need to do this for me. It's a chance I can't pass up," he said.

StuTech would finally trust him after this, he thought. He could finally learn its secrets and learn how to dismantle them, something he'd failed to do over the last five years.

"It's one year tops," he said. "After that, I'll be right back here with you with a nice fat raise."

Rachel knew that whether Luke admitted it or not, he was forcefully

claiming his independence from her and she understood why. Growing up a rich girl had its benefits, but it was also lonely. Private schools housed other rich kids who had similar problems that only other kids of significant means understood.

Her mother was a 21-year-old secretary at a real estate firm when she met her father, who was 20 years her senior. A fierce love affair ensued – ending Warren Evans' first marriage and resulting in a little bundle of joy named Rachel. Her mother died of cancer when Rachel was just 10 years old and right about the time her father became rich. She was raised by the estate's staff and rarely saw her father. When it came time

for college, she bolted for the other side of the country.

“And besides,” Luke said. “Portland is only a few hours away.”

“Assuming they hire you.”

“Have you no faith in me at all?” Luke asked.

“I do,” she said. “I’m just curious as to why someone would leave StuTech for MassEnergy. Seems like a step in the wrong direction. Wouldn’t they see through that?”

“Turns out I’m about to receive an offer from Millennium Optics that’s just too good to refuse,” he said. “California sun. Sandy beaches. Maybe a little surfing. Perfect reason to take a step backward if you ask me.”

“So you’ve already made your mind up then.”

“Well, yes. But there’s one other tiny little catch that I didn’t mention.” He put his hands on his head and pulled at his hair. “We have to – at least publicly – break up.”

“But we’re getting married!” She screamed at him. “Next year!”

“We’ll need to postpone it,” he said, looking away.

“You’ve got to be kidding. Unbelievable.”

“It’s the only way this makes any sense from the outside.”

“I don’t think this makes any sense to anyone,” she said, fuming. “And I’m just supposed to sit around and wait for you

to come back someday?”

“I will be back. This will be a good thing for me. You understand, don’t you?”

“But is it a good thing for us?” Rachel asked.

“I promise you that when this is over, I won’t be leaving again. This is it.”

“When do you have to go?”

“I start next week.”

“I guess we’d better get to breaking up then,” she said. “I’ve got a few ideas about what our final fight should be about.”

Chapter 4

San Francisco, California

Luke's 10 months at Millennium Optics was spent doing nothing but training for his time inside MassEnergy. There was little known about the inner workings of the company. Regardless, Lunsford had presented him with volumes of material that he said were worth a look. The old man had commandeered an empty office at the California facility and made it his personal mission to, "get your lazy ass into gear." At least once a week Lunsford showed up in person to instruct Luke on some form of covert affairs.

“These people might not see you coming,” he said. “And they might not know what you’re doing, but if you slip up. Just once. You’re going to raise a flag that will shut you down for good. Then this is all a waste, and damn it, I hate to waste my time.”

Luke logged weeks with computer network techs learning about the architecture of active intranet systems and where they might be vulnerable so he could pull data from MassEnergy’s inner networks.

He’d also been given some toys to help his progress. These brief show-and-tell lectures and quizzes had become a weekly annoyance, with Lunsford droning on about how items lying around

the office can, “save your bacon.”

Lunsford placed a black duffle bag on the desk and pulled out what looked like a typical mobile phone.

“I assume you know what this is.”

Luke blinked hard and squinted at the old man. “Um, yes, that’s a cell phone. It’s for making calls.”

“You’d think so, huh? Smart-ass. This isn’t just any phone. It’s a drop phone. I’m giving you a couple of them.

“And why would I need that?”

“To talk to me junior.”

“Looking forward to it.”

Lunsford reached into the bag again and handed Luke a copper-colored watch with a brown leather strap.

“Let me guess,” Luke said, “That’s for

telling time, right?”

Lunsford took a deep breath.

“If you prefer to do this on your own, by all means, give it a shot. But you’re putting my name on the line here and as much as I think you’re going to mess it all up, I at least want to give you the benefit of knowing how to get the job done.”

“All right, sorry. What’s the watch for?” Luke asked.

“It’s for telling time,” Lunsford said, dryly. “But it will also transfer up to five terabytes of data onto an internal hard drive in seconds. Just set the dials to noon and press these two buttons on the side until the dial clicks.”

“How do I retrieve the data?”

“Place it on a USB data mat and it shows up like a hard drive connected to your computer. Did you know those mats were how Warren Evans first started to make some dough? He wanted to go wireless before anyone else did.”

“Except for Nikola Tesla, of course.”

“Who?”

“Never mind.”

He dumped a dozen identical watches on the desk.

“Just don’t mix them up. Or you’ll overwrite whatever you copied.”

Lunsford was old school. In the age when every street corner was fitted with a security camera, purchases were made by credit more than cash and tracking down someone was as simple as

following their digital trail – he claimed it paid to buck the trends.

“You might have some nifty gadgets, but if you want to get around that place, you’re going to have to use a little of your own brain power too,” he said. “That means you should be the life of the party or the shy guy in the corner. Whatever the situation requires. Your real job is trying to figure out what exactly they need to trust you.”

Luke was instructed to never contact Lunsford except for pre-arranged days and times. If you miss an appointment, Lunsford told him, expect a visit. The look in his eyes said that the visit wouldn’t be a social one.

“If you obtain anything that you think

would be valuable for StuTech to have, leave the shades on the North wall of your apartment open for a full day. At 10:30 p.m. the following night, stick it in a plastic bag and drop it in the trash can near the playground at Mainfair Park.”

“Doesn’t leaving it out in the open like that mean that anyone can get it?”

“Yes and no. If you’re not a moron – and the jury is still out on that – you shouldn’t be suspected of doing anything, thus your trashcan drop offs would go under the radar. If someone does find it in the trash, then we have other ways to deal with that.”

Luke had learned enough during his time with Lunsford that dealing with someone, in this case, probably meant

following or snatching whoever was snooping around. Fortunately that was someone else's department.

Chapter 5

Mill Creek, California

A few months into his training at Millennium Optics, Luke received a letter from his sister Gina, asking him to come home for a visit. She'd been asking for him to come see her in Mill Creek for the past few years. Each time he had some excuse as to why he couldn't make it back to their hometown. She knew why he stayed away, but they never talked about it and it was better that way. No one but them could know the reason why.

Mill Creek was one of the first towns in California to go dark more than a

decade earlier. The great wireless electricity revolution had forgotten this little corner of the world. So many more towns followed. The power just went out. No explanation. No plans for restoration. Half of the town knew the end was coming and already left when the plug was finally pulled.

Two days after the blackout, the car accident killed both their parents. Luke and his older sister Gina were left alone in Mill Creek, fending for themselves. He was ready leave town right after the power was cut and even more so after the accident. But their deaths weren't the reason he left.

Luke had watched the regional media to keep tabs on the town and regularly

got handwritten letters from Gina. She had a fix on the town gossip and was always a great source of information. She always said there were rumors of power coming back to the town again, but he knew better. It just wasn't in the cards. The rumors were the result of a hope that the town would someday have some life again.

The power company that served Mill Creek went belly up once StuTech took over its major population centers. The copper wires and transformers in the area were sold for scrap to pay off creditors. There was no infrastructure to turn back on. You couldn't just flip a switch. The town was outside of the range of StuTech Towers and wasn't

able to receive wireless power. It was off the grid in every way possible.

Yet, somehow people stayed.

He decided the short weekend trip was inevitable. Luke filled a backpack full of a few days worth of clothes, energy bars and his tablet computer and set off for his past. Millennium Optics had a few electric motorcycles for employee use. He signed one out for the weekend with assurances it would be back, good as new on Monday.

The motorcycle was remarkably quiet, except for the government-mandated whirring noise it made under 10 miles an hour. The era of thunderous Harley-Davidson's with two-cycle gas engines, rattling the windows of nearby houses

was long gone. The economical, lightweight machines were a favorite among commuters in big cities. With a range of more than 400 miles, the bikes could be used for days without the need for a charge.

Luke arrived in town at 9 a.m. on a Saturday morning, but it might as well have been Saturday morning 10 years earlier. Little had changed, at least not for the better. The main strip through town featured a memorial to depression-era loggers in the middle of a one-acre city park. The grass was dead and dusty. The windows of the shops fronting the street were all boarded up. The graffiti wrapped all the way down the alleyways behind the old business

district. You could see through the burnt shells of several old buildings that had been gutted by fire.

Creasman's Hardware on Main Street was the only store still in operation. The storefront was shaded by large solar arrays, propped up with two-by-fours, which provided intermittent solar power. Strung around the panels were reels of razor wire, daring anyone to touch the panels. The street was empty of all cars and Luke's bike turned a few heads as he silently cruised by. The town didn't get many outside visitors.

A makeshift farmers market was being held in the Christian Community Church parking lot. It had the feel of a country swap meet, but with a little more

desperation. Patrons stuffed their carts with bags of soybeans, corn and oats. A man in overalls stood watch over a makeshift pen of chickens and a display of eggs. A 25-foot tall wooden wind turbine spun near the sidewalk, towering over the crates housing do-it-yourself wind turbine kits. The market was exactly as he remembered it, except much larger now. Maybe dirtier too. They used to hold the farmers market in the Catholic church parking lot, which was about half the size.

Gina still lived in their parents' house on the bluff overlooking the town. She always said it was the best house in the valley because from the front porch you could see the sun rise first thing in the

morning and hold on to it all day until it set at night. Her love of the outdoors meant she wasn't quite as affected by the blackout as others.

Luke rounded the last winding turn up to the house and pulled up the gravel driveway. He removed his helmet and set the kickstand, but didn't budge from the bike.

It was like looking at a picture. The blue house paint was a little faded, but other than that, the place hadn't changed. His memories of leaving so suddenly all those years ago flooded back to him like a dam bursting and he could feel his heart beating faster and faster in his chest. He didn't want to think about what happened that night in the backyard.

What he did to save Gina and then leaving her. He reached back for his helmet to leave. It was all too much. He didn't want to remember.

“Hey you!” yelled a young, but sharp voice coming from behind the woodshed beside the house. “We don't need what you're selling. Go away, we don't have anything you want anyway. Scram.”

The girl, thin as a rail, began coughing, a deep, heavy cough. She had long straight blonde hair and a freckled face. If he hadn't known better, he would have said the little girl was his sister 25 years ago. No, it couldn't be ... could it?

Luke was unsure of what to do.

“Now leave your uncle alone, Tilly. He's not selling anything,” Gina said,

taking off a pair of gardening gloves and rubbing her palm on the young girl's back to soothe her coughing fit. "You're not selling anything are you brother?"

Luke had yet to move from the bike, but that didn't stop Gina from walking up to him and wrapping her arms around his neck.

"I'm so glad you came. I wasn't sure if you got the letters. I tried to call you in Seattle but the number was disconnected."

"You have a phone?"

"That's the first question you ask me?" staring at him with wide eyes, then glancing at Tilly. "No. No phone. Not here. Borrowed one in Sacramento though."

“Is that where you got the kid too?”

“That’s the question I expected.”

“She’s not Elliot Costgrove’s-”

“God no. That half-wit never even got close. Tilly’s mine and original to Mill Creek. Long story.”

“Good thing I plan to stay all weekend,” he said.

“All weekend? I’m sure we’ll have you scared off by sundown, no question.”

Inside the house Gina stepped on a foot pump connected to a hose that slowly released a mist of medicine into a facemask that seven-year-old Tilly wore. Tilly sat by the window and sucked in the medicine with her eyes closed.

“It’s an advanced stage lung disorder. As long as she gets her medicine a few times a day she feels all right. The doctors said it’s probably from the residual environmental particles throughout the valley. Our water filtration systems can be pretty rough on young ones, considering we haven’t had any filtration since the blackout. There are a few other children in the valley who have symptoms like Tilly. But she’s lucky. It hasn’t advanced as far as some of the others. But she doesn’t even have the breath to blow out the candles on her birthday cake each year.”

She handed Luke a charcoal drawing Tilly had made. It showed a young girl in front of a birthday cake. The candles

were missing.

She turned away from Tilly and said in a low voice, “Two boys on Coffer Street passed earlier this year.”

“Is it that serious? What do the doctors say about her prospects?”

“We all get water from a community rain catch now, so she’s not exposed to the particles the broken water filtration systems miss. We hitch a ride to Sacramento every few months to get medicine and get her a check up. They really don’t know how long she can live like this. She coughs so hard some nights ... Thankfully we’ve got the machine for her medicine.”

Gina, shifted in her seat and began pumping the medical device with her

other foot. She had to nearly stand on the pump to get any medicine out.

“You need to move out of this place,” Luke said. “Living like Abraham Lincoln is a great ideal, but it just doesn’t make any sense. You’ve got a daughter now to think of.”

“You might have just met her, but I’ve known her for seven years and believe me, I’ve thought about moving, but this is our home. It’s what I know. This is a simple life and one that you should understand.”

“I understand it perfectly well. That’s why I left here 10 years ago and never looked back. If your daughter can’t get the medical care she needs, then its irresponsible for you to stay here.”

“Luke, there’s nothing more that can be done for her than what I’m already doing. It’s not easy, but she’s getting care.”

“But what happens when she needs something that’s more than a hitch hike away or costs more than what you can pay or trade for?”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it,” she said. “This is the life I’ve chosen.”

But the fact was that no one in these towns had chosen to be cut off from the rest of the world. It happened *to* them. But they chose to stay in isolation, Luke thought. It was a barbaric existence that had taken more from him than most.

It took his parents, but also guided his

future. If not for the blackout he would have never studied electrical engineering at Stanford. He was determined to get a job at StuTech and it was the only way. It didn't come easy at first, but after a few rough semesters, he began to understand how electricity worked. There were still a lot of unknowns in the field, but despite that, he got a certification in wireless networks. His certification was a joke, but the foundation was real and it kept him fixated on StuTech.

Gina never understood why he chose to work for StuTech. Revenge never crossed her mind. She lived in her own little world. Luke was exasperated. The idyllic life, off the grid, meant no strings

attached, but also no safety net.

“Is this why you asked me to come here?” Luke asked, his cheeks flushing red. “To remind me how horrible this place is? Mission accomplished.”

“You really are an asshole sometimes.”

Gina stopped pumping the machine and removed the mask from Tilly’s face. She had fallen asleep as the medicine took affect. She motioned for Luke to follow her out back.

Every inch of the two acres of land just beyond the back screen door was covered with vegetation. Carrots, cabbage, peas, corn, soy plants, potatoes, but the largest section was filled with marijuana plants.

Gina saw Luke fixate on the cash crop.

“That’s how I can pay for her medicine and machines. I’m not proud of it, but it’s not hurting anyone – in fact it’s actually helping Tilly.”

“You don’t give her-“

“No, you boob. I mean the profits help her. Walter Perkins sells it behind the market every weekend. Folks use it to ease the pain of their ailments. It’s a lot easier than getting prescription drugs.”

She tossed him a pair of gloves and began thinning the carrots. Painfully familiar with the technique, he joined in.

“I sent you those letters because I wanted you to meet your niece before it was too late. Like I said, I have no idea

how long she will hang on and I at least wanted her to know her uncle.”

“I’m sorry I got upset and I’m glad I came, but you know how I loathe this way of life and wish you’d come with me when I left and not just because of what happened that night. There was no reason for you to stay.”

“This is our home. Our parents’ home. That was reason enough. Besides, you were the big shot college athlete, what were you planning on doing, hiding me in your dorm room?”

“You would have fit nicely in my closet,” Luke said with a smile. “It was rather roomy.”

“You needed to go. And besides, I had this house to take care of and now I

have Tilly.”

The two worked in silence for a while, clearing weeds from the gardens. His back ached after only a few minutes.

“I haven’t done a lot of gardening lately,” he said.

When the power first went out at Salk High School, Luke was in a 12th grade history class. The classroom he was in had no windows. The students were pitched into blackness. The teachers knew what had finally happened because it had been all over the news for the past six months. Their electricity provider, Intra Power had gone belly up and the federal government had failed to come to its aide. When the lights went off, they

didn't come back on again.

One of Luke's teachers said it best. "We've been studying ancient history all year. Today we're part of making history. Things aren't going to be the same anymore."

The students were moved to the cafeteria filled with natural light and held until the school day ended. Traffic was heavy on the walk home. The roads were filled with moving vans and cars stuffed with family belongings. Several of Luke's friends waved goodbye as they went past. Gina was then a full-time cashier at Creaseman's Hardware. She met him on the walk halfway home.

"I lost my job today," she said. "Mr. Creaseman doesn't think the store can

survive. All his customers are leaving.”

A town council meeting was held that night. The meeting was arranged in advance to be held on whatever night the lights finally went out. It wasn't a surprise and plans had already been put into place to deal with the situation. There was no hope for the power being restored, they said, the poles and wires were already being removed to sell for scrap.

Those who chose to stay in the town were asked to check in at the council chambers by the next day so an accurate head count could be established. The Mill Creek Sheriff's office had planned ahead and was still in operation. All laws followed before the blackout were

still in place. Theft or looting of any kind would be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. It was an empty threat. Several deputies had fled the town days earlier and its capacity to enforce laws was weak at best.

By the next day it was announced that 753 area residents, about one-fifth of the population, had decided to stay, at least for now.

The next day Henry and Eleanor Kincaid were killed in the car accident. Gina and Luke were completely alone.

Chapter 6

The next day Tilly and Luke played a board game while Gina made a breakfast of pancakes on the propane stove. They were up early for the long walk down to the Sunday morning church service. Luke and Gina had stayed up past midnight catching up on just about everything they'd missed about each other's lives over the past several years. Luke stuck to his cover story about his job-hopping, not explaining that he was doing StuTech's dirty work to get in its good graces and find a way to gain influence at the company.

She'd always wondered about his

choice of careers. His motives for working at StuTech would not be lost on her, but it wasn't a conversation Luke wanted to have. Not yet. So she didn't ask him about StuTech and he didn't offer. Besides, his new employment would make him flush with cash. Maybe he would have the means to move Gina and Tilly to a city on the grid – maybe even Seattle – or at least provide his niece with the medical care she needed.

Tilly's father wasn't in the picture. He and Gina had dated for just a few months when they found out she was pregnant. Once she told him, he split. She had been on her own ever since. Gina said friends stopped by when they could to visit and keep her spirits up. The bonds

were strong between those who remained behind in the town. Book clubs and sewing circles were formed and no one missed church on Sundays.

A national television news show had once profiled the town and interviewed several of Gina's close friends. The show chronicled the plight of the towns severed from the power grid. Mill Creek wasn't alone. Across the country hundreds of cities and towns were in the same situation. Several were just abandoned all together. The trend was on the rise globally too as clean-energy groups persuaded governments to stop burning coal. Wireless hadn't yet been introduced on the international stage, so the current concern was the simple lack

of electrical generation. Third world leaders were lobbying StuTech to come to their country first.

The global implications of the power grid were all but lost on Mill Creek. No Internet, phone or television reception meant word just didn't make it to them. A few enterprising individuals had satellite radio and TV service and would sell tickets to watch shows or listen to live music. The entertainment was a welcome distraction. Tilly particularly liked listening to dance music on their radio when the batteries were charged. She wasn't able to move to the music more than just tapping her toes to the beat, otherwise her coughing would overcome her.

They left for the long walk early because she liked to sit in the front row at the Christian Community Church. Parishioners played music at the beginning and the end of each service. The guitar and piano combination was the only live music regularly played in the town.

The church had a large glass window on one side that filled the sanctuary with light. The other side was boarded up. A tree had smashed through the glass years ago and they didn't have the money to repair it. Plywood was ugly, but it did the job.

They reached the church just minutes before the service was about to begin, but there were two places held up front

for Tilly and her mother. There was a slight commotion when some of the churchgoers noticed that the third member of their party was Luke Kincaid, who hadn't been seen since his high school graduation a decade ago. Someone gave up their seat in the front so they could sit together.

The pastor gave a rather uninspired sermon on community giving and helping those in need. Luke did his best to focus on the meaning behind what the man was saying, but he was a bit out of practice when it came to pretending to pay attention in church. He scanned the audience, who sat in respectful silence. It was clear that people were attending the service out of a need for human

contact and engagement, not any spiritual awakening. He recognized some of the older people, who looked very much older than he remembered.

When the service and music concluded everyone filed out onto the dry church lawn for their weekly round of gossip. Tilly went off with some friends. Luke stuck to Gina's side, but was quickly swept up in the goings on around town. A family of outsiders had moved all of their belongings into an abandoned home and planned to take up residence there. The school was under threat from the state education board for their lack of computer access. The medical center was low on supplies.

There were also rumors that a new

cluster of wireless transmission towers was being sited for the town. This was always a popular rumor because it gave hope to many that maybe someday the town could be normal again – back on the grid. Luke knew better. Towers could only be linked together a certain number of times – a few hundred miles at best. As the electricity is transmitted farther away from its origin, it loses strength. Mill Creek wasn't close enough to power plants to ever get electricity wirelessly. But the rumors persisted because it was a small town and that's just how it goes.

Luke was relieved when the small group they were standing with switched back to discussing the medical center's

supply shortage. He really didn't want to answer questions on behalf of StuTech, his "previous" employer. He stepped away, thankful that he'd not been asked to contribute anything to the conversation. He didn't want to dash their hopes. It just wasn't possible to reach the town wirelessly and with no local utilities providing wired service due to the insanely expensive cost, it was really a lost cause.

"Luke," a deep male voice called out his name from across the church grounds. He turned to see Walter Perkins, striding over.

Walter and Luke had been in the same class from kindergarten through high school and through proximity over taste,

had maintained a touch and go friendship the entire time. When the town went dark, Walter and his family packed up and left. Just a few months later, Walter alone returned to town and moved back into his parents' farm. Rumor was that he had run into some kind of trouble and was hiding from the law. Given his current position as Gina's weed distributor, the rumor was probably true, Luke thought.

“Hey college boy. How you been?”

“Good, Walter. How about yourself?”

“Can't complain. Got a nice little side project that pays the bills around here. Bet you know about that one. Anyone need something. They know where to go.”

“Yeah, I heard about that.”

“You need something, man?” Walter said, looking around the area for no apparent reason.

“No, I’m good, but thanks for asking.”

“It’s all good,” Walter said. “We’re like family, you know.”

Walter Perkins was not what Luke considered family.

“I followed your exploits at UCLA,” Walter said. “You weren’t a chump like in school. You were the man.”

“It was Stanford. I had a good run, but that’s mostly behind me now. I haven’t been on a soccer field in a while. Not sure if I could even keep up.”

“Yeah, guess not. You know, your sister won’t shut up about you. Showed

me newspaper clippings of your games and stuff. And when you got hired up at that jacked-up wireless place in Seattle. What's that all about anyway? Can't say I'm a fan. Know what I mean?" he motioned around to the boarded up storefronts. "Bad for the local economy. Bad for my business. Thought you'd be the last guy to sign up with those fools."

"The devil you know is better than the devil you don't," Luke said, knowing Walter wouldn't understand his reasoning even if he spelled it out for him.

"Don't be spouting all that college-boy stuff on me. Tell me, any chance we'll be graced by your company's presence any time soon?"

And there it was. Luke recited his rehearsed answer and said he didn't work for the company anymore, but explained the limitations of the technology. Walter soaked it all in without a word until he'd finished his pitch.

“I know why we don't get power, but I want to know what's being done about it. It's hard for me to imagine with all those big brains up there, that nobody has it figured out yet.”

Hundreds of power companies had operated for a century before they were forced out of business because of carbon emission legislation. Even today there was yet more legislation forming that would give StuTech greater powers to

regulate the wireless market. StuTech wanted assurances that the radio frequency it used wasn't going to be given to up-start competitors. Legislation seemed to drive all meaningful, even harmful change.

"I know they're working on it," Luke said. "Trust me, I'll be the first in line to get this place back up and running if its possible."

"You do that."

About that time Tilly grabbed his arm and pulled him to safety – the swing set. He said goodbye. Walter nodded, looked to the right, the left and behind him and then walked off without a word. Luke followed his niece and was quickly put in charge of pushing her on the

swing. Her blonde hair fluttered in his face when she swooped back toward him for the next push. He made a concerted effort to keep the pushes low and short, hoping she wouldn't get too excited and have another coughing attack. He really didn't know what to do around kids.

“Mommy talks about you a lot,” Tilly said after a few moments of silence.

“She does? What does she say about me?”

“Well, she mostly talks about me and her, because we're the only ones that live here, but she says that you used to live here too and that you are the best family we have, even if we don't ever

see you. How come you never came to see us before?”

Luke wasn't a child psychologist, but he was pretty sure that telling his niece that he didn't know she even existed before yesterday probably wasn't the right blocks to be building a relationship on.

“I live pretty far from here and just haven't had the chance to come by. I hope that I can see you both a lot more in the future. Maybe you can come visit me.”

“Is it far to walk? Because I don't like it when we have to get rides from people we don't know. They aren't very nice all the time.”

“Maybe we could arrange a ride for

you that didn't involve hitchhiking. Would that be OK?"

"I think that would be a lot better."

"Tilly, do you like living in Mill Creek? I mean, you've visited other places to see the doctor, did you notice any differences?"

"It's loud pretty much everywhere else. Here it's quiet and I like that. And you can walk in the middle of the street most of the time. In Sacramento we had to be really careful walking around because it was so loud and there were so many people. Mommy didn't like it either. We like the quiet."

"What about your doctor. Did you feel any better after seeing him?"

"I sort of did. He gave me medicine

and I think that's good."

"I worry that since you're so far away from your doctor that you'll--"

Luke stopped, realizing what he was about to say. He'd never really had a conversation with a seven-year-old before.

"I just hope you get better," he managed to get out.

"Me too. Can you push me higher?"

"You bet."

The family had an early dinner and the sun was just starting to set when it was time for Luke to go back to his faux job at Millennium Optics. He packed up his things, including as many fresh vegetables as he could possibly fit in his backpack - Gina's orders. The ones at

the stores have too many chemicals and pesticides in them, Gina said, stuffing more into the pack. He gladly took them. Brother and sister walked out to the motorcycle in the front drive.

“You should have told me about Tilly,” Luke said. “If I would have known she was here, maybe I would have come back earlier.”

“And maybe you would have resented us for being beckoned back to this place out of guilt.”

She was right Luke thought, but said nothing.

“I won’t stay away as long this time. I promise.”

“I hope not, if for no other reason than to weed the garden. You’re quite a bit

faster than Tilly even if you're out of practice."

"Glad I could help out."

She gave him a hug and he mounted the motorcycle.

"I can't really talk about it much, but I've got a few projects happening at work that will mean some more money. Maybe I can help you guys out a bit."

"We'll be OK, we-"

Tilly began coughing hard on the porch. "I'd better get her medicine ready. See you soon brother."

She turned and walked briskly back to the house, her attention turned completely to her daughter, blocking out the rest of the world. Tilly waved as the two went inside.

As he pulled away he couldn't get out of this thoughts what he'd said to Walter, "I'll be the first in line to get this place back up and running." He still hadn't figured out how that was going to happen.

Chapter 7

Portland, Oregon

Present Day

Kathryn Tate, MassEnergy's striking Director of Research and Development set down her briefcase on the desk at the front of the classroom. She was wearing a black pencil skirt and a white blouse that was tailored for her toned figure. An attorney in her mid-30s, she gave off an air of professionalism mixed with sex appeal that couldn't be ignored. She'd used her looks to climb the ladder at several tech companies throughout her career, but it wasn't her sexual allure that had landed her the job at

MassEnergy two years earlier. She got the job because she was a shark.

In her professional circle she was a killer, brought in to clean house and move on. Most recently she had brought a software company from the brink of collapse to a wildly successful initial public offering by advising the client to fire everyone on staff and starting fresh with her at the helm. She found the people that fit what she needed and discarded the rest. She captured the vision and direction an organization wanted and made it happen at all costs. Her methods were not popular among her subordinates or co-workers, but she never hung around long enough to have it matter much. The hired gun wasn't in it

for the retirement pension. She was in it for the thrill of the kill. This shark didn't always bare her teeth, but she could smell blood in the water.

She'd been hired at MassEnergy to oversee the development of a product line that would compete with StuTech's towers and stubs to deliver wireless electricity. If successful, it would break StuTech's lucrative strangle hold on the wireless market. Thus far it had been a colossal failure for both her and the company with millions upon millions of dollars thrown to the wind with nothing to show for it. She was feeling the pressure to deliver. Her reputation and the compensation she was accustomed to were on the line.

The Engineering Candidate Class had been her idea from the beginning. Bring in a group of capable, smart engineers, physicists, statisticians to aid MassEnergy's development team. The new employees were largely expendable - hired guns themselves. It was their skills and ideas that were critical.

The classroom grew quiet as she slowly walked around the desk and paced in front of the classroom of new MassEnergy employees. Luke sat at a table in the middle of the room next to Amir Ghorbani, who had seemed to take a liking to him and had yet to leave his side all morning.

"Welcome to the engineering candidate class," Kathryn said. "And

congratulations for making it this far. The 35 of you were selected because you each offer something unique that this company can use. It's a significant accomplishment to be sitting here today, but don't kid yourself, you have achieved nothing and if you don't contribute anything meaningful to the mission of this company then you won't be around much longer."

You catch more bees with honey, than you do vinegar, she thought as she paused and smiled to let everyone know that she wasn't so bad. Of course if you could trap those bees, you could train them to make you the honey. She was already captivating the audience.

"In front of each of you is a sealed

packet which contains your first assignments, which are designed to test your skills as problem solvers in your respective fields. You've been divided into seven groups, which for now, will be your team, but you are on your own for the work. Each team will have a liaison from MassEnergy who will serve as your contact at the company. You have all agreed to work with us, knowing very little about what you are a part of and that's not going to change now. Accomplish the tasks set out before you to our satisfaction - that is your goal. You are all being paid well enough to be content with this arrangement.

“Look around the room, it may be the last time you see some in the class. Fail

to perform and you're gone. No second chances."

She looked at the ashen faces of the crowd, knowing that many of them had left good jobs with a future to take this fleeting opportunity to get in on the ground floor at MassEnergy. She forced a smile.

"It's just a job after all, right? Report to your pods and get to it."

Chapter 8

Luke had taken notice of those with orange packets, which corresponded to his own. Each candidate's packet was a different color according the team they were assigned to. Amir also had an orange packet – of course. The color-coded teams followed a staff member to their assigned workrooms – called pods.

The pod was a large circular room with high white walls and plenty of light. The exterior rim of the room was filled with five workstations, each equipped with an assortment of drafting tools and 180-degree wrap-around computer

monitors and desktop touch screens. Luke took an open desk on the far side of the room and opened his packet. Inside was a set of instructions to log on to the company's internal network, set up encrypted passwords and initiate a series of tests, which were not defined in the packet.

The orange pod consisted of five individuals with varied skill sets. Luke and Amir were engineers, electrical and mechanical, respectively. Meredith Barnes had previously worked with a communications company in Kansas City, managing cellular tower networks. Nadeer Husan was a statistician from Toronto. William Yong was the elder of the group. In his 60s, William was a

retired former shipbuilder who had already made it clear he had no idea what the hell he was doing there.

Luke was about to begin setting up his accounts when Kathryn Tate and a woman named Sheryl from Human Resources walked into the pod.

“Before you get started, you’re going to need a tour of the campus,” Kathryn said.

“I think we can manage fine without a tour. We have a lot of work to do,” Meredith said with the tone of someone who preferred to work alone. She spun in her chair, turning her back to the group.

“You misunderstand,” Kathryn said curtly. “Consider this new hire

orientation. The tour is not optional and believe me, you are going to be spending a lot of time here and you are going to need to know what Sheryl is about to show you.”

Meredith looked terribly offended, but followed the group out the door.

“Luke, can you hold up a second?” Kathryn asked, stepping in front of him, blocking his path. The rest of the group continued down the hall with Sheryl. “I’d like to have a word with you.”

“No problem.”

Up close she was even more beautiful, he thought. Luke forced himself to maintain contact with her eyes and not wander anywhere else.

“Walk with me and I’ll give you a

little tour myself,” she turned and they headed in the opposite direction of the team. “I’ve assigned myself as the liaison for the orange pod and I wanted to let you know that it is because of you.”

That was the shortest corporate spy career on record, he thought to himself. He looked to his right and left, assuming the security guards would converge on him at any moment.

“I’m not sure if that’s a compliment or something I should be concerned with,” he said, after a moment passed and nobody tackled him.

“It’s a bit of both.”

“I think your work at StuTech is probably some of the most relevant work

experience we could ask for, but I also wonder why you would leave after just five years. Especially concerning to me is your relationship with Rachel Evans.”

“That’s exactly why I left, to be perfectly honest,” Luke said, reciting his lines. “Once Rachel and I stopped dating, my work life suffered a lot. She made it very clear that she wasn’t going to make it easy for me at the company and I made the decision to leave, rather than be constantly punished for our failed relationship.”

Making up lies about Rachel was difficult. He was still very much in love with her, although due to the terms of his agreement with Steve Lunsford, they

were not permitted to have any contact. Rachel wasn't pleased with the arrangement, but she supported him – at least she had 11 months ago.

“That’s good to hear,” Kathryn said. “Angry ex-girlfriends are in a class of their own. You’ll find that there is very little fraternizing at MassEnergy, although people practically live here.”

She walked them out of the pod complex toward the large five-story administration building. Building schematics for the campus were filed with the Portland City Department of Building and Code. Lunsford had gotten a hold of them and required Luke to memorize the detailed plans. He knew where the offices and suites were but not

who or what was located in them. This walk with Kathryn was helpful to fill in the blanks.

She gave Luke a cursory overview of the admin building. It housed company executives on the top floor, where one of her offices was located. The four floors below were filled with the typical assortment of departments, such as human resources, legal and accounting. The auditorium and several large conference rooms surrounded the public lobby and exhibit hall.

The exhibit hall was a huge room that held artifacts from the early 1900s that were collected to inspire employees and interest potential investors or other visitors. A 46-foot high wood and metal

tower sat in the center of the room. A four-foot glass railing surrounded the tower to keep visiting school children from attempting to climb it. It was a quarter-scale replica of a famous Nikola Tesla project.

“I assume you recognize the tower?” she asked.

“Of course, in 1901 Tesla built his communications and electricity device, called the Wardenclyffe Tower in rural Long Island. The 15-story structure was intended to transmit wireless radio signals around the world. Funding for the Tesla Broadcasting System originally came from J.P. Morgan – the man – not the company. It was intended to deliver radio transmissions around the

globe through the ionosphere.”

“And if he would have left his design at that, it might have actually been completed,” she said.

“Right, Tesla added to his design what he thought was the ability to wirelessly transmit electricity along with his communications signals. He called it ‘world wireless.’”

At the time electricity was used primarily for simple lighting at night, but was quickly spreading to industry and home convenience. He was attempting to turn his alternating current into a radio transmission that could be delivered anywhere.

Luke continued, although it seemed as though Kathryn already knew the story.

“Once J.P. Morgan learned that Tesla’s tower had the potential to provide free electricity to everyone on earth, he pulled his support, knowing that his investors would never go for such a giveaway. The Warendclyffe tower was never completed and thus never tested. It was torn down a decade later.”

“Tesla had a vision, but could not gather enough support to see it through,” Kathryn said. “Sounds like MassEnergy so far.”

“He was ahead of his time,” Luke said. “He did not have the technical knowhow to accomplish what he intended to deliver, though he was far better prepared at the time than any of

his contemporaries.”

Tesla's plans influenced the development of modern day cellular tower networks and, no question, were the inspiration for Warren Evans to develop his proprietary wireless towers and stubs.

Luke looked up at the tower, which even on a small scale, was more than four stories high. It was wood, metal and copper and topped with a circular dome. The replica was made from pictures of the real tower.

On the exterior walls of the exhibit hall were large-scale reproductions of Tesla's massive energy machine designs. Tesla coils, which looked like something out of a black and white

Frankenstein movie were placed around the room. Images showed bolts of lightning shooting out from the devices. Several whitewashed wooden planks, which were said to be from the original Wardenclyffe Tower, were on display under a bright light.

“Why do you think StuTech and its public relations wing have so vehemently denied any association with Tesla?” Kathryn asked.

“Honestly, it’s because of Warren Evans’ vanity,” Luke said. “Tesla was viewed as a mad scientist. Evans doesn’t see himself that way. He’s an inventor, who delivered the world a gift. Tesla comparisons would tarnish that.”

The design similarities were obvious.

The devices themselves were both a bit mysterious, Tesla's having never been completed and Evans' locked down as proprietary technology.

"MassEnergy has taken up the mantle of Nikola Tesla to gain its funding and build a system that could compete with StuTech," Kathryn said. "This room represents what this company is all about. Delivering energy to the people where they need it."

"The notable exception to that vision of course is that no one is giving it away for free."

"That's simply the nature of our business. Or any business. Nothing in this world is truly free, but at the moment there is no competition in the

market and StuTech can charge whatever it wishes. We might not be able to deliver wireless energy for free, but we can provide an alternative to StuTech's monopoly."

"So you think it's possible to break the monopoly?" Luke asked.

"You tell me," Kathryn said. "You know more about them than anyone here."

"It won't be easy. They're geared up for a fight. StuTech isn't giving up any ground."

"I'm not interested in taking them head on. We're not ready, but there is room for us too."

"Filling in the gaps their system misses?" Luke asked. "Putting cities

back on the grid?”

“Exactly, but we’re not close to delivering any product at the moment so it really doesn’t matter, which is why we started the Engineering Candidate Class,” Kathryn said.

“How long can the company stay afloat if a wireless device doesn’t go to market?” Luke asked.

“I’m not privy to our finances in detail, but let’s just say that it’s pretty damn important,” Kathryn said.

“Understandable. So, what’s your role in this thing as our contact point in the orange pod?”

“I will monitor your progress and determine who we don’t need anymore. If one of you presents an idea that we

can use, then you'll be brought further into the fold and work with some of our guys. If you have something notable to report, you'll do it through me. The evaluation tests will give us a good idea what you're capable of. Those should take just a few weeks, then the real work begins."

They continued to walk through the campus, which was buzzing with people in every building. She showed him the cafeteria, which provided breakfast, lunch and dinner – and anything in between – at no charge to employees. Workers were encouraged to work whatever hours they wanted, provided they produced. Having a well-stocked cafeteria was a nice feature that kept

employees focused on work, not if they remembered to pack a bologna sandwich for lunch.

The place was packed. Each round table had 10 chairs attached to it. There were probably 20 tables spread across the room. Luke had a flashback from high school and thought of the segregation at his small school's lunchroom. Jocks, nerds and popular kids never mixed. That didn't seem to be the rule today. The only obvious differentiation was in attire. Executives were in suits and everyone else was very casual or in lab coats. Luke blended in with his sport coat and jeans.

James Beckman, VP of Development, who had conducted Luke's final

interview days earlier, sat alone at one of the tables.

“Kathryn,” he said, stuffing his mouth with a fork full of salad. “It’s going to take you quite a while if you plan to give your whole team a personal tour of the place.”

Beckman was Kathryn’s boss. It was his idea to bring her in as a hired gun, but her presence infringed on his territory and she hadn’t proven herself to him. In his opinion, the company was always on the verge of something great. Kathryn’s mercenaries were a cute idea, but impractical. They had everyone they needed to get the job done. Thank you very much.

“Just giving our boy the quick run

through, so he can get right to work,” she said.

“Mr. Kincaid here shouldn’t need too much encouragement in your little rainbow pods. He’s worked behind enemy lines up in Seattle. He should be on the Dev Floor.”

Luke knew better than to say anything, but he nodded to acknowledge the comment. He wondered exactly what and where the “Dev Floor” was. Clearly there was more to this discussion than he knew.

“As part of our candidate class, he has the same chance as everyone else. As we’ve discussed, I don’t think he’s going to have much trouble moving through the system.”

“Sure, but when you’re done with him, he’s mine,” Beckman said. Turning to Luke, “Just some internal politics. Don’t worry yourself about it, son. How’s your first day going, anyhow?”

“Just glad to be part of the team and ready to get to work,” Luke said.

“A born politician,” Beckman said.

“We’d better get you back to the team,” Kathryn said.

They left the cafeteria and walked out into the courtyard. Determined to show that she wasn’t bothered by the dressing down she’d just received in front of her newest employee, she continued to give the campus tour, but with a little less enthusiasm than she had previously.

They entered a V-shaped college-style

dormitory with two floors. The building was on the edge of the courtyard which was filled with large cement planters, lush green grass and crisscrossing pathways. A clerk at the front desk provided them entry. The wide hallways led to hotel style rooms, each with a queen bed, bathroom, desk and television. They were nicely appointed, but not lavish.

“The dorms are first-come first-served and all employees are welcome to take a room to get some shut-eye if they are working late hours. Many find it easier to grab a few hours of sleep rather than commute home to do the same thing and waste time.”

“Isn’t sleeping at work a little

unhealthy?” Luke asked. “What about work-life balance?”

“It’s all a choice. If you need a life, you might find it at the on-site gym or nurse’s station, the cafeteria or maybe even at your desk. Need something more? You’re out of luck, that’s what we offer.”

“No, I mean work-life balance, like families and stuff.”

“Unattached employees are better employees,” she said. “It’s not company policy or anything official, but you won’t find many people ducking out early to catch junior’s tennis match.”

“Good to know,” Luke said.

“Why, are you pregnant or something? Planning on popping out a few kids, are

you?” Kathryn asked.

“Not that I know of,” Luke said, without cracking a smile, “but maybe I should visit the nurse, just in case.”

“I’ll get you an appointment.”

They exited the dorm and were back on the intersecting paths of the courtyard.

“Beckman mentioned the ‘Dev Floor’ what is that?” Luke asked.

“That’s what we call the Development Floor,” she said. “It’s the Research and Development laboratory. Unfortunately newbie’s like you don’t have security clearance to access it, so you won’t be seeing that today. We keep it locked down pretty tight. Don’t want any prying eyes.”

“Sounds like Beckman wanted me

there now.”

“Play your cards right and you probably will be there, but for now, play the game like everyone else. I’m confident you’ll find your purpose here. Can you find your way back to the pod? Just use your thumbprint to access the outer doors.”

“I think I can manage.”

“Enjoy your weekend, you need to be on your game come Monday. And get that pregnancy thing looked at too.”

“Sure thing.”

She turned and headed back toward the administration building. He spun on his heel when he caught himself watching her slowly walk away.

Chapter 9

Eastern France

The two armed mercenaries sat on a dusty ridge overlooking a archeological dig conducted by the University of Munich. Their two hours of evening surveillance told them that no more than 10 individuals were currently occupying the makeshift encampment. A cluster of trailers and tents were positioned behind a large shallow hole in the ground, covered with tarps and illuminated with bright halogen lights. After a long day of digging for buried artifacts from WWI, the group of students and instructors were understandably exhausted.

The men watching from the darkness were only told that the camp's current occupants needed to be eliminated. They didn't ask questions. They were unaware that the students were weekend history buffs, thrilled with the chance to sit in a foxhole and relive stories from the Great War. Some of the students had already found bullet casings. One uncovered a helmet. Orders are orders to these hardened men and the reasons for killing didn't matter.

It was nearly 3 a.m. when Greta and Hans – the names the men gave them – stopped kissing by the fire and decided to call it a night.

Time to move.

Silently the smaller of the two men

climbed down the ridge, being careful not to alert anyone of his presence, at least not yet. He crept behind the trailers and removed his semiautomatic 9mm handgun from his waistband. With his free hand, he blinked a pen light back toward the ridge, giving his partner a 30-second countdown. He assumed the man on the ridge, whom he had only met hours prior, was a decent shot. He'd have to be quick too.

He was counting down now. *Five, four, three, two, one.*

The sniper rattle let out a loud pop that echoed through the camp. It's likely the sound would have been ignored had it not been followed immediately by Greta's scream after seeing Hans

shredded by the bullet of a high-powered rifle that had tore through the side of the tent and directly through her lover's midsection.

The half-naked Greta emerged from the tent screaming in German. Good, the man thought from behind the trailer. That'll do just fine.

Her fellow campers slipped out of their warm beds and sleeping bags to see what Greta was so worked up over. The sniper on the ridge picked off those who ran to Greta, while the man behind the trailer eliminated anyone who attempted to run away. The shots rang out for less than 20 seconds.

When the camp was silent again, the gunmen abandoned their weapons on the

ground and went their separate ways. One man headed back toward the United States, the other just a few hundred miles away. Mission accomplished. It's unlikely they would ever work together again.

Chapter 10

Portland, Oregon

For Luke the next several weeks were filled with mathematical equations, tests of skill, a little snooping and a few firings. Kathryn Tate didn't take long to leave her mark on the Orange pod. Meredith, who had repeatedly squared off with anyone who would listen to her, lasted four days. Not that anyone would miss her. She repeatedly squawked about poorly defined work and that she wasn't finding her place.

To a point she was correct. Most of the candidates felt that they were simply completing busy work that was beneath

their skills. Day after day they would be given a theorem or physics equation to complete, then asked to do the same work the following day, but in a different way.

“I hope they are storing this information someplace where we can see it some day,” William Yong told his fellow pod members. “I imagine it might tell us an interesting story if we put it together.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s the idea,” Luke said. “I spent some time yesterday analyzing the equations they have given me. They only differ by one or two variables at a time, but the answers they seek are already determined.”

“Right,” Amir said. “Since they are

looking for us to provide the different variables, it stands to reason that those variables are ones they are having difficulty with in lab tests.”

“True, but if you aggregate all the trouble variables together, you can get a clearer picture of what larger issue they are attempting to solve,” Luke said.

“So what did you find?” Amir asked.

“That’s the problem, I can only see what they have given me. I can’t create an accurate picture without seeing all the pieces. The other pods are probably dealing with the same issue. Until we see the inside, we can’t determine what piece of research we are actually working on.”

Luke had quickly become the voice of

reason in the pod. The work was frustrating and despite their orders to keep their findings to themselves, they were holding daily meetings on their work, trying to find commonalities that would assist them. Luke and Amir had orchestrated the informal meetings and they all agreed that it was best to keep the discussions to themselves and if they needed to report up something significant – which thus far no one had – they would do it through Kathryn.

Amir had to attend to a family matter during the first week on the job and was away from the office for a few days. During that week, Luke had done background searches on everyone in the pod, including Amir. Social networks

provided a wealth of information. He was a second-generation American with an Iranian father and German mother. He was honorably discharged from the United States Army several years earlier, after serving in the Middle East and Asia for extended periods of time. Luke couldn't find any records of his activities overseas, but that wasn't a surprise. Military records weren't public. He received a Mechanical Engineering degree while he was in the Army and was married with a young daughter.

The two men had started spending a significant amount of time together, first because of their work proximity, but their interests converged around

athletics and family. Luke talked about his sister and niece, while Amir went on and on about his wife and daughter. They also formed a healthy rivalry concerning mechanical and electrical engineering, which Amir's wife Lela found insufferably boring.

"Can't you two just give it a rest?" she pleaded, over dinner one weekend. "Seriously, nobody cares, at least not in this house."

"But dear," Amir said. "I won't feel comfortable until I have shown our guest how inferior his talents truly are."

"You must be have mistaken me for someone else," Luke said. "Last time I checked, I can spin circles around you with a keyboard and on the soccer

field.”

“A truly pointless discussion, if I ever heard one,” Lela said.

Lela was the polar opposite of Amir. Calm and meticulous, where Amir would jump from one subject to another with no regard for outside input. Luke had also seen him lose his temper several times at the office, flying off the handle when debating a point of some design. Luke had actually had to discuss Amir’s temper with him several times for fear that MassEnergy would let him go. Yet, he seemed to be a different person at home, relaxed and happy.

Amir didn’t find it hard to make friends though. He even organized a weekend soccer match with some of the

guys at work. Amir thought it was good to get some of that desk-energy out and encouraged anyone he met to come over to the park that Saturday.

The game was a friendly one. Fourteen men and one woman showed up to participate. Kathryn drew several double takes in a white tank top and gym shorts when she arrived at mid-field.

“What, you’ve never seen a girl before?” she asked, walking up to the men. A rumbling of consent made it apparent that they hadn’t expected her – or any woman to show up.

Amir picked the teams based on the player’s self-reported skill level. Luke was obviously the best athlete on the field, given his collegiate career, but he

hadn't played competitively in years, not that he was going to use that as an excuse.

Kathryn and Amir were on one team, Luke on the other. To allow for substitutions they played four on four with a goalie. The nets were positioned to shorten the field in half. No reason to make anyone's lungs explode. The strategy was basic, get the ball to Luke and let him run with it. On the other side, the idea was to keep him out of the play.

"Let me cover him," Kathryn said.

She looked so determined that Amir readily consented. For most of the game Luke held back to about half speed, knowing that the desk jockeys were not the most fleet of foot and this was

supposed to be fun.

Kathryn saw it differently.

Luke received the ball and dribbled up the far side of the field, looking to pass the ball inside to an uncovered teammate just outside the goalie box. Kathryn rushed him full force and slid to steal the ball when he held up to avoid a collision. With the short field, she quickly punched a pass to Amir that he knocked in the goal easily. Luke stood, motionless with a look of shock on his face as one of his teammates yelled, “head in the game, man!”

She repeatedly slammed herself into Luke when he received the ball, trying to steal it. His athleticism allowed him to avoid several, but not all of the

intentionally ferocious hits.

On one particular play Kathryn trailed Luke, who was without the ball. She ran even with him on his left side, then positioned herself on his right and launched her hip into his right knee, forcing both of them to the ground. Luke grabbed his knee – the same knee that had kept him out of most of the games his sophomore year at Stanford. He walked it off, but it hurt like hell. If he didn't know better, he would have thought she meant to go for his knee.

They were playing until one team scored four goals. It was 3-1, before Luke decided to play to his full potential, and quickly tied the score up, drawing some sneers from his co-

workers. He made it a point to pass to open teammates and not make a break for the goal every time it was available to him. He scored once, but assisted on the other goals.

Amir found the net on a long pass from Kathryn to win the game 4-3. The team celebrated as if they had just won the World Cup.

“Tough game out there Kincaid,” Kathryn said, barely even breathing hard as they walked off the field. “I thought you were some hot-shot soccer player.”

“And I thought you were some stuffy executive.”

“I am, but with a mean streak,” she took a gulp of a sports drink. “I played lacrosse at Vanderbilt. It translates.”

“That explains it,” Luke said rubbing his knee.

“You’ve got to play to win, or don’t play at all. I know you were pulling your punches out there,” she said. “What, afraid to upset your buddies?”

“Just kicking around the ball on a Saturday.”

“Like I said, play to win or not at all.”

The break from the humdrum of work was a welcome one for Luke, who had been spending 65-80 hours a week on MassEnergy’s campus. His assignments were rather trivial and he routinely completed them in less than half the time he was allotted. The remainder of his time was spent in the cafeteria, courtyard and common rooms in the

dorms, attempting to elicit information from his fellow employees. The most significant obstacle in his attempts was the lanyard he and all Engineering Class candidates were required to wear. The large orange tag signaled that he was an outsider.

The exception to this was in the dorms, where overly-tired employees went to crash after a long shift. Most considered the time in between shifts as personal time and didn't wear their campus identification. He'd had several lengthy conversations with female lab techs, but even then, they were guarded about their work, like good little employees.

Even after a few drinks, they were

tightlipped – at least about work.

Kathryn was fundamentally wrong about employee fraternization. He'd stayed the night in the dorms a few times a week probing employees for information. The dorm rooms resembled college campuses not only in architecture, but also activity. He'd been awakened more than once by amorous co-workers who didn't know or didn't care that everyone in the building could hear their late night exploits.

He had twice been invited back to a woman's room, but he politely declined each time, thinking of Rachel. He was still in a committed relationship. He wasn't yet so desperate for information that he'd break that trust to get it.

MassEnergy's security was understandably tight. No items that would hold data were allowed in or out of the campus. Biometric body scans were completed on entry and exit. Which meant even if he found something that he wanted to get to Lunsford, he could only memorize what he saw and attempt to draw or write it from memory. His work consisted of common mathematical equations and physics principals – nothing groundbreaking about that.

Luke had yet to wear one of the dozen data watches that Lunsford had given him. The devices were supposed to copy data from a hard drive to the watch, but MassEnergy had worked around that too. The hard drives that ran the computers in

the pods weren't local. The machines were all in a server storage room somewhere on campus. The wires that connected the monitors and touch screens dropped through the subfloor and into the abyss, so even if he had the watch, he had nothing to copy from.

Lunsford had seemed to know what he was doing, but his methods were archaic. Luke had a hard time believing the watch could go undetected during the entry and exit scans, assuming he found a location to turn the device on and copy a drive. For that reason, he kept the watches in a shoebox in the closet.

Once a week Luke would type up his findings for Lunsford – although he found no real value in the information he

was sharing. He'd leave the window shades on the North side of his apartment open for a day, the signal Lunsford had told him to make. Then he'd enclose an encrypted thumb drive in a plastic bag and drop it in the trashcan by the Mainfair Park playground at 10:30 p.m. the next night. If Lunsford or even the city garbage man was collecting the drives, he had no idea, but each week the can was empty.

It seemed as though his covert work was heading the same direction – right into the trashcan.

Chapter 11

Luke had yet to nail down any specifics on MassEnergy's stub and tower plans. There weren't any large campus buildings that could house a tower that big, but he supposed anything the company created could be built and assembled elsewhere. There were two buildings on campus that he wasn't allowed to enter – one of them being the Dev Floor where research was conducted. But a large space wasn't necessarily a requirement to test wireless capacity. At some point tests would have to be conducted in the open

air.

The physical structure of the StuTech towers wasn't really that complicated, they just had to withstand weather and time. But the receiver coils and transmitters affixed on top of them was where StuTech made its money. They were proprietary and still somewhat of a mystery as to how they worked.

Since electricity was discovered and harnessed for practical use centuries ago, copper was the primary conductor that got it from one place to the other. Copper is relatively cheap, easy to manipulate into shapes and is a great conductor. It was still at the core of power lines and transformers strung across the world, many of which fed

StuTech's towers.

For decades scientists used copper and other metals in their attempts to wirelessly move electricity from one thing to the next. These experiments were somewhat successful at short distances, but failed when pushed farther and farther. In-home wireless use was even becoming common for mobile devices and medical implants, such as heart pacemakers. These low-energy, practical uses were the catalyst for wireless research, as they could be sold on the market quickly and at a low cost to consumers. Warren Evans' first foray into wireless devices was a wireless electric vehicle charging station for garages. But that was small potatoes.

Evans had never been happy with using conventional means and struck out to uncover a wireless solution that no one had tried before. Evans would take samples of minerals and various elements he personally discovered or that were sold to him and used them to test his wireless devices. After years of testing, Evans created a process that he claimed distilled common minerals, once thought of as having no practical value, into something that would conduct electricity. He mined this secret material in an area of Colorado called Pueblo Bluff.

He called his material ARC and only StuTech had it.

Chapter 12

Seattle, Washington

Steve Lunsford sat in his office reading the incoming reports. He was not happy. He was down to seven covert employees in the field – agents he called them. Each report was written in the manner he requested and delivered exactly as he had instructed, but it didn't matter. His patience with the agents and funding to keep them up and running was wearing thin. He needed to show results or the project would get scrapped. His good buddy Warren Evans had made that abundantly clear to him.

Millennium Optics had turned out four

agents, but keeping up the veil of a legitimate business was difficult and expensive. Also he didn't like to double up the agents in more than one location because it might raise suspicion at the hiring company. That meant most of his agents were working solo. Solo agents get lazy or make mistakes.

He'd worked long enough in the international espionage world to know what the solitary life meant. He'd been trained by the best the United States government had to offer to assume an identity and carry out a task with no mistakes, no trace of his involvement. He'd gone three years alone in Europe during a deep undercover operation before his mission was complete. But he

wasn't the one in the field anymore. He did his best to train his agents to perform, spending weeks or months with each new recruit. But they were essentially playing themselves, not assuming a new identity that he could shape into a performer. They were completely vulnerable with few skills other than what they brought to the table. He looked at Luke Kincaid's reports. He was a great example of ambition, but few skills.

His people were spread too thin and he was tasked with covering too much ground. For years he had asked for more resources and more men, but was denied each time. It was a risky venture to protect an empire with a hodgepodge of

everyday employees, but that was his role.

StuTech was massive and had the resources to fund Lunsford's programs indefinitely, but with the amount of government oversight it had to undergo every day, hiding his endeavors was more than a shell game. He had to work completely off the book and there was only so much money that could be funneled his way before raising suspicion. The agent program wasn't even the most important one under his purview, but it was taking an enormous amount of time to cultivate.

The report that sat in front of him detailed the laboratory set up at a medical equipment manufacturer in

Tennessee that was testing a curious chemical mixture in one of its machines. The machine contained a laser that would strip away dead skin cells with a pulsing pattern. The latest model was an improvement on an old design, but featured a compound that wasn't readily identified in the patent application. Lunsford needed to know what it was.

It was the agent's last report before he was fired from the equipment manufacturer.

He had first met the agent at a diner in Illinois. Lunsford was eating a late dinner when a small man in the booth next to him, lifted the wallets of two men passing by in the span of 30 seconds. Lunsford watched as he stuffed the

wallets into his Loyola University sweatshirt and went on with his meal as if nothing had happened. Intrigued by the man's nerve, Lunsford sat down across from him. The man looked up with wide eyes when Lunsford sat down, and seemed ready to bolt.

“Unless you want to get arrested, don't say a word until I ask you to,” he said in a hushed tone. “Nod if you understand.”

He nodded, still looking at the exit.

“My guess is that those two guys are about one minute from walking back in here and fingering you for stealing their wallets. I want to help you out with that, but only if you can help me. Got it?”

Again, he nodded.

“I want a verbal answer on this one. Do you have an education?”

“Huh?”

“Not exactly the witty response I was looking for. Try again.”

“I’m in school at Loyola, if that’s what you mean,” his voice was conversational, but understandably on edge.

“Do you pickpocket often?”

“I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“Cut the bull, I know a veteran lift when I see one. Either you learned from someone who was really good or you’ve gotten a lot of practice.”

“Dude, I’ve really got to run-“

“If you walk out of here now, the cops

that just pulled into the parking lot will be on you in no time flat.”

He looked out the window at the cruiser.

“OK fine, what do you want?”

“What are you going to school for?” he asked.

“What the hell man, why do you care?” he said, scoffing at him.

“Just humor me.”

“Nursing tech.”

“Perfect, ever thought about medical equipment sales?”

The Tennessee operation fell apart because of one rather large screw up. Turns out his guy didn't follow security protocols regarding the check-in procedures of test equipment. Unfortunately, it was exactly what

Lunsford had directed him to do that got him fired. He was to disassemble a particular device, replace the core element with one provided by StuTech and then return it hours before federal regulators were to see it in action.

He missed the deadline for returning the equipment to the locked cage where it was monitored by radio frequency identification or RFID tags, which set off alarm bells. He was let go, but not before he'd completed his assignment, or so he claimed. The company missed the preliminary testing deadline and would have to re-file their application, a delay that would take months.

Replacing the component in the equipment wasn't the ultimate goal of

this particular placement, but it was a step in the right direction. Yet ending the placement without completion meant starting from scratch, which simply wasn't possible. Losing a valuable agent in the process just piled on more work that couldn't get covered.

The agent got his student loans paid off out of the deal and some rather advanced training on how to make friends and influence people. He arranged for the agent to get his last payment in cash, minus the final installation for failing to ultimately complete his assignment. He wouldn't be happy, but that was the agreement he'd made when he signed on. Lunsford was already in the process of relocating

the man. With too many questionable moves on his resume and now a termination, he was essentially unemployable by any relevant firms. Lunsford knew he could use his talents, but it would have to be outside the scope of medical work.

He set the report down and wondered if his other agents were making any progress at all that might get them out of their slump. Now that he was down an agent, he'd have to exert a little more pressure on the rest.

Chapter 13

Seattle, Washington

Luke stepped off the train in downtown Seattle amid a throng of rabid Major League Soccer fans. It was game day and the hometown team was in the hunt for the playoffs. More than 40,000 people filled the streets near the stadium and lined up to show their tickets for entry. It was Fourth of July weekend and the game was sold out. He'd purchased his ticket the week earlier and made it known to his MassEnergy co-workers that he was going to catch a game and meet up with some old friends over the holiday weekend. The doldrums in the

Orange pod hadn't subsided one bit. It was the same repetitive work, day after day. He was very much looking forward to a day off.

The warm summer sun beat down on the asphalt and seemed to radiate up, blasting everything in its path. Blending into the crowd wasn't difficult, given all the team jerseys and young athletic men of similar build. Yet he didn't notice the man watching him from the next train car all the way from Portland, who was now 10 spots behind him in line for the game. Luke carried a black messenger bag over his shoulder and showed it to the security guards at the gate. They scanned his ticket and he entered the stadium.

He had no reason to believe that he

was being followed, but Lunsford had drilled into him that there were far more serious consequences to being tailed than there were inconveniences to simply covering your tail. Given his destination, he opted to be cautious. Lunsford's training might actually come in handy.

Inside the concourse, there was a line for the first men's restroom, no doubt drunken fans relieving themselves from early afternoon tailgating. He took an escalator to the second level and stood in a hot dog concessions line. From the line he got a good view of people milling about the concourse. Nobody stood out to him. After moving up several spots in line, he left his place

and ducked into the nearest bathroom. Once inside a stall, he removed his green team jersey and replaced it with a black T-Shirt and put on a baseball cap. He turned his bag inside out and affixed a second shoulder strap to the hooks he had attached to the inside, effectively turning the black messenger bag to a brown backpack.

He looked at the time. Seven minutes until the game started. Perfect. They were just finishing up the National Anthem. Pulling the bag over his shoulders, he left the bathroom, quickly glancing in either direction for familiar faces. No fan wanted to miss opening minutes, so the crowd surging through the concourse toward their seats was

now at its peak. He cut through the masses and quickly walked to the other side of the stadium on the second level, then back down a maintenance stairwell to the ground floor.

Picking up the pace as much as he could without drawing the attention of security, he headed toward the bank of exit gates.

“Sir, there is no re-entry if you exit these gates,” a security guard said as he blew past him.

“No worries,” Luke said without stopping, “I’m not coming back. My wife called, she’s having the baby!”

The security guard gave him a big grin as Luke ran to the front of the line of cabs still dropping off fans at the

opposite end of where he'd entered the stadium. He opened the rear door of a yellow sedan for a couple just arriving and then jumped in the cab once they walked away.

“Where to?” the cabbie asked, surprised to get a fare so quickly.

Luke handed him a wad of cash.

“Toward downtown.”

The man on Luke's tail jogged up to the exit gates inside the stadium and watched as Luke's cab rounded the corner out of sight. He had caught sight of Luke back on the second level concourse. Luke was the only person who had been moving away from the field, otherwise he wouldn't have recognized the change of clothes. The

man had mistakenly gone left, instead of right at the bottom of the maintenance staircase and lost Luke's trail.

The man pulled out his phone and dialed Steve Lunsford.

"Your boy gave me the slip. Pretty good moves too," he said. "You were wrong, he did learn a few things from you, old man."

"Losing you probably wasn't all that hard, don't give him too much credit. And enough with the 'old man' stuff already. You were a soldier too, show me some respect."

"You got it pops. What do you want me to do now?"

"See if you can pick up his scent at any of his old hangouts, but don't be too

obvious. If he went through the trouble of losing you, I've got a pretty good idea where he's headed."

Chapter 14

Luke hadn't seen Rachel in more than 15 months and he'd been planning this since March. They'd arranged to meet at a boutique hotel downtown. The fact that he was sneaking around just to see his fiancée, was utterly ridiculous. But Lunsford was adamant that he was to stay away from Rachel for the duration of his time at Millennium Optics and MassEnergy. He hadn't wavered from the agreement until today.

“You never know what those people are doing, watching you,” he said. “They don't know you. They don't trust you.

You were sleeping with the enemy just a few months ago for God's sake.”

So, he followed Lunsford's rules, for the most part.

Rachel had rented the room and left a key for him at the front desk under the name Blaine Kirkhorn, one of Luke's favorite professors at Stanford. It grossed him out that he was about to secretly rendezvous with “old professor” in a hotel room, but that wasn't on his mind as he walked down the hallway and reached the door to the hotel room.

The two had made contact just twice since their supposed break-up. Luke had sent her a letter, thanking her for forwarding a letter from Gina, which

itself had been forwarded from Luke's old apartment to Rachel's condo then eventually down to him in California. If Rachel had not sent Gina's letter down to Luke, he would never have met his niece. The mail was infuriatingly slow, but Lunsford had once said it was the most secure form of communications, so that's what they used.

Luke's letter briefly described his activities at Millennium Optics and told Rachel about Tilly and Gina in Mill Creek. He didn't want to go into too much detail, but he also didn't want to leave anything out. He also told her that no matter what, he was planning to be in Seattle the following Fourth of July and that she should stay in town.

In just the past week Luke had sent her a private message through a dummy account on a social networking site – as Blaine Kirkhorn – with instructions for where and when to meet.

All these hoops, just to be together for a few hours. He would have done much more if he needed to. He had longed to see her since the day he left, cursing himself for being so stupid for practically throwing away his perfect relationship with a great girl to progress his career further inside StuTech.

Would she want to stay with him after he abandoned her for so long? There was only one way to find out. He inserted his key into the door, waited for the green light to appear and stepped in.

Warren Evans, dressed in a dark black Armani suit and green tie, sat in a high back chair facing the door.

“I thought you’d never come,” he said.

Luke scanned the room. No sign of Rachel. His stomach sank and his mouth went dry. He felt like a toddler caught with his hand in the cookie jar. Something wasn’t right. He removed his backpack, but held onto it next to his side. Evans’ eyes never left him.

“Have a seat,” Evans said, motioning him toward the desk.

The room was dark except for a bright lamp behind Evans. It gave him an eerie silhouette that Luke had to squint through to see him. It was obviously an intentional move. Evans wanted Luke off

guard.

Luke slowly walked over to the only other chair in the room and sat down. The two had only formally met once before at a Thanksgiving dinner two years earlier. The man had offered a rare invitation to Rachel to have the meal at his estate. She was hesitant to attend, but the draw of her father making an effort at a relationship was too hard to resist. She brought along Luke to help buffer the icy relationship between father and daughter. Luke had sat mostly silent as the pair chatted about inconsequential business subjects and ignored him entirely. It was fascinating how such a brilliant man couldn't hold a polite conversation with his own flesh and

blood. But then again, he had nothing to gain from his daughter, so why bother?

Time had not been kind to Evans, who seemed to have aged a great deal in the last few years. His eyes were alert, but sunken in their sockets. The loose skin of his neck draped his white shirt collar as he spoke.

“I’m sure you want to know why I’m here and not my daughter. Well, let’s get that out of the way first, shall we?”

He took great pains to cross one leg over the other before continuing.

“Quite simply, she’s moved on.”

“What do you mean? She rented the room,” Luke said, fumbling to get the words out. “She was going to meet me here-”

“No, she wasn’t. She never got your letter – cute, by the way, all that stuff about your niece. And she never agreed to meet you. It’s time that you face facts, son. You don’t belong in this world of ours. People like you and her aren’t supposed to be together. She’s realized that and moved on.”

Luke tried to take stock of his emotions before blurting out what a bastard Evans was to say such lies.

“So, you prevented her from coming here today.”

“No, she has had every opportunity to see you, and chose not to. Otherwise, she’d be here right now, don’t you think?”

His mind was spinning, but it all made

sense. She could have contacted him anytime. A call. A text. She could have told him she wasn't coming. They had agreed to meet on this weekend. Hadn't they?

Luke thought that she understood why he took the job. Why he left.

Then it finally dawned on him.

"You set me up."

"Well now, look who's head is finally in the game," Evans said with a smirk. "Thanks for joining the party."

Luke knew he wasn't a rising star at StuTech. He'd repeatedly applied to work in Advanced Analytics, the area of the company that knew the details and refined the process that actually made wireless work. He submitted plans that

he thought would interest the team. Mathematical models and formulas that would extend the reach of wireless - maybe even enough to reach Mill Creek. But his application was denied each and every time. When Lunsford's offer came in to branch out and work at MassEnergy, he snatched it up, hoping it would further his efforts to get into Advanced Analytics. Apparently he'd been dead wrong.

“So, spying on MassEnergy's projects, that was all bull?” he asked.

“Not at all. We still need that information and you're the right kid to do it too. Smart enough to get in the door and uncover the dirt. Unfortunately it's your ambition that has blinded you. What

sort of well-respected girl wants her future mate to go radio-silent for months, even years at a time? A faux break-up? How can you put a girl through that? Come on. You saw the brass ring and couldn't grab it fast enough. A paltry raise and new job is dangled in front of you and you were hooked."

Evans crossed his legs again, using his hands to lift his left over his right.

"A girl like Rachel has had money-chasing boys like you following her around like a little lost puppy her whole life. I feel somewhat sorry for her about that. You showed your true colors son, and went for the cash at first sight."

Luke took the opportunity to get deeper into StuTech. The cash was just a

bonus. He also wanted to show himself worthy of Rachel and be his own man when they got married.

“I took the job to show her I could make something of myself and show you I could deliver for the company. What you’re saying is twisting around what I did.”

“Like I said, those are the facts. I’ve never been able to tell that girl what to do and she’s made her decision.”

“I think I should hear this from her, not you.”

“Not going to happen. And good luck tracking her down too. She wasn’t waiting around for her dime-store boyfriend to make his valiant return. She’s out of the country, been gone quite

some time now. Some humanitarian mission in a jungle I think.”

Rachel had always talked about going to third-world countries to help destitute villages receive medical services and vaccines. She wrote her master’s thesis on the subject. No surprise her father didn’t know about it.

“So you’re firing me?”

“Not exactly,” Evans said.

“Then I quit,” Luke said, standing up.

“Not so fast. You haven’t told me where the body is.”

“Come again?”

“I did some digging on you. Any father in my position would. Do you really think I’d allow her to marry a murderer? You’re not going anywhere.”

Luke always wondered when that night 10 years earlier would come back to haunt him. But this wasn't what he'd pictured.

“I can still use you,” Evans said. “And unless you want the California State Police to get a rather detailed tip about what happened to your sister’s neighbor, you’re going to do exactly what I say.”

Chapter 15

Mill Creek, California
10 years ago

Eighteen-year-old Luke used a flashlight to walk the dark streets of Mill Creek, passing one abandoned house after another. His hometown had been in the blackout for three months now. His parents had been gone for just as long.

The walk home was familiar, but no less safe. He was counting down the days until he could leave this town. A soccer scholarship still awaited him at Stanford. Today was graduation day. He would finally be able to get out.

Today was the first time in months

that he and his remaining classmates had been able to celebrate. It seemed like the whole town was in the city park drinking and laughing until the early hours of the morning. They needed something to celebrate. They needed something good to happen. Cutting ties with this town was that thing for Luke.

After saying goodbye to his friends, Luke started the dark walk home. The house was quiet when he stumbled through the door, a little hazy from the alcohol. He knew he shouldn't be drinking, but it helped him forget his life, if for only a few brief hours. Gina had left the party early. He assumed she was asleep in her room.

Still fully clothed, he flopped into bed

to sleep it off. He didn't know how much time had passed before he heard Gina scream.

“No! Leave me alone!” she yelled. She said something else but her cries were muffled. She wasn't talking in her sleep. Something was very wrong.

Luke grabbed a baseball bat from underneath his bed and sprinted to his sister's room. It was empty. He frantically searched the house, looking for her. Then he noticed the back door was open. Then he remembered, when the house was too hot she slept on the back porch in the cool air.

When he reached the back porch he saw a massive man with his pants around his thighs perched on top of his

sister. When the man turned toward him, Luke recognized him immediately. It was Elliot Cosgrove, their closest neighbor.

“Get outta here kid,” he said, waving a meaty hand at Luke.

Gina was pushing him away in what seemed like slow motion. There was blood on her lip. He must have hit her to shut her up. It only took her a moment to regain her senses and start fighting back. She shifted her weight to the side and Elliot, who was resting on his knees on the sofa swing, lost his balance and fell to the porch.

He grabbed at his pants. Luke thought he was going to pull them up and leave, but instead he unsheathed a four-inch blade from his belt holster. He pointed it

at Luke while holding Gina down on the swing with his other hand.

“Kid, you go back inside that house,” his eyes were glossy and his words were slurred. “Your sister and I have a little catching up to do. Got it?”

He grabbed at Gina’s cotton shorts, nearly ripping them off her with one pull.

“No!” she yelled, shoving him away as best she could.

Luke was not a violent person. In his entire life he’d never even been in a fight, but because of his athletic training he was fit and strong. But this was not a fight and he wasn’t calculating his odds against the bigger man. This was his sister and he was the only man of the

house.

He didn't hesitate. Instinctively he jumped on Elliot's back, completely forgetting that he'd carried a weapon with him to the porch. Elliot stumbled backwards smashing through the railing of the porch and into the garden several feet below. Luke absorbed Elliot's fall, knocking the wind out of him and giving Elliot time to zip up his pants.

Elliot's rage was now set on Luke. He plunged at him with the knife, but Luke managed to roll under the porch and crawl out of the way. As Elliot leaned down to look under the porch, Luke kicked him in the face, dazing him momentarily. Luke crawled out the other side of the porch only to see Gina

holding the bat above her head in a standoff with Elliot and his knife.

Luke couldn't think. He tripped over a piece of twine strung over two metal stakes used to mark the edge of the garden. He pulled one of the sharp stakes out of the ground as Elliot jabbed his knife wildly at Gina. Luke rushed at Elliot from the side and in one fluid motion, stabbed him in the neck. Elliot dropped the knife and grabbed at the stake with both hands, but it was wedged in too far. He fell to the ground, shook for a few seconds and then lay motionless.

Luke stood like a statue in the moonlight and cool summer breeze. He had just killed their neighbor in the

backyard.

A look of calm came over Gina's face as she took Luke's hand and pulled him into the house. She covered herself up with a blanket and sat across from him at the kitchen table.

"You need to leave tonight," she said.

"What do you mean? We have to call the police."

"There are no more police here Luke. Not since the blackout. You know that. If you get caught up in this, even though you did nothing wrong, they will revoke your scholarship and you'll never get out of this town. I'll take care of this."

In the darkness just before dawn, Luke packed everything he could carry and left Mill Creek.

Chapter 16

Present Day

Luke's stomach was churning, but the irony of the situation wasn't lost on him. The man Luke believed was ultimately responsible for his parents' death was now blackmailing him for Elliot Cosgrove's death. The circumstances of the two incidents could not have been more different.

Evans' had the upper hand. If Luke didn't keep spying on MassEnergy, Evans would ensure he was prosecuted for killing the man who tried to rape his sister. Self-defense or not, Luke didn't know how much of the story Evans

actually knew or how he knew it. He wasn't about to ask. But Evans didn't just want administrative details at MassEnergy. He wanted to know everything.

"Get me something good on MassEnergy, or you're through," Evans told him.

Evans' words were running through Luke's mind as he rode the elevator down to the main floor of the hotel and walked through the lobby. As he turned the corner, he glanced into the bar. Steve Lunsford was leaning on the counter, waiting for him.

"So you knew the whole time?" Luke asked. The veins in his neck were tight.

"What, that Little Miss Hottie left

you? Yeah, I knew.”

“No, about Mill Creek.”

“What about it?” Lunsford said, taking a gulp of some brown liquid with ice.

He doesn’t know. Maybe Evans hadn’t told him. Interesting, Luke thought. He decided not to press him.

“So, you couldn’t have clued me in that Rachel left me?” Luke said, quickly downing a shot that was intended for Lunsford.

“That would have been a very foolish thing to do. For all the world knows you were already split up. Why would we upset that? Besides, you weren’t supposed to contact her, remember? Ignorance is bliss.”

“I’m not feeling too blissful at the

moment.”

“It’ll pass.”

Luke ordered a drink.

“We need to talk about your progress, or lack there of.”

“Not now.”

“Yes, now,” Lunsford said. “At this stage I expected that you’d have something to show for our efforts. And I don’t care what deal you just swung with Evans, if you come up empty handed, you’re not getting paid.”

Luke was surprised that Lunsford was so upfront about screwing him over, although he always suspected that it might happen.

“You should see that place. It’s locked down tight like a prison.”

“People escape from prisons,” Lunsford said.

“Not this one. You’ve seen my reports. They’ve got me locked out in this candidate class doing busy work.”

“You’ve got to do better than that.”

“I need more time, that’s all. I can do it, but it won’t happen immediately. Whatever they’ve got, its big otherwise they wouldn’t have us plugging the holes in their research.”

“How do you mean?”

Luke explained his theory that they were being given pieces of a puzzle that the research team was having trouble with. They couldn’t see the whole problem, so they couldn’t aggregate it to make any sense.

“There are still ways to provide us data without knowing exactly what it is. Why haven’t you delivered any of the data-plug watches to the dead drops?”

“Because I haven’t used them. I can’t bring those things in. They scan everything going in and coming out. If it has a virtual memory in it – like a cell phone or pocket computer - they flag it and hold it in a safe room just off the main entrance while we’re on campus.”

“I’ve got a solution for that. Give me your phone.”

Lunsford plugged a small black device to the data port on the phone. He punched in a few numbers on the screen and removed the plug and gave Luke detailed instructions on how to use the

new tool he just installed on the phone.

“Luke, we’re not going to be infinitely patient with you. If you can’t produce, you’re a liability. And I can’t have liabilities dragging down my operations.”

Luke stood up and gave Lunsford a mock soldier salute.

“Yes, sir,” he said, then turned to the bartender, “This guy’s going to pick up my tab.”

“Hey wait -”

“Screw you, Steve. I’m off the clock tonight.”

Luke left the bar without another word.

The streets of downtown were filled with sports fans spilling out of bars,

celebrating the local team's victory and guaranteed spot in the playoffs. Luke wandered among them, in no particular rush to return to his tiny apartment in Portland. He bought a cup of coffee to sober up. No one paid him any attention. They were caught up in their own world, just as he was.

He looked up at the skyscrapers and thought of the condo in Bellevue that he had once shared with Rachel. His ex-fiancée. Never thought he'd say that. They were supposed to be getting married. He'd given it all up. And for what? He had nothing to show for it. He was making a nice little salary with MassEnergy and StuTech was still funneling him funds every month, but did

the money really matter all that much to him? It didn't. Evans had just pulled the rug out from under him.

He still didn't have enough to help Gina. And she was content to live life with as little means as possible. She was happy and flat broke. Tilly was another story. She, like Luke, hadn't asked for the life Gina wanted to live. She was born into it and couldn't escape. Even her illness wasn't enough to make them leave Mill Creek. And maybe it shouldn't have to be. Why should people be uprooted from their homes because technology suddenly couldn't reach them?

That was really the whole game. If StuTech or MassEnergy or some other

company could figure out how to make the wireless technology work longer distances, then Mill Creek and the thousands of towns like it all over the country could thrive again. It seemed so simple.

And he had a chance to influence it, even if Evans was making it more difficult, yet again. He had the unique chance to make a difference even if he was being forced into it. He never intended to make StuTech his life, he didn't apply with them for the benefits package. He had his own reasons. But he met a girl and fell in love. Now where did that leave him? Alone, again.

If he wanted to help his family, his hometown and stay out of prison – he

needed to play the game with Evans.

And he needed to learn MassEnergy's secrets, but first he needed to see Rachel. She owed him that much.

"I'm sorry, Luke. She subleased the condo a few months back," the Bellevue condo manager told him. "Said she was going to be doing some traveling and didn't need it anymore."

"Did she leave a forwarding address, anything?"

"No, sorry. I thought you two split up, anyway."

"I guess he was right."

"What's that?"

"Nothing."

Chapter 17

The mountains near Tarija, Bolivia

The tall, dense jungle blocked out the sweeping mountain views from the old Jesuit mission. Dark clouds were threatening a downpour. Rachel Evans pulled on her waterproof jacket and headed down the street for her daily rounds. She had been living in the isolated outpost for weeks. Her canvas tent was a luxury that the other residents of the area didn't have. Living amongst the people was a treat, despite the deplorable conditions. They were welcoming and curious about her. A local Spanish-speaking translator helped

her stay connected through long ceremonial meals and conferences with tribal elders. She strolled the streets like a glad-handing politician – kissing babies and smiling at everyone. Her smile and compassion were genuine and she was glad to be there.

The people of the area had no access to clean water or electricity. People lived off the land and fished in the rivers. Just 15 miles away, several small cities thrived – oblivious to the plight of those isolated in the nearby mountains.

Her father asked her to provide him a first-hand account of several villages. StuTech was expanding its global reach, but instead of hitting the largest international population centers and

grabbing market share, it was working in reverse. By setting up StuTech towers in the most remote and poor regions of the world, it was bringing attention to its product and providing a valuable service to the local people, or so they claimed. The media had criticized the plan as a publicity stunt and in Rachel's opinion they weren't entirely wrong. The towers would bring wanted attention certainly, but the simple fact that they would bring energy to those who had forever been without it — that was enough for her.

The network of towers was currently under construction, but the company had already moved in and set up a medical aid center to serve anyone who wished

to visit them. Nurses, educated from the larger cities in Bolivia, staffed the center. It was a goodwill gesture to show the locals that the company wanted what was best for them. The old Jesuit Mission was a perfect place for StuTech to set up camp while a permanent medical center was built. There were rumors that the company might even build a factory here. American surveyors had been seen combing the countryside, presumably for the right location.

Rachel had every right to refuse her father's request to go on this observation and humanitarian mission. But they both knew she wouldn't turn him down. Ever since she was a little girl, she wanted to help those who weren't able to help

themselves. She'd never been forced to go without food, water or shelter for a day in her life. In fact she'd always had the best clothes, fancy jewelry – she even got a new Mercedes when she turned 16. She didn't have to help others, but she felt it was her duty because she could.

Visiting and cataloging StuTech outposts was a no-brainer. The communications department asked her to write about her experiences. Her journal was purposefully understated, but that was intentional. She talked about the people she met and the progress of the StuTech towers being built. The plan was to either publish the journal or make it a blog. It was genius marketing, really.

The company was already in the Fortune 100 category, with plenty of room to grow. She played along and wrote her journal entries in hopes that it would benefit the people she wrote about. It was also therapeutic.

Her father had already sent away Luke for some unknown amount of time. If she couldn't be with him, why not take the time before he returned and they got married to accomplish some good deeds? Made perfect sense. Almost. But the oddities of her efforts were mounting. She was an accountant, now living in a jungle tent. She'd done what her father asked, when that was the last thing she'd ever wanted to do. She was engaged, but pretending to be single. She

should be here with Luke, not forced to ignore that he existed.

Luke was a real man who wouldn't manipulate a situation like her father. He was really the best man she'd had ever met. He was caring and intelligent. Unfortunately the drive and passion she wanted in Luke was currently keeping them worlds apart. She knew he needed to prove himself and she was willing to give him the space to do it for some period of time, but not forever.

It was funny really. They never talked about work, even after they moved in together. They toiled in different areas of the company and never saw each other during business hours. Engineers and accountants only had meetings when

something was amiss.

They met through a chance encounter on the company campus. StuTech had taken over a large campus just outside of Seattle when a software company moved its operations to China. Dozens and dozens of buildings were scattered all over the campus, connected by a series of private roads.

Rachel was steadfast in her commitment to take 60 minutes for herself in the middle of each workday. Her colleagues who worked through lunch got fat and burned out. She didn't want that. She was sitting in an overstuffed chair, with her legs tucked under her in the employee learning center one afternoon, reading a murder-mystery

novel. The learning center was a library where employees could come and study for compliance exams, read the newspaper or just take a quiet break.

Rachel had nearly dropped her e-reader when, from a nearby study room a man yelled, “Son of a bitch!” He came bursting out of the room with a large brown coffee stain down his white shirt and khaki pants. He was carrying a thick text book that was dripping with coffee. It ran off his fingers too. Rachel knew immediately that the coffee stain wasn’t his biggest concern. He wore a red badge clipped to his belt, signifying his status as a network engineer. The network engineers were taking compliance exams that week. She

guessed he was taking his final test, which was timed. The clock was ticking.

He took off for the nearest bathroom to clean up.

“Wait,” she called after him. “You probably don’t have time for that.”

She pulled out a clean towel from her gym bag, intended for her after-work run and handed it to him. He didn’t look her in the eye until after he mopped up the spill from his clothes, hands and tried to dry the text book. Luke would say later that she looked like an angel who saved him. Rachel would always counter by asking, “Why didn’t you say ‘thank you’ then?”

Rachel was packing up to get back to work 30 minutes later when Luke came

out of the study room again.

“I think I passed, thanks to you,” he said, extending his hand. “I’m Luke.”

“Rachel. I’m glad I could help.”

“Can I buy you a cup of coffee?”

“That’s probably not your best move, Luke,” she said, pointing to his shirt.

“Right, how about dinner?”

“Big leap from coffee to dinner.”

“Well, you’ve already seen me at my worst, so I’m taking a shot.”

“If that’s your worst, then dinner should be a breeze.”

Rachel’s thoughts were interrupted when two men carrying a boy rushed past her just outside the Jesuit mission on the main street in the village. Their labored gait told her that they had been

traveling quite some distance. The village quickly awoke as passersby saw the blood. There was shouting in Spanish as dozens of people descended on the crumbled building. She followed behind the men. The boy, wearing only a pair of swim trunks, was placed on a table. He was bleeding from the left side of his abdomen. A nurse poured hydrogen peroxide over the wound and he shouted in pain. The nurse rolled him over. The blood was coming out the other side as well. He'd been shot.

Another nurse arrived and shooed all the onlookers out of the room and into the open-air portion of the mission. A continuous stream of villagers filled the square, speaking in excited and furious

tones. Some were praying. The scene was chaotic, a community gathered together to learn news of the boy. Rachel knew a little of the language, but not enough. They were talking too quickly and with too much emotion for her to follow.

Maria, who had served as Rachel's assigned translator, talked to a village elder.

"The boy's been shot by a soldier in the hills," Maria said. "The elder said that the boy and his friends were swimming in a watering hole that they weren't supposed to be in. When they refused to leave, a soldier fired into the water and hit the boy. The soldiers are dangerous men and the boys should have

known better than to cross them.”

“But that doesn’t give them the right to shoot someone,” Rachel said, sensing that she was the only one to believe this.

“There are no rules in the hills except those enforced by the men with guns. We do not interfere with them and they do not interfere with us.”

“Except now.”

“The boys should not have been swimming,” Maria repeated.

“Why is their watering hole off limits?”

“The army has an encampment in the hills and they’ve blocked off the road and trails.”

Rachel had seen soldiers in the village buying flour and corn over the

last few weeks. They carried rifles strapped to their shoulders and painfully teased the children who played by the market. Some parents didn't allow their children out of their homes if the soldiers were nearby.

“Why are they all the way up here?” Rachel asked. “Isn't there a base in La Paz?”

“It's only a small contingent in the hills. They moved up there few years ago and told everyone to stay away. The children of the village have been swimming in the watering hole for as long as I've been alive, but they knew that it wasn't safe after the soldiers moved in. They knew not to go there.”

A nurse emerged from the medical

center. She spoke first to a woman, who must have been the boy's mother. She was crying out and holding her hands to the sky. The square grew quiet as everyone listened in. The nurse showed little emotion. The boy must have died.

The nurse gave the woman a curt hug and then looked right at Rachel from a dozen paces away. The people in the square followed her gaze and suddenly everyone in the square was staring in her direction. She spoke with Maria, but continued to look at Rachel. Her eyes were hopeful and full of fear all at the same time.

"They need your help," Maria said after the nurse had finished. "The bullet passed through the boy and he is losing a

lot of blood. They are certain he will die.”

“What can I do?”

“He needs medical supplies that the center doesn’t have.”

Rachel knew the new center was short on critical supplies and she had already placed orders for much more, but it had yet to arrive. The nurse knew that.

“I can use the satellite phone and have them brought in immediately.”

“There is no time, he doesn’t have that long and we don’t have any vehicles. The supplies are close by, we just have to get them.”

“So what do you need from me?”

“The villagers are afraid of the soldiers, this is not the first time they

have hurt someone. But the camp has medical supplies that could help stop the bleeding and clean the wound.”

“Why me?”

“Because the soldiers won’t shoot a wealthy American,” Maria said.

Chapter 18

Rachel, Maria and a teenage boy named Paulo hiked up the trail to the army encampment. Paulo was the only one who knew the way. The trail was worn smooth after years of use, but it was steep and twisting through a thick jungle. Massive green leaves attached to small trees had overgrown onto the trail. The morning dew on the leaves soaked the trio and made the path muddy and slick.

They didn't encounter any soldiers, even as they reached the pond the boys had been swimming in. It was small and

shadowed by tall trees. You could see the bottom of the water, it was so clear. A knotted rope hung on a large tree branch for swinging into the cool water. Rachel could see why the children had a hard time staying away.

After about 30 minutes of hiking, the uphill trail ended at a rocky dirt road, just yards ahead of an Army Jeep that blocked the road. Beyond the vehicle was a flat grassy field, sunken into the mountainside, which contained an orderly assembly of green tents in four rows. Soldiers in white shirts and black military pants milled about the tents. Several were kicking around a soccer ball.

A young Bolivian soldier in a green

and gray camouflage uniform eyed Rachel from head to toe, as they approached the jeep. She stepped back behind Maria. The soldier shouted something in Spanish and motioned for them to go back the way they came. Maria began to speak with him, explaining why they had come. A heated but brief argument ensued.

“He says they will not help us,” Maria told her. “They will not help someone who as disobeyed their rules.”

“Tell him that we will pay for the medical supplies and that he can expect a reward for being so generous.”

Maria translated.

“He says bribing a member of the Bolivian Army is a punishable crime,”

she said. "He must be the only honest soldier in the entire army."

"This honest soldier is going to allow a boy to die for swimming in a pond. There must be someone else we can speak with."

The commotion at the jeep barricade had drawn the attention of soccer-playing soldiers, who had stopped their game to watch. Rachel looked at them, hoping one of them would intervene. She again got the once-over from the men, eager for a look at an American woman, but no one approached.

A short man wearing a blue baseball hat with a red "C" on the cap walked between the rows of tents, oblivious to the argument at the barricade. He had

fair skin and wasn't wearing a uniform. She took a chance.

“The Cubs suck!” she shouted, referring to the Chicago team's logo emblazed on his cap. “They are never going to get back to the World Series!”

The man stopped and looked with curiosity at Rachel, Maria and Paulo behind the barricade. In their own right, Maria and Paulo also stared at her sudden outburst, not understanding the reference.

“And they will never win one! I'm sure of it!” she yelled.

The man in the baseball cap briskly walked over. He wore jeans, a gray T-Shirt and black boots. He was not a soldier.

“You came all this way to heckle my Cubbies?” He was American.

“Thank God you speak English. I just needed to get someone’s attention. A boy from the village was shot by a soldier this morning and we need medical supplies to patch him up. It’s an emergency.”

“I heard shots this morning. They actually hit someone?”

“Yes and he needs help now.”

He spoke to the soldier in Spanish and then pulled half of the barricade open allowing them in.

“Those two have to stay here,” he said, pointing to Maria and the boy. “It’s their rules, but you can follow me. My name is Alan.”

Rachel didn't hesitate to go, forgoing her own safety by leaving the group and following a strange man into a foreign army's camp. He looked harmless enough. The injured boy needed her help. Her own safety wasn't her first thought.

The medical tent was fully stocked with shelves of supplies. It was well lit inside with bare bulbs on a wire. Diesel generators, chugging away outside the row of tents, powered the lights. Rachel couldn't hear Alan speak due to the noise.

The medical supply boxes were all in Spanish. She handed a list of items to Alan who quickly went about filling a plastic crate.

“This is everything on the list,” he said. “I added some IV bags of antibiotics, even though they weren’t listed. You don’t want him to get an infection and make sure they change the bandages every day. The humidity here slows the healing.”

“Sounds like you’ve had medical training,” Rachel said.

“I attended some classes back in the states,” he said, as they walked back to Maria and Paulo at the barricade.

Paulo took the crate of supplies. He was a fast runner who knew the trail and could get the medical supplies to the village faster than either of the women. Maria followed behind without a word, but Rachel lagged back, curious about

the man who had just undermined the soldier's authority to let her into the camp and offer her supplies even beyond what was on the list.

"Thank you for helping us," she said. "I was afraid that we had wasted a trip and cost the boy his life."

"The soldiers here were instructed to keep the pond clear," Alan said. "I never thought they would harm anyone to do it. The swimming rule was more for them, than for the locals."

"Why is an American way up here in the mountains with the Bolivian Army?" Rachel asked.

"I could ask the same question of you."

"Fair enough, I'm working to build a

medical clinic in the village and my employer is helping bring power to the area.”

“You work for StuTech?” he asked.
“You guys are the talk of the town around here.”

“I get that a lot. So what are you doing here then?”

“I was hired by the Bolivian government to study earthquakes and fault lines. The land up here is undisturbed by any development. Helps with measurements. It works even better if people stay out of the pond. We’re set up right next to it. I’m afraid the boy was shot because of me. I asked that the water remain undisturbed .”

“So you have medical training and

study earthquakes?”

“Among other things,” he said. “I’m multi-talented.”

“Obviously you are. Tell me, why do you need so many soldiers here? There must be over a hundred.”

“There are rebel forces and tribes roaming the hills who don’t think too highly of the government. They are here to protect us. Strength in numbers. You can’t be too careful. Anyone could be lurking around up here. I’d rather be protected. That’s my story. Why is StuTech so interested in Bolivia?”

Rachel explained that the company was focusing on remote areas to begin its international campaign.

“It still seems a bit off the beaten

path,” he said. “There’s been some talk about a natural gas pipeline through here to tap shale deposits, but as far as I know that’s all speculation.”

“Maybe our power can help make it happen.”

“You’re assuming of course that the people here want that.”

“Why wouldn’t they?” she asked.

“Do I have to remind you that we’re talking because of a gunshot victim?”

“That’s doesn’t have anything to do with StuTech. Your soldiers shot him.”

“Of course, you’re right. My apologies.”

He quickly changed the subject.

“You know, I don’t get too many baseball fans up here, even ones that

hate the Cubs,” he said. “Would you stay for lunch?”

Rachel couldn't believe it. He was actually trying to put the moves on her. What a sleaze ball.

“Thanks,” she said politely, “I'm not really much of a baseball fan. I'm leaving tomorrow to go to Africa and I've got a lot of work to get done here before I leave.”

“What's in Africa?”

“We've got another medical outpost opening there.”

“Let me guess – Sudan?”

“Actually yes. How did you know that?”

“Lucky guess,” he said. “Did I impress you enough to change your mind

about lunch?”

“I don’t think my fiancé would approve.”

Noticeably disappointed, Alan held out his hand to say goodbye. Rachel took it.

“Best of luck to you and StuTech. And be careful at your next stop. You might not run into another American like me nearby.”

“Thanks, I’ll keep that in mind.”

Alan Grant went back to his tent, fired up his computer and shot off an email to his boss. He couldn’t wait to tell him whom he just ran into in the Bolivian jungle.

Chapter 19

Portland, Oregon

Frankie Forman's coffee was always cold. The type of insulated metal mugs that actually kept the coffee at a reasonably warm temperature weren't allowed at MassEnergy's security entrance. Not professional enough. The security guard had finally fought with her supervisor enough to get a plain ceramic mug – which was terrible at keeping her coffee warm. So Frankie was perpetually cranky. Blame the coffee or the erratic hours standing guard. It might also be the small chair her large frame was forced to endure. But the employees

probably had more to do with Frankie's grumpiness than anything else.

"They are hired for their brains and their PhDs, not their social skills," her supervisor had told her on day one.

And she tried to tolerate them every day from 6 a.m. until at least 4 p.m., plus Saturday shifts she picked up for overtime every few weeks. The overtime was great. She was trying to save up for a cruise to Hawaii. Maybe she could finally meet a man. That's not exactly true. She met men all day long, but they all had rulers up their asses and calculators for brains and nothing else.

So the ones that showed the simplest interest, even out of bare bones politeness and nothing else, got special

treatment from Frankie. She couldn't do much, she was locked down to the front entrance all day, except when she did rounds. But she treated them well, worked quickly when they were in line and made sure to show that she too appreciated being treated like a human.

Luke Kincaid was one of the good ones. From the first day he always made it a point to say hello, inquire about her day and make her feel good in the span of 30 seconds. That was about how long it takes to dump a mobile phone, pocket computer or any other device with a virtual memory into a sealed box for storage, while their owner was inside the building. The smart ones just left their items in the car, or didn't bring

them at all. It wasn't a new rule, but every day she boxed up items and stuck them in storage until the owner left the building.

So Frankie was surprised when Luke arrived the Tuesday after the Fourth of July weekend with a phone. He never had a phone.

"Sorry about that Frankie," he said. "I had to take a call when I left home this morning and it sort of followed me in".

"Sounds like a stray dog."

"I don't think I'd stick a dog in that metal box all day."

"Good call on that. You're in box 1126," she said, handing him a redemption ticket. "Just hand this to the guard when you leave to get your

belongings.”

She had him step through the body scanner, which let out a high-pitched beep, the signal for a more in depth search. She tried to hide a tiny grin as she asked him to hold his hands up and spread his feet apart.

“On the first date?” Luke said.

“We go all the way here, Honey, but just with the lucky ones,” she said, as she ran the back of her hands up and down the length of his body.

“Just be gentle with me, I’m fragile.”

“Yep, a regular porcelain doll, you are,” she said. “OK, you’re good. Have a good day.”

He said the same and placed his thumb on the biometric scanner to open

the swinging glass gate, the final barrier to enter the building. Just as the device registered his name, a whooping siren sound filled the entryway. Causing him to step backwards, right into Frankie. They both toppled over.

It had to be the phone. It had a proximity sensor on it that could connect with digital devices. Lunsford had planted a program on the phone that Luke activated minutes before he got inside the building. Luke had touched his phone to the wall of the body scanner seconds before he placed it in the box and handed it over to Frankie. The device registered the scanner as its target and then was supposed to work quietly through the day like a virus to find a

loophole in the system's security. Luke was to check the report created by the program at the end of the day to ensure it was in place. This would effectively give him access to bring in the data-plug watches.

“These things are fickle,” Lunsford had told him. “It’ll build you a nice loophole for the watch, but you have to have your phone within range of the device each time you bring it through. Otherwise the loophole won’t open.”

Luke hadn’t even brought a watch with him, knowing that it couldn’t work until the program was in place.

As he picked himself up off the ground, he was prepared to play dumb, not wanting raise any suspicions.

“Now, help me up so I can turn off that damn alarm,” Frankie said. “Big strong guy like you. What? Afraid of ghosts and black cats too? Alarm dings and you hit the ground like it was an air raid. My, oh my.”

“Sorry about that,” Luke said, using both hands to heave the woman to her feet.

“That damn alarm has been going off all morning. Some sort of reorganization, it changes your security clearance. But the system is buggy. So each time one of you scans in, it freaks out.”

“Freaks out?”

“That’s the official term as far as I know,” she said, punching in a code on her keypad. The siren stopped

whooping. “Just head over to HR, that’s where the others went. They’ll straighten it out.”

Luke again apologized for bumping into her.

“No doubt it’ll be the highlight of my week,” she said with a smile and barked at the next employee in line. “Let’s go people, I don’t have all day.”

The Human Resources office was located on the second floor of the main administration building. The receptionist handed Luke a stack of papers, blank access badge and a small cardboard box, then directed him to another room. A security guard was set up in an empty conference room. He cross-referenced Luke’s image on his badge and took his

orange lanyard and ID tag. The guard inserted the blank ID card into a machine to create a new ID tag.

The new tag had Luke's name and picture, just like his old one. The plastic card was a few millimeters thick with a metallic gold colored rim. He affixed a gold lanyard to the card and handed it to Luke.

"You are required to wear this ID tag at all times when you are on campus," he said. "If you are in the Green Levels of the building without your tag, you will be escorted out and not allowed back in."

"Where are the Green Levels? I've been all over campus and never seen a Green Level."

“It’s your new home,” the guard said, handing Luke the tag.

Printed below his name in black lettering were the words, “Associate, Research and Development. Development Floor.”

He was in.

Chapter 20

Of the three buildings on campus that Luke had yet to enter, the smallest one was the Dev Floor, at least from the outside. He carried his papers and cardboard box to Building 5, passed through moderate security at the entrance and was directed down the hallway to the bank of elevators. He stepped inside. The elevator sprang to life, dropping him 25-stories under the ground.

The elevator opened up, revealing a massive underground compound in front of him. It was one gigantic cave shaped like a silo. The floor space was larger

than a football field and a few hundred feet tall. Dozens of people were buzzing about or having heated conversations. Large machines in the center of the room were erupting with sound. At least that's where he thought the sound was coming from. The noise was deafening. Luke wanted to cover his ears, but was still holding his papers and box.

A man in a lab coat noticed his struggles and handed him a small plastic bag with a set of pink ear plugs in it. Luke put them in and got immediate relief from the machine noise.

“The plugs block out the high frequency sound, but lets you hear low tones like voices. It takes a while to get used to them. We don't normally do

these tests with so many people around,” he said. “Your group is over that way.”

He pointed to the other side of the space where a number of people were inside a conference room. He set off in that direction.

In the center of the cave was a laboratory that was sunken down from the rest of the floor by 15 feet. Spaced evenly on four corners of the lab floor were full-scale transmission towers that looked very similar to StuTech’s towers. A physics lab sat in the middle of the area. The lab was comprised of devices holding swinging magnets, calipers, measuring instruments and other devices atop rows of narrow tables. Several employees were hunched over stools at

various points around the lab.

Encircling the edge of the laboratory on the main floor, where Luke was standing was a ring of workstations separated by cubical walls made of glass. Some of the walls were frosted so Luke couldn't see inside, but the majority of them were clear and open. The first ring overlooked the lab directly. Two more rings encircled the first, separated by short walkways. On the far side of the room was a bank of conference rooms, again with glass walls and no ceiling.

Inside the conference room, Amir was chatting with some of the other candidates.

"It's a natural formation," said the

shipbuilder, William Yong. “These caves are all over the Pacific Coast, carved out naturally over millions of years by water.”

“Let’s hope somebody plugged the hole then,” Amir said. “I didn’t bring my water wings.”

The cave was an impressive sight. MassEnergy had obviously gone to great lengths to conceal it from the outside. Given what was stored inside, it would have been an enormous eyesore sticking out of the ground causing questions to be asked about what they were developing and giving StuTech more of a reason to view them as a threat. Besides, if the size of the building wasn’t in question, the sounds emanating from inside would

have been

A bright light flashed, which indicated the testing was over. Everyone removed their earplugs.

Kathryn Tate entered the conference room, followed by four more candidates. In all, 12 candidates sat around the table. Amir and William were the only other members from the Orange pod.

“Welcome to the second stage of the candidate program,” she said. “Your recent work has been evaluated by our top engineers, statisticians and physicists and in some cases it has helped in our current research. You’ll have to forgive the blind nature of the work, we needed to fully vet each of you before allowing you into the cave.

“I’m a bit disappointed that more than half of my candidates failed to make it this far. Those who didn’t make the grade have been cut loose. I said it before, but you should be proud to have made it this far.

“You will now be assigned to a project focus area and become part of our development teams in your area of expertise. Your assignment work is waiting for you at your desk. You have one week to present a solution for the problem you’ve been given. I have every confidence you will succeed. Your workstations are in the third ring of cubicles. Get to it.”

At his desk, Luke leafed through the papers he’d been given. Included inside

were standard forms for medical insurance, short-term disability and 401(k) investments. In the back was a confidentiality agreement that detailed his clearance level and consequences if he was found to be making confidential company information available to the public. Lunsford had told him that most of those contracts weren't enforceable, but just a scare tactic to get people to keep their mouths shut about what they were working on. He filled out the paperwork and fed it through a high-speed scanner and punched in a code to transmit it to HR.

Inside the cardboard box he'd been given was a small hard drive, which he connected to the workstation's data port.

A note engraved on the top of the drive warned that removing it from the Dev Floor would erase its contents.

The files on the drive were meticulously prepared, labeled in sequential numbers and then by subject. He had to read through one before gaining access to the next. The first set of files showed designs for transmission towers and basic range, distance and strength equations that related to neighborhood distribution networks of electricity that Luke had created when he was at StuTech. The files were simply a report on the work and read like an instruction manual. Do this, then that. Standard stuff. But the level of detail was astounding.

The next batch of files included a detailed schematic for towers and stubs. The plans for the tower looked almost identical to the towers positioned on the lab floor. Luke stood up to get a better look at the tower. The only obvious difference between the towers that were in use all over the world and the one detailed in the plans in front of him were the devices affixed to the top. The StuTech towers included dishes on all four sides that emitted radio waves. The MassEnergy tower eliminated the dishes in favor of a singular ring that surrounded the top dome. It definitely looked more elegant than the bulky dishes.

Luke clicked on the third and final set

of files on the drive. At the same time the glass walls of his cubical became frosted. He closed the file and the walls became clear again. Clearly this was a security measure to keep whatever he was looking at out of the public eye. It also meant that someone was watching him, probably recording his use of the program.

As he read through the file and studied the diagrams, he began to realize that he was looking at a set of files meant for someone else.

Chapter 21

Luke had studied a little physics at Stanford, but it was certainly not his favorite subject. The basic understanding of physics is the study of matter and its motion through space and time. The forces imposed on matter are the basic building blocks of energy and electricity, so he endured lessons on the fundamental theory of these elements as they related to his engineering degree.

Luke had the basics down. All particles known to man can be explained through the quantum field theory, referred to as the Standard Model. At its

core, the model detailed 17 species of elementary particles known as 12 fermions, 4 vector bosons and 1 scalar boson. Hundreds of composite particles are formed from these elementary particles.

How these particles interact with each other, under certain conditions form our understanding of nature and how the physical world works. At its most basic, it was like looking at thousands of parts in an car, down to the last screw and bolt. Everything under the hood and chassis works in unison toward a common goal – making the car move. Those interactions could vary greatly depending on the make up of the engine, exhaust system, drive chain and so on.

Physicists attempt to understand how everything works together – thus the aptly named Theory of Everything.

Inside the file was a mathematical formula describing how electricity was conducted wirelessly. What little information Warren Evans had released to the scientific community, called his basic findings, was included in the file. Yet there was one area of Evans' work that he wouldn't share, his personal creation and the source of his monopoly – ARC, the material that made wireless electricity possible. The Advanced Analytics group at StuTech had the market cornered on this information, which is why Luke had tried to get into the group since his first week at

StuTech. If he wanted to know everything about StuTech, he had to be in Advanced Analytics, but he had been rejected five years straight.

The final pages of the file included a lengthy list of particles, minerals and chemical compounds, showing their interactions. Luke had never seen a comprehensive list of the make-up of ARC – it was simply amazing. Its actual make-up had been bantered about in the scientific community since its inception, but it had never been replicated. The equations flowed together rather simply, but Luke was quickly lost. He clicked on a video file that showed basic particles and mathematical replications of their interactions with each other. The models

showed collisions of particles in the Standard Model: quarks, leptons, Higgs boson, gluons and photons. They flew across his screen, combining and dividing along the way.

The video concluded with a large equation, labeled S.A.R.C., drawn sequentially across the screen, but missing several variables. It ran through once, highlighting the missing pieces, then pulled the missing pieces out into their own formulas, noting several other missing areas.

The formula wasn't complete. If this was supposed to be his area of focus, he was doomed. For the rest of the day he stayed in his frosted cubical studying the final pages of formula. Maybe something

would pop for him. And then something did.

“MassEnergy is trying to make a synthetic ARC, or S-A-R-C.,” he said.

“We aren’t trying, we are making it. But it’s still under development,” Kathryn said.

“No one has successfully made ARC except StuTech. They claim it can’t be done by anyone else. Its practically a scientific law.”

“You can’t be so accepting of their explanation. They claim that their proprietary process creates the ability to efficiently transmit electricity through the air. But we also can’t examine the components that make it happen without damaging them. That’s the trick.”

“Right,” Luke said. “Once ARC is removed from its casing and exposed to air, it loses its strength. The compounds inside the material breakdown. When you examine the material, you can’t replicate its characteristics.”

“How convenient that the one thing that keeps StuTech on top, can’t be reverse-engineered,” Kathryn said.

“That’s why they’ve never filed a patent with the U.S. government on it, once they do that, it legally bars anyone from replicating it, but they would have to disclose how it works publically and lose the rights to it after a period of time.”

“You’re forgetting the bigger picture about ARC. StuTech doesn’t just control

the process that creates its characteristics, it also controls the only known source of the root material.”

The root material was found only in the Rocky Mountain Range, in a place called Pueblo Bluff. Warren Evans had served as a volunteer on an archeological dig at the base of the mountain range in the summer of 1995. The dig was attempting to uncover a long forgotten Native American encampment. The land was just outside a national park and was up for sale. A large benefactor for Cornell University by the name of Barbara Meyers owned the land and wanted to dispel any rumors that it had a historic value, which could bar development. The dig was meant to

prove that no encampments had ever existed. Had there been evidence of an encampment uncovered, the land could not be developed and would sell for much less, if it sold at all.

The dig found several historical artifacts that were carbon-dated to match the era in question, just enough in fact that the ski resort developer who wanted the land, abandoned the idea, fearing lawsuits if he attempted to build. Meyers was furious and so was the university president who was hoping the sale would make a nice addition to the school's endowment.

Evans was a physicist, but also an amateur archeologist, fascinated by the hidden world around him. He often

volunteered himself to work on digs throughout the world uncovering ancient relics or animal bones. Before gaining tenure at Cornell, Evans was reprimanded by the dean of the Physics Department for not devoting enough time to the science of today. An ironic twist in Evans' story, if there ever was one.

Throughout the summer Evans had taken mineral samples inside deep-water wells and examined what he found in his personal lab later that fall. He kept the findings to himself. The minerals, when treated and refined became what he later called ARC. The name ARC was in reference to a lightening bolt, or "arc" that forms when electricity is passed between two objects and visible to the

naked eye for a split second.

In 1996 Barbara Meyers sold the land to a corporation that claimed its intent was to make it a nature preserve. No one paid any attention until eight years later when Evans announced that he had found a way to efficiently transfer electricity without wires. His discovery was traced back to the land in Colorado and its newly uncovered minerals. The site was now a secure facility, controlled by Evans that barred outsiders with razor wire and armed guards.

Evans was chastised by the academic world for his underhanded dealings regarding the land. Yet with some success he argued that the land had no greater value at the time it was sold

because he didn't fully know the value of what he found there until after his corporation had purchased it and done extensive testing.

By the time the university and Meyers realized the deception, Evans had already monetized his creation and had endless financial means to fight any legal battles. He made a significant donation to Cornell's endowment with the stipulation the funds went toward arts, not sciences, a final poke at the university president and his former dean, whom he didn't care for in the slightest. Meyers also reached an undisclosed settlement. The argument over control of this new precious material was all but settled. Evans had deceived, cheated and

won.

“The search for additional sources of ARC is pretty well dead,” Luke said. “No one has been able to locate additional deposits.”

“That’s naïve. You don’t really buy into the meteorite theory do you?” Kathryn asked. “To think that millions of years ago something hit that specific segment of land and embedded a material that has these ‘magical’ properties. It’s just ludicrous.”

“Yet plausible. As glaciers pushed the Rocky Mountains up into place, the material was forced deeper into the earth, making its discovery one of simple chance.”

“Chance, right. Why was Evans at the

site in the first place? He didn't have any credentials to be there."

"You're saying that he knew what he was looking for," Luke said.

"Exactly. And he became the world's finest actor for playing it cool for years until he was certain about what he found and then he reaped the rewards."

"So he's got some secret knowledge of pre-historic meteorite crash landings? What makes him so special?"

"OK, so maybe chance plays into it a little bit," Kathryn said.

"Chance and luck. Since ARC material is only found in one spot, the meteorite explanation is the widely accepted one until someone can prove otherwise."

Kathryn looked at the towers in the center of the Dev Floor. Massive paperweights at the moment. She closed her eyes and rubbed her temples.

“I’m not a physicist or an engineer, so I won’t be making the scientific discovery that will give MassEnergy the ability to provide the world with access to efficient power,” she said. “I’m a mercenary. I know how people talk about me. My job is to provide the company the tools and employees to get the job done. And thus far it has been a failure. Which is why your candidate class is so important.”

“But not just to you though. You know the reason why this research is so important, right?”

“I do, people are suffering, blah, blah and all that. I saw the documentaries. But if we can’t solve some of our major issues, or at least show progress, then this venture is done. I’ve never failed to turn a company, but this is bigger than me.”

“That’s sort of why I came to see you,” he said, choosing to ignore her dismissal of people left off the grid. The focus area you’ve given me. It’s fascinating, don’t get me wrong, but I think I got the wrong assignment. I don’t know anything about the process that creates ARC,” Luke said.

“After all this, you still don’t get it?” she said.

“Get what?”

“We didn’t hire you for your engineering skills – sure, your scores were all right, but you weren’t the top of the class.”

“Quite a pep-talk, boss.”

“You’re not here because of what you know, but rather who you know. Or more accurately, who you used to know. And quite frankly I’m a little disappointed I have to point this out to you.”

Luke’s heart started beating just a little bit faster. She must know he was there under false pretenses.

“I’m not following you.” he said.

“You’re here because of Blaine Kirkhorn.”

“My old professor at Stanford?”

“Yes. Your old and I’m sorry to say, very much dead professor. I’ve got a meeting in three minutes, so I don’t have time talk about it now. Buy me dinner tonight and I’ll tell you all about it. How about Burrow’s downtown at seven-thirty?”

She didn’t wait for a response. She patted Luke on the thigh, her hand lingering a surprisingly long time, then left him sitting alone in her office.

Chapter 22

Kathryn Tate was a relentless researcher. She'd clerked for a state judge back home in Texas and earned the reputation as someone who always came prepared for the fight. Her judge was a hopeless alcoholic, a fact that she made every effort to conceal. She enjoyed working with the man and he was fair, when he was sober. Fresh out of law school, she was writing his briefs and recommending rulings on his decisions. It was an unhealthy relationship and one that the elder should have known was improper, but for three years, Kathryn

was effectively a federal judge without the robe and title.

She worked 70 to 80-hour weeks and rarely saw the outside world in the daylight hours. She had decades of experience to catch up on to keep up with his expanded role, so she would dig, and she was good at it. Lawyers were lazy and typically left the research work to paralegals alone, who were overworked and couldn't possibly do a decent job of uncovering every necessary fact. This was a detriment to their clients and Kathryn didn't see why they should suffer.

She had a knack for uncovering a piece of evidence or a witness that hadn't been properly interviewed. She

took pleasure in dropping hints to the prosecution – or in some cases the defense team. She got a kick out of showing them how bad they were at their jobs. She always remained anonymous, but watched the proceedings in each case to see how her efforts were used. In one case she drove five hours to review the paper medical records of a man suing a drug company. With very little effort, she found that a blood sample taken by a free clinic showed he was off the drug in question for months before his mysterious symptoms appeared. When the drug company entered the new evidence, it contradicted what had already been submitted by the plaintiff to the court. The man's lies were

uncovered and the jury ruled in the drug company's favor.

Soon after the case was concluded, she was offered a job at the drug company - a personal recommendation from one of the defense lawyers. How they had learned of her help, she didn't know, but she took the chance to move on from her clerkship and joined the drug company. She became permanent a member of the legal team as a researcher and advisor. After a few years, she started working as an independent consultant to several large companies and moved into management. She hit it big by turning around a large software company. But in all her dealings she never forgot the foundation of her

success — research and finding the information that most people ignored.

She had no family to speak of and hadn't stayed in one area of the country for more than a few years since law school. When James Beckman called, she could tell that he was running out of ideas for MassEnergy and brought her in just to rock the boat. Maybe an outsider's perspective could get it done, he said. Even though Kathryn was his call, he still questioned her value at every turn. He was also driven, so despite his lack of trust, she understood where he was coming from. He wanted to win too. She'd yet to fail at anything she'd ever done on a professional level and she was giving all she had to

MassEnergy.

On the personal side, that was another matter. There had been a few boyfriends here and there. A painter in Dallas, a swim coach in South Carolina – even a truck driver in the Mid-West. They never panned out. The guys were all right, but she could never commit the time and effort it takes to form a real bond. She was always the one to leave. On to a new city and professional challenge.

As she pulled her hair back into a clip and finished applying her makeup, she wondered what exactly she was thinking when she asked Luke to dinner. Yet she didn't hesitate to put on a scoop neck black dress that showed a little more

cleavage than her standard work attire. Nothing wrong with a woman looking nice, she thought.

She had hoped Luke would have made the Kirkhorn connection on his own. Better to let him figure it out, than have her spoon feed him, but the clock was ticking and they needed to move on it.

She wasn't going to lose this fight. She was playing every card she had, but she would just play this particular card over a nice meal, in the company of a handsome man.

Luke looked up the restaurant online from his workstation. Burrow's was a posh eatery that bragged of its extensive wine collection and hand-selected seafood and steaks. Jacket required.

What was he doing? Dating the boss wasn't a good idea – even one that looked like Kathryn Tate. Maybe a date wasn't her intent at all. Besides, he needed to find out what MassEnergy had to do with Professor Kirkhorn. Lunsford had told him to be whatever MassEnergy wanted him to be, so that was all he was doing. Right?

Luke collected his phone from the guard at the front entrance without incident. He left the office at 5:15 after switching into his running gear for the quick jog to his apartment. He had gotten into the habit of jogging to work in the morning and then home again each night with his work attire in a backpack.

He used the time to collect his

thoughts each morning and then wind down each night. In the evenings he usually took a circular route back to his apartment so he could get a few more miles in. Tonight he cut through Mainfair Park to get home as quickly as he could.

Luke grabbed his mail from the lockbox on the first floor of his building. He thumbed through it as he walked up the stairs - water bill, garbage and recycling bill, several pieces of junk mail and a large envelope from Mill Creek. He entered the apartment and opened the envelope. Inside was a charcoal drawing from Tilly on a piece of light green construction paper. The drawing was of him standing next to a motorcycle. The likeness was pretty

good and it was obvious that Tilly had spent a considerable amount of time on it. She wrote a note on the back, “See you soon.”

He felt honored to receive the drawing. It was the only such gift he'd ever received. That kid's a keeper, he thought. He hung it on the refrigerator and snapped a picture of it with his phone. He made the photo his phone's background image.

After jumping in the shower, he shaved off the day's worth of scruff and got dressed. New black slacks and a trendy sport coat. He hightailed it to the metro station just in time to catch the train downtown, unsure of what was going to happen over dinner.

Chapter 23

As Luke rode the train he thought of professor Blaine Kirkhorn. He was in Energy and Mineral Engineering at Stanford, specializing in geology and mining practices. Before moving to academia, he worked for several natural resource companies, advising them on drilling and mining in an effort to have them do the least harm to the environment. He was an ardent environmentalist, which often came into conflict with the chosen profession that hacked its way into the earth and didn't look back.

Luke took a basic geology class from Kirkhorn his freshman year and liked the man's frank manner, but he was not a student favorite. He liked to call on students who he knew didn't have a good grasp of the subject in question to make an example of them. The Socratic Method, or just learning by embarrassment, he called it. He had a passion for his geology work and expected others to give it the respect it deserved.

When Kirkhorn advertised a teaching assistant post, Luke was the only student to apply. Kirkhorn was reluctant at first to take on a freshman, especially one who was an athlete, being of the mind that younger students wouldn't stick

around long enough to do him any good. Luke proved him wrong and for three years worked any number of jobs in his laboratory and office. The scope of work was outside of Luke's major of engineering, but the work was basic and he could fit it in between his soccer practice schedule and other odd jobs. Kirkhorn relied on him to grade papers, keep his appointment calendar, file paperwork and occasionally help out in the laboratory.

Luke would sometimes go weeks at a time without seeing Kirkhorn, who liked to spend his evenings at home, but would often return to work at 11 p.m. or midnight and work until daybreak. He left detailed notes for Luke to follow so

he was rarely left with nothing to do.

Kirkhorn gave Luke a doorstep as a thank you gift for his nearly four years of service to him. It was some rare rock that apparently meant something to the professor, but much less to Luke. He also presented him with a strong letter of recommendation for any prospective employer, commending his work ethic and academic acumen. The day Kirkhorn gave Luke the letter was the last time the two ever saw each other.

Luke arrived at Burrow's Restaurant first and ordered a beer.

“Domestic or imported, sir?” The waiter looked down his nose at Luke with mild disdain. Ordering a beer at this upscale restaurant was obviously

frowned upon.

“Maybe just a bottle of red wine instead. You pick.”

“Very good choice.”

He glanced around at the other tables – not a beer glass to be found. He wasn’t much into fancy restaurants, preferring the company of strangers seated at the counter of a diner or on the curb outside a taco truck. No worries about a wine list at those places.

The waiter uncorked the bottle and made a point to tell Luke the wine “has to breathe for a few minutes.” Luke was afraid to touch the bottle for fear that the waiter would slap his hand. He wanted a beer.

Kathryn arrived just in time for the

glasses to be poured. She always looked good, but until tonight he had only seen her dressed for work. This was a whole new side of her. She looked fantastic and had turned a few heads since walking through the front door.

“Thanks for coming,” she said. “I’ve always wanted to try this place. I walk by it just about every day, but have never stopped in.”

She took a few sips of the wine and fiddled with the glass, glancing around the room, taking in all the tables that were filled with couples like them. Couples who were pawing each other and gulping even more wine. Luke pulled at the cuffs of his shirtsleeves and squirmed in his jacket. He hadn’t

touched his wine.

Perhaps sensing that his environment wasn't the setting she intended, she downed her glass of wine and pushed back her chair.

"You know," she said. "I've just gotten the biggest urge for a greasy hamburger. What do you say we-."

"Agreed."

Luke quickly paid for the wine with a smile - happy to be moving on from the pretentious restaurant. There was a burger joint a few doors down that looked promising. They ordered at the counter and got their food in little red baskets lined with wax paper. There was a tall table with stools open by the front window and Luke happily poured

them each a glass of an Oregon microbrew. Beers from the Northwest were always better than the stuff he used to get in California.

Luke felt the tension in his shoulders relax as he finished off his first beer. Kathryn wasn't too far behind him. Before they were done eating they'd polished off two pitchers of beer.

The place was packed, so they had to sit directly next to each other to avoid shouting. Luke didn't mind, but he was anxious for her to tell him about Professor Kirkhorn.

"OK, so here it is," Kathryn said. "When Warren Evans took his deep-well mineral samples during that first Pueblo Bluff dig in 1995 he was one of

26 people on the dig. Since Cornell University was footing the bill for the work, they kept a detailed work record throughout the summer, although they probably didn't know what he was up to."

"How did you get Cornell's records?"

"That's a minor point," she said. "The team from Cornell wasn't the only organization given access to the site that summer. Barbara Meyers wanted to cover all of her bases, so she brought in a natural resource company that was charged with preparing an Environmental Impact Statement that would be used if a developer wanted to move forward with developing the land for a ski resort.

“Natural Path Engineering – or NPE - had five men who stayed in a motor home for two months that summer as they surveyed the land and took samples of their own,” Kathryn said. “Blaine Kirkhorn was among them.”

“That sounds right,” Luke said. “He used to work for NPE before he accepted a teaching position at Stanford.”

“When Meyers was told a Native American encampment used to be located on the land, she was understandably upset and disappointed, but not at the students or faculty from Cornell,” Kathryn said. “She took issue with the Environmental Impact Statement that NPE had presented her. Nowhere in

the hundreds of pages of material was there any mention made of a historically sensitive site or accessible material that would have dated back to that point. In fact the statement basically gave the go-ahead to develop the land with no reservations at all.”

“So NPE missed something.”

“That’s what Meyers thought too, so like any red-blooded American, she sued them. The case was settled out of court the following year, but the original filing of the lawsuit was still on record, which is how I found Kirkhorn’s name attached to the case. As far as I can tell, it was the last job he ever did for NPE.”

They were on their third pitcher of beer and Luke was starting to feel a bit

more than a simple buzz.

“OK, but I was just a kid when this all this happened. I’m still not seeing a tie to me.”

“I know, I know. Just listen,” she touched her finger to his lips to get him to stop talking. “I think that Kirkhorn found something that summer, just like Evans did. It might not have been some world-altering discovery like ARC, but for a man who had worked decades in the minerals business and had done quite well for himself, he sure was in a hurry to get out fast.”

“Or maybe he was tired of living in mobile homes with four other dudes? Maybe he wanted a change of scenery.”

“Maybe. There was only one way to

find out. A year and a half ago, I flew down to Palo Alto to see him at the university, but found out he had died of a heart attack just a week earlier. Try as I might, I haven't been able to find any of the records of his work and research."

"But you think it has something to do with ARC?"

"I know it's a loose coincidence, but two brilliant scientists were working in the same exact spot years before one of the greatest discoveries of our lifetime was uncovered. I find it hard to believe that Kirkhorn didn't know what Evans was doing."

"But you hit a road block since Professor Kirkhorn died. He's not around to tell you what he saw that

summer.”

“No, but I know someone who worked with him for his entire college career.”

“You think that I know about an *assumed* discovery that happened when I was in elementary school? I worked for him, true. But he rarely ever shared any of his research with me. I took care of grading papers and stuff like that. I wasn’t his lab partner,” Luke said.

“You got this job on your own and I didn’t seek you out, but when I saw that letter of recommendation Kirkhorn wrote on your behalf, I thought it might be worth a try to find out what you know.”

“So all the testing I’ve done over the

last few weeks, that wasn't part of the candidate class training?"

"Yes, it was. I couldn't bring you into our confidence – into the inner workings of the company until I knew you were trustworthy. The tests were different for everyone, but they all included some psychological elements that told us whether or not a candidate is a person who can be trusted."

"And I passed?" Luke questioned any test that claimed to show such a thing – especially in his case.

"Don't sound so surprised," she said, with a smile. "You're worrying me slightly."

Luke recovered quickly.

"It just seems like a difficult thing to

test for. How can you really tell if someone is being truthful? That's not a test. Its something you feel. Something you earn over time."

"Maybe it's the alcohol talking and my guard is down," she said. "Maybe tomorrow I'll regret saying it, but the test you took had very little to do with me wanting you to move to the Dev Floor. I think you might be able to find the Kirkhorn link, but I also want people on our team who care about what we're doing. I can see it in your eyes – this is a passion for you too and you want to find those answers."

"I just don't think I had enough exposure to his actual work to offer any insight. There were times when he

would direct me in his lab, but it was simple stuff like measuring amounts and checking temperatures. I recorded some of the data, but it was only every few months that he would ask for my help. The next day it was like it never happened.”

“How do you mean?”

“Like I said, he usually worked alone in his lab most of the time, but every few months he requested that I help him over a weekend in the lab. Since he was so lenient of my frequent absences from the job, I made sure to help out whenever he needed me. I was just a second set of hands. He didn’t explain what he was working on and he didn’t mention the weekend projects to me until it was time

to work another weekend.”

“What about the data you recorded? Where did that go?”

“He had a laptop inside the lab that I used and we filed everything away.”

“Do you remember if it was issued by the university?”

“No it wasn’t. The university used PCs, but this was a Mac.”

“So it was probably his personal computer.”

“I never thought about it much, but yes, it probably was. I thought that it was a computer for the lab only because I only used it there.”

“So what does that tell us?” Kathryn asked.

“It means that whatever experiments

he was doing right in front of me, weren't university sanctioned," Luke said.

"I agree. So the laptop is the key if we want to find out what exactly he was working on, but I have no idea where it would be."

"His possessions had to go somewhere after he died. What about his wife, Loretta? She probably still has all of his things."

"He wasn't married," Kathryn said.

"Yes, he was."

"There is no record of him being married. Even on his death certificate – and yes, I did go as far as to check it," Kathryn said.

"That doesn't fit. He wore a wedding

ring. I noticed it because he always took it off when he was working in the lab. He even had me send Loretta flowers on their anniversary.”

“I don’t know who you were sending flowers to, but it wasn’t his wife.”

“I guess we should start with her,” Luke said.

“Do you have her number?”

“No, but I’ve got a pretty good idea how to find it in the morning.”

The bartender made the rounds to all the tables and announced it was last call. It was nearly 1:30 a.m. Luke couldn’t believe they’d stayed there so late. They both had had a lot to drink. The downtown streets of Portland were relatively safe at night, but Luke decided

the right thing to do was to walk her back to her apartment, given the late hour. She didn't protest.

She lived in a 15-story complex on SW Salmon Street near Chapman Square. Standing outside in the breeze, her hair blew into her face and she was repeatedly tucking it behind her ear.

"You want to come up for some coffee?" she asked. "Maybe sober up a little before heading home."

Her eyes told him to take her up on her offer. He knew what going up to her apartment would lead to. They were standing just inches apart. The writing was on the wall, but rejecting her could backfire too.

"I think maybe I should just head

back,” he said. “Get an early start on finding this laptop in the morning.”

She flashed him a knowing smile, took a small step forward and reached up, placing her right hand on the back of his neck. She pulled him close and lightly kissed him on the mouth.

“Thanks for dinner.”

With that, she turned and walked into her building, leaving Luke to wonder what it would have been like if he’d accepted her offer.

Chapter 24

Luke hit a button and unfrosted the glass surrounding his workstation. It took him about 15 minutes on the phone to find the address for Loretta. He recalled the name of the shop he had used to send her flowers on behalf of her husband. Rainbow Flowers. He told the shop he was an administrative assistant trying to find a distant relative's place for his boss. After some arm-twisting the girl on the phone reviewed the addresses of orders sent on behalf of Blaine Kirkhorn. There were only two. One was to Kirkhorn's home address in Palo

Alto. The other was to an address a few miles south.

“Can you tell me who the orders were addressed to?”

“They both went to women named Loretta. Loretta Kirkhorn and Loretta McDonald.”

“Are they the same person?”

“How in the world would I know that?”

“Good point. How about this? What did the deliveries consist of?”

“I thought you just needed to know the addresses to find an old relative.”

“Yes, and you’ve been very helpful, but can you tell me what was sent?”

“I’m sorry, I just have the cost listed, not the items delivered. But I can tell

you they were large orders. The charges are all for \$115 apiece, plus tax of course.”

“So they were probably the same bouquet?”

“Like I said, I don’t have that here. We don’t have itemized order records that go back that far. Would you like to place an order to one of those addresses?”

“No thank you, but I appreciate your help,” Luke said as he hung up the phone. Since Kirkhorn spent the same amount on each, it had to be the same woman with two last names.

He found an online reverse directory and got phone numbers associated with both addresses. He called the number

attached to the address he thought was Kirkhorn's old house.

"I'm sorry," said a friendly man who answered. "There's no one by that name who lives here."

"I was afraid of that," Luke said. "I'm trying to find an old friend. Maybe you can still help me. Did you buy the house from a professor from Stanford named Kirkhorn?"

"I'm not sure. It was an estate sale. We never knew the previous owners."

He called up the second address on an online search and saw it was for a retirement community called Palms Arms Living Center.

"Hello, I was hoping to speak to one of your residents, Loretta Kirkhorn,"

Luke said. He could hear the tapping of the computer keyboard as the name was entered.

“Doesn’t look like we have a resident by that name,” said the elderly woman in a slow, measured voice.

“How about Loretta McDonald? Maybe I’ve got my names mixed up.”

“No, McDonald is a winner, just the wrong place. Loretta McDonald hasn’t lived here in years. I remember her, she was very nice.”

“Can you tell me where she moved to?”

“Well, I’m a volunteer here. Actually I’m a resident here, but I say volunteer, because they don’t pay me nothing. They tell me I can’t give out personal

information about the residents.”

“But it sounds like you know where she went, right?”

“Of course I do, honey. I know everything that happens around here. I work at the front desk.”

Chapter 25

Tucson, Arizona

Loretta McDonald stared at the hanging ceiling tiles above her bed. The white tiles were speckled, which provided just enough of a peak to allow cobwebs to take hold. She had been looking at three cobwebs and their residents for the past eight days. The spiders didn't bother her much. She needed the excitement. She remembered it had been eight days since that was when they moved her into the room. Her previous room was a private one and had a nice view of the sunset over the mountains each evening. Now, she was

sharing the room with Glenda, who besides having an ungodly smell, just didn't know when to stop talking. Morning, afternoon and into the night Glenda talked.

Despite her efforts to show her indifference, Loretta was forced to listen. There wasn't much a quadriplegic could do to escape when they were in bed. If it wasn't the construction happening on the ceiling above her pillow or the chattering of Glenda, Loretta's only way to pass the time was television. And she loathed television. The other residents of Sunset Ridge couldn't get enough. They became virtual zombies, plopped in front of their screens with glossy eyes. Game shows,

news programs, soap operas – it didn't matter, they watched them all. Loretta had given up on television years ago.

Her eyesight was finally going, so she wasn't able to read her favorite authors any longer. Though she still had her electronic book attached to a swivel arm next to the bed. It was useless, but familiar and she wouldn't let them take it away. The little device held her entire library of books - 73 years worth of titles. She knew she'd never read them again, but having them close by was reassuring.

She had partial control of both left and right hands. Mounted on the bed next to her right hand were a small joystick and several buttons. From the controls

she could move the brace that held her head left or right. She could also move the bed into several positions, not that it mattered much. She had no sensation below the neck, except for her hands.

She rarely spoke anymore, although when she was alone in the room, she'd whisper a few country songs to herself. Her memories were from a different life. A better life. Her new room and roommate were all thanks to a dwindling bank account. She always thought there was more money in the account, but it seemed to be going faster and faster every month. Of course, she had a death horizon too. No question. She didn't know how many years she could hang on, but she did know how much money

she had to pay for her stay at Sunset Ridge. Her shared room was one-third cheaper per month than her private room. She needed to economize or face the real possibility that she'd be placed in a state-run facility. She did not want that to happen. She was cared for as well as she expected to be. The staff wasn't the best, but they provided the minimum care she required.

A green light flickered on below the wall clock, indicating that one of the nurses was about to enter – another welcome feature of the place. Residents don't get caught with their pants down.

Glenda's aimless rambling about the cabin her cousin used to own on Lake Michigan came to a thankful end as she

noticed the light.

“Come on in!” She bellowed toward the door. “We’re both decent!”

A nurse named Larry stepped into the room and walked past Glenda.

“Loretta, are you up for a visitor?”

A visitor? Loretta hadn’t had a visitor in more than four years and even then it was an insurance man. She pushed the button to raise the bed up, so she was in the seated position and more presentable.

“I guess it’s all right,” her frail voice squeaked out. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Larry went back into the hallway and let the guest in.

He was a big man who towered over her. His speckled gray hair was parted

on the site in an unnaturally straight line. White, crusty spittle marked the corners of his mouth.

She could tell the smile was forced. Damn salesman, she thought. He pulled up a chair adjacent to the bed.

“Loretta, I’d like to talk to you about Blaine.”

Chapter 26

Luke and Kathryn took the first flight from Portland to Tucson, but it was already late evening when they arrived, so they had to postpone their visit to Loretta until morning. Luke booked separate hotel rooms for them near Sunset Ridge so they didn't see each other until breakfast the next morning. There was still an obvious tension between them that started on the sidewalk outside her apartment in Portland.

“What are you going to ask her?” Kathryn asked, dipping her spoon into a

bowl of yogurt and granola.

Luke had spent his five-mile morning run wondering the same thing. The woman didn't know him, but she was the only connection he could dig up to Kirkhorn.

"I'm hoping that maybe she knows something about what Kirkhorn was researching over the last years of his life, Luke said. "But it's a long shot. I don't know that she was ever involved in his research. I never saw her at the school, not even once in four years."

"At the moment, she's the only lead we have. So, let's hope she's willing to talk."

"Especially to a couple of strangers."

Luke pulled their rented sedan into the

retirement home's parking lot and they both walked into the lobby. An orderly led them down a series of hallways to Loretta's room.

"She's a surprisingly popular woman these days," the orderly said.

"How do you mean?" Luke asked.

"Mrs. McDonald doesn't get too many visitors, but you two are now her second and third in the last two days."

Luke and Kathryn exchanged a quick glance, but had no reason to think that the visits were related. The receptionist punched a few buttons and directed them down the hallway.

Glenda excused herself when Luke and Kathryn came in the room and introduced themselves. Loretta was

sitting in a motorized wheelchair by the window, her head strapped to the back of the chair.

“Loretta my name is Luke Kincaid and this is my co-worker Kathryn Tate. I used to work for Blaine when he was at Stanford and I was hoping that I could ask you a few questions.”

“You can ask, but I can’t guarantee any answers,” she said. “You’re the soccer player, right?”

“Yes, I played soccer at Stanford and worked as a Teaching Assistant for your husband.”

“He wasn’t my husband.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I thought you were married.”

“We were, but after my accident, he

divorced me and here we are.”

Loretta didn't look angry. Luke was searching for a reason Kirkhorn would have divorced her in such a condition. Maybe he didn't really know the man at all.

“Your accident, can you tell me what happened?”

Loretta cleared her throat, most people were afraid to ask. She respected Luke for not shying away from the obvious question.

“I used to ride barrels competitively when I was a girl. Damn good at it too. Made some extra cash on the national rodeo circuit and got to see the country. But that was a long time ago. Even after I officially retired I kept riding, even did

a little bit of coaching for the younger riders.”

She paused and closed her eyes, as if trying to recall the memory from the back of her mind.

“I was working with this young girl on a ranch in Montana - granddaughter of a friend of mine. You see there is only so much you can tell someone about riding. At some point you have to show them – especially when they don’t get it. And this girl didn’t get it. So, hindsight being 20/20, I shouldn’t have done it. But I mounted the girl’s horse. Just so I could show her how to maximize her final turn. You see she was dragging her heel on the mare’s flank and slowing it down. The damn thing got spooked by an

unfamiliar rider and bucked me off. Damaged my spine at C1, C5, C6 and C7.”

“I’m so sorry,” Luke said. “There’s nothing medically that can be done?”

“Nothing. Not when the damage is so severe in so many places. You hear about people gaining back some control of their limbs under certain circumstances, but that just wasn’t in the cards for me. So that’s my sad story, but you didn’t come to hear about me, now did you. What to you want to know about Blaine?”

Luke explained that he and Kathryn worked for MassEnergy and wanted to know more about Kirkhorn’s research.

“Like I said, I was his TA for a few

years during college and I think there may have been a link between some of what he was working on and what we're researching today. Did he ever talk about his work with you?"

Again, she closed her eyes for a few moments before beginning to speak.

"I fell in Montana on a Sunday morning. Blaine flew up to see me in the hospital Monday. He was very concerned about me. So concerned in fact that he filed for divorce on Wednesday. The next time I spoke to him on the phone I remember distinctly what he told me. He said that he expected his life to get very busy soon and that I'd be better off without him. He was so busy that he was about to hire an teaching

assistant – you.”

Luke knew he was Kirkhorn’s first teaching assistant, but not about the curious timing. Kirkhorn kept his personal life mostly to himself, but this was very much a surprise.

Kathryn couldn’t believe what a jerk the man seemed to be.

“Who would divorce a woman that just became paralyzed? What an ass,” she said.

“I’ve wondered that myself,” Loretta said. “He was a wonderful man for our entire marriage. We rarely had an argument. Even after three decades, we were best friends. Never once did I think that we wouldn’t be together, but I’ve accepted what he did. We had a great

life together. I've forgiven him."

"I'm sure that was a difficult thing to do," Kathryn said.

"In some ways, yes. For some reason he couldn't handle my accident — couldn't handle being with me. After so many years of marriage he wasn't going to give any more. I can't fault him for that, he'd reached his breaking point."

"So he never discussed his work with you?" Luke asked again, just to confirm that the trip was in fact a total waste.

"No, but I know his focus shifted in his last few years. He'd been working in the mines for so many years that he was on autopilot. He liked the freedom that an academic setting allowed him. Whatever made his life busy, as he put

it, was different from all that.”

“How could you tell? Wasn’t this happening right when you got divorced?”

“It was. You see, Blaine always took his work home with him. His whole life, he’d tinker with something after dinner, or at night or on the weekends. He didn’t like being confined to an office or laboratory. Which is probably why he liked the mines – they didn’t come with cubicles and office doors. My point is that he had to pay for his own research when it was conducted at the house. I was staying at an assisted living facility, so I never saw what he was doing, but it was expensive. Since the divorce wasn’t final he needed my signature when he

took out a second mortgage on the house. He told me it was important, but that was it. Blaine wasn't one to waste money. He spent that money on whatever he was researching, I'm sure of it."

"How much was the second mortgage for?" Kathryn asked.

"A little over \$700,000. Enough that when he died, last year it wiped out nearly all of his savings to pay it off."

"What happened to all of his things when he died?"

"He willed everything to me and I had an estate company sell off as much as they could. This lavish lifestyle I enjoy needed some cash."

"I was hoping that maybe there was something left over that we might be

able to look through.”

“The estate company didn’t sell everything. What’s left is boxed up in storage.”

“Would you let us look through it?”
Luke asked.

“On one condition – take me with you.”

Chapter 27

Seattle, Washington

Warren Evans sat in his kitchen, receiving guests from StuTech. The parade of employees had been going on all morning. He could usually dispatch each of them in just a few minutes, their simple minds jumping at the chance to please him. He loved the control he had over their actions, but not the idiotic interactions they required for the simplest task. No doubt each of them would come calling again next week with even more mundane matters that they should be dealing with themselves.

The last employee had finally left, but

Evans was still at the table waiting for one more. Steve Lunsford was running late. Evans was growing increasingly impatient with his old friend and not just because he was now 12 minutes behind schedule. For years, Lunsford had assured him that the money he funneled into “strategic initiatives” with him was worth it.

“My job is to protect this company at all costs,” Lunsford had told him. “I need the capital to do it. Spying on the competition and protecting our assets isn’t cheap.”

But in reality, he didn’t need all that much money, so he never got it. His job wasn’t that hard, Evans knew that for a fact. Lunsford was a simple man with a

simple mind and his tricks weren't all that complicated. If not for their friendship, all of Lunsford's extra-curricular activities would have come to an end long ago. But he needed Lunsford, although he'd never tell him that. He just wished that the man would focus more attention on where the company was truly vulnerable and less on his pet projects.

Corporate spies. What a waste of time. What have they ever actually given us? It was a good place to dump that gold digger, Luke Kincaid though. Besides, the competition was clueless. StuTech had the market cornered. There was nothing to uncover that they didn't already know.

Now 17 minutes late, Lunsford finally showed up.

“I’d appreciate it if you could manage to make it to our meetings on time,” he said.

“If you didn’t insist on meeting in person, we could have had this conversation already,” Lunsford said.

“You are going to lecture me about being paranoid? That’s new.”

“We have methods for secure communications.”

“Not reassuring to me. I know my home is safe from any ears to the ground,” he said. “Now, what have you got for me?”

“There’s been some movement on the Kirkhorn widow,” Lunsford said.

“If I recall, she wasn’t very helpful the last time we dealt with her.”

“No, she wasn’t. And now she has the onset of dementia. I went to see her a few days ago and she didn’t even know her name. Had no idea who I was, even though we’ve met previously.”

“So, what’s the movement?”

“One of our teams has latched on to her as a link to Blaine Kirkhorn.”

“Him again? I thought we were through with that. If she’s a dead end, why are you wasting time with it?”

“I just want to see how it plays out. It could be important.”

“You need to learn to prioritize your resources Steve. You’ve got bigger problems than some incoherent widow.

Now, lets talk about our \$10 million donation to the University of Munich for that archeological dig.”

“I had the situation taken care of quietly,” Lunsford said.

“No red tape?”

“I put my two best men on it,” Lunsford said. “They are very good at what they do.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear.”

Chapter 28

Tucson, Arizona

Sunset Ridge had a deal with a local mini-storage company. Once the residents moved in, they very rarely ever moved out, but that meant that the bulk of their belongings collected over a lifetime had to go somewhere. Alberto's Storage gave residents 10 percent off each month to store their old junk. Alberto's recouped their money every few months when the residents died and stopped paying their bills. State law allowed them to auction off the contents of the units blind to the highest bidder. But Loretta was a good paying customer

and her unit had only been opened once. The moving company loaded the items in and locked the door behind them when they left.

“I know it sounds silly, but I didn’t want to just give away his things,” she said as Luke wheeled her down the rows of sheet metal storage units. “Since they couldn’t sell it all, I asked that everything be boxed up and shipped out here. I honestly have no idea what’s in there.”

The hot Arizona sun beat down on the black asphalt as Luke procured a key from his pocket and inserted it into the padlock. He rolled the door up, giving Loretta the first look at what she’d been paying to store for the past year. The unit

was 20 feet deep and just 10 feet wide. Cardboard boxes of all shapes and sizes were stacked 15 high, nearly touching the ceiling in teetering towers. Bags of clothes and shoes were spilled out onto the floor. A bowling trophy sat atop a piano bench. It hadn't been packed with a great deal of care.

Luke took the first tenuous steps inside the place. There was a narrow walkway that led to the back of the space. The first thing to catch his eye was a large rusty whisky still used in the distillation process for liquor. The bent metal cylinder was heaped into the corner, partially covered by a white bed sheet. He walked on and disappeared from view behind a wall of boxes,

investigating the contents with a flashlight.

Kathryn remained outside with Loretta. They both marveled at how much was stuffed inside the space.

“How much of his estate did they sell?” Kathryn asked, wiping sweat from her brow.

“They told me there wasn’t much left, but from the looks of this place, I don’t know, they must have sold a lot - if this was their idea of a little leftover.”

“It’ll take us weeks to go through this stuff.”

“Needle in a hay stack. I guess.”

“Loretta, I appreciate you doing this, but I’m not sure why you’re opening up to us,” Kathryn said. “You don’t know

us at all. Why are you letting us snoop through your ex-husband's belongings – which by the way, are yours now, not his.”

“Oh, I know dear. Blaine made some mistakes in his life, but he was a good man. At least I thought so. He wanted to see the best in people and he wanted to help when he could. If you two tell me he was on to something great – or even something halfway good, then I hope you can continue what he started.”

“But why us?”

“Sweetheart, no offense, but it's Luke that I'm looking to here, not you. Blaine didn't have many confidants in his life and if he trusted Luke to work so closely with him, then there's got to be a reason.

And what am I going to do with all this stuff? I'd never have even seen it if you two hadn't showed up today. It's nice to have visitors."

"The receptionist told us that you had a visitor yesterday too."

"Yes and no. He was looking for someone else. I wasn't much help to him."

Luke appeared from the darkness of the storage unit carrying a box of files.

"The shed isn't organized at all, which isn't a big surprise because the movers didn't know his filing system."

"And you do?"

"Four years of being told that I put stuff in the wrong place makes you remember. From what I can tell from the

labels on the boxes he sorted his files by year, but some of the years have several boxes.”

“But we’re only looking at specific years, right?” Kathryn asked.

“Technically, yes, but he often built on ideas that he started researching years prior, so if we want to know what he was working on from the time he hired me to the time he died, we’re going to need to look through everything, from the beginning.”

“But there are hundreds of boxes in there,” Loretta said. “You’ll die of heatstroke after an hour inside that shed.”

“We’ll be OK, just need to hydrate,” he said, turning to go back in.

“Oh, don’t be such a hero,” Loretta said. “I’ve got a much better idea that will get all of us out of this horrendous sun.”

Chapter 29

For the next two days Luke, Kathryn and a few able-bodied residents of Sunset Ridge worked in the relative cool of the community recreation room. A seldom-used ping-pong table became headquarters for reviewing the contents of the boxes. Elvin, a friend of Loretta's was the first to volunteer to help the cause. They had been sorting out the plan of attack when he arrived to watch television. The activity in the room was enough to snag a few more helpful residents who readily admitted they had nothing better to do.

Elvin recruited some of the staff to bring in extra tables so they could better organize the belongings.

“At our age, we’ve all been placed in the position of having to go through another’s belongings,” Elvin said. “You want someone who will respect your personal life. Respect your things. There’s a reason people keep things. Even if they don’t know it.”

“I think that’s a great attitude, Elvin,” Kathryn said. “Sounds like you’ve done this before.”

“I was a garbage man before my hip gave out.”

“I see.”

By the end of the first day the collection of 54 boxes was sorted on

four different tables that Elvin organized. The ping-pong table held personal effects such as photographs, postcards, letters and things you could stack. A round reception table near the window held clothing and housewares that spilled out onto the surrounding floor space. A long banquet table held odds and ends - things that didn't fit anywhere on the other two tables.

The last table was simply Kirkhorn's research, which had been mixed into 26 of the 54 boxes in no particular order. Luke's hope that the records were ordered chronologically was quickly dashed.

"It seems like at some point the records were in order, but in the process

of packing up his belongings to sell, the moving company just stuffed files into the nearest boxes or combined them into less boxes,” Luke said.

“At least we’ve got them separated from the other junk,” Kathryn said.

“Hey, this isn’t junk, young lady,” Elvin said from the other side of the room. He’d taken a particular interest in Kathryn throughout the day. “One man’s trash is another man’s treasure.”

“You’d know, wouldn’t you Elvin?”

He flashed her a smile.

Luke pulled a stack of boxes to the side to clear more room for sorting the piles. When he stacked them together he noticed something that he hadn’t seen before. There were series of six letters

and numbers on the labels. He piled them three high with the labels facing the same direction. The months May, June and July and their corresponding year were lined up.

“You see how the markings on the box are in order by month?” Luke asked.

“Yes, all of the boxes are labeled with a month and year, what’s your point?” Kathryn asked.

“They are all labeled, but they aren’t all here, according to the pattern.”

He grabbed another set of empty boxes and piled on October, November and December of the same year.

“You see? Where are the rest of the boxes for this year?”

“Maybe he didn’t have a new box for

every month,” Kathryn said. “Or maybe the movers just tossed them.”

“OK, but when you stack the boxes in order by date – which is how most people would, you’d never see it.”

“See what?”

“The series of letters and numbers in the corner of the box label,” Luke said. “They’d mean nothing. But if you order the boxes by the pattern, it’s obvious. The months and years don’t mean anything. He added them later. That’s why they are all in the same black marker, but the rest of the markings are multiple colors.”

“I don’t understand,” said Kathryn.

“It’s a hexadecimal code. It uses a base 16,” Luke said. “Meaning, 16

distinct symbols including zero to nine. The letters A, B, C, D, E and F are used to represent ten through fifteen.”

Luke lined up three boxes by the code. The months and years were all out of order. The box labels read from top to bottom: CCFF66, CCFF33, CCFF00.

“I’m not sure why he did it, but it looks like he used color shades to organize his research. If he did this back at Stanford I never noticed it before.”

“Colors? I thought you said it was a code,” Kathryn said.

“The most common use for these numbers today is to represent colors in the HTML language used to build websites. The pile of boxes here represents bright shades of neon green.

It's a mathematical pattern that tells your web browser what color to show you."

Luke lined all the boxes up by the hexadecimal pattern. The months and years were random. There were also four boxes missing from the patterns, if they were indeed complete sets.

They stayed late into the night, after all the residents had gone to bed, reading through the files Kirkhorn saved, trying to find some clue to what he was working on in the years after he split with Loretta. The man took meticulous notes, but they were much like the hexadecimal code - he used his own shorthand. He wrote everything down. Nothing was recorded on video or audio, at least nothing that was left in the

files, which was probably a factor in why he wrote in a coded language. Luke figured if Kirkhorn had put his thoughts on video, his research would be more easily decipherable. And for some reason he didn't want to make it easy.

The boxes contained receipts for office supplies and items from dozens of health food stores. Copies of Scientific America magazine, junk mail and other random things that were easy to separate from Kirkhorn's research notes. The text was simply infuriating - a foreign language.

"I think the Sunset Ridge manager is considering charging us rent," Kathryn said, pouring another cup of coffee from the recreation room's pot.

She yawned and rubbed her eyes.

“We might have to take up residence here to get to the bottom of this mess,” Luke said.

“You didn’t really believe this was going to be simple, right? Just waltz in here ask a few questions and by some miracle, we walk away with all the answers we need. Maybe uncover the man’s secret diary that tells us he knew all about ARC? Maybe he wrote some plans for a homemade wireless tower in his backyard?”

“No, it’s just that I’ve been looking at these files for hours now and even if I knew what sort of shorthand he was using, I have absolutely no faith that I’d be able to understand it. The equations

he listed aren't something that I've ever seen before. It's some sort of advanced quantum mechanics that are way over my head."

"We can always take what we find back to MassEnergy and get one of the pods to work on it."

"I know, I just feel some sort of responsibility to figure this out. If it was happening right under my nose at Stanford – for God's sake I helped him do some of the research ... I should have known what I was working on."

"You expect some drunken frat boy to remember everything he did in college?"

"OK, first, I wasn't a drunken frat boy and second, yes, I think you should remember the important stuff."

He was getting increasingly tired and irritable as the hours dragged on.

“But that’s just it, you didn’t know it was important at the time. But you’re here now. That’s how we’re going to make a difference,” Kathryn said, taking another sip of coffee.

She poured him a cup and put her hands on his shoulders from behind, rubbing the tired muscles. Luke stiffened and she stopped.

“I guess.”

“Tell you what,” she said, sitting back down at the table. “Let’s keep digging, if something pops, then we can run with it, otherwise I’m pretty sure Loretta would be happy to lend us the files and we can have a pod team take it on.”

“Fair enough. Oh, and there’s something I need to tell you that I’ve actually been dreading all night.”

“That sounds sort of serious.”

“It is. So, here goes – that coffee is decaf.”

“That’s explains it,” Kathryn said with a yawn, then stretched out on the recreation room sofa, her midriff exposed as she laid down. She closed her eyes and Luke diverted his and went back to work.

Chapter 30

Elvin Walker wasn't always a garbage man, but he liked to tell people that he was. They seemed to open up around him when they thought he was beneath them. They let their guard down when they think you've been hauling trash your whole life. So he continued to do it, 40 years after he stopped being a garbage man and 15 years since he officially retired from the United States Air Force.

Military service had taken the better part of his life, but he loved the service. An operations analyst, Elvin saw things

that others missed. How the price of wheat in Europe impacts computer sales in India. How the money spent to entertain a troop of soldiers impacted the war effort the next morning. Seemingly random occurrences found a connection with Elvin.

But now his biggest challenge was a daily crossword puzzle. So, the excitement of a new project occurring in his recreation room, was too much to keep him away. Even if Loretta hadn't asked him to keep an eye on Luke and Kathryn while they reviewed the boxes. He was more than up for the task and had trouble sleeping after a full day's work – a rare occasion since he retired. So he was up bright and early the next

day to join the project again before anyone else arrived.

He started sorting through the table of old photographs. The pictures had one clear similarity, Loretta and a tall man with white hair, who he assumed was her ex-husband. Elvin never married. He'd dated a few women, but just never felt the vibe. He was more comfortable alone anyway. Yet, he'd grown fond of Loretta. She was obviously fond of him too.

He looked at her smiling face in the pictures. The same smiling face he'd seen from her everyday. At least glimpses of one. She was a tough nut to crack, but he liked the conversations they had. Who knew that a cowgirl and a

kid from the inner city of Atlanta could have so much to talk about? Of course there were times that they didn't talk at all. During those times they just listened to country music tracks from the heart of the Deep South. Nothing sounded better.

He was flipping through another set of photographs, when he heard the whine of Loretta's motorized wheelchair.

"It's not nice to stare," Loretta said.

"Sorry, come again?"

"The pictures. It's not nice to stare," she said, parking her chair at the edge of the table. Glenda had followed her into the recreation room. She plopped herself down at a table nearby and started quietly rummaging through Blaine's personal items.

Loretta moved the joystick on the chair and lowered her head slightly to see what Elvin was looking at.

“These were all inside the boxes. We pulled out the pictures for you. Thought you might like to see them.”

“Thank you, that was very kind. I would like to take a look.”

Elvin carefully spread out a dozen pictures on the table so Loretta could look at them as long as she wanted. He could see the flood of memories coming back to her in the expression on her face. The eyes. The eyes always told the story.

“Tell me what you see,” Elvin said after a few minutes.

“I see a part of my life that I’ve tried

to forget. When I could walk – hell, when I could run. When I saw the world on my own terms. Old age or strapped to this chair, it really doesn't matter, it's a lifetime ago. There's not much difference between me and everyone else here now. My memories are in those pictures and fading in my head.”

She took a hard look at a picture of her and Blaine in a pineapple field. The sharp green sprouts of the plants were dark green and filled the background of the fading image. The large stem of the pineapples poked out the top of each still-ripening fruit.

“This was taken on our honeymoon in the Caribbean on the Island of Nevis. We'd rented a motorcycle and rode it

everywhere we could on the island. We were riding to a beach on the south side of the island when we saw this tiny little trailer parked on the side of the highway. It was really just a wide spot in the road, but they managed to get the trailer wedged in there against a mountainside. They cut a big window out on one side to sell cane juice with flavors and shaved ice.

“A teenage girl and her little brother invited us into the trailer to watch them push the cane stalks into a press that extracted the cane juice. It was probably my favorite memory of our honeymoon, simple and quiet. Sugary sweet too. There was a small pineapple plantation just behind the trailer. We spent an hour

walking through the rows of pineapples, enjoying the sun and the smells of the tropics.”

“Did you ever make it to the beach?”

“Not that day. And not the next few days either, actually.”

“I get it. It being your honeymoon and all.”

“No, that wasn’t it. When we rode back to the hotel, I wasn’t paying attention when I got off the back and accidentally touched my leg to the tailpipe. I spent the next four days at a medical school hospital on the other side of the island being treated for second and third-degree burns and a little sunstroke.”

“I can see why that wasn’t your

favorite memory of the honeymoon.”

“Blaine only left my side once the whole time I was in that hospital bed. He walked into town and bought me a necklace. I still wear it.”

Elvin gently pulled back her shirt collar and moved the necklace to the outside of the shirt. A shiny dark gray stone heart was attached to a washed out red leather cord.

“It’s a polished rock from the island. Only Blaine, the mineral specialist, would think that giving his new bride a black heart was romantic.”

“It felt warm when I touched it,” Elvin said.

“Of course, I can’t feel it now, but it always had - what’s the best way to

describe it? A strong presence when I wore it. I stopped wearing it completely after a few days because it wasn't comfortable. I just kept it in a jewelry box. I put it back on after my horse riding accident."

"You don't seem to have any resentment toward Blaine. I mean, you still wear the necklace he gave you on your honeymoon."

"I don't know why, but he asked me to wear it. It seemed important to him, so I did. To tell you the truth, I don't really think about it much, since I can't see it or feel it."

"I can't imagine that. You're a strong woman and I don't want to feel sorry for you, but I am sorry you're in this

position.”

“It’s my own fault. You need to know your limits. Riding that horse in Montana was over the limit. In my forties I broke my elbow skiing too. Hit a rock on a black diamond. Guess I’m damned.”

“I hate to say this to a lady in a wheelchair, but you seem pretty accident prone. Tailpipes, horses and black diamonds.”

“You’re right, Elvin. You shouldn’t say that to the wheelchair lady,” she said. “Now show me the rest of the pictures.”

Chapter 31

Loretta, Elvin and Glenda left the community room when breakfast was served in the dining room. Luke and Kathryn arrived during breakfast and went right to work. The files were still where they left them and they dug in for the long haul. Luke had been going over the files in his mind all night. Kirkhorn had a laboratory in his basement where he was conducting research. Even with a second mortgage, there were limitations to the type of equipment he could afford to purchase. The costly work had to have been completed at another location –

which is probably why he did some work at the Stanford lab. He could get in and out, but wasn't required to keep his work accessible to anyone else.

By dividing up the type of experiments he could do by location, maybe he could make a connection. The records indicated that he had a sample size of 45 items – which were described only as units. He tracked and described the conditions of the units in daily increments. One entry read, “Unit 3 shows slight reaction on exposure, but falls short on second application.” Other entries, “Case 23FF3 mirrors previous batches,” and “Case 6AD9J6 a total disaster.” The records didn't describe the units or what they were being

exposed to.

Maybe the missing boxes had the clear answers he wanted. He wasn't sure. Luke felt powerless. Kirkhorn was obviously creating something and testing it in batches or cases. He'd yet to bring this theory up to Kathryn. She was so keen on giving the project to another team. Her only reason for caring about his professor's work was for her professional gain at MassEnergy. She had already booked them on a flight home the next day. She was ready to give up the search and focus her efforts elsewhere. Luke was more interested in figuring out what Kirkhorn had been involved with during his college days. He wasn't ready to let it go to a pod

team. Not yet.

Luke thought that maybe with a little probing, Loretta could offer some insight into the search. He found her resting in her shared room with her roommate Glenda who was visibly annoyed that yet another visitor was there to see Loretta and not her. She wasn't about to excuse herself from the room, so she flipped on the television mounted on the wall and began watching a news program. She turned the volume down low, so she could still get the gist of her roommate's conversation.

Luke explained his theory about the different locations for research work and experiments.

“He had always done some work at

home, but he kept it out of sight. It wasn't something I really even wanted in my house, all those rocks and things that he got from the mines. Pure filth spilling out all over my rugs. The man had no sense of tidiness."

"So it was rocks and minerals that he worked on at home?"

"Yes, at least some of it was. He kept it locked up in the basement. But like I said, I didn't ever see any of it for very long, he knew I didn't want that stuff all over my house."

"That's OK. Did he ever refer to the rocks or minerals by name?"

"He wasn't a crazy person, Luke."

"No, I mean did he refer to their scientific names?"

“I’m sorry, if he did, then I can’t recall it.”

Glenda began stirring on the other side of the room, and she turned the TV up noticeably higher.

“Maybe you should tell him your honeymoon story, dear,” Glenda bellowed. “That’ll bring down the house again.”

Loretta rolled her eyes, sharing a room to save a buck was beginning to seem like a really bad idea.

“Honeymoon story?”

Partially to annoy Glenda, she told him the same story she’d recalled to Elvin earlier that morning, including the burns on her leg.

“What was the name of the hospital

you stayed in on Nevis?”

“I have no idea, it was in Charlestown tough, I remember that. It’s the big city on the island.”

“Was it the Medical College of the Caribbean?”

“It might have been, yes, that was probably it,” she said. “The students were mostly from the U.S. Why does it matter?”

“It might not, but I think I saw the name of that school on some return address labels.”

“I don’t know why he’d be receiving mail from the school. We only went to the island together once. How old were these shipments, our honeymoon was decades ago.”

“These weren’t decades old,” he said. “I’d have to go back and look, but I’m pretty sure there were several shipping labels and receipts in the files.”

“Does that mean something?”

“Only because he kept them.”

Luke found six cardboard boxes that Elvin and the other residents had sorted into a trash pile. Each piece of cardboard was torn out of a larger box, but the rest of the boxes were nowhere to be found. The labels were clearly from the Medical College of the Caribbean, care of by Dr. Estevan Rigau. Two of the shipments were made before the accident. The other four were sent in the months after.

The inside of the boxes had a thin

layer of tough rubber lining.

“I’ve seen these before. Hospitals and drug companies use these to ship medical waste or other human biohazards so they don’t leak out,” Kathryn said. “It’s not a common practice. The rate they have to pay to ship biohazard materials is outrageous, for even the most benign items. So, they sometimes put it in these lined boxes and seal them up so the carrier doesn’t know what they are transporting.”

“Just to save money?”

“Yeah, like I said, its not a common practice, but everybody has a budget.”

Luke couldn’t imagine what sort of biological material Kirkhorn would be getting from a hospital in the Caribbean.

He pulled up the university website on his phone. The school offered a medical degree program to United States citizens. Go to school in paradise, was the big selling point. He dialed the main switchboard of the school.

“Yes, I’m hoping to reach the office of Estevan Rigau,” he said.

“His office? Well, I believe he’s around here somewhere, I will track him down,” said the receptionist who answered the phone. “Please hold.”

It was more than 10 minutes before someone came back on the line.

“This is Estevan.”

“Hello, my name is Luke Kincaid and I’m researching the work of Blaine Kirkhorn.”

There was a slight pause before the man continued, “Oh, yes. Brother Blaine,” Estevan said in a thick West Indies accent. “In need of more samples, I can only assume? It’s been some time and I’ve got them all ready.”

“Yes, that’s why I’m calling, I’d like to procure his standard samples.”

“I was hoping for this call, but dreading it all the same,” he said, in a hushed voice. “I cannot ship the samples anymore. Our government’s port security has been strengthened and I cannot get them out through the mail.”

“We’re really in need of the samples, is there any other way I can get them?”

“Of course, but it will take quite an effort. Are you sure you’re up for it.”

“It’s very important.”

“In that case, is your passport up to date?”

“Yes it is.”

“Then write down this address on the island and let me know when to expect you. And give Blaine my regards.”

Regards?

He doesn’t know Kirkhorn died.

Chapter 32

Arionesti, Moldova

Rachel's wheeled suitcase thumped on the train car's stairs as she stepped down onto the station's wooden platform. She quickly admired the history of the tiny World War II relic of a station, and then damned the place for not having an airport within a reasonable distance. After a week out in the bush of the Sudan, she had high expectations that the poorest country in Europe would still have a higher standard of living than the African nation. Her first glance of Moldova wasn't promising. She did notice the commercial-size StuTech stub

attached to the train station's roof, telling her that the towers were catching on in this small town. It remained to be seen if the rest of the region was on board for anything other than industrial use.

The stubs were cheap, even though they were practically giving them away to residents of Arionesti. The average family in the region brought home just enough money to feed the family – on a good week. Luxuries like power, even free power, were still out of reach for many in the town. That was one of the problems her father asked her to check into. Why weren't the people willing to pay?

The people she visited in Bolivia and

Sudan didn't have the resources to pay at all. They got stubs free of charge, but Moldova was different. These people could taste normalcy and were comfortable with what they knew, not the promise of what could be. The people of Moldova knew of the "outside world," whereas the other StuTech project areas, simply didn't.

Moldova suffered from a small, immovable economy and little natural resources. Some of its citizens weren't too keen on following the law unless it suited them. Needless to say, kidnappings were a constant threat to foreigners.

She was to meet a man named Reynolds at the station who was

assigned as her security and translator during her visit. She knew nothing of him, other than he was a local. There was only one car waiting on the street. A man was leaning against the hood. This must be the guy, she thought.

Reynolds flicked his cigarette to the ground. He wore a black leather jacket and dark sunglasses. His holstered weapon bulged under his arm. He didn't hold a sign bearing her name. Calling attention to who she was could be dangerous. He recognized her picture from the detailed security packet that Lunsford's team had sent ahead.

"Ms. Evans, welcome to Arionesti," he said with a French accent. "Would you like to check into your hotel and

rest, or see the sights first?”

Rachel glanced around the station and saw nothing but rolling fields of weeds and tall grass. Snaking away from the station was a narrow road, presumably leading to the town.

“I slept a little on the train,” she said. “So by all means, show me the sights.”

Reynolds’ black Audi screamed down the small road at a breakneck pace, but both of his hands left the wheel momentarily while he lit another cigarette.

“Would you mind terribly, not smoking?” Rachel asked.

He glanced at her, then back on the road. He took a long drag, rolled down his window and dropped the lit cigarette

to the ground. He rolled up the window and released the gray puff of smoke, filling the car.

“Certainly,” he said.

They passed several cross streets that led to a smattering of abandoned homes in open fields. Windows were boarded up. The porches and walkways were empty. No children were playing in the banks of the river. It was a ghost town until they crossed the bridge.

Arionesti had a distinct Bavarian look to it. Short, peaked buildings with decorative awnings. The city was laid out in a grid pattern that ran along a river. To Rachel’s astonishment, the streets were teeming with people who elbowed each other as they walked by

busy storefronts. The business district faced the river and several street vendors called out to the Audi as they passed. Reynolds had to finally slow down to avoid hitting the mass of people who were walking in the streets. There were few cars. He honked the horn dozens of times to part the way.

“Why are all these people here?” Rachel asked. “Is there an event being held nearby?”

“The real question you should be asking is why these people are crammed into this small town when hundreds of nearby homes sit empty,” he said.

He pushed his sunglasses down to the tip of his nose to look her in the eye.

“And why do they sleep in shifts, ten

to a room?" he said.

"I certainly don't know," she said.

"Then you need to see the sights."

He pulled the car down a cobblestone alley and parked behind a two-story stone building. He knocked on a heavy wooden door and they were let into a large storefront filled with eight tables, each staffed by individuals wearing tan polo shirts, with an embroidered StuTech logo on the left breast pocket. One or two townspeople were in chairs at each table. A line formed out the door and into the street.

"They want jobs at the factory," Reynolds said. "Even though it's not even up and running yet. There is nothing else here. The promise of a job and a

livable wage was an unachievable dream for most of these people. Then StuTech started building that factory and powered the central part of town for free.”

“What promises have they been given?”

“None, just that StuTech will hire only citizens of the country. Men from across the region have flocked here to live and wait until the factory opens.”

“What about their families?”

“Some of them are here too, but certain women have come alone too. The construction work at the factory is employing about 50 men right now, who have never had a dime to spend in their lives. They are living it up in the bars,

tossing around their money. They don't have to look far for companionship each night."

"That's obscene."

"That's reality."

The StuTech main office was located upstairs. The staff provided Rachel a desk by a window overlooking the street. She looked out the window while her laptop was booting up. The street looked like old movies that depicted the American industrial revolution, hazy and gray. Able-bodied men crowded the streets. They stood in bunches on corners, hollering to women who passed by. Several women were working the crowd, but didn't seem to find any takers.

“The employed men are working at the factory,” Reynolds said, joining her at the window. “These fools are just waiting for a chance.”

“We’ve only been on the ground here for six months. Are we already that big a piece of the economy?”

“Without StuTech, there is no economy.”

“Amazing how fast that happened.”

“Not really,” Reynolds said. “You are providing jobs and power where before there were neither. People want to work and have moved here to find jobs. Your biggest concern now should be crime against your workers. Last week two men were beaten to death on their way home from the bar.”

“Do the police know why?”

“Police? No, they don’t know, but you don’t have to be Scotland Yard to know that two new positions opened up at the construction site pretty quick.”

Rachel considered it. Could jobs be worth killing over? It didn’t seem possible, even under the most dire circumstances.

“I’ve got a few things I want to review here before going to the hotel for the night. Will you wait for me?”

“I’ve been assigned to you exclusively.”

“All day?”

“Twenty-four hours a day while you’re here.”

“I’d also like to go up to the factory

tomorrow first thing.”

“I’ll call ahead and have everything ready.”

“Give me an hour and we’ll go to the hotel so I can get some sleep.”

Rachel took her cell phone off the nightstand and looked at the time. It was nearly 3 a.m. and she hadn’t slept at all. She liked visiting new places, but it was draining and took her out of her comfort zone. She glanced around her room at the small inn where she was staying. It sounded crazy, but it was a little too nice. It was nothing special, but her tastes had become accustomed to cots and sleeping bags, not bed ruffles and running water. She didn’t expect to fall asleep.

She slipped on a pair of black jogging pants and a T-Shirt and headed down the creaky stairs to the main living area. The rest of the house was quiet. She was surprised to find the front door locked tight. She flipped the latch and took a seat on a wicker chair facing the town to the east and the river to the west. Despite the early hour, the air was warm and inviting.

She marveled at the tiny town. Less than six months ago it was as dark and desolate as any nearby town, but with one simple decision by StuTech, the place was suddenly a boomtown. Wielding that much authority was a frightening thing. She wished that she knew for certain that the right people

were making those decisions. Her father had once told her that he never wanted to be bogged down with the responsibility of running a huge company, but his creation required it. Only he knew “the secret sauce,” he’d say. Over the years he slowly stepped away, giving more and more authority to his subordinates, while still retaining central management.

She suspected that part of the reason he asked her to travel to these outreach project locations is to gain an insight that he wasn’t getting from his managers. She might be estranged from her father, but they were still blood.

She’d found that reviewing the accounting logs of the personnel on the ground was an enlightening way to gain

an understanding of the projects. She could have seen the same numbers back in Seattle, but being able to see the new water well, x-ray machine, thousands of mosquito nets or even a factory in use was preferable to a desk in a high-rise. She was proud of the work they were doing. Giving this little country a chance to be respected by its European neighbors while giving its people a better life.

She had only gotten the chance to give the Arionesti books a cursory review earlier in the day. The business here was more complex than the others, with multiple locations, wages, and contractors.

They were spending a great deal of

cash - nearly \$50,000 American every single day. She hadn't seen the return on investment yet. She was eager to visit the factory building site that was at the heart of the company's spending.

Before she knew it, her head was leaned up against the back of the chair and the warm night air helped her doze off into a deep slumber. She was still out two hours later when a string of SUVs rolled past the inn, headed toward the StuTech factory, long before the sun was up and any construction could possibly start.

Chapter 33

Reynolds arrived at Rachel's door at 7:15 with a large cup of hot coffee for her. He was again wearing the black leather jacket, his sunglasses dangled from the front pocket.

"How did you sleep?" he asked.

"Well enough," she said. "Are we ready to go?"

"I thought we'd grab breakfast with the innkeeper downstairs first, then head out."

"That's fine."

The innkeeper was an elderly man who didn't get many guests. There

wasn't really anything to visit in the area, but he kept the rooms open in the off chance that someone might stop overnight. His grandson, a 16-year-old boy named Mikhail cooked eggs and toast. Mikhail had a slight build and mousy brown hair. They all sat down at the kitchen table together.

“You are from America?” the teenager asked.

“Yes, Seattle. It's on-“

“The Pacific Ocean below Canada. I know,” he said obviously excited to share his knowledge. “I studied America in school. Do you think I could go there someday?”

“I think we'd be lucky to have you.”

“How about a job with your

company? I'll work very hard. I won't cause any trouble. Promise."

Reynolds spoke to Mikhail harshly in Romanian. Mikhail, turned his back on the table and fiddled with the stove.

"He doesn't know his place," Reynolds said.

"It's quite all right, really," Rachel said. "I think having dreams is a valuable character trait. What sort of job would you like to have Mikhail?"

"I don't want to work for my grandfather. I'm small, but strong. I can do anything the others do. They won't give me a chance because I'm too young, they say."

"You applied for a construction job?"

"I tried, but they won't have me. They

need special skills. More than just builders.”

“I’ll tell you what, maybe I can put in a good word for you. Would that be OK?”

“Very much so, thank you.”

He heaped another serving of eggs on her plate with a huge grin on his face.

“Why did you tell the innkeeper’s grandson that you could get him a job?” Reynolds asked as they drove to the factory. “Boys like that don’t know enough about the world to take a job here.”

“How do you mean?” Rachel asked. “And I didn’t promise him a job. I said I’d look into it.”

“He doesn’t know the difference.

There are very few jobs in this country and even less in this region. You have your pick of workers. Why pick one who is so young and small?"

"Experience and girth aren't the only things that qualify people for employment. How would it have sounded if I told him that he had no chance whatsoever to get a good job someday? That he shouldn't dream of coming to the U.S.?"

"You are filling his head with false hopes," Reynolds said. "It's not safe for him to want these things."

"I disagree. It's not safe for him to have his fate determined by someone else or tradition for tradition's sake alone."

They rode the rest of the way in silence.

The massive factory came into view from a mile away. The white eight-story structure was enormous, jutting out of the ground like a cinder block. A checker box of large windows filled half of the building. The other half was barren, no windows at all. From the outside it looked completely finished. You could park the space shuttle in that thing, she thought.

Reynolds rolled down his window and showed the security guard his ID before they were allowed to proceed past the locked gate. Bulldozers and other large industrial construction equipment littered the dirt lots around

the building. They had to traverse huge puddles of water as they twisted and turned toward the entrance.

“The building could hold three full football fields if it wasn’t broken up into manufacturing areas. The inside of the building is still months away from completion, but you’ll be able to look at the areas that are finished. It’s really quite impressive. Nothing like it has ever been built here. The locals call it The Block.”

An empty cubical farm was just inside the building’s main entrance. A series of hallways and offices were unfinished and dark. No one was working in those areas. A large auditorium-style classroom was finished. The chairs had

fold out desks and power outlets for computers. Rachel could hear the distinct sounds of construction work happening through the auditorium walls. When Reynolds led her to the main floor she could see why. Dozens of men were working on the factory's polished concrete floor. Some were setting up machinery. Others were welding together steel beams that rose to the full height of the ceiling.

“The Block is divided in half,” he pointed to their left. “We’re only working to develop this half now.”

“What’s in the other half?”

“Storage. They didn’t even put in the floor, but they needed the structural support from the full space so they

decided to build it larger than they needed it the first time, rather than going back later. There's no question that the space will be needed once production begins."

A crane attached to a rail and pulley system dropped down in front of them. A worker secured a collection of beams on both ends and gave the signal for the operator to hoist up the load. It swung back and forth over the heads of the workers. The crane moved down the rail to the opposite end of the warehouse near six garage doors that were large enough to drive a semi truck through.

"Once they get all the foundation equipment set up this will be the first European manufacturing facility for the

towers and stubs.”

“I expected something large, based on our financial spend, but I didn’t know that we were already building a manufacturing plant here. It’s listed in the accounting records as an unoccupied warehouse.”

“Accounting records are notoriously bad around here,” he said dryly.

“Good to know.”

Rachel had never seen the inside of a StuTech manufacturing plant before. All of the towers and stubs were currently being made in Pueblo Bluff, Colorado. It made sense from a diversification standpoint to globalize their operations, but the choice of Moldova was still puzzling. No major highway. No airport.

The train station was antiquated. There wasn't even a port of entry on the river and besides – the river didn't lead to a shipping lane on the ocean. How were they supposed to get their products to market?

These questions filled her head when, with no warning the ground underneath Rachel's feet shook violently, tossing her and Reynolds to the ground. An earthquake, she thought. A loud hydraulic whine filled The Block, even as the workers lost grip on their equipment and fell silent. Rachel estimated that it only lasted three or four seconds, but it was enough to take her breath away. Then, as quickly as it started, it stopped. The workers went

back to their various jobs with no conversation about what they just experienced.

“What the hell was that?” Rachel asked, standing up, but bracing herself against a wall.

“Oh, that’s nothing. The ground is still settling from the pilings the workers had to build to support the frame of the building. It gives a little tussle now and then. No worries.”

“That’s normal settling?”

“I don’t know about normal, but its not uncommon. All the men know what to do when they feel a jolt coming on.”

“So you call that a *jolt*?”

“It usually only happens once a day, so chin up. It probably won’t happen

again.”

“How comforting.”

Rachel toured the plant floor for the next hour or so, taking special care to note the devices being installed on the floor so she could audit the “notoriously bad” accounting records. The workers kept their distance, allowing her to move around freely. She knew they didn’t speak English, so she refrained from asking questions about what they were building.

Reynolds stayed on the perimeter of the building, smoking his cigarettes and chatting with the workers. She’d never asked him what exactly his job duties were, but he seemed to know everyone at The Block.

When she finished her inspection of the factory, she tried to get into the unfinished half of the massive structure, but the doors were locked. She stepped outside and didn't see another entrance there either. She walked the perimeter and saw that there were more massive garage doors on the other side of the building. Reynolds had said they hadn't even installed a floor on the storage side, but there were well-worn ruts in the dirt where trucks had driven through the doors into the building.

She went in search of Reynolds to get a key for the storage area. He wasn't on the floor, so she wandered through the empty hallways and offices. The maze of space looked like a traditional office

setting, minus the workers. Desks, computers and phones were all brand new and ready for use. When she reached the second floor she saw there was a light coming from the end of the hallway. She could hear voices. She knocked on the door before opening it.

It was an executive office. Inside were two leather sofas. On one was Reynolds, a cloud of smoke floating around his face. Sitting on the other sofa was Steve Lunsford.

“Rachel my dear, just the person I was hoping to see.”

Chapter 34

“Reynolds, would you excuse us for a few minutes?” Lunsford said. It wasn’t a question.

“Certainly,” the cloud of smoke followed him out into the hallway.

Rachel knew Lunsford by reputation only. They didn’t exactly run in the same circles. Growing up, Lunsford would be at the house often, but she wasn’t involved in those visits.

“Please have a seat,” Lunsford said.

“Mr. Lunsford-“

“Please, call me Steve. We’re practically family, I’ve known you since

you were born.”

“OK, then. Steve. What brings you to Moldova?”

“I wanted to check out this place of course. I was in the Ukraine looking into some suppliers for our European launch.”

“Are you on the purchasing and supply chain side now too?”

“No, but all our supplier relationships are brand new. We need to ensure that we know who we are dealing with. These are very lucrative contracts. We don’t want to strike deals with the wrong element. We’ve got to set a tone for our efforts abroad.”

“I see.”

Lunsford pulled a red file folder from

his briefcase and placed it on the table.

“There is another matter I’d like to discuss with you, but it’s sensitive. Would you like to discuss it here or go somewhere else?”

“I’m fine here.”

Obviously Lunsford being here wasn’t a simple coincidence.

“It’s Luke. As you know he’s been working under my direction for the past 14 months or so. I know that you were not happy that we selected him for the assignment, but he was the right guy and I don’t regret his selection, even now.”

“Is he OK? What’s the matter?”

“I know you’ve been out of contact with him to keep his cover story and I truly thank you for keeping our little

operation under wraps. Your understanding and cooperation is duly noted.”

“Tell me what’s wrong with my fiancé?”

“He is fine, but I’m afraid he has changed sides.”

“What does that mean?”

“I think MassEnergy offered him a deal that was better than we did. It’s my belief that he is working against StuTech. He is helping MassEnergy develop technology that will serve as a direct competition to us.”

“Why would you think that? You sent him there to learn their secrets. How can you be sure he’s not simply doing what you trained him to do?”

“My dear, I’m good, but not this good.”

He opened up the red folder and handed her three photographs. The first was of Luke talking to a woman in a park. They were dressed in workout clothes and Luke was holding a soccer ball. The next photo showed the same woman with Luke at a swank restaurant. There were glasses of wine on the table.

But it was the last photograph that completed the picture. It was Luke and the woman kissing on a downtown street. Her arms were wrapped around the back of his neck.

Lunsford watched her face and neck blush with color -emotions she couldn’t hide.

“Why would you show me this? What possible good would it do?”

“I thought that given our long history you deserved to know that your fiancé is either a very good actor or he’s getting some on the side. The woman’s name is Kathryn Tate, she is his supervisor at MassEnergy. She’s a very attractive woman, I understand why he-“

“Enough! No, that’s not my Luke. I refuse to believe that this is what you are saying it is. We’re getting married. Jesus! I need to speak with Luke immediately. Where is he? What’s the number?”

“That’s part of my concern. He’s stopped checking in with me. We made an arrangement that regardless of what

he was up to, that he would provide me a status update. It's been over a week since I've heard from him."

"Then he's probably in Portland," she said. "Why didn't you just go see him? Get an update. Straighten all this out."

"I did go see him. I'm feeling very uncomfortable telling you this, I'm so sorry."

"Sorry for what? Spit it out."

Rachel was growing more and more frustrated with Lunsford. Despite his repeated apologies, he seemed to be enjoying parsing out little bits of information at a time.

"When I went to see him, he'd gone on a romantic weekend with Kathryn Tate to Arizona."

The words hit her like a sledgehammer. That didn't sound like a cover story. That sounded like something Luke would want to do. He had taken her for a long weekend at a resort in Phoenix to celebrate their engagement. They spent all day under the umbrellas at the pool and then spent all night in bed together.

She continued to stare at the picture of Luke kissing that woman. She imagined them lying by the pool, enjoying cold drinks in the hot sun. It was awful. She physically shook her head to remove the image. But the photographs were still in her hands. She turned them over. And that's when the tears started.

She loved him so much, how could he

hurt her like this? Again? The ruse of leaving her the first time was enough to break her heart, but she understood why he felt like he needed to do it. Now this. It was too much.

“Where is he now?”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to-“

“Where is he?”

“I don’t know exactly, but he just left Arizona on a flight to the Caribbean.”

“With her?”

“He bought two tickets to some small island.”

“Why?”

“I honestly don’t know, but its clear he’s gone off the rails.”

Chapter 35

Federation of Saint Kitts and Nevis

The island Federation of Saint Kitts and Nevis is located roughly 200 miles southeast of Puerto Rico and 50 miles south of Antigua in the Caribbean Sea. Christopher Columbus gave the island the name San Martin in 1498, but the name was changed later to avoid confusion with other islands of the same name. The British settled the islands in the mid 1600s, but fought with the native population and the French for control of the tropical lands for centuries. After the succession of Antigua, it became an autonomous state in the 1960s.

Nevis, to the south, is smaller than the island of Saint Kitts. Both have a combined population of around 50,000. Island-wide electricity wasn't in place on Nevis until the 1970s, when diesel generators were installed. Wind, solar and diesel generation now serve as the primary source of electricity.

Nevis Peak, sits at the center of the island and tops out at more than 3,000 feet above sea level. The top of the dormant volcano can be seen from most anywhere on the small island on a clear day. StuTech's wireless technology had not touched the island.

Luke could see the top of the volcano's crater as their small prop plane swept in for a landing at the

airport on the northern tip of the island. It took just under an hour to fly the final leg of the trip after changing planes in Puerto Rico.

Kathryn had been reluctant to take the journey.

“Flying to the middle of the Atlantic Ocean on a hunch is a waste of our time,” she said. “You could have tried a little harder to get him to send us these samples. We don’t even know what they are.”

“He doesn’t know that Kirkhorn died. If I would have pushed him to do it over the phone, he might have asked to speak with him. This way we can at least get an idea what material he was getting from the island.”

“How could it possibly matter?”

“You’re the one who said I was supposed to find a link between Kirkhorn’s work and StuTech. I’m trying to find a link.”

“I think you just want to spend the company’s money on a trip to the tropics.”

“Well, yes, it does have its drawbacks,” he said, putting on his sunglasses and walking down the plane’s steps to the tarmac.

“I guess it couldn’t hurt to get a little sun while we’re here,” she said, finally noticing the beautiful surroundings.

“That’s the spirit.”

Luke tasked Kathryn with a little scouting work to check out the security

at the port of entry. It seemed rather lax on the trip in, but going out might be another story based on what Dr. Rigau had said. Luke went to the college to meet his contact alone.

The school was on the east side of the island, facing the Atlantic Ocean. The tiny campus was beautiful, just steps away from the beach amidst lush tropical greenery. Students milled about between the buildings or sat in circles on the lawns with their textbooks open. Going to school in the tropics looked rather nice.

He could see why Loretta had liked the island so much. It was a tropical paradise. There didn't seem to be hordes of tourists clogging up the streets either.

Unlike the commercialism that sustained places like Puerto Rico, Barbados and most of the Bahamas, Nevis seemed unspoiled. The beaches weren't lined with surf shops and burger stands, but rather native restaurants and small businesses that catered to residents – not sunburned tourists.

The largest building on the medical school campus had a white stucco exterior and a slightly pitched red roof built to withstand seasonal hurricanes. The receptionist at the front desk said she'd page Dr. Rigau, but it might be a few minutes. He wandered over to the waiting area. The walls were lined with graduating class pictures dating back to the late 1980s when the school was

officially formed. The smiling faces of a dozen students and their teachers were on full display in the outdoor photographs. On the way in he saw the tiered landscape, including the school's welcome sign, which was used in the pictures.

Luke nearly fell over when he saw the last picture on the wall. The date etched into the lower right-hand corner said "June 1984." Standing among a happy group of co-eds and a handful of other teachers was Professor Blaine Kirkhorn in a stark white lab coat.

"I remember that day well. It was the day before a large tropical storm hit the island," said an elderly man in a janitor's uniform, holding a broom. "We

had to move the graduation ceremony up a full day back in '84 to ensure the students and their families were off the island before it made landfall. What a mess we had to clean up the next day.”

Luke pointed to the photograph of Professor Kirkhorn.

“Can you tell me who this man is in the picture?”

“Unless I’m in the wrong waiting area, Luke, you should know who that is,” the man said with a grin, extending his hand. “Pleased to meet you, I’m Dr. Estevan Rigau, the school’s caretaker.”

Estevan led Luke down the hallway to a narrow windowless office that included a desk, small sofa and what seemed like the entirety of the school’s

cleaning supplies. A single bare bulb was suspended above their heads for light. Estevan closed the door.

“I may have misled you somewhat,” Estevan said. “But when you told me you worked with Brother Kirkhorn, I thought that maybe you could help us. I knew that you were lying to me, about who you were, since the man has been dead for many years now, but I thought it was worth a shot. I looked you up after we spoke and saw that at one time you did work for Brother Kirkhorn. Maybe it was selfish of me, but I hoped you could help.”

“Help you how?”

“By continuing our research.”

Luke took a seat on the janitor’s dusty

sofa.

“I’m afraid I don’t know what research you’re referring to. That’s the reason I’m here,” he said. “And, I’m sorry, but aren’t you the janitor?”

“Yes I am, but there was a time, before I lost my medical license, that I ran the medical research wing of this hospital and we were the best in all of the Caribbean. And before you laugh that off, know this, our work wasn’t hampered by American laws that discourage innovation. Brother Kirkhorn and I were researching medicinal uses for an unpublished rare earth element.”

“He was researching a drug?”

“Not a drug, but the application of this material on the human body,” Estevan

said.

“But he wasn’t a medical researcher, he was a minerals expert.”

“Yes, and that’s why he needed me. And why I needed him,” the elderly man said, taking off this baseball cap and wiping the sweat from his forehead. “Unfortunately my friend, he’s dead, as you can now see I’m just the janitor.”

“I think I need to know a little more about you and the professor,” Luke said.

“How much time do you have?”

“As long as it takes.”

“Then, I’ll tell you what I recall.”

Chapter 36

Nevis Island

September 1965

Blaine Kirkhorn had to escape the confines of the hospital. For nearly three full days, he had sat vigil at his new bride's bedside. The burns on her leg from their rented motorcycle had to be aired out in the open, not wrapped up with gauze. She had to stay in the sterile hospital atmosphere so infection wouldn't set in. Ointments had to be applied to the wound every hour so it didn't dry out. The constant stream of nurses meant neither Loretta, nor he could get any sleep at night, or any

privacy during the day. It was a great, romantic honeymoon indeed.

At least he could leave on his own free will. Loretta was stuck. He convinced one of the nurses to apply a little extra ointment and skip the next hourly dose so Loretta could get a little extra shut-eye and he could stretch his legs. Of course, she'd been telling him to leave since the first day.

"Just because I'm stuck here, doesn't mean this has to ruin our whole trip," Loretta had told him. "Go enjoy this beautiful island. Explore that volcano you wanted to see."

He may have only been married for a few weeks, but he saw the trappings of a grudge that could be held for a lifetime,

so he played the part of the dutiful husband and stayed with her. He wanted to be near her anyhow, but the chivalry lasted for about two days, and now he needed a break. Blaine wasn't used to being trapped inside a room all day. The white walls and ticking clock were enough to drive him crazy. His work as a junior mineral analyst for Pearson International Mines kept him in the field for most of his days, which was preferable to a desk job in his opinion.

Blaine turned down one of the hospital's side hallways and found an exit. He was immediately blasted with the heat from the orange tropical sunlight and sweltering humidity. It felt good. He found a path worn into the crabgrass and

followed it parallel to the beach. Like most of the beaches on Nevis, it wasn't filled with sun worshipers. Just a handful of locals were reading under an umbrella or out for a stroll. The riptide that surrounded the island made swimming near shore all but impossible, except for the most adept swimmer, so most people didn't go in past their knees.

The path continued around a small cove and up a slight incline to an overlook about 40 feet from the water below. A three-rail wooden fence bordered the trail at its highest point. A weathered sign said the name of the place. "Columbus Pointe, where the great explorer first spotted our peaceful

island.” Blaine noted the irony of that statement, the natives honoring their *discovery*.

Just over the crest of the cove, the path turned back toward town and into a narrow, but bustling marketplace on State Street. Merchants lined the street with carts set out to display their wares. The smell of roasted pork made his mouth water. The meat and other island delicacies sizzled on open grills. Tourists were haggling over the prices for fruit, jewelry, colored seashells and coral, lengths of cloth and island trinkets.

He wandered the street and stopped at a cart selling jewelry. Loretta didn't like to wear a lot of jewelry – a reflection of

her growing up on a farm. She was a self-proclaimed simple girl. But he thought, if nothing else, she should have something to commemorate the honeymoon other than a scar on her right leg the size of a loaf of bread.

“And a good day to you sir,” said the boy staffing the cart. He couldn’t be older than 10. “What can we do for you? Anything in particular you looking for? Our pieces are one of a kind. They bring out the emotion in your body.”

“And how do they do that exactly?” Blaine asked.

“Just pick one that you fancy, hold it tight in your hand and close to your heart and you will see.”

The necklaces and bracelets all hung

on red, black or brown leather cords and featured shaped stone pendants on each. There were numerous pendants to choose from, like a dolphin, moon, sun, star, pineapple and heart. To his surprise, he couldn't tell the make up of the stone, something he could normally do at just a glance.

“What are these shapes made of?” He asked.

“This I can never tell. The mysteries of the island cannot be revealed to our treasured visitors.”

Of course, he wouldn't want to let the tourists know about the con. Blaine picked up a necklace with a red leather cord and a one-inch wide heart pendant. He held it out in front of him. It was

possible that the rock was Chert due to its wave-like features that showed several shades of gray, but the polish on the stone made it difficult to tell. Chert was often used in pre-historic weapons because it held a strong sharp edge, but these ripples in the stone didn't look natural, they were too symmetrical.

“Hold it close to your heart, and see if this is the one for you,” the boy said.

Blaine clutched the pendant in his hand and held it in a fist over his heart. He felt like reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. It wasn't particularly heavy. In fact, it seemed lighter than what he'd expected. But then, inexplicably, the stone started to wiggle ever so slightly between his palm and fingers. He

opened his fist and examined the stone, turning it over and over in his hand.

“I see you’ve made a connection. For you today, we can make a great bargain.”

Blaine wasn’t listening. He’d studied minerals for years and held advanced degrees in geology and physics. Stones, just stones, don’t move on their own. It was impossible. He grabbed another stone shaped like a sail boat and held it in his hand. Just as the other had, the boat seemed to vibrate when he held it tight.

“What do you call this jewelry?”

“Today we call it Antoine’s Jewelry, but tomorrow we can call it yours. Let’s talk about your bargain-”

“No, I mean the stone in Antoine’s Jewelry. What is that called? If you can’t tell me what is it, you can tell me what you call it, especially for someone who is willing to buy three pieces, right?”

Blaine pulled a wad of cash out of his front pocket to show he was serious.

“My family has always called it viberock. That’s all I know, we’re the only ones on the island to have it, so it’s your lucky day.”

“Vibe-rock, like vibrating rock?”

“I suppose so. Now, let’s make a deal.”

Blaine paid \$6 a piece for the three largest pendants, a moon, sun and star to go along with Loretta’s heart necklace. The price was outrageous, but it was a

curious find. When he got back to the U.S. he would break the pendants in half and use a magnifier at Pearson's lab to identify what exactly was inside this stone.

He bought some grilled pork and slices of fruit, and ate them as he hurried back to the hospital before Loretta woke up.

When he got back to Loretta's room, she was still asleep, so he took a seat in the hallway to avoid disturbing her. He pulled out the pendants and looked over every millimeter trying to determine the origin. When a nurse down the hall left her station to deal with a patient, Blaine borrowed the reading glasses she left behind. By holding the lenses of the

glasses a few inches away from the pendant, he could slightly magnify the surface. Like he suspected, the ripples in the stone looked even smoother on a larger scale. While the pendants didn't have a matching pattern, the angle of each stripe inside the stone looked similar. It was like nothing he'd ever seen.

"Nurse Harris won't be a happy woman when she returns and finds she is unable to read the orders I have just set on her desk," said a young doctor with the name Rigau stitched into his white coat.

"I was just trying to get a closer look at these trinkets I bought for my wife," Blaine said, embarrassed to be caught

stealing the nurses glasses.

“No harm done, she’s dealing with a pesky patient in Room 112 and won’t be back for a few minutes.”

“Good. I wouldn’t want to upset the people in charge of my wife’s care.”

“You’re right about that. The nurses have more pull around here than most doctors, especially first-year residents like me.”

The doctor sat down in the chair across from Blaine.

“It looks like you’ve been to State Street?”

“Yes, I bought these necklaces there today. They’re the strangest things.”

“Viberock.”

“Oh, you’ve heard the *mystical island*

legend then?”

“Heard it? I probably made the one shaped like the star. That was my specialty. No one else in the family could get the points to match equally. You probably met my cousin Antoine, right?”

“Your cousin is some salesman,” Blaine said. “So tell me, what type of stone is this?”

“I’ve actually tried to find it on a identification chart many times and haven’t been able to. And I doubt you can identify it with those glasses either.”

“Because I need higher magnification?”

“No, because we grind it up into tiny little pieces, boil it to a liquid and

reform it to the shape we need.”

“That’s not possible. The only liquid rock on this island would be flowing out of the top of Nevis Peak. The temperature would have to get to be at least 700 degrees Celsius before it would act as a liquid.”

“I’ve seen it happen hundreds of times in my grandfather’s backyard.”

“Impossible,” he repeated.

“Well, the proof is in your hand.”

“So you say. Where does the original rock come from?”

“As my cousin Antoine would say, ‘the mysteries of the island cannot be revealed to our treasured visitors.’ But I’ll tell you what - I believe your wife will be with us for another night. If

you're interested, I could show you the process. It's only a short drive from here. It'll only cost you the price of a nice island meal for a medical student burdened with too much school loan debt. We had to sell a lot of Viberock to pay for my education."

"Anything to see you liquefy this rock."

Chapter 37

Nevis Island

Present Day

Estevan led Luke down the same worn path that Kirkhorn had followed to State Street so many years before. They walked slowly round the cove and up to Columbus Pointe.

“This entire campus is my responsibility,” Estevan said, motioning to the campus below. “Its maintenance, cleaning, construction. A lot of work for a man my age, but this is where I belong. This school and hospital are my family.”

“So your family is on the island?” asked Luke, keeping pace with the

elderly man's measured strides.

“No wife, but I had a daughter. Ann was a beautiful girl, so happy. She-“

He stopped at the railing and leaned on the heavy steel guardrail.

“Ann was 12 years old in 1982. Her mother is an American. I met her while I was at a medical conference in Atlanta. She stayed on the island with us for a few years, but she wanted other things. She left when Ann was five. Didn't want the burden of a child, so she left us. Ann had a hard time in school, being of mixed race. She still had dark skin, like me, but lighter. It was a small difference that meant the world back then. She stood out and was teased by the other kids in her class whose families were

only from Saint Kitts and Nevis. They tormented her for being half of a white American.”

“That’s awful for a child to go through that,” Luke said.

“I can’t blame them really, the island was 95 percent West Indian in the early 1980s. White folks were an anomaly. They didn’t know any better and we didn’t do a good enough job with them, showing them different cultures and understanding like today. Their world view was based on the borders of these islands.”

Estevan placed both hands on the large railing and shook it with all his might. There was a slight waver at one of the posts bolted into the stone path.

He took out a crescent wrench from his tool belt, knelt beside the loose post and methodically tightened the bolts at each railing juncture.

“She used to take this path home after visiting me at the hospital. A couple of times a week, she’d stop in after school, just to say hello before heading home. Sometimes she’d do homework in my office while I tended to patients.

“She was on her way home, right here at the pointe when she came across a group of her classmates headed to the beach. Three boys, all much older than her, blocked the path. They shoved her down to the ground. She managed to get up, but one of the boys grabbed a hold of her backpack, knocking her off balance

and into the railing. It was made of wood back then. It was weak. The top plank gave way and she went over the cliff. She landed on that outcropping.”

Clear as day, Luke could see the image of Elliot Cosgrove tossing his sister to the ground that terrible night. The rolling video was looped in his brain. A bully and a rapist making a woman subservient to him. He didn't like to recall those thoughts.

Estevan continued. He pointed to the only shallow piece of the rock face that jutted out. Below it was a straight drop to the Atlantic Ocean.

“Two of the boys just ran off. Cowards. But the third had the sense to get help. He sprinted to the hospital and

told the first people he saw what had happened. When the medical rescue team arrived with the ropes and backboard, she still wasn't moving. There wasn't any other way to get her off that outcropping but to lower someone down to strap her into the board.

“One of the nurses recognized Ann and came and got me. I got up here just as they brought her back onto the level part of the path. I checked her pulse. It was weak, but I could feel it. She had a gash above her left eye with significant bleeding. I applied pressure, but couldn't wrap it up because she was strapped into the backboard to immobilize her head.”

Estevan stared intently out at the ocean waves, both hands on the thick steel rail. His voice was failing him.

“They did everything right getting her up here and we gave her the best medical treatment we had.”

His voice trailed off, buried by the roar of the ocean waves.

“I’m sorry. I can’t imagine losing a child like that.”

“No, the good Lord didn’t take my baby that day, but the fall permanently damaged her spine. She was paralyzed from the waist down.”

“Paralyzed?”

“At C5 and C4.”

Luke thought of Loretta sitting in that motorized wheelchair, unable to move

anything but her fingers and finally recognized what Kirkhorn had been researching.

“You and Professor Kirkhorn were trying to heal spinal injuries,” Luke said.

“For more than 30 years.”

“That’s why he divorced Loretta,” Luke told Kathryn later when he called her for an update on the port security. “To focus all of his attention on finding a cure for her injury.”

“Sure, but the least he could have done was to tell her that,” Kathryn said. “She’s been under the impression that he’d just had enough and just wanted to end it.”

“As cold as it was, he did it for her,”

he said.

“That’s not enough, you can’t put your wife through that. It’s just unforgivable.”

“You don’t think dedicating your life to curing your spouse from a crippling injury is enough?” Luke asked.

“Well, it didn’t work did it? Now he’s dead and she’s stuck in that chair thinking her husband wanted nothing to do with her.”

Chapter 38

Estevan and Luke talked over dinner on the outside patio of a bar on the beach. Luke couldn't help but be curious about Estevan and Kirkhorn's longstanding relationship, even if it didn't concern the transmission of energy. The fact that they were conducting medical experiments was so out of character from the man he knew.

“Blaine and I have been friends since we first met in the mid-60s,” Estevan said. “He was continually fascinated with the viberock on the island and I was his source for the material. He even

used the medical school as his adopted research headquarters for a few months over the years.”

“Is that why he is in that class picture on the wall?” Luke asked.

“Yes, he was working out of the school then, but that particular year, he was working for me.”

“You employed him?”

“I found a way to pay his expenses, yes. You see, Blaine contended that the vibrock had properties that he’d never seen before. Brother Kirkhorn’s theory supposed that when you held the rock in your hand, under your arm or between your knees – wherever the body would naturally join, it helped pass your body’s natural electrical impulses. The

vibration of the rock was just a manifestation of that impulse. It served as a conduit. The trouble with proving the theory was the impure nature of the material.”

“Because your family manipulated the rock before forming it into shapes for sale?” Luke asked.

“Yes. Our process was extremely impure. We were doing it to sell trinkets to tourists, not conduct a scientific experiment. He was able to extract the exact material from the rocks that he claimed was a yet-to-be published rare earth element.”

“Some rare earth elements are used inside high-capacity computers and hybrid cars,” Luke said. “But there are

only 17 on the periodic table.”

“He thought this was the 18th element,” Estevan said.

“Maybe he just misidentified it. Isn’t the periodic table pretty well set by now?”

“Recently, yes, but there were countless times in the last century that new ideas were proven or discoveries were made about our world,” Estevan said. “The scientific community will always question new evidence, but will only accept it if it clears a burden of proof and the test of time.”

“Was he able to isolate it and definitively prove it was the 18th rare earth element though?” Luke asked.

“That was not his goal, although it

would have been quite a scientific achievement. An achievement that would have gotten him in the history books forever.”

“What was his goal then?”

“In the beginning it was to identify the material, yes. I can’t argue with that. But over time it became clear that this wasn’t something he could do on his own – we needed financial backing that we just didn’t have. But I also couldn’t let him publish his findings to find investors.”

“Why not? Wouldn’t that have provided a better opportunity to receive funding and isolate the material?”

“Yes, but I didn’t care about identifying the material. I needed it

isolated and pure so I could do my own testing.”

“On spinal injury patients.”

“On my daughter.”

“So, there’s no way that Kirkhorn was trying to develop a synthetic or replacement for ARC?” Luke asked.

“I know exactly what he was working on and can tell you definitively that the only electricity he and I ever discussed was what is pulsing inside the human body. Besides, he knew of this material decades before the world knew about ARC.”

Kathryn now joined them, setting three beers on the table.

“So, we’ve wasted three days down here,” Kathryn said.

Luke didn't know how much of the conversation she'd heard.

"Hold on a minute," Luke said. "It may be true that his focus was medicinal, but that doesn't mean you weren't researching the same material that MassEnergy is interested in. Kathryn, you told me that MassEnergy has not been able to identify, with any certainty, what ARC is made of. Isn't it at least possible that this is the same material?"

"But how could an academic and industry expert of Kirkhorn's status not see the potential? Why didn't he make the leap like Warren Evans did?" Kathryn asked.

"Love, my dear," Estevan offered.

“He wasn’t trying to save the world. He was trying to help a friend’s crippled daughter and then, his own wife.”

Kathryn turned away to avoid saying something she might regret later. Her normally stoic exterior was no match for her clear disdain for what Kirkhorn did to his wife. Her face couldn’t hide it.

“Estevan, if we can get a sample of the original rocks that you and Kirkhorn used, we can take them back to MassEnergy and get them tested,” Luke said.

“What will that tell you?”

“It will tell us if your rocks contain the same elements as ARC. Meaning, you would know of another location where ARC can be harvested. It would

be a goldmine of information.”

“A goldmine to you maybe, but not me,” Estevan said. “To be quite frank, I don’t see how helping you and MassEnergy access the material would do any of us any good. It’s not like this stuff is just lying around. Other than vibrating in your hand, we could never get it to ... well, let’s just say it was a lost cause. And you think it’ll transmit electricity? That’s a big leap.”

“With our resources and Kathryn’s connections to drug companies and research facilities, there’s a chance we can help your paralysis research by further refining the minerals. It could be the answers that you weren’t able to find on your own.”

“I wish it were so simple,” Estevan said. “I wish this was an option 30 years ago.”

“There’s no reason why we can’t make this happen,” Luke said. “We just need the raw material.”

More to herself than anyone at the table, Kathryn said, “Imagine what our cut would be.”

If Estevan heard Kathryn’s remark, he didn’t acknowledge it. He took a few moments before saying anything more, choosing his words carefully. It was obvious that this short visit had already put him through the emotional wringer.

“I have no one left to heal,” Estevan said. “My Ann has been gone for many years now. I’m sorry. I thought I could

deal with this. I should never have let you come here. I didn't mean to bring this up again."

He stood up to leave.

Luke could see sorrow in the man's eyes. He knew the viberock was unique in some way, but wasn't able to control it. What was his hesitation to sharing it with them? What's the harm? And then it hit him. Estevan had yet to say what happened to his daughter, but it was obvious that his efforts to get her to walk again had failed. Nearly 30 years of his life had been spent trying to solve one very complex problem – human paralysis. One problem he couldn't solve.

"You're afraid to get your hopes up

again, aren't you?" Luke said, standing to look him in the eye.

"Yes I am," Estevan said, ashamed. "I can't do it again."

"You did everything you could to help your daughter, that's obvious."

"You don't know what I did."

"Then tell me," Luke said. He sat back down and Estevan did the same.

"It's not something I'm going to talk about."

"Estevan, you know that my interest in this material is only to deliver wireless electricity, but this is a huge business and I can promise you that if we find something of value in this material, we might be able to help fund more extensive medical research tests or

trials.”

Kathryn raised her eyebrows. Luke could tell she was questioning him giving away profits they’d yet to make.

“You really believe our little trinket stones can transmit electricity?” Estevan asked.

“You know something is there. Its more than just a vibrating rock. Kirkhorn knew it too, but there’s only one way to test it.”

“If I help you procure some samples, I can’t put myself through the pain of doing the research. You’re on your own for that. I’ll share my rudimentary findings, but that’s it.”

“That’s more than generous,” Kathryn said. “We’ll make sure you’re

compensated for that.”

“Compensation isn’t my concern.”

“I just meant you should get something for your work.”

“Continuing this research is enough payment for me,” he said. “I have to warn you, it won’t be simple to get the samples. Like I said, this stuff isn’t just lying around. And if you really want this, then you have to do the heavy lifting.”

“We’re in, no matter what,” Luke said.

“We’ll have to wait until tomorrow night.”

“Why’s that? Is it on the mountain?”

“Quite the opposite, actually. We have to wait until tomorrow, because that’s when the patrolling gunboats are

less likely to see us. Oh, and we have to get our scuba gear ready too. Hopefully you can dive.”

“Gunboats? Scuba gear?”

“The samples are at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean and are guarded night and day by patrols,” Estevan said casually as if it was no big deal. “You said you were up for anything.”

“I thought only you and your family knew where you got the rock from. It was your island secret. Who’s guarding the rocks?”

“The location is still a secret as far as I can tell, but it’s precariously close to an offshore oil rig and they don’t like visitors. You two do know how to scuba dive, right?”

“I took a hotel certification in Mexico during spring break once,” Kathryn said. “Does that count?”

Luke was a certified scuba diver and had logged over 60 dives in open water. He served as a volunteer instructor during the summer.

“I’m comfortable in the water,” he said.

“Hold up a second,” Kathryn asked. “I don’t care how good of a diver you are. Why are we even talking about this? Didn’t he just say ‘gunboats’?”

“Yeah, sounds exciting.”

“Sounds insane,” she said.

Chapter 39

*Two miles Southeast of the Island of
Nevis
Dusk*

Cousin Antoine, decades removed from selling the Rigau family's unique jewelry to tourists as a boy, now runs a fishing boat, the Anchor Point, out of Charlestown Harbor. The 31-foot Pursuit Offshore 3000 had held up well over the years. There were modest living quarters and storage below deck and plenty of room above deck for guests. Antoine was the second owner. These days it only left the marina if a tourist came calling for a day of sport

fishing, which wasn't very often. Antoine was a retired commercial welder who specialized in underwater work. His extensive collection of scuba gear was about to come in rather handy. MassEnergy paid handsomely for the boat, its skipper and equipment.

Luke had wanted the scuba gear on the previous day to help Kathryn acclimate, but they couldn't risk being seen in public with it. Since the early 1990s, the government of Saint Kitts and Nevis placed heavy regulation on open water dives. Only permitted, recreational dives were allowed. A 72-hour advance permit was required and even then, the approved locations for dives were nowhere near their desired location.

They could only dive without a permit under the cover of night, but their choice of dive locales was the real issue.

The Island of Nevis was essentially a mountain volcano sticking up from the sea. Yet its visible ridges and terrain above water were unlike those found below. The ocean floor off the Southeast end of the island was filled with steep ravines, caves and a rift. From the rift, or geothermal vent, shot up warm water produced by the heating of magma deep inside the volcano and the earth's core. These unique deep cuts in the floor of the ocean, so close to the island in relatively shallow water, were an immense attraction to recreational scuba divers. But the entire area was restricted

by government order, and guarded by a private company, Deep World Oceans or DWO.

DWO was an Australian-based oil company that operated the oil platform about two miles off the Southeast shore of the island, but well within the federation's national territory. Due to its close proximity to residents on the island and fear that drilling could set off a seismic event, the rig only worked at about 25 percent of its capacity, but it still collected enough oil to line the pockets of the government's top officials many times over. Claiming a concern over the security for their oil platform from the threat of eco-terrorists, the company was allowed to patrol the

waters off the coast and effectively serve as their own naval police force. The government had no reliable navy of its own, only an aging ferry system that transported passengers and goods between Nevis and Saint Kitts. DWO had the might and authority to police the waters surrounding the island.

The sun was still setting to the west as Antoine, Luke and Kathryn piloted out toward the restricted area in an indirect route and at a leisurely pace. The hum of the diesel engine was covered by the waves lapping up against the side of the boat. Estevan elected to stay on shore, never having been a big fan of boats or deep water.

“You know where you’re going?”

Luke asked Antoine.

“My grandfather used to come out here in a 9-foot aluminum boat with an outboard motor, a snorkel and a glass mask. After him, my father and his brother would come out here. I was doing it for years until DWO moved in. *Bam*, there goes neighborhood. So yes, I think I can find my way.”

“How did your father and grandfather know there was something worthwhile down there? Why didn’t anyone else see it?”

“The western side of the island is the popular spot for divers because of the coral reef and all of the topographical features. But my grandfather didn’t like the crowds, so he went to the east side

where the reef was. He had this old anchor with sharp points on the bottom. The kind they don't sell anymore. It was steeply hooked like bullhorns. He always carried it. He used to drop it at the edge of the coral reef. I'm not proud of it, but he would use the anchor to break off chunks of the reef for sale. He was out at this site fishing – where we're headed – and accidentally dropped the anchor over the edge. At about 35 feet down the anchor snagged an outgrowth of rock and became wedged. I don't know if this was bravado talking or what, but Gramps claimed he sucked in as much air as he could and dove the length of the rope and freed the anchor. I have no evidence

to doubt him.

“When he got the anchor back in the boat there was a deep charcoal gray rock about the size of a softball impaled on one end. It wouldn’t budge. He took the anchor back to his shop and used a commercial vise and a sledgehammer to remove the rock.”

“Wouldn’t that damage the anchor?”

“No, they are pretty tough and it was the only one he had, so he couldn’t let some rock stay attached to it for any period of time, it wasn’t safe. When the rock fell to the floor he saw silver flecks on the inside, but when he picked it up, he felt a tingling in his hands. He knew he had found something special, so he kept going back collecting more and

more rocks.”

“When did he realize that there was something specific inside those rocks that made them vibrate?”

“He thought that the silver flecks might actually be real silver so he tried to separate them from the larger rocks,” Antoine said. “He created this process for refining it using an old moonshiner’s still that leached out some of the material through steam.”

Luke remembered the whisky still that was back in Loretta’s storage shed in Tucson. Maybe Kirkhorn had tried his hand at replicating the refining process. Luke would need to learn their refining process too.

The scuba dive was simple and

shallow. At Stanford he needed an easy recreational elective and signed up for a scuba class that did most of its work in an Olympic size swimming pool, then completed the certification with an open water dive in a California lake. He had been diving with a club in the frigid waters of Seattle's Puget Sound since he moved there. He liked diving, but it was the camaraderie after a dive that was a big draw. Your only communication under the water is hand signals, so when you surface, everyone is excited to share their tales. It was always a good time.

Luke was concerned about taking Kathryn down to the dive site. Even with lighting for both divers, going down in the depths at night was a difficult dive.

They weren't able to get any of the commercial droplights that would help visibility. They were stuck with what Antoine had on hand - aging handheld lights with wrist straps. Unless there was something solid in front of them, it would be just endless black. But Kathryn insisted she also go on the dive.

“As MassEnergy’s corporate representative on this project I need to see what you’re doing and what is actually down there,” she had said. “This stuff could be worth a fortune and I want to make sure we do this right.”

Luke spent the next hour of the slow ride to the dive site going over the equipment with Kathryn and ensuring that she knew how to use it. He fit her

buoyancy vest with the proper amount of weight, tested her regulator, tank, mask and fins. Luke also instructed her on how to use the failsafe breathing apparatus attached to her vest. In case her regulator malfunctioned or was pulled out, the breathing tube could kick in. Hopefully that wouldn't need to happen. She seemed a bit overwhelmed by the complexity.

“When we're down there you must keep me within your field of vision at all times. That should be about six to eight feet. No excuses,” he said. “If for some reason you lose me, stay where you are and blink your flashlight toward the surface. You can also bang your flashlight on your air tank. That sound

carries enough that I can find you.”

“Luke, it’s like 75 feet down, right? Will I be able to see the surface? The boat?”

“No. You won’t be able to see anything. Use your flashlight. I’ve seen even the most experienced divers freak out on their first night dive and you’re doing it without any training.”

He went over the hand signals that she might need such as thumbs-up to go to the surface, the A-OK sign and no air. He gave her the big three, knowing full well that she’d probably not remember to use them. Most rookies never did.

“Gear up. We’re about 15 minutes out from the location,” Antoine said. “You can see the Deep World Oceans oil rig

up a head.”

Sure enough, the oil platform was lit up like a Christmas tree sticking out of the water 15 stories on four massive pillars. It was the size of a large office building, but all the corridors were open air, giving the impression that it was still under construction. Various rigging and shafts were positioned under the platform into the water.

“They patrol these waters every hour or so,” he said. “You’ll need to get in and out as soon as possible. You never know when these guys will come through here.”

He handed Luke a wrist-mounted water-to-surface communications link. The face was about the size of a silver

dollar with green and red buttons on it. A protective layer of plastic encased the rubberized face of the device to ensure you didn't accidentally hit the buttons.

“When you're ready to surface, do your standard safety stop at 15 feet and hit the green button on the device. If everything is clear up here, I'll confirm you have the OK, which will make your green light blink. If you can't surface, then I will give you a blinking red light.”

“What if I don't get any blinking lights?”

“That means you better be a good swimmer, because I'm not up here anymore.”

Chapter 40

The boat stopped about a mile from the oil platform based on the GPS coordinates Antoine had programmed in. The moon was out and a few lights on the island were visible in the distance. Luke took the first wide step into the water, holding his regulator and mask on his face to absorb the impact. Antoine helped Kathryn slide into the water from the rear deck ladder.

“I’m not getting arrested with you gringos,” Antoine said. “Your ride is leaving in 45 minutes. Be back here.”

Antoine was taking a risk bringing

them out here, but would he really leave them? Luke didn't want to find out. With their breathing equipment secure, Kathryn held onto Luke's buoyancy vest as he released the air trapped inside them. The vests loosed around them as the air escaped. They slowly began to descend into the blackness.

The air tanks were filled with two hours worth of air, but according to the directions they were given, it shouldn't take more than 10 or 15 minutes to reach the rock formation. Luke estimated they could be out of the water in around 35 minutes, so they had plenty of air. Just in case, he double-checked the gauges on both tanks as they sank toward the ocean floor below.

During daylight dives in the Caribbean, visibility was 20 to 40 feet, but even with a full moon out tonight, visibility had shrunk to around four feet. It was not optimal at all. The four foot range was only as much light as their flashlights could put out. That sort of limitation was incredibly disorienting.

Kathryn's eyes danced wildly, searching for a landmark – something that would tell her mind that up was up and down was down. Even though Luke was right in front of her, she wasn't fixing on him, the only stable thing in her view. Luke had seen this before, divers who had never been in open water before experienced a feeling called vertigo that comes from the pressure a

dive puts on the inner ear. You felt dizzy and disorientated. For some people it's a feeling that can never be overcome. Luke hoped that Kathryn wasn't one of these people. He didn't have time to take her back up to the boat.

He wanted to tell her to relax, but of course he couldn't speak and Antoine didn't have underwater boards for them to write messages on.

Luke grabbed both sides of her mask, putting blinders on her vision, so she was forced to look directly at him. After a few blinks, she seemed to recognize him and focus. He slowly touched his nose, then placed it between his thumb and forefinger, indicating that she needed to clear her ears. The pressure of

being underwater builds up in your ears the further you go down. She did as he instructed and her eyes quickly lit up. It must have relieved some of the pressure.

When they reached the ocean floor, Luke adjusted their buoyancy vests so they hovered just above the sand, without kicking it up. They were at a depth of 45 feet. According to the coordinates Luke had, they were about 100 yards from the mouth of the ravine that held the material. He had hoped Antoine would have dropped them right on top of the ravine, but he wanted to keep the boat hidden from the patrols behind a formation of rocks that was nearby.

Luke took out two blinking yellow

glow sticks and placed them on top of a flat rock. He stuck a smaller rock on their cords so they stayed in place. Marking their original location for the boat was just a smart thing to do, given that he was unfamiliar with the terrain. He wanted them to surface as close to the boat as possible.

They exchanged the A-OK sign and set off for the ravine. After spending so many dives in the cold water of the Puget Sound, the relatively warm water around Nevis was a welcome change. He felt a great deal of freedom moving about without a tight neoprene wetsuit, but that also meant that their arms and legs were exposed to sharp rocks or other objects that could injure them.

Luke was constantly on the lookout for problem areas and navigated them around boulders or tall seaweed that might hide dangers.

Kathryn was having a hard time keeping up. Her lumbering stroke meant she wasn't staying close behind him and he was constantly slowing down to allow her to stay with him. Antoine and Estevan said the edge of the ravine was distinctive because it was ringed with a band of white coral. The GPS unit said they were at the dive site. He had no idea if they were at the middle of the ravine or near its narrowest edge, where the rocks were supposed to be located.

They were now at 70 feet deep. He checked his air tank, it was nearly full

just as he expected. Kathryn's gauge told him that she had used roughly half of her supply of air already. Damn it, he thought to himself. He'd forgotten how novice divers sucked down their air faster than veterans. They focused so much on breathing in and out, rather than just taking in what they needed. Her ability to continue the dive was now seriously in question. Her range was now extremely limited. There was no way she was going to be able to dive into the ravine and have enough air to get back to the boat. He wanted some safety net and she'd just ripped it apart.

Without any way to tactfully explain to her that she was going to have to stay behind, he simply showed her the two

air gauges so she could see that her supply was very low. He pointed to her and then down to the ocean floor indicating that she needed to stay put. She vigorously shook her head no, but he ignored her.

He removed two more glowing light sticks from his belt and attached them to another rock, as he had at the drop zone. He flashed her two open hands, indicating 10 minutes. He didn't want to leave her alone, because he knew how absolutely terrifying it could be to be left at the bottom of the ocean, but they had a limited window of time, and now air, to get back to the boat. They couldn't risk Antoine leaving them. He could deal with her feelings later. He again

indicated that she was to stay in that spot, then he quickly swam into the ravine. When he looked back, she was already too far away. He couldn't see her lights.

According to Antoine and Estevan, the ravine dipped down to at least 175 feet, which was the farthest they had gone down. A human can easily withstand a depth of about 130 feet, but could dive deeper with a special mixture of gases in their tanks. Luke's air mix was standard, so he didn't want to go below 130 feet. At 110 feet down the walls of the ravine started to narrow, so much that he was able to touch both sides. He was reminded of his tiny kitchen in Portland. He was so close he could feel it. When

the ravine opened up as he slowly sunk deeper, he could see the markings where chunks of rock had been chiseled away, a good indicator that he'd hit the mark.

He used his hands to walk along the rock walls exploring the area. He thought the rock walls were dark gray or black, it was tough to tell underwater. The untouched surface was bumpy with tiny divots, like bubbles, indicating that something else had been present when these rocks were formed. He shined his flashlight directly on the rock face. Through the murky water he could see faint specs of silver embedded in the rock.

He opened the mesh retrieval bag that was attached to his thigh and removed a

small chisel and hammer. Both tools had wrist straps to ensure they didn't get dropped. He angled the chisel about 45 degrees up and swung the hammer down on its striking surface. The resistance from the water meant that his mighty slam with the hammer resulted in a modest tap on the chisel. He pounded repeatedly until the tool sliced off a sliver of rock. He placed it in the mesh bag and readied the chisel again.

His flashlight was also attached to his wrist. Each time he swung the hammer the flashlight bounced back in his face or onto the chisel, forcing it off line. He pulled the flashlight off his wrist and opened a Velcro strap on the side of his buoyancy vest. If he could angle the light

just so, it would give him a clear picture of his work so he could speed up and get back to Kathryn – and the boat. The Velcro strap tightened down on the flashlight illuminating his excavation project beautifully. He pounded away at the rock face, chipping off dozens of playing card sized samples. The work was becoming easier, as he mastered the underwater tools. As he reached down to place one final rock chip in the bag, he brushed his flashlight with his right arm, pulling apart the Velcro strap and loosening the light. The flashlight rebalanced in the water, shining up toward the surface, plunging him into darkness. Luke couldn't see the body of the light until it was too late. It quickly

sank down and out of his frantic clutches. He watched the light go from a bright bulb to a small dot, then to nothing.

His focus was on the light, so he didn't feel the mesh retrieval bag loosen around his thigh as he struggled to grab the light. The bag, heavy with rock chips, slipped off his leg toward the bottomless pit below him.

Luke gripped the familiar rock surface and realized his eyes weren't actually closed, but rather wide open to the darkness. He was in the terrible blackness of the open ocean, with nothing to show for it and no way to get back to Kathryn.

Kathryn waited about 30 seconds after

Luke swam down into the ravine before checking her air gauge herself. She had indeed become low on air. Lower than she had intended, but she wasn't overly concerned. She retightened her tank's release valve and stopped the slow leak of air. She had already slowed her breathing to a trained and even push and pull. She had no intention of waiting motionless in the dark for Luke to return. She moved the glow sticks closer to the edge of the ravine so she could more easily see them. Then, like a fish, she swam gracefully into the ravine in the opposite direction from Luke.

Chapter 41

Antoine had been watching the DWO patrol boat for the past five minutes. The boat was making ever-tighter circles around the oil platform. A bright spotlight affixed to the top of the boat scanned the water. The patrol boat clearly wasn't in a hurry to investigate Antoine's vessel, or the pilot was just a moron. If Antoine could see the DWO boat, the 30-foot Anchor Point shouldn't be tough to see even though it was partially obscured by a rock formation.

He wondered what in the hell he was doing out here anyway. Just yesterday he

was resting comfortably in a studio apartment in Charlestown, living off his retirement pension checks, without a care in the world. He'd all but forgotten about this place. Cousin Estevan calls and all those memories of Ann rush back. The accident and her failed recovery. The constant pain she was in and the relief he felt when she finally passed. What a horrible thing to want, for someone else to die. She was so miserable and didn't want to fight any longer. It was a blessing. It really was.

Estevan shutdown after Ann died. He retreated to his work, but was unable to continue when they revoked his medical license. He became a shell of the man he once was. The driving spirit and

determination that had led him all those years left completely when she died. He had failed to save her and lost everything. He was lucky the university let him stay on as a caretaker. He once told Antoine that he didn't view the job as a disgrace, but rather a suitable punishment for what he did. He was tormented for what he did to Ann.

His job now was to make sure the school and its students were well taken care of, something he could control. If that meant cutting the grass and washing the toilets, then so be it. This was his lot in life, he had said. But Antoine knew the truth, he wanted more, but so much had been taken away, he wouldn't know where to begin.

So when the phone rang yesterday, Estevan sounded like a different man. He was practically giddy about this new adventure. He had a couple who needed to get some silver sand – what they always called it growing up - and Antoine was the only one who could help them. There was no way he could refuse. But now, as the patrol boat's spotlight finally fixed on his location, he was questioning his decision to help these strangers.

Antoine twisted open a beer and put his legs up on the side of the boat as the patrol approached. His two large trolling fishing poles protruded from the back of his boat. Only about 15 minutes had elapsed since they went down.

A man in a white security uniform piloted the DWO boat, which pulled up a few lengths away. He stepped to the side of the boat and angled the spotlight on Antoine. The security man clutched a shotgun.

“Sir, these are restricted waters,” he shouted. “You must vacate the area immediately.”

“Restricted waters?” Antoine said, shaking his beer bottle at the man. “There’s no restricted waters out here, this is the Goddamned ocean. This is where the fish are biting and I’m one bad fisherman, so if they are biting, I’m staying. This never happens.”

“Sir, you must vacate this area, it is off limits at all times.”

“I’ve been waiting to find a fishing spot that actually has real fish in it for years,” he said, taking a swig from his bottle. “You know those guide books we sell to tourists. Yeah, they don’t have this spot listed because it’s a local secret I guess. This is where we keep all the good fish. Good thing too, because I’m going to fry these babies up tonight.”

He pulled up a collection of freshly caught fish that were chained to the side of the boat. The clips were through their gills and mouth, but they still flapped when he lifted them out of the water.

“This location isn’t listed in any fishing guidebooks, because this is a restricted area sir,” the man said, becoming more agitated. “I have the

authority to board your vessel and forcefully remove you from this location.”

“Come on over, I’ve got enough beer for two. You got any bait? I might be running low on bait. Maybe they’ll like my beer?”

He shook up the beer and sprayed it into the water with his thumb over the opening. Some of the spray hit the security man. Antoine wasn’t just acting tipsy. He’d pounded a few beers already.

“Sir, please make this easy on both of us and just pull up your anchor and vacate the area.”

“OK, OK. You didn’t have to whip out the shotgun for God’s sake! I’m

reasonable.”

The man watched intently as Antoine slowly walked to the captain's chair of the boat and turned the key. The engine roared to life – a little too much. The rumbling from below deck petered out faster than it began.

Antoine turned and looked over his shoulder, “Now see! You got me all flustered and I flooded the damn thing. Let me see if I can tell what's the problem. You got a flashlight I can borrow? I think it's in the engine.”

The security guard could only watch and wait as the drunken man stumbled about his boat. In no hurry at all, Antoine climbed down the deck ladder and into the bowels of the boat.

Chapter 42

It seemed silly, Luke thought to himself. You get stuck underwater or lose your flashlight like an idiot, all you have to do is swim up. That's it. The surface of the water doesn't move. It's still where you last left it. Just head up there and all's forgiven. No problem. Except he left his boss next to two yellow glow sticks a couple hundred yards away. He had to go back for her and then get them both to the boat.

Dropping the bag of rocks was another story altogether. Talk about stupid. He had to get the flashlight for

Kathryn, but he needed the bag for him.

Had he packed his own gear, he would have placed a spare flashlight on his jacket, just in case. Unfortunately, he was at the mercy of someone else's equipment and he just didn't have that luxury. But he did have two more battery-operated glow sticks that could bring him a faint amount of light. He twisted the top of one of the sticks. By tightening the seal, he brought the trigger mechanism in contact with the two AA batteries inside. In his darkened panic, he rotated the cap left, not right and the spring inside the glow stick ejected the batteries into the water, rendering it useless.

One stick down.

Recognizing his mistake, he correctly tightened the second glow stick. A faint green light illuminated a foot around him in all directions. It wasn't much light, but it would have to do.

He could always come back for the samples, but he only had one chance at getting Kathryn out of the water safely. He feared that she would run out of air, then try to surface without any safety stops. He'd never seen pressure sickness - the bends - before and he didn't want to start tonight.

He remembered what Estevan had told him - the deepest point of the ravine was just 175 feet. He was currently hovering around 125 feet. He checked his air supply. He had plenty left. He

twisted the cord of the glow stick around his finger so he wouldn't lose it, deflated a little more air out of his vest and started to descend in search of his flashlight that could be anywhere.

“Here, hold this,” Antoine thrust a wrench into the security guard's hand.

His name was Phil and he was from Charlestown too. They had dispensed with the small talk rather quickly and got to work on Antoine's boat. Phil came aboard the boat after Antoine had spent a little too much time below deck working on his engine.

“I think you may have cut a fuel line,” Phil said. “It reeks down here.”

Phil was right. Antoine was prepared for the possibility that DWO would

investigate his boat floating in its restricted area. He'd pulled out a spark plug and rested it on a paperclip spacer in its slot, so the engine would fire, but quickly flame out when the paper clip fell. Once detective Phil hopped on board he had to modify his plan. Before he could get a good look at the engine, Antoine used his pocketknife to slice open a small hole in the fuel line. Now the diesel fuel was leaking into the engine compartment.

“Son of a gun,” Antoine said. “You’re right. That’s an easy fix. I’ll just wrap it up.”

He stumbled over to a cabinet and made a big show of digging through its contents.

“I know I’ve got some duct tape in here somewhere. Who doesn’t have duct tape? You can’t practically live without that stuff. It does it all. Doesn’t it?”

“Yes, it does come in pretty handy. I may have a roll on my boat,” Phil said. “Let me double check.”

Phil quickly got up and headed for the other boat.

“That’d be swell, thanks!”

Damn Boy Scout, of course he has duct tape, Antoine thought.

The green light was enough to keep Luke from straying away from the rock wall – the only thing he could see at this depth. The tool markings on the rocks stopped at around 135 feet. He had no idea how far the ravine had been

laterally mined of the material. What he'd seen so far indicated that the removal of the rocks was shallow and done by hand.

Luke kept his hands on the walls the whole time during the descent, which he knew was not a proper diving technique, but he didn't care.

There was very little aquatic life around. Not even much plant life. A few small fish had made their way past him, but no large schools of fish and no tall waving plants. As he descended further, the little plant life dried up to a rocky, barren landscape, which made spotting the flashlight easy. He hit the ocean floor at about 160 feet and snatched up his light. Staying at this depth for any length

of time was not safe. The pressure was too high and his air mixture wasn't made for this depth.

Despite finding his light, his mask started to fog, so he ever so slightly tilted his mask up allowing a small amount of water inside to wash off the lenses. He then purged the mask by holding it tight to his face and blowing air out through his nose. It only served to blur his vision more. It wasn't fog. It was blood.

His nose was bleeding from the pressure. He needed to get up to 130 feet. His missing bag of rocks would have to wait.

“Well, it turns out I don't have that duct tape after all,” Phil said. “But since

you're clearly a stranded vessel, I can't detain you for being in these waters. We'll just forget about your fishing gear, which is still in the water, by the way. I can give you a tow back to the nearest marina."

"Tow, what in the hell do I need that for?" Antoine said, exasperated. "It's just a fuel line, I'll just wrap some towels around it."

He turned to go back below.

"That won't hold any pressure on the line you drunk fool," Phil said, yelling into the bowels of the boat. "It'll catch fire in no time."

"Risk I'll take," Antoine yelled back, not leaving the cabin. "Thanks for the help."

“Hold on. Get out here, let’s talk about this,” Phil said. “You can’t be serious about the towel.”

“Serious as a tourist’s sunburn. I can’t get towed into the harbor by your outfit. People might get the wrong idea. I’d be laughed off the island.”

“I don’t follow.”

“You guys are the enforcers for DWO, port of entry, law enforcement. Truth be told, I don’t want to be associated with you guys. Bunch of thugs. At least that’s what they say.”

“Oh, it is huh?”

Antoine was getting the feeling that baring his soul to this guy wasn’t his best idea, but he was running out of stall tactics.

Luke continued to clean his mask by clearing and purging water through it. His eyes were burning from the salt water and blood. Then he saw it. The mesh bag. He looped it around the front of his belt this time so he could keep an eye on it. He also attached his last glow stick to it – just in case he dropped it again. He ascended through the narrow walls and up to the top of the ravine, stopping every 20 feet to regulate the pressure on his body. His nose was still bleeding, but the pressure in his head had eased.

He followed the rim of the ravine for just few minutes and saw the two glow sticks he'd left with Kathryn. Finally, he thought, something went right. But as he

got closer, he noticed that Kathryn was nowhere to be found. The glow sticks had been moved closer to the edge too. It was certainly possible that she had decided not to wait for him and headed to the surface, but how could he know that for sure? It's not like she could leave him a note. "Dear Luke, went to the surface, see you there."

He followed the ridgeline of the ravine in the opposite direction for about 50 yards, then out across the open ravine until he reached the other side. Swimming parallel to his original path he found himself directly across from the flashing glow sticks with no sign of Kathryn. He continued down the edge for what he estimated was another 50 yards

then crossed the ravine again.

He knew his ascent would take about 10 minutes and was preparing himself to continue circling the area until his remaining air was just enough to get him to the surface. He owed it to her to do all he could to get her back to the boat. She might have insisted on coming down here, he thought, but he was the one who left her alone. That was a mistake. With the way Kathryn had used up her initial air supply, waiting until his supply was almost gone would probably be too late for her anyway.

What a disaster. This shouldn't be happening. They came down to the ravine hoping to learn more about his professor's past, about a medical

treatment for paralysis, about a wireless revolution – not to die alone in the cold ocean.

Then, on his third pass, floating just over the ridge of the ravine was Kathryn, spinning in circles, flashlight blinking. He could hear the faint clinking of the light on her tank.

She noticed his approach. Her eyes were wide. He put his palms up and shrugged his shoulders, using his body language to ask, “Where were you?”

She touched her thumbs and forefingers together to form a triangle, making the sign for “boat.”

Yes, he thought to himself, they needed to get to the boat. He checked her air. She was low, but she had more air

than he expected. She must have calmed down after the initial shock of being in the water.

They slowly ascended to 15 feet below the surface for their final safety stop. Luke pushed the green button on his communications device. He knew they were about 100 yards from the boat and when they surfaced, they'd have to either swim to it, or signal Antoine to come to them.

A standard safety stop is three minutes. After six minutes of waiting, he'd yet to receive a reply from Antoine. No blinking green light. No blinking red light. Just under 50 minutes had passed since they entered the water. Five minutes over Antoine's time limit.

The bastard had left them.

Chapter 43

Back on the surface Phil and Antoine continued to debate over the fuel line.

“Let’s make a deal,” Phil said. “I’ll prove to you that we’re not all thugs.”

Phil had taken Antoine’s jabs at his employer rather seriously. Clearly Antoine had underestimated Phil. Out of the corner of his eye, the communications device that was sitting in a cup holder near the wheel started to blink. They were headed up.

“OK, what are you offering?” Antoine said, stepping in front of the light, blocking Phil’s view.

“I’m sure I’ve got some mechanical tape back on the rig. I can easily fix your fuel line for you and you can be on your way.”

“All right, what’s in it for you?”

“How many fish have you caught tonight?”

“Three so far.”

“It’ll cost you your catch. It’s a fair trade. They don’t let us fish out here either my friend. At least we’re not supposed to. And even when I’m out on patrol alone, I never catch anything.”

“Three fish for some tape? Deal,” Antoine said, anxious to get rid of the helpful security guard.

Luke couldn’t wait any longer. They had to surface. He turned off their lights

and released the glow sticks from their blinking state. When they went up top they needed to blend in as much as possible. The lights might attract the wrong attention. He hoped they had the energy to make it to shore. The extra oxygen might come in handy.

When they finally emerged from the water, they saw that Antoine hadn't left them. A DWO patrol boat was tied up to the Anchor Point. Luke could see Antoine talking to a man in a uniform on the other boat. Not a good sign, because they couldn't approach the Anchor Point with the security boat tied up to it.

"Did you get the samples?" Kathryn asked, bobbing up and down in the water.

“Yes,” Luke said, hoisting the bag out of the water to show her. “Sorry I had to leave you, but I knew you couldn’t make it down any farther the way you were sucking down the air.”

“I get it. It sucked, but I get it.”

“Where did you go? I came back for you and you weren’t there.”

“There was a sunken boat down there near the edge of the ravine. I was looking at it. You didn’t see it?”

“No, but in my defense it was awfully dark. So, that’s what you meant when you made the boat signal? A shipwreck.”

“Shipwreck? It wasn’t Black Beard’s boat or anything. It was a little rowboat. It must have been a hundred years old, pretty cool.”

“When you made the triangle sign, I thought you meant our boat. How did you know to make that sign?”

“What sign?”

“The international scuba diving hand-sign for *boat*.”

“Didn’t know it was an official sign, I just made the shape of a boat with my hands.”

“I guess it doesn’t matter. You had me worried for a minute down there when I couldn’t find you.”

“Worried? I was petrified when you left *me*, jackass,” she slugged him in the shoulder rather hard. Even in the water, she packed a punch.

They heard the engine of the patrol boat roar to life and echo across the

water. The boat pulled back from the Anchor Point and sped off. The face of Luke's communication's device finally blinked green.

“You ready to get out of here?”

“No, I think I should stay a while – yes, I'm ready!”

Exhausted, they started to slowly swim to the boat.

Once on board and before they had a chance to take their masks off, Antoine sped off in the opposite direction from the oilrig. He'd repaired the fuel line with the duct tape he'd been hiding in the cabin.

“Time to out run the Boy Scout,” Antoine said.

Chapter 44

Antoine tied up the Anchor Point to the dock at the Charlestown harbor as Luke and Kathryn stripped off the scuba gear below deck. Luke emptied the mesh bag of samples into his backpack.

“It seems like quite an ordeal to get these rocks back to the surface,” Kathryn said. “Why would Estevan and Antoine’s family go through all that trouble just to make jewelry and sell it to tourists?”

“You have to remember that there isn’t a lot of industry on the island. Especially 30 or 40 years ago before

this place even had reliable electricity,” Luke said, thinking of the marijuana patch in his sister’s backyard that helped pay the bills. “People do what they have to do to make ends meet. It might be a lot of effort, sure, but they found something that no one else had ever found. They capitalized on that.”

“If that’s the case, why did they stop? Estevan said that the government started requiring permits for dives, but couldn’t they have just continued to dive at night, like we just did?”

“I don’t think anyone would want to repeat what we just did. Besides, once Deep World Oceans built the oil rig, they restricted that area to all boats – not just dives.”

“We were a mile from the rig,” Kathryn said. “It doesn’t make sense that the company could have control over an area that large.”

“The government doesn’t have the means to patrol it, so they defer to the company who has the cash.”

“DWO does security or law enforcement for the entire island too. When I scouted out the airport security I made note of their uniforms. The patrol boat logo was the same as the port of entry security guards.”

“So the DWO is effectively controlling what happens in Nevis.”

“Looks like it.”

Antoine came down below deck.

“We might be in a spot of trouble,” he

said.

“What do you mean?” Luke asked.

“I think the Boy Scouts just found us.”

Luke looked out a porthole window and could see that two DWO security guards were waiting at the end of the dock. One of them was talking on his phone while the other scanned the marina.

“You need to leave before they see you,” Antoine said. “They know the boat’s name and will be here any second. I’ll play along as the stranded boater, but you need to get going and don’t come back. Get these samples to Estevan. He’ll show you what to do.”

“But you’ll be arrested,” Luke said.

“I’ll be fine, just do some good with

those rocks. They've only hurt our family."

"What do you mean?"

"No time to explain. Just go."

Antoine gave them instructions on how to avoid the guards. They went over the edge of the boat on to the opposite side of the slip from where the guards were standing. The marina had an elevated boathouse a few docks down. Wealthy boat owners used the boathouse during hurricanes and rough seas to protect their precious boats. Staying low to the dock, they crept behind a series of boats before reaching the building.

There was a two-foot gap from the walls of the large boathouse to the surface of the dock to separate the

rocking dock with the fixed building. The waves were too high to safely enter the building at the gap. One large wave could crush them between the dock and the building.

Luke went into the water first, followed by Kathryn. Together they swam into the boathouse, hoping it was unoccupied. He found a ladder, climbed up and helped Kathryn onto the deck. There didn't appear to be anyone else in the boathouse. Peering through a crack in the wooden slats, Luke saw the security guards approach the Anchor Point.

The guards and Antoine exchanged a few words, but Luke was too far away to hear what was being said. One of the DWO men boarded the boat and walked

over to where Antoine was standing behind the cabin. They were out of Luke's view.

Antoine's gut-wrenching scream pierced the quiet night. Then silence again. Luke headed down to the ladder to help the boat skipper.

"What are you doing?" Kathryn asked, looking at Luke in bewilderment.

"I can't let them hurt him."

She grabbed his arm tightly.

"If you go now, its just a matter of time until you're screaming like that."

Luke knew she was right. He had no weapons and was unfamiliar with the marina. What was he actually planning to do? Time slowed to a standstill as they waited for the guards to leave.

Could they have killed Antoine? But that punishment wouldn't seem to fit with his crime of fishing in restricted waters, he thought. Five minutes went by before both guards left the boat, trotting down the dock and jumping into a waiting SUV that sped away.

“OK, they're gone. Lets get out of here before they come back,” Kathryn said.

The man could be hurt or even dead because of them, Luke thought. He couldn't just abandon him.

“Feel free to leave, but I need to go back to the boat,” Luke said, slinging the bag over his shoulder. “He might need our help.”

DWO Security Chief Ernesto Hines

had just received a call from his bosses at DWO corporate headquarters, warning him to take extra care patrolling the waters around the oilrig tonight. When his patrolman, Phil, radioed in that he was helping a stranded boat, he worried that it might be too late. When the boat was miraculously repaired on its own, he alerted his men at the marina to investigate.

“Sir, the boat owner’s not talking,” the guard said into his cell phone. “We Tasered him when he tried to run. He lost consciousness. There’s no use wasting time with him now. The guy’s not got long to live.”

“Let’s not let that happen,” Ernesto said. “I’ll call the med unit and get

someone over there. He was alone?”

“We found two sets of wet diving gear in the cabin, but the owner was bone dry. We talked to a local who said he saw a man and a woman board the boat earlier tonight.”

“The call from corporate said a couple might be out on the water tonight,” Ernesto said. “They must have hired the boat for a ride. Keep looking. Word is that they may have something that doesn’t belong to them.”

“We’ll fan out and find them.”

“This one came from the top,” Ernesto said. “So I don’t want to hear from you until you’ve found them.”

Chapter 45

Estevan was stoking the fire in the pit behind his home, waiting for word from the underwater expedition. He was managing to keep his expectations low. The thought that MassEnergy would do anything to help the cause that he cared most about was pretty far fetched. He knew Luke and Kathryn only wanted the minerals for their own selfish use, although spreading wireless electricity to the far reaches of the world was undoubtedly a benefit, but not the one he'd hoped for. Further research on the mineral would be good and this might be

the only shot he had to help push it along, so he was willing to tutor them a bit.

The fire pit was four feet in diameter and was dug into the ground roughly three feet. A cast iron grate covered the blaze. Resting in the middle of the grate was an old oblong whiskey still. It narrowed at the top where a copper tube curved down to the ground in a collection bucket.

He hadn't used the still in years, but remembered the precise steps his father taught him for separating the rock and mineral. He was about to share a family secret. Hopefully it would do some good. He stoked the fire and waited for his guests to arrive.

Luke used a fireman's carry to get Antoine to the car. The DWO SUV was long gone. Kathryn had to continually remind Luke he needed to keep the car under the posted speed limit as he drove to Estevan's house. The last thing they needed was to attract attention from the DWO goons. She attended to Antoine in the backseat as Luke drove.

"He's still out, but he's breathing," she said. "Luke, we can't afford to let this guy slow us down. He's lived a long life. We might need to cut him loose. If they find us with a dead body, we'll never leave this place. Lets just head for the airport."

"Are you serious? He just risked his life – twice – to cover our tracks. I'm

not leaving him,” Luke said with both hands on the wheel to hold the car steady around a steep curve at a high speed. “We’re going to Estevan’s house like we planned. He can attend to him there.”

“I’ve got a lot to live for and I’m serious,” Kathryn said. “I’m not going to let this guy drag me down. We need to get off the streets.”

“It’s just around the corner up here.”

“There’s no way we can get through the port of entry with those guards looking for us,” she said.

“We don’t know that they are looking for us.”

“They were on the boat, Luke. They had to have seen the scuba gear and they know Antoine wasn’t in the water.”

“Let’s say you’re right. How do we get home?”

“We’ll charter a plane. I’ll call Portland and arrange it. Once I tell them what you’ve got in that bag, they will demand we fly home immediately.”

When they pulled up to the house, Kathryn walked away from the car with her phone to her ear, ignoring the dying man in the backseat. Estevan came to the side of the house where Luke parked. He took one look at Luke and knew something was wrong.

“Where’s Antoine? What happened?”

Luke filled him in on the pertinent details as they carried Antoine inside the house. Estevan noticed two dark circles on the front of his cousin’s shirt when

they placed him on a bed. He had matching burn marks on his skin left by the Taser. Estevan gave him a full medical evaluation.

“It doesn’t look like he’s had a heart attack, which is the big fear with those electroshock devices, but his body is still in shock,” Estevan said, in his best bedside manner. “I really won’t know anything for sure until he wakes up. I don’t have anything to monitor him with here and moving him to the hospital would be risky at this point.”

“He saved us out there and he didn’t have to,” Luke said.

“He’ll be fine, I suspect. He just needs some rest, really. He’s tougher than he looks. You, my friend are

another story. You've got blood on your face."

Luke had forgotten about the ocean depth he had just endured. The heavy water pressure caused his bloody nose.

"I got a bloody nose down below. It's nothing."

"Whatever you say."

They left him resting in Estevan's bedroom and went out back. Luke gave Estevan several of the rock chips from the bag for him to look over.

"You got the right ones. Not very many though."

"I was sort of in a hurry. That's not enough?"

"Oh no, this is fine, it'll just separate down to almost nothing. I'm sure you

have some pretty sophisticated stuff back in the States to separate the minerals, but let me show you how we used to do it. It's not perfect, but it's reliable."

Estevan placed three rocks in a vise and clamped them down. He then attached a dull blade over the top of the rocks. It looked like an upside down blender. He affixed a hydraulic lever to the top and pumped it to lower the spinning blade onto the rocks. They settled in the vise as it clamped tighter. Once they were firmly in place, the blade began to slowly turn, grinding away the porous rock. Small bits of rock and dust fell from the vice into a collection drum below it.

"The rocks are rather soft really,

which is why you were able to collect them with simple hand tools, even under water.”

“So you can just crush the rock into dust?”

“Essentially yes. But it takes a few times through and finer blades to get it just right.”

After the first pass of the grinding blade, Estevan sifted out the larger pieces of rock and repeated the process. On the third pass he emptied the collection bin into a small metal Petri dish, added a blade that looked like a meat grinder and pumped the hydraulic lever until the material was as fine as sand. The whole process took just minutes.

“This is silver sand. At least some of it is.”

“It looks like ashes.”

Estevan used large oven mitts to open the hatch of the whiskey still on top of the fire pit's grate. He added a few buckets of water, which began to boil and evaporate almost immediately, forcing steam out of the open hatch. He used a long pair of tongs to carefully empty the Petri dish into the still, then quickly closed the hatch and tightened down the lock to seal it.

“In a still, the pressure of boiling liquid inside forces the lighter elements to evacuate the main chamber through steam as it rises and looks for an escape route. Typically these stills are used for

booze. Whiskey mash heats up and the alcohol escapes through the top of the still and into a collection tank.”

“But we’re not making Bourbon, right?”

“Not exactly, but the process is strikingly similar in its simplicity. The minerals we want to collect are carried by steam to the copper tube and then into the collection tank. After about an hour on a boil the material is separated and the waste rock sinks to the bottom of the still. I’ll disconnect the tube, use a swab to push out any excess material and you’ll have the same raw material we used to make the viberock.”

“It seems very elementary.”

“Because it is,” Estevan said, pouring

in another few buckets of water. “Remember, this was developed by my grandfather over 60 years ago.”

“But what about the purity of the material?”

“This is as pure as we’ve ever got it.”

Kathryn had ended her phone call and was watching the process from the side of the house. She stepped out into the light of the fire.

“I’m sure our guys at MassEnergy have the equipment to get this in a pure form,” she said. “This looks like a caveman developed it.”

“I welcome your improvements on our design,” Estevan said. He set about adjusting the collection barrel as Luke and Kathryn walked to the other side of

the yard out of earshot.

“What’d they say?” Luke asked.

“Beckman is arranging a private plane to pick us up at the airport in the morning. To put it mildly, he’s excited to see what we’ve got. He’ll have a car waiting to take us to the office in Portland. We’ll just wait here until then.”

Luke could sense Kathryn eagerness to get back home.

“You feeling all right?” he asked. “I mean, you kind of freaked out back there.”

“What, because I don’t feel like getting held in some third-world prison?” She seemed annoyed by the question.

“You were ready to dump Antoine by the side of the road.”

“He’s fine, I saw him. He knew the risks better than we did when he agreed to take us out there. If this silver sand or viberock - or whatever they call it - is the same mineral as what is inside ARC, then we’ve just broken StuTech’s back. This is what we came here for Luke. Don’t be such a wimp. Grow a pair. There will be casualties in this fight.”

“I don’t disagree with you and that’s all I’ve ever wanted, but the ends don’t justify the means,” Luke said, calmly. “If not for Estevan and Antoine, we’d never have found it. We owe them, personally.”

“Maybe you do. Not me. This is

business,” she said, sticking her hand out abruptly. “Hand over the car keys. I’m going back to the hotel to get my things. Give me your room key and I’ll get your bags too.”

Chapter 46

Estevan started a pot of coffee. No reason to think they'll be sleeping much tonight. Antoine finally woke up about 2 a.m. with a throbbing headache, but not much the worse for wear. Estevan ordered him to stay in bed and rest.

“At least he’s all right,” Luke said.

“He’s been through worse,” Estevan said. “He was in and out of the deep everyday for decades as a welder. The companies he worked for didn’t always put safety first. They pushed for longer dives and fewer safety stops because it shortened the time in the water. He got

decompression sickness about ten years back. Never went back under after that. Spent a week recovering in a decompression chamber in Antigua.”

“Is that why he stopped diving for the silver sand?”

“That and they built the oil rig and restricted access to it.”

“Speaking of the rig, I didn’t think there were oil deposits this close to the island. Most rigs are in much deeper water.”

“Apparently there’s something down there, otherwise they wouldn’t have built that monstrosity off the coast. The only good I’ve seen come from that thing is the revenue the company dumps into the economy here. They fund schools, roads

and infrastructure.”

“But with the rig only producing a small amount of oil, they still have the money to bribe the government?”

“It’s not a bribe when it’s legal.”

Luke was exhausted, but he knew Kathryn would be back any minute and they would have to leave for the airport. He needed some answers from Estevan before it was time to go.

Luke sat down next to the fire. He was still chilled from the cold dive and his adrenaline was finally slowing.

“Estevan, I need to ask you about your daughter,” Luke asked. “Kirkhorn was trying to fix Loretta, we’ve established that. I can only assume he was doing it under your supervision. You used this

mineral on Ann. What happened?"

Estevan stared at the fire and sipped his coffee.

"I never told Brother Kirkhorn that it would work, but he insisted on trying, despite the risks. When Loretta became paralyzed, I was the first person he called. I'd long given up hope that my work would do anything to help people like Ann. I thought that maybe he could find something that I didn't."

"What didn't you find?"

"I didn't find anything. I am, or at least was, a medical doctor, not a medical researcher. It's a different type of medicine and skill set. I wasn't looking at trials and documentation. I wanted to fix my daughter, but in my

blind emotion, I ... I killed her.”

Estevan said this with the matter-of-fact tone of a man long resigned to the reality of his actions.

“I don’t understand,” Luke said. “How did you kill her?”

“What did Kathryn say? A caveman created this process? Yes. I tried to recreate it in a lab environment, but I was clueless. The mineral wasn’t extracted in a pure form. It still contained trace elements of rock and sediment and probably other things that I didn’t know how to remove. And because I was doing the testing alone, I couldn’t ask for help. Which was my first mistake. Blaine led me to believe that his material was special in some

way, but I didn't dare tell him what I was planning on doing. He'd have tried to stop me. Anyone would have told me that injecting this material into a human wasn't safe."

"So you injected it in Ann's spine?"

"Not at first. I couldn't risk it on my daughter. I injected myself first. I placed it on the same area of the spine that was damaged in Ann. It did nothing to me. I didn't feel it, no sensation, nothing. But no side effects either."

"So that's when you gave it to Ann?"

"I thought that it couldn't do any harm, since it didn't do anything for me. She wanted me to try and I couldn't say no, as much as I knew it was wrong," the tears were flowing down his face. "She

was in so much emotional pain. She wasn't herself anymore. She hated being stuck in that chair, so I gave her what she wanted. Its impact was immediate. She went into cardiac arrest and died within minutes. I couldn't save her."

Couldn't save her. In Luke's mind he could see the headlights of the truck bearing down on him and his parents on that dark highway. He could see his father dying in front of his eyes. He was familiar with the torture Estevan felt. Helplessness.

"I'm so sorry," Luke said. "That is a terrible thing to have to live with."

"My guess is that the injected material entered her blood stream and traveled to her heart, where it caused a blockage

and forced the cardiac arrest.”

“Why wouldn’t that have happened to you?”

“I can’t prove it, but I suspect that the injection in me stayed in my spine because it was functioning fully. It gravitated toward a healthy, working process. Since her nerve endings were dead, it couldn’t find an attraction and moved on to the blood stream.

“The school insisted on an autopsy, but I refused, which raised some eyebrows with the administration. They ordered an autopsy anyway and discovered a foreign, unidentifiable substance in her body. I never admitted publically what I did, but they knew something was amiss. Our laws here are

very clear. Experimenting on another human, without approval and protocols is unlawful.”

“And they took away your medical license.”

Estevan nodded and continued to stare into the fire.

“I knew everyone on the medical review board,” he said “They knew I was trying to help Ann, even in a misguided way. Taking away my license wasn’t the worst thing they could have done. They could have turned me in to the authorities where I would have been charged in her death. They didn’t cover up what I did, they just didn’t push it as hard as they could have.”

“Wouldn’t the school also have some

culpability in the matter since you used its resources?" Luke asked. "There had to be a reason they didn't push it any further."

"It's certainly possible," Estevan said, finally looking away from the fire.

"When did Professor Kirkhorn find out about Ann?"

"He was back on the island in 1984, the year after she was hurt. Officially he was researching Nevis Peak for his employer, but he was looking into the silver sand as well. He couldn't help himself. The silver sand was too interesting to him. He didn't know anyone else on the island, so we became friends, although I never told him about my ideas for medical uses for the

material. I told him what I did after she died. He said that I was reckless for injecting her. We didn't speak again for more than 25 years, until Loretta got hurt."

"He wanted to know what you did with Ann, so he could try it on Loretta. But he knew that it failed?"

"Yes, he never got the chance to test it on her and I don't know that he would have unless he was sure. He emailed me updates on his progress and I gave him what advice I could. He only worked on it for a few years before he died."

"Do you still have those e-mails?"

"Yes, I can send them to you," Estevan said.

"Thank you. Those e-mails might be a

game changer. When I get the samples back to Portland I'm certain we can isolate and separate the unique minerals in the rocks," Luke said. "The number of people that this technology could help is huge, and not just in the U.S. This mineral – whatever it is used for might be the missing link. It could have global repercussions."

"You really think our rocks are that important?"

"We won't know until we try."

They both turned when the headlights of the rental car shown from the driveway. Kathryn honked the horn.

"Can you promise me something?" Estevan asked. "Don't forget about Ann and Loretta when you get back to the

States. I still think the silver sand, in one way or another, can have a medicinal use.”

Luke thought of the mask on Tilly’s face as she breathed in her life-sustaining medication through the foot-powered machine operated by her mom. How she didn’t have the breath to blow out her birthday candles.

“There’s a little girl back in California who won’t let me forget.”

Chapter 47

Portland, Oregon

MassEnergy's VP of Development, James Beckman pulled out of the parking garage of Portland's largest financial institution. He'd just ended a meeting with a pair of potential investors, set up by his personal broker. It couldn't have gone better. His week was looking up.

Earlier that morning Kathryn Tate had delivered even better news concerning what she was bringing back to Portland. He didn't hesitate to arrange a private plane out of Nevis and back to Portland. If he could have flown there himself that instant, he would have.

His impressions of Kathryn continued to be correct. She got the job done at all costs. She was a first class bitch, but one that he wanted on his side. He couldn't wait to be rid of her — she was only supposed to be a temporary employee anyway. She was gaining the attention of company management. Not a good sign for him. Regardless, he hoped that what she claimed about these magical rocks was true. The science of wireless electricity wasn't his strong suit and the lab guys would have to be the ones to prove it worked. And do it fast.

The clock was ticking on MassEnergy. It had to introduce a product to market in the next two quarters or be forced to declare

bankruptcy. It would be an absolute embarrassment - a complete failure.

The engineering candidate class and Kathryn's ridiculous "pods," all had one goal. The all-out push against StuTech was MassEnergy's last-ditch effort to stave off the trash heap. They had a plan, but it was missing a few key items – like a product that worked.

While Beckman didn't have a significant stake in the company, his stake did comprise the entirety of his net worth, around \$6 million. He should have diversified, sure, but he didn't. His fortunes would mirror those of MassEnergy.

Simple bankruptcy and the loss of a personal fortune wasn't the only thing at

risk. Time was running out on another front as well. Legislators were currently debating a bill in the Senate that would give StuTech exclusive rights to the radio spectrum it used to transmit its signals. It was called the Wireless Electricity Spectrum Act, or WES Act. The House had already passed it. If MassEnergy wasn't allowed to use the same spectrum, they wouldn't be able to transmit wireless electric signals at all.

StuTech had lobbied hard for the WES Act, which was sponsored by a senior Congresswoman from Washington state, who was a former StuTech executive. She argued that StuTech was offering the country a perfect mix of efficiency and cost-effectiveness. If they

were forced to fend off competitors in their market, they would be distracted from that pursuit. It was a ludicrous idea and everyone knew it. StuTech had bought the votes for such a monopolistic bill out of its own sense of self-preservation. It certainly violated anti-trust laws and wouldn't likely hold up to a court challenge, but it didn't matter. MassEnergy wouldn't have the funding to fight it if it couldn't sell a product that worked.

A few pro-business senators were stalling a vote on the bill, knowing its massive ramifications. The president had already promised to sign the WES Act into law and was putting pressure on the Senate holdouts, who couldn't delay

the bill indefinitely.

Beckman figured if they could get a product on the market, even just a test case, before Congress adjourned for summer recess, the bill couldn't get passed. But if they missed the window, it would be over for good.

This was Beckman's reality. He was all-in or it was all over. It had to work and he would do everything in his power to make it happen.

Chapter 48

The executive airport terminal at Portland International smelled like leather and popcorn, a high-class movie theater. A co-pilot for the chartered jet had carried Luke and Kathryn's bags from the luggage hold into the terminal on a soggy red carpet. Luke and Kathryn slept most of the flight back and thus did little talking. Luke wasn't interested in conversation anyway.

He was embarrassed about their kiss the night she told him about Kirkhorn. He was still mourning his break-up with Rachel and should have known better

than to let it go that far. He was relieved that he had followed his head that night, not his sexual urges.

It didn't take him the entire flight back to Portland to realize that she was just playing him. That was her plan all along. The dollar signs that he now saw spinning in her eyes had clearly impacted her in ways he didn't expect. Why was this a surprise? What did he really even know about her? She was his boss and this was a job - nothing else to her.

The rock samples were his insurance. He hadn't let the backpack out of his sight since they left Estevan's home the previous morning. He used it as a hard pillow on the flight and now carried it

slung over his shoulder. It wasn't going anywhere.

StuTech wasn't going to take him back so his chance of ever getting into Advanced Analytics was gone. Warren Evans didn't want him at his company or around his daughter. But he had a choice. His first option was to present the samples to Evans and cut his ties with MassEnergy all together. He'd beg for mercy from the old man and hope Evans would keep the Elliot Cosgrove affair a secret. But that would require trusting Evans and that was a long shot.

His second option could be lengthy. Give the samples to MassEnergy and see what it could do with them. Slowly chip away at StuTech and wait it out. But he

was setting himself up for a fall. If Evans learned how instrumental Luke was in getting the samples for MassEnergy – and they proved valuable – Evans would be furious and not hesitate to seek retribution.

His options weren't appealing and despite the valuable material he held in the backpack, he still wasn't in control.

Rain streaked the windows of the airport's terminal lobby. It was a typical Portland day – raining and overcast. They both huddled inside the entryway, behind the double doors leading out to the parking lot. There was supposed to be a car service waiting for them. Beckman ordered them to head straight to the office, no matter when they

arrived, so the samples could be analyzed immediately. It was just after 5 p.m.

After about ten minutes of waiting, Luke grew impatient and found the one terminal agent working the entire private lobby.

“We landed about 15 minutes ago and I believe we were supposed to have a car waiting for us. Is there another spot we should be waiting for it to arrive?”

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t at the counter when your flight landed,” the middle-aged female agent said. “You must be Luke Kincaid. Are you traveling with, let me see here, Ms. Tate as well?”

“Yes.”

“Again, my apologies, I have your

keys right here,” she set two sets of rental car keys on the counter. “There was a mix up of some sort with the car service. I’ve been instructed to provide you each a rental car instead.”

Luke thought it would be nice to stop off at home first and get a shower and change of clothes. Maybe the time away from Kathryn could help him decide his next move, he was certainly ready to part ways with her.

He thanked the agent and scooped up the keys.

“Looks like we’re flying solo the rest of our adventure,” Luke told Kathryn. “Car service issue. They got us each a car to get to the office.”

“Two cars?” she asked, raising her

eyebrows.

“Apparently. I’m going to stop at home really quick and change my clothes.”

“No rush, take your time. It’ll probably be a long night at the office.”

Chapter 49

A man behind the wheel of a dark blue SUV watched as his targets talked behind the glass doors of the terminal lobby. The man left momentarily, but they finally exited the building after he returned. Instead of climbing in a waiting luxury town car as planned, they each got into sedans parked by the door. Time to adjust.

The woman he only knew as Ms. Tate carefully placed her single bag in the trunk, adjusted her mirrors and exited the lot. Mr. Kincaid did the same, but placed a backpack on the passenger seat.

He must want to keep it near. With that simple decision, Mr. Kincaid just sealed his fate.

The freeway from the airport was always congested, despite the abundance of commuter trains in and around Portland. The rush hour traffic helped the blue SUV blend in. The man stayed two car lengths back in the bumper-to-bumper jumble of cars. The route from the airport to MassEnergy was fairly obvious, with only one main artery as a reasonable route. The man played the percentages that Mr. Kincaid would follow conventional wisdom.

The exit from the freeway led to Linwood Drive, a winding road along the Willamette River. Linwood allowed

one lane of travel in both directions. On the left side of the road was a mammoth wall of reinforced concrete. On the other side was a small shoulder just a few feet from a tree-lined slope down to the bank of the river. Traffic was thinning. It was time.

Luke couldn't wait to get on a fresh set of clothes. He'd only packed for a two-day trip to Tucson and was now returning after seven days in the blazing dessert of Arizona and thick humidity of the Caribbean. He was ripe. His apartment was only a couple of miles past MassEnergy. He'd probably only lose about 25 minutes. It was a little price to pay for his sanity and odor.

He turned down Linwood Drive,

which would take him all the way down to his block. He was going about 45 miles per hour in the 35 mile per hour zone. The flashing red and blue lights of the blue SUV lit up behind him, quickly reminding him of the appropriate speed limit. Knowing he was about to get a speeding ticket, he flipped on his signal and took his foot off the gas and began coasting to the shoulder.

The SUV didn't use a siren, just the lights. It stayed within one car length and then accelerated to pass his car in the oncoming lane. Maybe the cop was responding to a call and just needed to pass. That'd be a relief. He wasn't in the mood for a ticket. Luke continued to pull onto the shoulder toward the river as the

SUV pulled even with the rental.

Luke could hear the SUV's engine rev as the man floored it and bolted along side Luke's smaller rental car. The oversized front bumper was now even with the rental's front tires. In one powerful nudge, the SUV jerked to the right and slammed directly into the driver's side of the rental car. Luke tried to keep a grip on the wheel as the car bounced into the loose gravel on the shoulder. He overcorrected. The smaller car plunged back onto the roadway at a 45-degree angle. Without the gravel from the shoulder to help ease the skid, Luke's tires caught abruptly and started to flip.

He felt the immediate sensation of

flying through the air and flipping upside down. Everything went black as the car rolled four more times away from the road and down the slope toward the river. The car finally stopped when it wrapped around a thick Ponderosa Pine.

The man pulled his baseball cap low over his face and as he jogged about 30 feet from the roadway to the destroyed car. He kept the lights of the SUV flashing on the side of the road. He used a small pick to shatter the passenger side window. Mr. Kincaid's airbag had deployed and he was slumped motionless over the steering wheel with blood running down the side of his face. His arm was at an awkward angle, clearly broken. Grabbing the backpack,

the man returned to his SUV and drove off before any other cars came across the scene.

Chapter 50

Three Days Later

The rhythmic beep of the machines droned as Luke lay in the hospital bed at Portland Sacred Heart Hospital. The EMTs had arrived on scene quickly after a driver saw the accident and called 911. He was treated for a neck injury and placed on a backboard. His left arm was broken and he had suffered head trauma. The doctors were concerned about swelling in his brain and believed it would be aggravated if he were awake. He'd been given medication to keep him sedated. The doctors felt two days of monitoring his breathing and

brain activity were enough. They slowly decreased the strength of the drugs and waited for him to wake up. That was yesterday.

Rachel sat alone in the corner of the room, just as she had for the last two days. She was still listed as Luke's emergency contact and got a voicemail from a nurse on the day of the accident. Her plane from Europe had just landed in Seattle and they were taxiing to the terminal. She never left the airport and took the first flight down to Portland.

She didn't even have time to question whether she should go see him. He needed her and that was enough. She wondered who else would be in the room with him. Would that woman,

Kathryn, from the photo be there? But no one else came.

The staff didn't know much about the accident other than the condition of the car. It had rolled several times and he was lucky to be alive. His seatbelt and airbag had done their jobs. Rachel didn't have any authority to direct his medical care, but the doctors had kept her updated on his condition as if she did.

They wouldn't know the extent of his injuries until he woke up. If he woke up.

Other than the swelling around a dozen stitches on his face, and the broken arm, Luke looked remarkably well. She spend the hours in his room going over that she would say to him if she got the chance. Her mind spun out of

control as she waited for him to come to. She hadn't seen him in more than a year. Seeing him again brought back all the feelings she had for him - the good ones and the bad ones. He looked so helpless lying in the bed. She missed him dearly and she'd promised herself that she would forgive him for whatever he had done with that Kathryn woman if he would just wake up and be with her again. They had to be together now. She wouldn't let him go back to this fictitious world of corporate espionage. He didn't need to do it. Things were different now. It had to be different.

The bright lights of the room were a rude awakening back into the real world. Then the pain in Luke's arm and back set

in. He blinked open his eyes and then closed them just as quick. Keep the light out. It was so bright. He hurt everywhere. Why? Then he remembered. He had been in a car accident. No, it wasn't an accident. The lights were so bright. He lifted his arm over his eyes to block out the light and was smacked in the face with what had to be a brick. There was a cast on his arm. It was broken? It smelled like ... vanilla.

There was someone else in the room. A flicker, then suddenly it got dark. He put his arm back down to his side. The plastic rings on the hospital room's curtains scraped against the rail and the last bits of light disappeared. He opened his eyes. As they adjusted to the light,

the smell of more vanilla brought him awake. He turned his head to the left and saw who had shut the curtains. It smelled like her. She always wore the same perfume. He knew it well. Tears welled up in his eyes as she touched his hand.

Rachel leaned down and kissed him on the forehead.

“Hi,” was all he managed to say. His throat was so dry no sound came out.

“Don’t talk, just rest. I’ll be here when you wake up.”

Luke closed his eyes and didn’t wake up for another eight hours.

It felt like a weight had been lifted to Rachel. Things could finally get back the way they were. Luke could come back with her to StuTech. Or he could do

something else. She didn't care. They could finally get married and have a normal life. Things were looking up.

She had relaxed a bit since she knew Luke was resting and that he knew she was there waiting for him. He'd be awake soon enough. She sipped her coffee as she finished working on her fourth crossword puzzle book. It was the last one the hospital gift shop had. She was afraid she'd have to switch to that infuriating game Sudoku. She just couldn't sit idle in his room.

A nurse came in and checked his vital signs.

"The doctor wants him up now. If he isn't awake, I'll have to give him some wake-up juice to get him up and

running,” she said. “You don’t want that. Maybe you can give him a little prodding, so we don’t have to?”

Rachel sat down on the bed and put her hand on his chest. She’d always liked to feel his heartbeat at night after they made love. The rhythm helped her go to sleep.

“Luke, honey, it’s time to wake up,” she said softly, as she gently rubbed his chest.

He blinked his eyes open and tried to clear his throat.

“Here, drink this,” Rachel repositioned the head of the bed and helped him take a sip of water. He drained the cup and looked around the room.

He wanted to ask her why she was there in the hospital with him. Hadn't she dumped him and left the country? Wasn't it over between them? But he knew those questions would have to wait.

"Where's my backpack?" he said in a rough voice.

"What?"

"My backpack. It was in the car."

"That doesn't matter now, you need to rest."

"No. I need my backpack, there was something very valuable in it."

His voice was getting stronger as he became fully awake.

"What could be so important that you need it in the hospital?"

“I can’t exactly say. Well, I’m not sure,” Luke wasn’t sure what Rachel knew about the StuTech’s proprietary materials or what lies her father might have told her about him. Could it be that he didn’t trust her anymore?

“What day is it?” he asked.

“You’ve been in the hospital for almost four days,” she said.

“Did they bring my things here?”

“No one brought you anything,” Rachel said. “It’s just been you and me here at the hospital. Your clothes are in the cabinet. That’s it.”

“No one else came?”

“Expecting your girlfriend?” She couldn’t help herself, it just came out.

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing. Never mind.”

Rachel regretted saying it. This wasn't the time.

“If I don't get that backpack back, well, that's not good.”

“It's that important?” She looked into his eyes, searching for a reason.

“Yes it is.”

“The doctors aren't going to release you.”

Luke sat up on the bed. A wave of lightheadedness washed over him, but it quickly passed. He swung his legs over the side of the bed.

“I'm OK, just a little sore, that's all.”

“And you got a concussion, 12 stitches in your face and broke your arm. So, you're right. No big deal. How about

we go for a little five-mile jog? Feeling up for that?”

“Not quite.”

“Didn’t think so.”

“If I can prove to you that I’m OK, will you help me?”

“If I don’t help you, you’re going to do it anyway aren’t you?”

“Probably.”

“Then I guess I’ll help, but you need to tell me what we’re doing.”

“OK, first we need to find my rental car.”

The car was at a service center a few minutes outside of town. After several phone calls to local towing services, Rachel had found the company that hauled the rental car away. While she

tried to locate the car, Luke gingerly got dressed. Luckily the clothes he wore during the accident escaped nearly unscathed. Just a few bloodstains.

Knowing the doctors would not allow him to be discharged from the hospital, they simply walked out without calling any attention to themselves. He was still weak and pale, but determined to leave. He'd have to fill out their paperwork some other time.

At the towing company counter Rachel talked their way past the manager and his six-foot high perimeter fence to gain access to the car.

Luke tried to hide his sweating. He was dizzy when they finally got to the car. He was astonished at the damage.

His injuries seemed inconsequential compared to skeletal remains of the car. He was lucky to be alive and he knew it.

Luke couldn't help but be reminded of his parents' deaths. He felt a wave of guilt for surviving not one, but two car crashes with just minor injuries. The rental car was in much worse shape than his parents' old sedan had been. The windows were shattered and peeling away from the damaged frame. The rear passenger side door was caved in from the impact with the tree. The trunk was the only area of the car still intact.

The backpack was supposed to be on the front seat. They searched the inside of the car as best they could given the extent of the damage. It was gone. Luke

had been worried that thieves might have stolen it, but his suitcase was still in the trunk, so that was out.

“I should have thought about this – it must have been ejected from one of the broken windows as the car rolled,” he said, bracing himself against the hood of the car. “We’ve got to get to the crash scene to find it.”

“Luke it’s not here and you’re in no condition to go hiking around the side of the road – let alone the cliffs overlooking the river where you crashed,” Rachel said. “It’s getting dark. Let’s get back to the hospital and we can look in the morning.”

“There’s no harm in looking now. It’s not that far from here.”

“If the backpack is anywhere in the open, its probably been picked up by someone by now anyway. The only way we’ll find it is if it’s hidden in the overgrowth. That can wait till morning.”

Luke looked reluctant, but knew she was right.

“OK, but we’re not going back to the hospital.”

Chapter 51

The knock on the Luke's apartment door was so light that Rachel wasn't sure she heard it. She went to the peephole in the door, expecting to see nothing, but standing in the dimly lit hallway was a pleasant-looking olive-skinned man fiddling with the cuffs of his light jacket. Luke was asleep on the Murphy bed of the studio apartment and she hated to wake him, so she opened the door using the chain and quietly asked what the man wanted.

“Oh, I'm sorry, I thought this was Luke Kincaid's apartment,” Amir

Ghorbani said. "I must have gotten the wrong door."

"No, this is Luke's apartment, he's a sleep. Can I help you?"

"Luke and I work together and I have some urgent matters to discuss with him."

"Can it wait until morning?" Rachel asked, hoping the man would just go away. Work could wait and it was 10:30 at night.

Amir, tried to hide his frustration. Just open the door, he thought, and make it easy on all of us.

"My news could wait until the morning, but I think this is something you both need to hear," Amir said. "I assume you are Rachel. He mentioned you. I'm

glad to see you two together. Should do him good.”

She was surprised to be recognized by the stranger – especially since Luke and Rachel had been “broken up” for nearly a year and a half. When Rachel closed the door to unlatch the chain and let Amir in, she missed the thin smile that flashed across his face.

Amir helped Rachel fold up the Murphy bed into the wall, once Luke and his broken arm had rolled out of it. They needed the extra seating in the small living area. Luke warmed up a stale cup of coffee to try and break the cobwebs from his brain.

Amir wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead. He looked nervous. More so

than the first day Luke met him in the MassEnergy auditorium when his right leg wouldn't stop bouncing up and down and he was listening to his smuggled-in headphones.

“There's something that I need to tell you and I'm not very happy about it,” Amir spoke at his typical rapid pace. “Not very happy with myself. I mean, I'm a good guy. I think I am. I have a family and I raised my kid right and I don't think I've done the right thing yet. And I want to do the right thing.”

“Do the right thing about what?” Luke asked.

“I wasn't supposed to be involved, I was supposed to just do my job and that was it. No one said I was supposed to

do anything else. Or let people do things that were wrong, but it happened and I don't want it to happen again. And I think it might, so I want to help."

"Amir, what are we talking about? Are you in trouble? Can I help?"

"Not me. You."

Rachel handed Amir a bottle of water, which he downed in several long gulps. Luke and Rachel were leaning forward in their seats, waiting for him to spit out whatever it was that he needed to say. It was obviously weighing on him.

"The day after we started at MassEnergy, I was assigned a side project that I didn't tell anyone about. And after I tell you what it was, you'll know why I didn't say anything. They

offered me a 25 percent increase in my salary if I would help with this particular project. You've met my wife. You know she's out of work and we're living paycheck to paycheck with my daughter. I had to do it."

"What was the assignment?"

"They said that because of the secret nature of the projects we were working on in the pods, that they needed to keep an eye on the employees. They wanted to make sure that no one was double-dipping – selling our secrets to the competition."

Luke and Rachel shared a quick glance, knowing what that might mean for them. Amir ignored it and kept on.

"Beckman was worried about you

since you used to work for StuTech. He wasn't too keen on the idea of having you running around the company because he couldn't be sure that you weren't still working for StuTech. That's why he wanted you on the Dev Floor right away, more security than the pods. It's laughable really. Corporate espionage? I told him that I knew you and thought the idea that you were some sort of double agent was absolutely ridiculous."

"Got that right. Ridiculous," Luke said.

"He asked me to keep an eye on you and several other employees, while going about my regular job. Beckman said it was good business to keep a tight ship. I didn't see anything wrong with it.

He is so worried about this Senate Bill, the WES Act, now that it's about to come up for a vote."

"Why you? There were dozens of new employees that they could have asked."

"Beckman knew I was an Army intelligence officer and was familiar with handling sensitive information. I feel like an idiot now. He just wanted someone who would follow orders."

"OK, so they asked you to keep an eye on me, so what? I think that's fair. I don't have anything to hide," Luke said, but of course, he did.

"I know and I told him that, but he wanted more. Luke, I'm ashamed to say this, but I followed you and Kathryn to Arizona and the Caribbean."

“You tailed me?”

“Because that’s what he asked me to do. I’m truly sorry,” Amir said. His voice was calm and sincere.

“You said that you had something both of us needed to hear. What is it?” Rachel asked.

“Your car accident wasn’t an accident at all,” Amir said in a voice just above a whisper. “It was deliberate and I let it happen.”

Tears welled up in his eyes. He covered his face with his hands. He was shaking and sobbing. Luke and Rachel shared another glance, neither one knowing exactly where this conversation was headed.

“Luke fell asleep at the wheel and

overcorrected,” Rachel said. “How did you let it happen?”

“Right, I was tired, but I don’t remember the actual accident very well,” Luke said.

“That’s why you’re in danger. They tried to run you off the road and kill you for the rock samples you were bringing to the lab.”

“Kill me? Wait, who?”

“Beckman. He wanted to eliminate you, but not before getting the samples for himself.”

The news rocked Luke. He’d been worried about Warren Evans and StuTech, not Beckman.

“Beckman knew you were bringing back some new mineral that was

supposed to be the missing link to making the Tesla project finally work,” Amir said. “Kathryn told him that you two needed a private plane back to Portland. He wanted those samples for himself and didn’t want to share the credit with either of you. The samples were the prize.”

“Amir, forgive me, but I don’t know you from someone off the street,” Rachel said. “Why would you know all this and why would you tell us now?”

“I’m here because I don’t want to follow orders anymore. I played along with Beckman and MassEnergy. I’ve seen what they are capable of and it needs to stop. I’m probably putting myself in danger for just being here.

Maybe I should just go.”

He stood and grabbed his jacket.

“No, please stay. I want to know why this happened,” Luke said, pointing to the 12 stitches on his forehead with his broken left arm.

Amir looked at Rachel who motioned for him to sit back down.

“Beckman arranged for a car service to pick up you and Kathryn from the executive airport. But instead you got two rental cars.”

“The airport concierge said there was a mix up at the car service,” Luke said.

“That’s where I made a mistake. I overheard Beckman planning what I thought was a carjacking with someone on the phone. I had already tapped his

office line so I could listen to his calls. You were supposed to get into the car and somewhere along the route to the office, the man was supposed to stage a carjacking and get the samples. Beckman instructed him to do whatever he needed to do to make it happen.”

“You created the mix up at the car service, so we had to take the rental cars,” Luke said. “If they were planning on killing me, why the hell didn’t you just tell me that before I got into the car?”

“I didn’t know that then. Beckman’s instructions to the man were vague and I assumed that he just wanted the samples and the credit. He didn’t say anything about hurting you. I didn’t know who the

hired gun was and I thought that if you two split up in different cars that he'd have no choice but to abort the whole thing. I don't know why he went after you and not Kathryn."

"If we weren't in danger, why would you get in the middle of it and send the cars?"

"I didn't think Beckman deserved the credit – I know what you had to go through to get the samples."

Luke wanted to ask what Amir knew about their dive in Nevis and what he told Beckman, but he was confused about the car mix up.

"So you're telling me that Beckman tried to kill me for the samples that he personally ordered us to go get? That

doesn't make any sense. We were driving to his office to deliver the samples to him personally."

"What happened to your samples?"

"I don't know. They weren't in the car when we went looking today. I think that maybe they were ejected from the car when I crashed."

"I don't know how they got there, but as we speak, the lab techs are analyzing rock samples from Nevis. They started the day after you came home. I'm leading the project to analyze them."

Luke was starting to wonder if Kathryn somehow orchestrated his car accident. He wouldn't put it past her.

"Have you learned anything from the samples yet?"

Not yet, no. We're working overtime on it because there's some big shipment coming in tomorrow. It's all been pretty hush-hush, but rumor has it that it contains pure elements for ARC."

"Where did it come from?" Luke asked.

"I'm not sure, somewhere in Europe."

Rachel hid her surprise. She had a pretty good guess what little country in Europe the shipment came from – Moldova. Probably near Arionesti.

Chapter 52

Kathryn stood overlooking the Development Floor on the Green Level of MassEnergy's campus. The dark walls of the sunken work area were a stark contrast to the jubilant voices coming from the employees below. It had been like that since she returned. They were finally making progress. James Beckman actually gave her a big, uncomfortable hug when she presented him with the rock samples. The samples that no one knew she had taken from the ocean floor.

Back on Nevis, she had almost

laughed when Estevan asked if she knew how to scuba dive, but kept it to herself, knowing it might be an advantage. She too was a certified diver. Her experience was mostly in lakes in Texas, not the open ocean, but she certainly knew her way around the equipment. Her improvised panic attack on the ocean floor worked exactly as she had planned. Luke went off by himself and she had time to collect her own samples. She simply replaced the weights in her buoyancy vest with the rock samples she collected. Her assortment of rocks was about a quarter of the size of what Luke had brought up.

She thought of Luke lying in the hospital. Why should she feel guilty

about it, she thought? He wasn't about to let her carry the samples once they made it back to shore. He wanted the glory for himself. He wanted to be the one getting all the credit from Beckman. He wanted to cash in too.

When the samples were inspected, Beckman had immediately ordered all of the Research and Development teams to start working on analyzing the samples.

"This might be the most important single project you've ever worked on in your entire lives," he told the team. "You damn well better get it right."

Most of the techs were working 14-hour days and sleeping in the dorms.

Kathryn had called the hospital several times to check on Luke, but they

wouldn't provide any information. Just that he was still a patient.

Her desire to make the Tesla project a reality had pushed aside her feelings of guilt toward not helping him. She should have stopped when she saw his rental car roll. She should have gone back for him when, through her rearview mirror, she saw the driver of the other car take Luke's backpack out of the front seat. But she had her own samples, why did she care what happened to his? She wanted to be the one to present them to Beckman. That's my job, she told herself. Winning was all that mattered.

She had called 911, and knew help for Luke was on the way. She then drove straight to the office. So why did she feel

so guilty, she wondered?

The man who took the backpack knew exactly what he was doing, but she didn't know how. Very few people could have possibly known what Luke was carrying or that it had any value at all. She'd only told Beckman. But why would Beckman send someone to snatch the samples from Luke, when he was in the process of driving them right to the corporate headquarters? It made no sense.

She had not left the campus once since she returned four days earlier. She stayed there because she was a workaholic, just like the techs who worked for her. She kept telling herself that. Nothing could happen to her here.

There were too many witnesses. She wasn't sleeping.

Kathryn was familiar with being uncomfortable. She had received death threats before from terminated employees and angry spouses. Those things came with the territory. She wielded the ax. She was the shark. It was expected.

But this was different. She forced herself to admit that the reason she was hiding out was because she feared for her life. If they tried to kill Luke for some rocks, what would they do to her since she already delivered them?

Chapter 53

“We have to go public with this Luke,” Amir said. “We have to go to the police. It’s attempted murder. If they would do this to you, then they wouldn’t hesitate to do this to anyone. I’m a big fan of capitalism, but this is much more than being competitive.”

“There’s no use,” Luke said. “It’s a huge company. Think about it. There’s no actual evidence that Beckman ordered the hit. I assume you didn’t intercept his telephone calls legally, right?”

“Well, no, but that’s beside the point.

MassEnergy needs to be held accountable.”

Luke felt he had to let Amir in on his secret. The man had put himself in danger to come here tonight and warn him about Beckman. MassEnergy would stop at nothing to finish the Tesla project. It wasn't any better than StuTech's monopoly. At least StuTech wasn't killing people.

“Amir I-“

“I think it's about time we said goodnight,” Rachel interrupted. “It's late and Luke needs his rest.”

She got up and started folding down the Murphy bed.

“You two need to pretend like this didn't happen,” she said.

“And why would we do that?” Amir asked, an obvious look of discomfort crossed his face. He stood up as Rachel removed his chair.

“Because if you let on about what you know, you are going to remain a target to Beckman and MassEnergy. I know egotistical men – I grew up with one. They want to be the most powerful person in the room. You need to let Beckman know that he has won. That’s the only way you can expect to stay out of any danger.”

“You think we should just pack our lunches tomorrow, trudge into the office and pretend that they didn’t try to kill me?” Luke was astonished at what she said.

“But I don’t know if I can look Beckman in the face again,” Amir said.

“So don’t,” Rachel said. “Do your work and keep your head down for a few days. There’s no harm in that. Beckman will assume that once again, he’s outwitted everyone. It’ll blow over. Trust me, this will work at least until we can figure a way out of this.”

Luke didn’t want to argue with Rachel in front of Amir, but the thought of going back to that place after what happened made him sick to his stomach. He didn’t belong there. Hell, he didn’t know where he belonged now. Yet a small part of him wanted to go back and confront Kathryn to find out why she never came to see him in the hospital.

After all they had been through together in the previous weeks he expected something. He wasn't sure what. Surely, she knew he was in an accident. Of course, she could very well have been in on it too. That made the most sense. Regardless, he didn't understand why Rachel was insisting that everything was just fine. It wasn't fine at all.

Rachel waited for Amir to leave before speaking again.

"You need to go into work tomorrow and get a sample from that shipment he was talking about."

"The one from Europe? Why?"

"Because I have a feeling that the shipment is from StuTech, but for the life of me, I don't know why."

Chapter 54

Rachel spent the next hour telling Luke where she'd been over the last few months. She told him about her humanitarian missions to Bolivia, Sudan and Moldova and how she audited the records at each location to ensure that they were on the straight and narrow. She went in depth about the people she'd met and the encounters she had.

“Some people said we were only building the medical aid stations and trying to help the people of those regions as a publicity stunt. They said we were trying to influence public opinion in

favor of the WES Act. But I saw how much good we were doing and I guess I was blinded by that and never really saw the bigger picture.”

“Which was what?”

“That my father had an ulterior motive to send me on those trips and build those missions. He didn’t care about those people, but it didn’t fully register until Amir said MassEnergy was getting a shipment from Moldova. There is nothing in that country that MassEnergy could possibly want, except one thing – ARC.”

“You saw ARC there?”

She explained the Block warehouse she’d visited and how she’d only been able to see half of the place. The other

half was locked up tight. She told him how the earth rumbled below her feet and no one thought it was odd except her.

“I have no doubt now that inside that warehouse was a mine for ARC. They were using that half of the building, but it was buttoned up tight when I was there.”

“How can you be so sure if you never saw the inside of it?”

“The amount of cash on the books in Moldova was over a hundred times more than it could possibly need for the activities that I saw. It’s ridiculous to build a manufacturing plant in the middle of nowhere, with no access to high-traffic roads or a shipping port. It’s the only answer that makes sense.”

“But why would StuTech send its proprietary material to its competition?”

“That’s just it. I don’t think it would. That’s why you need to get a sample of the material at MassEnergy tomorrow. I wish that backpack from Nevis wouldn’t have been stolen.”

“They didn’t get all of it. I stuffed a handful into my suitcase. I wanted to keep some for myself, just in case.”

He went to the other room and zipped open the laundry storage section of his suitcase and pulled out six rocks, each roughly the size of a deck of cards. Rachel saw the flecks of silver reflecting as she held the rocks up to the light. She was instantly transported back to her childhood.

“I used to play with these same rock chips when I was a kid. My father had a wooden tray of these sitting on a table in his office. I would sneak in there when he was away and see how high I could stack them on top of each other. One day my mother caught me doing it. She startled me and the rocks smashed to the floor, breaking into thousands of pieces. Just then my father came home and saw what I did. He never raised his voice at me, but he told my mother to leave. He sat there without saying a word, watching me clean up the mess.

“I swept up the floor with a broom and a dustpan until there was nothing left. When I was finally done, he said, ‘There are few things in this world that

are one of a kind. You just ruined one of them.’ Then he left and I didn’t see him again for days.”

“ARC only comes from Colorado. That must have been where those rocks were from. Are you sure that these rock chips from Nevis are the same type?”

“There are some memories that you never forget. These rocks are identical to the ones I saw as a little girl. I’m sure of it.”

“That means the material that makes wireless electricity possible isn’t just found in Colorado. It’s in the ocean off the shore of Nevis and probably in Moldova too. Maybe other places as well.”

“We can’t be sure about either

sample. It's crazy to think StuTech would give it up. There's no logic behind it. If you can get us that sample, we can compare them and see if they are the same."

"But without a pure sample from Colorado, we won't know if all three of these places are producing the same raw material."

"Leave that to me. Just get the sample tomorrow and I'll figure out a way to get one from Colorado."

"Are you sure you want to get involved in this?"

"Luke, my father is an asshole, I've always known that. But now it looks like he might be intentionally manipulating the market for wireless power – leaving

millions of people to suffer off the grid like your sister, when there is more raw material out there to provide cheap power to everyone. I can't let that go. And up until now, we've just been a pawn in his game. I won't be his pawn anymore."

"So you're saying you want to take down StuTech?" Luke wanted confirmation.

"Yes, but we've got to do it my way."

"What about MassEnergy and Beckman — they are the ones who tried to kill me."

"I've got a plan for that too," she said, grabbing a pen and jotting down an idea. "But in order to protect you, we need to find out what my father has been hiding

first. That's most important."

Luke hadn't expected Rachel to willingly – in fact insist on destroying her father's company. Once they met and fell in love, he'd put his original plans for StuTech on the back burner, knowing that she'd hate him forever if he ruined the company. This effort was personal for more than just him. As he saw the anguish on Rachel's face and heard the resounding confidence in her voice, he knew that she too was ready for the daunting effort ahead of them. They each had their individual reasons, but now they could do it together.

But Warren Evans could still stop Luke with one phone call to the authorities. He had to tell Rachel about

what happened to Elliot Cosgrove in Mill Creek. She deserved to know what he did. But he missed his window. She laid out her plan in sophisticated detail and by the time they had finalized it, he was too exhausted to go another round. The time wasn't right.

Rachel lay awake that night. Luke's snoring was enough to keep anyone awake. It was good to be together again, sleeping in the same bed. It felt like old times, before Luke left, except now she had no idea what the future held for them. Her mind was spinning with scenarios about what sort of business her father was really running. What had been kept from her all these years and why she hadn't seen it before now?

She must have drifted off at some point. The alarm clock buzzed when it was still dark outside and Luke got up for his last day at MassEnergy.

Rachel had some work to do herself, but she also gave Luke a detailed “Honey-Do” list.

Chapter 55

Luke walked through the front security entrance at MassEnergy. Frankie, gave him a once over with the wand, even though he didn't notice the machines giving her any indication that a secondary search was required. The lobby, normally a hive of activity with people coming and going, was strangely empty.

“Where is everyone? It's not Saturday is it?” Luke asked.

“Everyone is in the exhibit hall, some big announcement. You'd better get a move on or you'll miss it,” she said.

“What happened to your arm?”

“Car accident.”

“Be careful with yourself. You’re too pretty to be broken.”

Luke smiled. He didn’t mind the confidence boost in the slightest.

“Frankie, you are a delight.”

The exhibit hall was filled with nearly every MassEnergy employee on campus. The room had no chairs, so everyone was gathered around the platform in front of the scale-model Tesla tower. The space was hot and stuffy, not having been intended for this many people. A fire marshal would have emptied the room in minutes.

Amir caught Luke’s attention and waved him over. He was standing in the

back of the room with some of the other tech's from the Dev Floor who couldn't be bothered to greet Luke when he joined them. They were too busy working on their tablet devices.

"I wasn't entirely sure I would see you today," Amir said. He really did seem surprised.

"To tell you the truth, I don't really want to be here all that much. I'm sure you understand," Luke said.

"Absolutely."

The last people to enter the room were two men in suits followed by a photographer. Each was wearing a media credential around their necks, probably from a financial publication. Luke watched as they made their way to

the front of the room. As he scanned the crowd, he saw Kathryn. He was anxious to see her reaction to seeing him back in the office. She was on the side of the platform next to James Beckman. The fat man was reviewing a stack of note cards and peppering Kathryn with questions. Even from a distance, she looked tired. She had made no effort to hide the big bags under her eyes. Even her hair, normally perfectly coiffed, was slightly disheveled. When she looked away from Beckman, she met Luke's eyes from across the room.

For a brief moment, she looked shocked and Luke couldn't be sure, but it looked like she wiped away a tear from her eyes. He lost sight of her as

Beckman mounted the platform and the crowd surged forward to get a better look.

“Thank you all for coming here today,” Beckman said. “Not that you had much of a choice, but it’s good to see you all here. I know how busy everyone is and I can promise that things aren’t going to be slowing down anytime soon. As you know, the goal of our company is to fulfill the vision left behind by the man who designed the machine behind me – Nikola Tesla. He had a vision that the world could be electrified wirelessly. He didn’t envision a world where this service was monopolized by one powerful company like it is today. At least I don’t think he did. He’s dead,

so we can't ask him."

Beckman paused momentarily for laughter or applause that didn't come. The photographer took that moment to snap a picture of him. He glared back in the general direction of the camera flash and continued on.

"Anyway, each of you in this room is helping us write a piece of history each passing day. We have been at this for a while now and this work has become a labor of love. I see the dedication of our employees as I walk through the halls and visit with each of you at your desks. I know that making advances in technology means as much to you as it does to me. Well, maybe not as much as me, but a lot, right?"

Luke could practically hear people roll their eyes at that. The photographer raised his camera to snap another photo, but Beckman's stare caused him to lower it again. The reporters next to the photographer furiously scribbled notes.

“We are closer today than ever before to making a breakthrough that will help us enter into the wireless market before Congress acts to provide exclusive radio spectrum rights to StuTech. I am pleased to announce that by the end of the next quarter MassEnergy will be a viable competitor to our giant monopolistic friends in Seattle. Today is a great day.”

This time the applause did come. Beckman's yellow teeth showed as a jubilant smile broke across his round

face. He raised his hands toward the sky like a Pentecostal preacher on a Sunday morning, soaking in the praise from his flock.

“As you well know, our competition does not want us to exist. We threaten their way of doing business and so we have had to keep a pretty tight lid on our progress, for fear that the good word might get into the wrong hands. But today, we are going to lift the curtain, if ever so slightly, to recognize some people who have made this achievement possible. When I call your name, please join me on stage.”

He shuffled through his stack of cards before finding the one that he needed. He called out the names of seven employees

who worked their way through the crowd to the platform. They stood on the opposite side of the stage from Beckman, smiling nervously out at their co-workers and obviously wondering why they were singled out. Luke didn't recognize any of them. Three of them wore lab coats. Two were in maintenance uniforms, while the last two were dressed in jeans.

“Like I said, there are many people we need to thank, who have worked to make this achievement possible. You seven on stage with me here, are not those people.”

The employees stopped smiling and several of their faces flushed.

“For reasons each of you knows better

than I, today is your last day with us. You are each terminated.”

The crowd gasped as four security guards ushered the seven employees off the stage and out a side exit. Whispers filled the audience as people asked each other what they thought the employees had done to deserve such public humiliation.

“Let this be a lesson to all of you. As we introduce our product to the market we will not tolerate disclosure of any confidential information to any outside source. The seven losers who just left us aren’t just fired. They will also be prosecuted for violating their terms of employment contracts and several other legal infractions. I expect some of them

will do jail time. Don't let this happen to you."

He paused before continuing. The room was dead silent.

If he didn't have their attention before, he certainly did now. Luke had never seen anything like this before. Beckman was power hungry and vindictive. Sure, if these employees did something wrong, it was completely understandable that they needed to be shown the door and dealt with, but this little show was a bit much. Better than being run off the road and almost killed, sure, but harsh all the same.

"Now on to the celebration," Beckman said. "There are a few employees who I'd really like to thank.

Two employees in particular have gone above and beyond for this company and made untold sacrifices. Only one of them is with us today. Would Kathryn Tate please join me on stage?"

The audience clapped as she went on stage and leaned into Beckman's ear.

"Apparently both employees are here," Beckman seemed to be hiding a scowl. "This is a surprise. Luke Kincaid, please join us up here as well."

Luke weaved his way through the audience although his first instinct was to bolt for the door, but the security team was already back and manning the exits. If anyone deserved to be fired, it was probably him, although at this point he'd done nothing to hurt MassEnergy or for

that matter, help StuTech.

Kathryn looked even worse up close. She was a shell of her former self. She'd lost weight in just a few days, when she certainly didn't have any to lose. It had only been five days since he'd seen her last, but it was as if she'd aged several years.

“Keeping with our theme of confidentiality, I cannot share with you all what these two fine employees have contributed to the company, but let's just say this. Without their contributions, we wouldn't be having this little get together today or in the future.”

His forceful clapping told the crowd it was time for applause.

“Now everyone get back to work,” he

said. “We have a lot to get done in the next several months.”

The brief meeting was over. The reporters descended on Beckman with a barrage of rapid-fire questions the moment he stepped off the stage.

Luke and Kathryn had to wait for the congratulations to stop before they could talk. One employee after another wanted to pat them on the back for whatever it was that they had done to help the company. No one knew, but they assumed it was part of the payday they were all expecting. The pair finally slipped away to the courtyard where they could talk privately.

“What the hell was that all about?” Luke asked.

“Beckman knew that I didn’t get those samples from Nevis by myself,” she said. “You should be happy that he gave you some credit.”

“So you did take my samples after the accident.”

“What? No. I’m not an idiot, I had my own share of the material.”

She explained to him how she had collected her own rock chips when she was left alone in the water by replacing her buoyancy vest weights with the rocks.

“You kept that bag so closely guarded that I didn’t think it would matter that I had my own,” she said.

“You didn’t trust me to share them with you?”

“I’ve been burned before. This was my backup plan. I didn’t know if you would even find anything down there. I had to plan for the worst. I had every intention of sharing the credit, but you weren’t here to discuss it.”

Luke could understand her position. It wasn’t about sharing credit. It was all about achieving their objectives and getting the job done. She had never waivered from that.

“I didn’t take the samples from you Luke,” Kathryn said. She went on to tell him what she saw after his car rolled. About the man who ran him off the road and how she was now in fear for both of their lives. It confirmed what Amir had said the day before. She collapsed into

his chest, sobbing.

“It’s not supposed to be like this,” she said, wiping away the tears from her face. “We were only doing our jobs – that’s it. Why are we the enemy now?”

“There’s got to be more going on than what we know about. I’ve got a friend who’s working on something that might straighten all this out, but I need your help. I need to know I can trust you.”

“You can,” she said. “I don’t feel safe here.”

“We’ve been through a lot, but you’re going to have to show me I can trust you. Here’s what you need to do.”

Luke explained the initial steps of the plan he and Rachel came up with last night, without mentioning Rachel by

name. He didn't want to confuse her before it was time.

"You really think it'll work? Are you sure your friend can pull it off?"

"It's the best shot we have."

An assistant from the lab waved at Kathryn from across the courtyard.

"Sorry to interrupt, but the shipment just came in and you'd asked to be there when they started."

"Thank you," Kathryn said.

Luke knew there was much more the he and Kathryn needed to discuss, but right now was not the time. She knew what she had to do. If she came through, he would know that she could be trusted.

Luke scratched at the skin under the watch on his left wrist as they took the

elevator down to the Dev Floor in silence. He never wore a watch, but today was different.

Chapter 56

Seattle, Washington

For a highly sophisticated and technological company that had pioneered wireless electricity, Rachel thought StuTech was remarkably lax about internal cyber security. It allowed company-authorized computers to roam from building to building and share one large back-end network. An employee working in downtown Seattle could share files with one working in Los Angeles over a broadband Wi-Fi connection, as long as they were in a StuTech facility. File security within the buildings wasn't a paramount concern

because StuTech piggybacked its own network on towers to relay its communications traffic. Passwords were key, but they were also user-generated and thus incredibly vulnerable.

Before taking the train back to Seattle, she visited a Portland pawnshop and purchased a second-hand laptop with cash. She then stopped at a small computer repair store and with a little convincing, got the college kid behind the counter to re-set the configuration image on her used laptop to mirror that of her StuTech-assigned machine.

All she had to do was punch in the network ID and an official username and password to get the new machine connected to the system. She got the idea

from one of her co-workers whose son's school was closed last year for a holiday. Rather than paying for childcare for the whole day, the woman brought in a personal laptop and connected it to the internal network. The son watched videos streamed from the web all day in her office with a set of headphones glued to his ears. Great parenting? No. Nice budget savings? Yes.

Her office hadn't been touched in over a month. A jumble of envelopes and junk mail was piled into a mail bin in front of her door. She placed the bin on the table across from her desk, when she noticed what was on the top of the pile. It was an invoice from the wedding photographer that she and Luke had

hired, given a deposit and never used. It hadn't dawned on her that last weekend was supposed to be her wedding day. She hadn't canceled the photographer. He billed her for the day anyway. She'd have to send that bill to Luke. Maybe she could get a frequent-bride discount for her real wedding, assuming it was still going to happen.

She hadn't confronted Luke about the photos Lunsford showed her of him kissing Kathryn. Since he hadn't voluntarily brought it up, she felt even more convinced that something had been going between them. Why else would he hide it? She'd have a chance to see them together herself soon enough. She could decide on her own what was going on.

Thoughts of her big day momentarily distracted her from the reason she came into StuTech today. She hoped coming into the office before 5 a.m. would have given her the chance to get her tasks completed before most employees came in. She wanted to get in and get out with as little interaction as possible. So far so good. The janitorial staff barely noticed her as she passed through the breezeway toward her office.

She fired up her computer and docked it at her desk after unplugging the thick network cable that looked like an over-sized telephone cord. It was getting a strong wireless signal. That was good. She needed her computer to be connected to mix the signals.

The sheer size of the StuTech campus meant that running to the cafeteria for coffee was at least a 10-minute walk. Each section of the building was built with a small kitchenette that included several microwaves and refrigerators, plus a commercial-size coffee maker and two large insulated coffee stands with pumps at the top. Each morning the first to arrive was required – by unwritten rule – to get the first pot going, then return exactly eight minutes later to start the second pot. It was an efficient and well-respected system.

Rachel dusted off her New York University alumni coffee mug from her desk drawer and walked to the kitchenette through the empty rows of

dark cubicles that belonged to the accounting and operations groups. She got the first coffee pot started and found a large bottle of powdered non-dairy creamer. She emptied the chalky substance into a trashcan, but held onto the bottle. Once the coffee was done she started a second pot and filled her NYU cup from first pot.

Brenda Mitchell was the executive assistant to the director of Mining Operations – not the hardest job in the world, but she made it more difficult by being an all-around terrible secretary. If her husband wasn't a VP, she'd have been canned a long time ago. She was missing a key trait for any successful executive assistant – knowing when to

keep your mouth shut. She was a gossip goddess, who knew a little about everyone and wasn't afraid to share it.

So it was no surprise after Brenda's boss, Albert Jackson had berated her for one infraction or another, that she just had to dish the dirt on him to anyone within earshot. He wore a toupee. He still lived with his mother. And he kept all of his program and network passwords on a piece of paper taped underneath his keyboard.

She hoped Brenda was a truthful gossip.

Rachel strode into Jackson's office, flipped the keyboard over. Sure enough, it was there. The critical flaw of any security system is that real people use it

and don't protect their passwords. She snapped a quick picture of the list of all of his passwords and usernames. Just as she was stepping around the desk to leave, she heard the floor squeak from outside the office. Before she had a chance to exit, a security guard blocked her way, shining a bright flashlight in her eyes.

“Come on now, get that light out of my face,” she insisted, immediately being the aggressor since she couldn't be caught snooping around another person's office.

“What business do you have in this area at this hour?” the guard asked.

“Coffee,” she said, handing him her ID card. He looked at the card, then back

at her.

“This isn’t the kitchen Ms. Evans,” he said, realizing who she was.

“No, but it’s the only place on our floor with a hidden stash of creamer packets to go with my coffee from the kitchen.”

She held up the empty bottle of creamer in one hand and her cup of coffee in the other. A rectangular packet of creamer was visible between her fingers.

“I think Albert steals packets when no one is looking,” she said, as if it were a criminal offense to hoard condiments. “It’s like he’s saving them for the apocalypse or something.”

She stepped around the guard, not

wanting to prolong the conversation anymore and then made a beeline for her office.

“I’ll look into that theft of the creamers for you, Ms. Evans,” the guard called out, but she was already gone.

Chapter 57

Portland, Oregon

The shipment from Moldova was shrink wrapped on four wooden palettes. Each palette held four layers of foil bags separated by fiberglass sheets. The bags looked like packages of coffee beans, except for the armed guards encircling a convoy of forklifts headed toward the Dev Floor. There were no identifying markings on the foil bags or stamped on the palettes. For all Luke knew it really could have been coffee beans in the bags, he'd never seen how the ARC material was assembled.

Every employee on the Dev Floor lined the rim of the sunken center

laboratory and watched as the line of palettes stopped at the stairs leading down to the lab.

Luke was starting to get a rash from the wristwatch. He gladly undid the strap and set it down by a stack of books. He was standing at Amir's desk, which had a perfect vantage point of the scene.

"It's like that stuff is royalty," Luke said.

"Worth its weight in gold," Amir said.

"Probably more than that. You said this stuff came from Malaysia?" Luke asked.

"Moldova. They found some supplier over there that claims this stuff will help ionize the copper rods in the tower and

receivers. Beckman said we paid a fortune for it.”

“So, is this it, or is there more?”

“That’s it for the first shipment. I guess this is a taste test. If it works out we’ll be getting a lot more of it.”

“Can we trust this supplier? Why wouldn’t they sell it to StuTech?

“Said they weren’t interested. They’ve got their process set in stone.”

“So what is it called?”

“A.F.K.A. or Afka, but don’t ask me what it stands for, Beckman keeps calling it double-A. That’s sort of stuck with everybody.”

“As long as it works, I guess it doesn’t really matter what it’s called,” Luke said.

“After the show Beckman put on today with the reporters, it better work, or he’s going to look like an idiot.”

Luke picked up his watch and with a grimace, placed it back on his wrist as he walked down to the rim of the lab to get a closer look at the bags of double-A.

Chapter 58

Seattle, Washington

Running into the security guard wasn't good. She'd have to move up her plan a bit. Thankfully he hadn't seen her do anything wrong and she wasn't accessing a secure area of campus. Even the files she needed to get into weren't in a secure database, but easily accessible if you had the right passwords, which now, she did.

Employees started to trickle in around 7:15 a.m. and by eight o'clock the building was full. After bearing through the obligatory, "Oh, it's been so long since I've seen you," and "How was

your vacation?" comments, she finally made her way to the atrium in the center of the complex and fired up her second-hand laptop and connected to the shared corporate Wi-Fi.

She entered Albert Jackson's login information and a list of his shared folders appeared in a tiered file structure. The same folders were accessible to everyone in the Mining Operations group, as they were required to utilize the information contained there for their job functions. She was surprised at the level of detail included in the schematics and documents, considering their contents and obvious security weaknesses regarding access.

Rachel easily found what she was

looking for. She saved the documents she wanted as PDF files and e-mailed them to an online account she set up for this exact purpose. Before logging off of the file structure she opened a web browser to the corporate intranet. The intranet was used for everything from timesheets to news alerts, but the most frequent use was to find other employees. Simply type in a name and the employee's picture, contact information and office location appeared on screen. You could also search by office location.

She typed in Moldova and no records came up. Being more specific, she entered Arionesti. Again the search came back empty. Offices in the Ukraine,

Germany and England all came up, so it wasn't that European countries were excluded. On a whim, she entered in the name of her chain-smoking driver Reynolds – she didn't know if that was a first name or a last name so she tried both. A grainy security badge image of Sebastian Reynolds appeared on the screen. The intranet page listed him as based out of Germany. His official title was Critical Infrastructure Procurement Engineer and he was categorized as working for a division of the company that she had never heard of - Seismic Integrity Operations.

She associated the word seismic with earthquakes, maybe that was why the ground shook so violently in Moldova.

Then she got another idea and clicked on Seismic Integrity Operations to display a list of active employees. The third name down on the list was Alan Grant, the American she met in South America who said he was studying earthquakes and fault lines for the Bolivian government. She clicked on his name. Sure enough, another security badge picture appeared on the screen, the smiling face of Alan Grant, wearing his blue Chicago Cubs hat, staring back at her.

A cold shiver ran up her spine. What was StuTech really up to?

Chapter 59

Portland, Oregon

With Beckman in the administration building giving media interviews, it was left to Kathryn to supervise the unloading of the double-A, which was perfectly fine by her. Each bag weighed just 16 ounces, but the techs were carrying it down into the lab like they were bricks of lead - very slowly and one at a time. When they came off the pallet, an RF-ID tag and a bar code were affixed to the sides of the bag then entered into a computer system. The bags were then placed into several air-tight storage containers and locked

inside the secure laboratory.

After 30 minutes, only half of the first palette had been emptied. Most of the employees had lost interest due to lack of action. Kathryn gave Luke a nod and he moved closer.

“Come on, we don’t have all year,” she said to the tech entering in the bar codes to the database. “I’ll take over.”

She wasn’t any faster. She entered the codes and then handed the bags to a tech who carried it down the steps, then handed it off to another man. She cleared off the second to last row of the palette. They were getting into a rhythm and now working at a more fluid pace. As the tech walked down the steps with the second to last bag, she left the bar code

scanner and picked up the last bag. Using the prongs of ring she wore on her right hand, she punctured the bag along the side seam, leaving only the bottom three inches of the bag intact. A slight dusting of the gray material wafted out of the bag. She brushed it off with the sleeve of her jacket.

When the tech returned, he did as he had for the previous trips. He picked up the bag and walked toward the stairs. Only this time the open seam of the bag gave way under the pressure from his hand, spilling its contents all over the tile floor and stairs. A huge cloud of dust exploded from where the bag hit the ground. Luke watched as the stunned tech tried to save the bag, but only

managed to fall to his knees covered in the ash-like substance.

“You moron!” Kathryn screamed. ”Do you know how much money you just cost this company? You know how valuable this substance is! Don’t you? Obviously not.”

“I’m sorry, I-. I don’t know what happened,” the man said. “I’ll clean it up.”

“No you won’t. You’re covered in that stuff. You can’t breathe that in. Move out of the way.”

Kathryn pushed past him and looked up at the employees who had rushed to see what she was yelling about. Luke was enjoying the show.

“You, Luke,” she pointed at him. “Get

on a Haz-Mat suit and clean this mess up. I don't want these idiots to touch it."

She continued to glare at the tech who was forced to sit in the mess and not move, under the watchful eye of every employee in the building. His red face only got brighter and brighter.

Luke had some trouble getting the suit on over his arm cast, but managed to squeeze it in. He used a vacuum with a micro fiber filter to suck up the material. After going over every inch of the stairs and floor, making a smooth circle around the man on the floor, he had nearly filled up the entire tank of the vacuum. When left to settle, the line on the side of the tank read 10 ounces.

He brought the sealed vacuum tank to

a secluded area of the laboratory, out of view from all but a handful of employees. He used a measuring cup to empty the contents of the tank into a Haz-Mat burn bag, which he placed in a second sealed bag and handed it over to a waiting tech, who locked it in a storage container. If the tech had emptied the contents, he'd have noticed that it weighed just over six ounces.

Luke removed the bulky Haz-Mat suit in the sterilization and contamination room. He cautiously removed the helmet with one hand and unzipped the jumpsuit, then stuffed them into a large bin for disposal. He took off his left glove and tossed it into the bin. He pulled his right glove halfway off, then

rubbed his fingers together until he was confident that they were as clean as they were going to get. His hand was gray with the dusty substance. He got his first look at it under the light. It sparkled with silver flecks.

He folded over the top of the glove, sealing in roughly four ounces of double-A, shipped directly from Moldova. He stuffed the glove in his pants pocket and washed off his hands before going back to help unload the rest of the shipment.

Chapter 60

Seattle, Washington

Rachel's back was to her office door, so when she heard the knock, she simply said, "Come in," without looking at who it was. When she turned around, she instantly regretted it.

"You're a sight for sore eyes," Steve Lunsford said, striding into the room and plopping down across from her desk. "Didn't know you were back in town."

He pulled a stick of gum out of the pocket of his ruffled jacket, popped it in his mouth and began chewing it with gusto. It had been nearly two weeks since they last spoke.

“I’m only in for today, I need to finish up a few loose ends and then I’ll be taking some time off. I need a little getaway.”

“Glad to hear it. I envy those who can take vacation time.”

His eyes were scanning the papers on her desk. Instinctively she scooped them up and placed them in a drawer, although there was nothing in them worth hiding.

“I got an interesting call from your former fiancé this morning. You must have worked your charms on him after his accident.”

Rachel had arranged for Luke to call Lunsford that morning but she played dumb.

“It’s not ‘former,’ it’s ‘fiancé.’ And I’m not sure what you mean.”

“I was a little worried that our boy had gone off the deep end. I told you that when we were in Moldova. I guess I misjudged him, which I’m sure you think I had. He said big things are happening down at MassEnergy and he wanted to assure me that he was still working hard on behalf of StuTech. I can only assume that someone gave him a little shove in our direction. My gut says it was you.”

“Not that it’s any of your business. We obviously had a few other issues to work out considering him and that woman. I told him that he needed to make sure the last few months have been worth it to us and in turn, to the

company.”

“That’s good. Very good. MassEnergy is trying to rush to market before the WES Act is law. Makes sense for them. They have got to pull out all the stops. You don’t think Luke’s trying to play both sides? I mean, you of all people stand to lose the most if MassEnergy becomes a real threat.”

“A woman knows,” she said. “He is with us.”

“That’s what I was hoping to hear. Your father will be pleased as well.”

“What do you mean that I have the most to lose?”

“As the sole heir to Warren Evan’s fortune you will have controlling interest in this company upon his death. Of

course you know this. And God willing, he lives many more years.”

Rachel didn't spend much time thinking about the vast fortune that awaited her after her father's death. She'd always had more money than she knew what to do with. Even today, if StuTech didn't make another cent, she would have enough cash on hand to live ten more lifetimes. Her father was worth as estimated \$7 billion, including his stake in the company.

“What I stand to lose is never getting my fiancé back and never having a normal life,” she said. “That means making sure that StuTech can withstand challenges from its rivals, even upstarts like MassEnergy. This isn't the best

arrangement at the moment, so I urged him to wrap it up down there and get home.”

“So, he’s reporting to you now?”

“As any good future-husband should. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got a lot of work ahead of me.”

She took a file out from her drawer and began reading to herself, essentially telling Lunsford that he was excused.

Lunsford went back to his office and called the only person he could talk to about what had just happened. After summarizing the conversation, his confidante detailed the events that occurred that morning in Portland.

“So they haven’t started working on the material yet?” Lunsford asked.

“No, it’s being analyzed first. It might take a few days.”

“You know the clock is ticking in D.C., we don’t have a few days. This needs to happen now,” he said.

“I’ll see what I can do to speed the process, but I can’t promise anything. These things take time. Unless you give me the green light to ramp up my efforts.”

“Hands off Luke Kincaid. It won’t do us any good to hurt him. There’s still something he’s hiding and I need to find out what it is. Just get the towers up and running. That’s your priority now. It has to happen. If the WES Act gets signed before we launch, then we’re screwed.”

“I know, but there’s another wrinkle.

Your boy got a hold of a sample of double-A. There was some sort of spill and he snapped up some of it. He got lucky.”

“So what? That just confirms what Rachel said. He’s back on the payroll with us. Let’s just see how it plays out. I expect to hear from him again tomorrow.”

“I’m not so sure about him. I don’t like it. I just don’t see the point in letting him run around here. Let me end him.”

“No, just get those towers up and running and let me worry about the kid. Trust me, he’ll be out of our hair soon enough.”

Chapter 61

Portland, Oregon

Luke and Rachel sat at a small circular table tucked into a corner of their motel room. They choked back bitter cups of motel-room coffee. The place offered free breakfast and a cardboard-like mattress for \$40 a night. Luke saw the place as a slight upgrade to his previous accommodations, although he'd been getting used to the Murphy bed. He wasn't comfortable at his apartment any longer. Any number of reasons would do. First on the list was Beckman. Luke managed to leave the campus with the sample in his glove and

avoid a one-on-one encounter with the man, but Luke had caught Beckman watching him several times. If he tried to get rid of Luke once, he'd probably do it again. No reason to take the chance. Better to keep a low profile.

Then there was StuTech. Who knew who was watching Rachel? Sure, he shouldn't be surprised that the company who hired him to steal secrets from its competition wouldn't be totally on the up and up. Rachel had come to the same conclusion.

"They have mines on four continents, but only claim to have one in Colorado," Rachel said. "One source for their precious material. I believe the humanitarian outposts are storefronts for

the mining operations. It explains why they would invest in locations that have no obvious market for goods. Claiming to have grand humanitarian goals is the perfect cover. Once they establish a strong presence in those areas, no one is going to argue when they go public with the mining operation. It's actually pretty ingenious. They are buying cooperation."

"But how can you be sure they are mining underground in those areas?" Luke asked. "You said yourself that you never saw any digging whatsoever."

"Follow the money," she said. "I kept copies of the books I saw in Bolivia, Sudan and Moldova. Each of them was flush with cash. The notations on the

ledgers said the money was for taxes, security, local access-“

“Which means bribes,” Luke added.

“Exactly. The amount of money being spent couldn’t have possibly been used for the medical clinics or office buildings. For the amount on the books, we could have built a first class hospital. Not a drafty medical tent.”

“What about Nevis?” Luke asked. “If StuTech knows about the other sites, why aren’t they mining there too?”

“Who says they aren’t? Deep World Oceans is a subsidiary company of Atlantis Oil. Atlantis recently had a shake-up in their top leadership, which has led some investors to believe that they are gearing up to fight a hostile

takeover or it already happened, just not publically.”

“So StuTech owns Atlantis,” Luke said.

“Possibly. Or maybe they’ve just taken a strong position with them. I haven’t had enough time to dig that far into it.”

“They aren’t publically mining the site, so maybe they are under orders to just keep others away,” Luke said. “I can’t believe your father wouldn’t tell you about the mines before sending you to each of those places.”

“I’m not one bit surprised. He needed to confirm that his operations were well hidden. Who better to tell him than the person he sent to give him a hands-on

report.”

“Did you ever give him your notes?”

“I did. I dropped them with the guard at the gate of his estate just so he’d know that I found out about his little game.”

“Do you think we should go public with this?”

“No, not yet. We need definitive scientific proof if we want people to believe this. Besides, StuTech is a publically held company that at the moment is providing electricity to more than half of the United States. If investor confidence in the company drops, then its stock value will plummet.”

“So what, serves them right.”

“It hurts the company, sure, but it will also threaten the lives of millions of

people. The elderly people on oxygen; people could freeze to death. Do you want that on your hands? And cities like Mill Creek will lose any chance of getting back on the grid. Crushing StuTech isn't the answer. It hurts too many people."

"But your father isn't going to just roll over."

"With the right evidence we can roll him. I can be very persuasive."

"All right, so we've got two of the three ARC samples we need, one from Nevis and one from Moldova," Luke said. "Are we set to get the last piece of the puzzle?"

"I downloaded the schematics of the StuTech operation in Colorado. It is set

up similar to the plant in Moldova, but on an even larger scale. The material comes up into the main warehouse over a seven-day period, when an armored truck company picks it up for transport to the refining plant three miles away. That's where we hit them."

"Armored truck?"

"Yes," Rachel said. "They pick up the raw extracted rock from the mine."

"So your plan is for an accountant and an engineer to hijack an armored truck full of guys with guns."

"It's a little more subtle than that."

"Too bad, because that sounded like a really great plan," Luke said.

Rachel ignored the sarcasm.

"We're missing one thing though," she

said. “We need a third to make this work. Do you think Kathryn will do it?”

Luke considered this for a moment.

“She put her neck on the line to allow me to get the sample at MassEnergy and she didn’t have to. And I couldn’t have gotten the material off the island if she weren’t there. I’m sure I can get her on our side, she’s scared to death of Beckman.”

“But do you trust her? That’s what matters.”

“I think she’s our best option,” Luke said.

“All right. There’s something else I need to know before we bring her in on this. You had to work very closely with Kathryn and you spent a lot of time

together. Be honest with me. Did anything ever happen between you two?"

"No. Nothing."

Rachel's heart sank. She could still see the image of Luke kissing Kathryn on the street. If he wasn't honest with her, then what else happened that she didn't know about?

"Wait. That's not completely true," Luke said. "She kissed me, once. It was right after I found out you left Seattle. The things your father said really tore me up inside. I was a mess and we'd both had too much to drink. But I didn't let it go any further than that. I immediately regretted it. That's not an excuse, but--"

"What do you mean, 'what my father

said?”” Rachel asked.

“He told me you left me,” Luke said. “He said you realized that people like us didn’t belong together and so you moved on. I wanted to contact you, but you were out of the country. Your condo was subleased. I thought you were gone.”

“And you believed him? After all these years of me telling you that my father is a snake, you take him at his word on something as important as that?”

Luke thought back to his surprise run in with Evans in the Seattle hotel room. Rachel leaving him wasn’t the biggest surprise to come out of that meeting. Luke always thought he was “marrying up” with Rachel, so when Evans simply

confirmed his insecurities, Luke believed him. At the same time, Evans was threatening to expose his involvement in Elliot Cosgrove's death. Looking back on it, he realized that Rachel would never have left him like that. She was not her father. Luke had been conned by a professional liar and he felt like an idiot for it.

"I'm not cut out for this double-life stuff," he said. "I didn't know what to believe. When I saw you in the hospital room after the car accident, I wanted to ask you about it, but I-."

"You had other priorities."

"No, I just, well, yes I ..."

"It's okay," she said. "I know what it's like to be led to believe something

that isn't true. Pretty much my whole life. You've got to promise me that from now on we're in this together," she said. "No matter what."

"No matter what."

"And you're going to have to make it up to me," she said.

"How?"

"I bet we can think of something."

She leaned in close to him, pressing her body next to his and she kissed him deeply.

Chapter 62

Los Angeles, California

To set Rachel's plan of action to work, they had to get out of town the next morning. Out of an abundance of caution, Luke and Rachel missed Kathryn at Portland International Airport by several hours. They purchased tickets to Los Angeles and used Rachel's corporate credit card to buy passage on a Mexican cruise leaving the California coast later that day, which fit with her comments about taking a little vacation. After landing in L.A., they dropped their bags off for the cruise, then slipped out of line before reaching the gangway.

Luke was afraid to use a credit card that could be tracked, so getting a rental car was out of the question. Rachel had prepared by making a large cash withdrawal from her bank in Seattle before they left town. They visited a used car lot and forked over \$3,500 cash for a used Ford Taurus that looked like it was in decent shape. It smelled like mildew, but it would have to do. Luke took the first shift as they headed up I-15 toward Las Vegas where Kathryn was waiting for them.

Luke didn't have to twist Kathryn's arm to get her to become the third member of their team. She was anxious to finally leave the campus again. She had made a convincing case to Beckman

that she needed a few days off, even at this critical time. Her mind just wasn't right, she was stressed and afraid she'd make a crucial mistake. The Tesla project meant too much to her to mess it up, she said. A couple days by the pool in Vegas with friends from college would do her a world of good. He seemed happy to be rid of her and told her to take her time. Kathryn said she had gotten the distinct feeling that she wasn't really wanted around MassEnergy anymore.

Rachel was on GPS duty during the long drive to Las Vegas, watching their course and keeping them on track. Luke thought it might keep her occupied for the trip.

“You don’t have to drive like a grandma,” she said. “It’s a highway after all, not a golf cart path.”

Luke checked his speed – 80 MPH, ten above the posted limit.

“Tell me more about Kathryn,” she said. “I want to know who we’re working with.”

“I’ve already told you everything,” he said.

Rachel continued to check the GPS and not so subtly glance at their speed, until Luke pulled into a rest area and they switched places. Rachel seemed more comfortable behind the wheel and had stopped asking for details about Kathryn.

They spent the drive going over and

over the plan to make sure they hadn't missed any detail. Since they only needed Kathryn for the initial phase, they were only going to let her in on the information she absolutely needed to know. Luke might trust her, but both of them agreed that it was better to compartmentalize the effort.

"You don't think this is too risky do you?" Luke asked when they were just outside of Las Vegas.

"You're going to have to be more specific," Rachel said. "Do you mean using Kathryn or breaking in to a secure facility? Or maybe it's because taking on one of the biggest companies in the world is a tad dangerous? No, it might be because someone tried to kill you last

week? Like I said, you need to be more specific.”

“A little bit of all of it,” Luke said.

“Is it risky?” Rachel asked, looking over her shoulder to change lanes and exit the freeway. “Yes, but if the president signs the WES Act into law without knowing the truth about StuTech and my father, then there is no chance their monopoly will ever be broken. Millions will continue to live in the dark like Mill Creek. If we don’t do this, no one ever will.”

That’s what he needed to hear.

Luke saw Kathryn waiting for them in the sweltering heat under the drive-up portico of an off-strip hotel. She pulled two suitcases behind her. One bag was

stuffed with Luke and Rachel's clothes – they had to abandon their luggage at the cruise ship. Rachel eyed her like a predator as they pulled up and he pointed her out. He noticed the stiffness that had come over Rachel's face. She clenched her jaw.

“Breathe, babe,” he said. “It'll be fine. Just relax.”

Luke noticed she let the tension fall out of her shoulders and took a deep breath. She had to be bigger than her emotions today, he thought. It wasn't going to be easy.

There was no arguing that Kathryn was a beautiful woman, Luke thought, but he quickly erased the thought from his mind. She looked tired and stressed.

She wore no make-up and her clothes seemed to hang loosely on her thin frame.

“It’s good to meet you,” Rachel said, extending her hand. “Luke has told me a lot about you.”

“I wish I could say the same thing,” Kathryn said.

Rachel’s face rang with recognition at the comment. Kathryn had only known Luke by his cover story at Millennium Optics and MassEnergy. According to the myth they had built, Luke had broken up with Rachel over a year before he ever met Kathryn. It wouldn’t have made a great deal of sense for him to jabber on about his old girlfriend, now would it? All at once, her anger toward Kathryn –

for kissing an engaged man – seemed to fade slightly.

“I guess we’re going to have to fill in the gaps, then aren’t we?” Rachel said.

Luke continued to drive as the two women sat in the backseat. Rachel wanted to get a feel for her and make the final evaluation before bringing her completely up to speed.

For the next two hours, the two women talked and Luke listened, bewildered at how well they got along and how much they had in common. They both were avid runners who were graduates of elite schools where they belonged to sororities. It was amazing to listen to. Their competitive spirits came out as they tried to one up each other

about their marathon and half marathon races. They didn't talk about their professional lives, as it was obvious that both of them knew what they needed.

Luke didn't say a word the whole way to St. George, Utah, where they decided to stop for the night. But the women didn't stop talking the entire time. If the rest of trip went this well, he thought, they were home free.

"Seemed like you two got along really well. That's great," Luke said, once he and Rachel were alone in their hotel room.

"Oh, my dear, dear Luke. You've got a lot to learn about women."

"What? You didn't stop talking the whole drive up here."

“True,” she said flatly. “Just go to sleep. We’ve got a long day ahead of us if we want to be in Colorado by tomorrow.”

“What did I miss? You two had tons in common.”

“Just go to sleep.”

Chapter 63

Portland, Oregon

“We’ve got a problem. The cruise ship manifest says Luke and Rachel never boarded in L.A.”

“What about their credit cards?” Lunsford asked.

“Nothing.”

“I give you one simple job to do and you already flubbed it. Why am I not surprised? Find them. Now.”

“They could be anywhere.”

“Get creative, that’s what I’m paying you for,” Lunsford said. “Or maybe I don’t need to pay you at all. What exactly have you done for me so far? Do

you know how much trouble your little bloodbath in Germany could have caused us? You killed seven university students. It was a damn massacre! I asked you to be subtle. That wasn't subtle."

"Reynolds and I got away with it, didn't we?"

"You're lucky Warren didn't make the connection to the murders at the archeological dig and his \$10 million donation that didn't exactly make it to the university account."

"Isn't it your job to keep him occupied with other things?" the man asked.

"I know what my job is. Your job is to find them or I'm coming after you

next.”

Lunsford didn't wait for a response and slammed down the phone.

It wasn't the first time that Lunsford had hung up on Amir Ghorbani. It seemed as though all of their conversations ended up with a dial tone and a veiled threat and from the older man to the younger, former Army intelligence officer. Amir wasn't about to let this opportunity pass by him. The money was too good and Luke Kincaid had made a fool of him once already. He didn't appreciate the feeling.

He'd already tracked Luke once, but was ordered to keep his hands off him. But now he had the benefit of knowing where they started from and access to

Luke's credit card transactions. He had the upper hand and he wasn't going to waste it. An electronic trail was simple to follow, but Luke wasn't making it easy this time. He hadn't used his credit cards in days. If he didn't have such disdain for the man he'd been forced to befriend months ago, he'd admire his efforts. His gut told him where he could find Luke and Rachel, but it was a long shot.

Amir was pleased that he was finally going to be able to end his charade at MassEnergy. Lunsford had promised Amir the chance to use his best traits if he came to work for him as an operative inside MassEnergy. Biding his time had not been easy. Dealing with these people

had nearly driven him to drink. Something he hadn't done in years. The endless meetings and whining about the tiniest details of pointless failed projects had pushed him over the edge. His unique skill set was meant for a dark alley and a foreboding enemy, not a suburban office building with fake flowers in the bathrooms.

It had been Amir's commanding officer who contacted Lunsford when Amir was dishonorably discharged from the Army. He'd served his time all across the globe, but got drunk one night too many and punched the wrong guy. The poor guy turned out to be some pansy from the French United Nation's delegation. He didn't stand a chance

against Amir.

His C.O. didn't want to see Amir's career as an excellent intelligence operative go to waste. He was unpredictable at times, but very effective at getting the information he needed. He'd never been good at the softer side of intelligence, which was what Lunsford had stressed. Keep an eye on the little things. Blend in to the background. Make friends. He felt like a caged animal, held back from unleashing himself against his prey. More than once over the past few months he wanted to drag Luke into a room with no windows and simply end him, but he knew that would do no one any good.

He had a family to think of now. When

he came home each night, he kissed his wife and daughter. He was off the booze for good too. The pay from MassEnergy was twice what he ever made in the Army. Couple that amount with his pay from StuTech and his family was taken care of. But he wanted back in the game. He'd been at a desk too long. It was finally time. His heart was racing.

He took a deep breath and opened the slider from his backyard deck and walked back inside the house to the dining room where his wife and daughter were sitting down to have dinner.

"I'm going to have to go out of town for a few days," he told his wife.

"Again? But Erin's soccer games start this weekend."

“I’m sorry, it’s an urgent matter that I have to attend to. I need to leave tonight.”

“Where do you have to go?”

“Las Vegas. I have to crash a party.”

Chapter 64

Pueblo Bluff, Colorado

Pueblo Bluff was StuTech's secure mining facility located just south of the Gunnison National Forest. The enormous building was built into the side of a mountain and didn't look imposing from the outside. Of course, most people never got to see even the outside of the building because of the electrified eight-foot high perimeter fence. Wildlife activists had actually taken the company to court because goats and deer had been killed touching the fence. Their lawsuits had been thus far unsuccessful, but they brought a great deal of attention to the

site and its dangerous security. People stayed away.

Rachel had been on a working visit to the site once before, but only in the office building. She had never been into the mining operations, which were deemed highly sensitive and off limits to nearly everyone. She hoped that her presence here today didn't raise any red flags. She was confident that Lunsford, who was no doubt tracking her movements, would discover her visit soon enough. She needed to get in and out quickly, hopefully giving Luke and Kathryn enough time to complete the job at hand.

Rachel drove up to the gatehouse and handed her ID to the guard who took it

back inside his little booth. Protocol dictated that the guard would check the list of visitors for the day on an electronic log sheet. If she was on the list then it was no problem. Of course, she wasn't on the list, neither were Luke and Kathryn, who were with her in the backseat.

“What's your business here today?” the guard asked.

Rachel looked at the man's badge hanging from this breast pocket. Duane.

“Duane, when you cross-referenced my name on that list did you happen to notice who I am?”

Duane had been staffing his post for four years. In that time no more than a dozen people who weren't on the list

had tried to gain access to the site. Animal rights groups, government inspectors, tourists or just the curious. He liked his job, it was easy and they let him keep the windows to his gatehouse open in the summer to enjoy the breeze.

“Yes, ma’am I did recognize your name, but you’re not on the roll today.”

“Of course I’m not on the roll today. If I announced my presence every time I went to one of our sites, a little colony of busy bees would scrub the place clean. They would polish the floor and neatly stack the papers on all the desks. They’d give me no reason at all to be here. Does that sound like a good way to inspect my father’s property?”

“Well no, I guess not, but you’re not

on the list.”

“Duane, do you remember that I was here a few months ago? I remember you. You didn’t look like a man whose life was ruled by a list. You can make your own decisions and actually use your judgment. Are your orders and protocols always right, Duane?”

“No, sometimes our systems are down and we have to call the main office to check the rolls.”

“Let me tell you what. I’ll give you a number to call. Warren Evans doesn’t typically take phone calls from his employees, but this time I think he’ll make an exception.”

She dialed a number, pressed speaker and stuck her hand out of the car window

to hand over the phone to the man. The display read, “Dad” and it was ringing.

After two rings, the hoarse voice of an elderly man answered.

“Hello?”

Duane grabbed the phone and hit the end button to disconnect the call.

“No reason to bother Mr. Evans.”

“Good. Now, I need two visitor badges for these two,” she motioned toward the backseat.

“And they are?”

“Independent auditors from Turnbridge, White and Hall.”

He made a few notations, handed over the badges and in less than 30 seconds, the gate was lifted and they were on their way. One hurdle down, a whole

bunch to go.

Luke stifled a smile. He was certain that back in Tucson, his friend Elvin Walker was cursing whoever had just hung up the phone on him.

Chapter 65

Las Vegas, Nevada

Amir approached the front desk in a pair of swim trunks and sandals. He was dripping wet from the pool and held two large salt-rimmed drinks with little umbrellas in them. His eyes were glossy and he made a point to bump into a bellhop. To anyone watching, he was a typical drunk vacationer who had been left in the sun a bit too long. He stumbled up to the desk. One of the drinks sloshed over the side, spilling onto the marble counter.

“I can’t find my room key,” his words were slurred and slow. “It might be at

the bottom of the pool.”

He paused, looking down at the counter, then slowly back up to the front desk clerk.

“You know when I was a kid I could have probably swam under there and got it, but today’s just not my day. Maybe she’s right. Maybe it is time for us to go our separate ways. What a way to spend an anniversary. What am I gonna tell the kids?”

“Sir what’s your room number? Or can you show me your ID,” the woman said.

“Room’s under Tate. Does it look like I got ID?”

“Certainly sir, but I need to confirm the room number before I can give you

another key.”

“She booked everything. Like always. She’s always taking control of everything I do. Not that I’m surprised, I always liked it when she’d take control in the bedroom. You know what I mean? You do, don’t you?”

Amir took a big, long gulp from his tropical drink and slammed it down on the counter.

“I just need to go back to the room,” he rolled up his pool towel and rested his head on it. The line was starting to back up at the counter and guests were starting to become irritated.

The front desk clerk saw that the only reservation for Tate was in room 2045.

“Sir did you have to take the elevator

to get to your room?”

He nodded yes, figuring that since the hotel only had four stories that he had a three out of four chance to be right.

“OK, sir, here’s your key, room 2045, but I’ll need you to come back down and bring me your ID. Otherwise I’ll deactivate the card in 10 minutes.”

Amir snapped up the card shoved it in his wet pocket. Over his shoulder he said, “I’ll be right back down with the ID. I think you saved my marriage.”

The bed in the hotel room had not been slept in, confirming what Amir originally thought. Las Vegas wasn’t a final destination. He didn’t know if Kathryn was with Luke and Rachel, but the odds were leaning that way. There

was a receipt on the desk for room service. Caesar salad. It was just a meal for one. He scanned the room, looking for anything out of place. It was obvious that Kathryn hadn't spent a great deal of time here. It was so easy to mess up the perfectly manicured nature of a hotel room. Everything in its place. Then he noticed that the cabinet for the television was slightly ajar.

He opened the cabinet. Inside was a television, a laminated list of channels, a wired video game remote control and a keyboard for accessing the internet. All standard stuff, but the keyboard was sitting on top of the game remote. Not in perfect alignment like the rest of the room.

He fired up the television and used the keyboard to access the Internet function and search its recent history. People were so sloppy about this stuff. Erasing a digital trail was so simple, but most people never took the time to bother with it. Kathryn should have.

He jotted down a few notes, changed his clothes then raced to the airport.

Chapter 66

Pueblo Bluff, Colorado

Rachel made a big stink about her arrival once she was inside the building, commanding the attention of everyone in the office. The dozen or so employees were all fixated on Rachel. She had a heated exchange with the site director just out of earshot in which the portly man looked exasperated and confused. After a few moments he turned to his workers who had gathered nearby.

“We’re being audited today,” he said. “It’s an impromptu inspection of our record keeping. I need you to drop whatever it is you were planning to do

today and go to Conference Rooms A and B. I want to you to give our visitors everything they ask for. You are also required to bring your laptops with you and disconnect all e-mail and instant message programs.”

He looked at Rachel to confirm that he'd covered everything. She held her hand up to the side of her head.

“Right, and you need to leave your cell phones at your desks. No outside calls.”

Once all the employees were safely put away in the conference rooms, Rachel provided them with dozens of small tasks and claim codes to keep them busy for the next few hours. She paced around the room, looking over

their shoulders and directing them to answer for one thing or another. Her intimate knowledge of the company's financial reporting systems was invaluable fodder for lengthy discussions. After about 25 minutes, no one noticed that the two serious looking auditors who had accompanied Rachel were no longer in the room.

A massive warehouse that went deep into the mountain covered the entrance to the mine. Luke had a general overview of the facility's layout thanks to Rachel's digging into the operations department's records database. But they had no intention of heading into the mine itself. There was no telling what sort of roadblocks they would find underground

and they certainly wouldn't be able to blend in. They just needed to access the loading dock. It was about 20 minutes before the armored truck would pick up the week's load of raw material.

Now wearing white coveralls and white visitor hardhats that had been stuffed neatly in their oversized briefcases, Luke and Kathryn strode confidently into the loading dock. A plastic State of Colorado identification badge dangled from each of their waistbands next to their official visitor badges. The IDs wouldn't pass thorough inspection, but Luke didn't plan on letting that happen.

The loading dock was a series of three stalls big enough for a tractor-

trailer to park. Each stall was connected to a double-rail that was affixed to the floor in two-foot steel increments. The raw material was brought up from the mine on the other side of the massive building and pushed along the rails for loading onto the transport vehicles.

Luke waved at the foreman who was sitting in an office overlooking the dock. The foreman got a curious look on his face and came out to greet them.

“This is a secure area, who are you?” he demanded.

“Colorado Office of Occupational Health and Safety,” Luke said. “We’re here to ensure that this operation is not cutting corners regarding employee safety. We’ve had some complaints.”

“Complaints from who?” the foreman demanded.

“Tsk, tsk, you know I can’t tell you that. Our office prides itself on the confidentiality of our whistleblowers. Just know that we’re going to fully inspect this claim right now.”

“This government oversight is BS, I run a good dock here. Can it wait for about a half hour, we’ve got a shipment going out and I can’t afford to delay that.”

“So it’s your belief that timeliness and productivity come before the safety and health of your workers?” Luke said, scribbling notes as he talked. “Okay. That’s certainly your call. What was your name again? I need it for the

inspection report.”

“Fitz Grimes. But hey, I’m not going to get in the way of your work, but I’ve got a job to do and I just don’t want to slow anything down. I’m sure you understand that.”

“Well, first on my list is that I need to see your federal OSHA poster. You know it’s mandatory that those posters be prominently displayed in an area that employees frequent. I don’t see them anywhere. This is not a good way to start out.”

“The posters are in the break room. Follow me.”

While Luke and a reluctant Fitz left the loading dock to visit the all-important safety posters, Kathryn stayed

behind to get a jumpstart on the rest of the inspection and lay the ground work for the only part of their plan they hadn't worked out yet. Now that they were minutes away from seeing a shipment of raw material, how exactly were they going to get any of it?

Kathryn scoured the dock trying to improvise a plan. It only took a few moments for her to come up with it. She smiled. Simple and effective, if it worked.

The loud alarm sounded as the roll-up door at the end of the loading dock opened up and a convoy of mining carts rolled into the space behind the loading dock stalls. The armored trucks had yet to arrive and so the remote controlled

machine, that looked like a riding lawn mower pushing the carts forward, shut down just inside the door.

There were three carts on the rails, each the size of a washing machine. They were metal with an open top. Piled high in each cart were dark gray rocks with tiny silver flecks, nearly identical to the ones they found in the Caribbean. This was the first time Kathryn had come face to face with the reality of what they found in the underwater ravine and what danger they were really in.

“You run a pretty tight ship here all right,” Luke told Fitz loudly from down the hallway, announcing their arrival back on the dock to Kathryn who was just about to reach in and grab a handful.

The armored truck buzzed the intercom to request access to enter. Fitz returned to his office to punch in the code that opened the door, but kept an eye on the carts. Kathryn quickly told Luke what to do. Her plan wasn't a sure thing. Not by a long shot, but what choice did they have? It was now or never.

As the carts began to move forward Kathryn moved to the transition point on the rails. Here, the foreman had to manually switch where rails would go, depending on which stall the truck was parked in. The truck was backed into the stall nearest the foreman's office. Fitz adjusted the alignment of the rails as Kathryn stepped to the appropriate point.

The first set of heavy metal wheels on the carts scraped along the track toward the transition point. Luke took this moment to chat up Fitz about the importance of proper overhead lighting. Neither of them was looking at the cart as it rolled on to the transition point.

Kathryn's gasp and collapse drew their attention. There, lying on the ground was Kathryn, covered in black oil from head to toe. A small pool of the stuff was dripping from her white coveralls. She was now motionless on the floor, eyes closed.

"What the hell?" Fitz said, stopping the cart by slamming his palm into a large button on the wall then frantically running around the other side to see what

happened.

Kathryn was now shaking her head and rubbing the back of it. She started to sit up, but collapsed back onto the floor dramatically.

“What sort of joke are you playing?” Luke said to the foreman, holding half a plastic bottle of lubricant in his hand. “This bottle of oil was jammed in the railings. You could have blinded her. Or me.”

“I don’t know how it got there. It was some sort of accident. We only use that for maintenance work.”

“I’m fine, really,” Kathryn said. “Just a little bump on the head. Nothing my embarrassment won’t cure.”

“Oh, no,” Luke said. “We’ve got to do

a report on this. Full investigation. This dock is a death trap. We're lucky to get out alive. This place needs to be shut down until we can access the real dangers here. Could take days."

"No, please you can't do that," Fitz pleaded. "I'll lose my job. This is just a misunderstanding. Nothing like this has ever happened before."

"I'm really OK. Just help me up," Kathryn said. "If I hadn't had on this hard hat I might have gotten a concussion."

"Thank goodness for that," Fitz said. "See she's OK. We don't need to report this."

"I really don't want to head back to HQ and tell them that I slipped on a pool

of oil, I'll be the laughing stock of the entire department," Kathryn said.

"But we're here and I've already started filling out our report," Luke said.

"We'll come back tomorrow and finish it," she said. "Let's just pretend this never happened."

"That sounds like a great idea," Fitz said.

"That means you can't breathe a word of this to anyone else," Luke said to Fitz. "You got that?"

"My lips are sealed."

Chapter 67

Rachel had just about exhausted her requests for financial data and the employees were starting to get a bit restless when Luke caught her attention from outside the conference room door. The strap of his briefcase was cutting into his shoulder. It was being weighed down by 10 pounds of rocks that he'd snagged while Fritz was tending to Kathryn. Rachel held up two fingers indicating that she would be along to follow them shortly.

The car was parked in front of the main building, but given Kathryn's

appearance they wanted to avoid a public exit. They headed down a side tunnel under the main building that ended next to an electrical substation that fed the building. Given the massive amounts of electricity that the mining operation used, it needed a hard-wired connection to the grid plus a back-up generator. Ironically it didn't use wireless electricity at all.

Once out of the tunnel, Luke could see a standard six-foot chain link fence surrounded the electrical substation on all sides. It was spread out over nearly an acre of land that was forested on two sides, but open to the parking lot and building. It blocked their path around the front of the building. Luke found out too

late that this wasn't an exit at all, but just a path into the substation.

Luke made the decision that they would have to go back where they came from, when he saw there was a set of toolboxes near a transformer bank inside the sub that must have been left by a worker doing maintenance of some sort. Luke tried the first gate. It was open. Hopefully the gate on the other side was also unlocked. They could slip through to meet Rachel at the car and no one would have to see the oil and grime on Kathryn's face and hair.

"Don't touch anything inside here," Luke said to Kathryn as they stepped inside. "The transformers and switches have live electricity running through

them. These subs aren't meant to have visitors."

"Let's just get through to the other side and get out of here," Kathryn said.

They quickly walked through the massive web of gray overhead wires, porcelain insulators and transformers the size of minivans to get to the other gate. As Luke reached for the other gate he saw movement in the tree line just outside the sub and stopped short.

The sun had pierced the overcast sky at just the right moment and the glint of a silver handgun shined into Luke's eyes. He couldn't help but look directly at its source. Emerging from the trees was Amir, pointing a pistol at him.

"Try the gate Luke," he said. "It's

open.”

“What’s with the gun?” he said, not sure which part Amir would play. Friend or foe? It didn’t take long to figure it out.

“I’ve been waiting to train my gun on you for the last four months. You couldn’t just do your job. You had to be the big hero, didn’t you? You know if you hadn’t drained my computer with that data sync watch, I wouldn’t have made this personal.”

“I needed to check out your story. Turns out Rachel was right, you’ve been working for StuTech all along.”

“Sure, StuTech. Let’s go with that.”

Luke and Kathryn didn’t move toward the gate, but were slowly backing up

through the substation and toward the confines of the building.

“Why are you doing this? Put the gun away,” Luke said. “We’re no threat to you.”

“But you are Luke, and not just to me. You were only supposed to report back what was happening at MassEnergy. Not help them take the next step in developing towers. You brought this on yourself. You gave away the Golden Goose.”

“Who do you work for?” Kathryn asked, trying to stall him.

“Today? I work for the highest bidder.”

Luke had already suspected that Amir wasn’t telling them the entire truth the

day he came to his apartment. Which is why he had used one of Lunsford's data watches to copy the recent activity on Amir's computer when the ARC shipment arrived at the Dev Floor. They knew Amir was talking with someone at StuTech, but not who it was. Seeing him here now, confirmed that his orders came from the top and that meant only one person – Warren Evans.

“Here's what I think happened,” Luke said. “You never worked for Beckman. That was all bull. StuTech gave the orders. You told the truth when you said you trailed us halfway across the world. But what I can't figure out is why they wanted you to do it.”

“That's why you're locked inside this

cage and I've got you in my sights," Amir said.

Amir stepped inside the gate and at the same time pulled back the slide of his weapon, preparing it to be fired. The gravel under his feet crunched as he moved toward them, but the electrical hum from the transformers drowned out the sound.

"Drop the bag," Amir said. "I assume you stole minerals from the mine. You really shouldn't take things that don't belong to you. Nevis and now here. Bad habit you've got. You know, you have no idea what you're up against. This thing is bigger than you could ever imagine. Now, drop the bag."

"Great plan," Kathryn said. "You're

going to shoot us right here? So during the next shift change when 50 miners walk back to their trucks to go home, they will see you blasting away at two unarmed people.”

Amir looked to both sides of him and realized that he was overly exposed. He hadn't intended to leave the tree line. He was planning to surprise them once they left the sub, not confront them in the open. He was on his own. He needed to move to cover before someone called security and he was trapped.

“Very astute, boss,” Amir said with a smirk. “Now, both of you turn around and slowly walk back the way you came. And for the last time – drop the bag.”

Luke's mind was reeling, searching

for a way to escape. He had no intention of getting back into that long tunnel with an armed man who had already said he wanted to kill him. Amir had obviously been given some sort of autonomy at StuTech, otherwise he wouldn't have been allowed past the mine's main gate.

Luke removed the bag from his shoulder, relieved to have the weight off. Quickly scanning the sub, he selected his spot and tossed the bag toward a row of high-voltage wires near him that connected to incoming power lines. The bag was within two feet of the live wires. Amir could easily grab it, but it might give them enough time to make a run for it. They continued to back up.

The gunshot smashed into the gravel

just inches in front of Luke's feet, causing him to stumble backward to the ground.

“You're not going to make killing you easy, are you?” Amir said with a sadistic smile, still pointing the gun at him. “Inside, now.”

He still had the gun pointed at them, when a semi-truck fired up a diesel engine around the corner of the building. The rumbling sound combined with the hum of the electricity from the substation equipment made it difficult to hear.

Out of the corner of his eye Luke saw Rachel emerge from the tree line. She must have been waiting for them out front and came looking for them when they didn't show up. He shook his head

no slightly, hoping that Rachel got the message to stay away. She saw him shake his head, Luke was sure of it, but she also saw the gun pointed at them. There was no way she missed hearing the gunshot either.

As Luke and Kathryn continued to retreat toward the tunnel, Amir kept his eyes and the gun pointed at them. He was just feet from the shoulder bag when Rachel took off at a full sprint at him from behind. The sound from the truck's engine covered the crunch of gravel beneath her feet as she rushed through the gate and halfway through the substation.

Amir never saw her coming. She slammed her shoulder into his back,

knocking him off balance. The gun fell to the ground. Instinctively, he reached out his arms to brace himself. Unfortunately for him, there was nothing to grab a hold of but two exposed transformer connections.

The sizzling sound was grotesque. His hands began to smoke as the 115 kilovolts of electricity used his body as the path of least resistance. The smell of burning hair and flesh filled the air. The powerful jolt of electricity rocked his body back and forth until a safety breaker on the opposite side of the sub gave an explosive pop, cutting off the flow of juice. Amir's lifeless body collapsed onto the wires.

Rachel had managed to stop her

forward momentum, but landed just inches away from Amir's body. She ran to Luke, horrified at what she'd just done. He embraced her.

"He was going to kill you both," she said. "I had to."

"You did the right thing," Kathryn said. "I know you're upset, but we have to go, now. We can talk it through later. Who knows how many more guys like him are after us."

"We can't just leave him here," Rachel said.

"That's exactly what we need to do," Luke said.

He grabbed the bag and the three of them ran to the parking lot. They got into the Taurus and after passing the security

gate with a friendly wave, they sped away from the compound at a breakneck pace.

“What do you think he meant when he said he was working for the highest bidder?” Luke asked when they were miles down the road.

“That he was on StuTech’s payroll,” Kathryn said.

“Sure, but he said ‘bidder’ as if someone else was vying for his services.”

“If it wasn’t StuTech, then who? He was already working for MassEnergy.”

Luke knew they were missing something, but couldn’t put his finger on it.

Chapter 68

Palo Alto, California

Two days later

Luke hadn't been back to the Stanford Campus in well over 10 years. The terracotta roofs and brick buildings were a pleasant reminder of his four years at the school. Four years where he rarely left campus for anything other than soccer games and odd jobs. The campus had undergone a few upgrades, including a new wing on a student activity center, but in general it was the same conservative, well-kept place he remembered.

He was counting on several other

things remaining the same as well, such as his access code to the Earth Sciences building, otherwise their collection of the rock samples was just a bag of paperweights. They had kept off the radar over the last two days, but had also monitored the media on their phones. No mention of a death at the Pueblo Bluff facility. StuTech was keeping things in house.

It was Friday night, but the campus was still hopping with activity as co-eds and their friends went out to celebrate the end of another arduous week of academic study. Luke and Rachel picked up some school-logo gear at the university bookstore in an attempt to blend in.

“Nobody’s going to believe I’m a college student,” Rachel said, admiring her cardinal red sweatshirt in the mirror. “I’m about 10 years too late.”

“If anyone asks, we’ll just say you’re a super senior on the six-year plan.” Luke said.

“Very funny.”

The road trip from California to Colorado and now back to California was an exhausting experience. They made it to the school in two days. The three of them traded shifts at the wheel, until they dropped Kathryn off at the Las Vegas airport. Kathryn would stick to her vacation and relaxation story and fly back to Portland that day.

Rachel was still shaken by Amir’s

death. Although it was she who alerted Luke to Amir's dishonesty back in Portland. His insistence on trying to pin Luke's car accident on Beckman was questionable, given his story about switching out the town car for two rental cars. Something was off, she was certain of it. Nonetheless, she never imagined that it would come down to her ending the man's life. The smell of burning flesh seemed to be trapped in her nostrils and burned into her hair. She couldn't shake it.

She was strong enough to realize that by ending one life, she'd saved two others and possibly her own at the same time. But she'd still had trouble sleeping the last two nights and it wasn't just

because they were in a car driving 75 to 80 miles an hour. Every time she closed her eyes she saw the body hunched over the bank of wires. She couldn't shake the smell.

"You saved my life," Luke said when they were finally alone on a deserted stretch of Nevada highway. "I can't thank you enough. He wasn't going to hesitate. He was going to kill us."

"I know," she said softly, staring off into the distance of desert night. "I'm just glad I came around the long way to the substation, otherwise we'd all be dead."

The time alone in the car was good for the couple. No matter what happened from this point on, they had no intention

of ever leaving each other again. Their partnership was so much stronger now than it ever was before. There was only one thing blocking their complete happiness – the mysterious rocks they were about to analyze. But so many questions remained.

If they could confirm StuTech was intentionally manipulating the market, would Rachel have the courage to stand up to her father and put an end to it? She'd been under his thumb her entire life. And at what lengths would he go to silence them? Would he send another man like Amir to kill them?

Luke was also concerned about the samples from Nevis. There was a strong chance that they were not connected to

the others. Even if Deep World Oceans was controlled by StuTech, they didn't know who was pulling the strings at either company. Now that MassEnergy knew of the Nevis site, who was to stop them from mining it? It was possible that Luke had in fact unwittingly provided MassEnergy the missing pieces it needed to build its wireless systems. Maybe it was for the best. But they couldn't answer any of these questions until Luke analyzed the samples.

Stanford had an Earth Element Particle Analyzer, locked away in the laboratory of the McDonald Building for Computational Earth and Environmental Sciences. It was nearly identical to the machine that the techs at MassEnergy

were using to reverse-engineer StuTech's tower and stubs. Now that he had samples from Nevis, Moldova and Colorado, he could analyze them and compare the results.

The McDonald Building was dark as they approached a side entrance. Luke didn't have a magnetic scan card to unlock the door, so he tried his old pass code – his sister's birthday. Nothing, just as he feared, they still cleaned out the personal access codes every semester.

“The outside access is controlled by different systems,” he told Rachel. “It's a redundancy built in so that someone breaking in would have to know more than one code, or get past more than one

set of locks. I suspect the inside codes haven't changed. They never did before. The professors are lazy and hate to remember new codes."

"But if we can't get in to find out, it really doesn't matter," she said.

"Have some faith."

Just off the cobblestone pathway to the entrance was a landscaped flowerbed with three dwarf trees and a rock lining. Luke dug a small hole in the rocks under the middle tree and pulled up a yellow plastic keychain. Hanging from the chain was a silver key fob.

"I can't believe it's still here," Luke said. "They only allowed so many access cards, so the lab assistants buried this key here so that we didn't have to

call into the lab and interrupt each other to get in.”

He waved the key fob over the access control plate and the door clicked. They were in.

Chapter 69

Luke kept the shades of the laboratory drawn through the night. Rachel finally got some fitful sleep in a reclining desk chair while he worked. He was on his second pot of coffee, but his night was rather productive considering how exhausted he was. The Earth Element Particle Analyzer was a hexagon with a cylindrical glass insert on the top. Luke placed each separate sample element in the insert, closed it with the side clips and lowered it down into the machine for analysis.

The time in the machine was

dependant on the weight and size of the item placed inside. The Nevis and Colorado samples were pure rock samples, but the Moldova sample was already refined down to a substance like ash. Each rock sample ran for just over two hours inside the machine. The Moldova sample took less than an hour. Once it was finished the machine spit out a glossy cash-register style list of elements.

It was morning before all three samples had been analyzed. Luke woke up Rachel to show her the results.

“They are identical,” he said. “There are minor variations that you would expect from being mined in different parts of the world and contamination

from transport, but these are the same fundamental elements.”

“So my father has been pulling the wool over the eyes of the entire world for his own greedy benefit,” she said.

“I’m afraid so, but there’s something else. After I ran the Colorado samples to form our baseline of material, I cross-referenced it with the specifications I downloaded from Amir’s computer. The MassEnergy techs provided him a list of the elements they found when they reverse-engineered the StuTech systems.”

“In English, please.”

“None of these samples contain all of the elements included in the towers. StuTech has been adding its own mixture

of elements.”

“Wouldn’t you expect that they had to combine several things to get the ‘secret sauce,’ as my father always called it?”

“Yes, but I did a mathematical analysis of the radio frequency that we could reasonably expect to come from the three samples. I then compared that to the signal strengths that I used to work on when I was designing residential systems for StuTech.”

“What did that show you?”

Luke didn’t have the chance to answer as they both turned at the sound of the laboratory door latching shut. Luke was once again facing down the barrel of a gun, this time held by Steve Lunsford. Another man, wearing a Chicago Cubs

hat, followed Lunsford into the room.

“Let me tell you what that means, my dear Rachel,” Lunsford said, walking the outer aisle of the laboratory, toward the Earth Element Particle Analyzer. “It means that your father has been gaming the system for years. Intentionally making a weak product to sell more towers. You see, if he’d cranked these puppies up to full capacity, he’d only be able to sell a few every hundred miles, but with his diminished product he has to sell dozens of them instead of just one. Crafty, isn’t it?”

Rachel ignored the comment and spoke directly to Alan Grant.

“You’ve come a long way from the mountains of Bolivia, Alan.”

“Gotta follow the money. You know how it is. Sorry about all this. We’re just going to be-”

“That’s enough,” Lunsford said. “If I want you to talk, I’ll tell you what to say.”

Luke wasn’t feeling any more comfortable with a gun pointed at him now than he did two days ago, but he spoke up anyway.

“Why did you send me into MassEnergy. What possible benefit did it have?”

“You haven’t figured it out by now? I didn’t pick you. Why would I? Her father did.”

“Did he tell you why he picked me?” Luke asked, knowing full well that

Lunsford could easily lie.

“He didn’t have to, you twit,” Lunsford spat. “Just look at that pretty little thing next to you. I wouldn’t want you as my son-in-law either. I have to give you two a little credit though. You just about messed up my whole operation too, you’re a sticky pair.”

“So you are the one who sent MassEnergy the refined minerals from Moldova,” Rachel said.

“In the flesh my dear. But you make it sound like charity work. Nothing is free. I got a nice little piece of the pie from MassEnergy for that windfall. If Warren wasn’t going to see the big picture, someone had to. He was right about one thing though, he just wanted you out of

her life,” he pointed the gun at Rachel. “Didn’t seem to work though, seeing as you’re here together. But we can take care of that right now.”

He cocked the slide and raised the gun, leveling it at Luke’s head. The muzzle of the gun had a long round extension attached to it that Luke recognized from the movies as a silencer. The precaution meant Lunsford could shoot the gun without the sound alerting people outside the building. He intended to use it.

“Steve, don’t,” Alan said in a firm voice from the other side of the lab. “No way, I didn’t agree to this. We’re supposed to get the samples and go. That’s it. That’s what you said.”

“I told you what happened to Amir. Poor guy got roasted – well done. Ok, it was probably the most effective way to contain that little bastard, but still – bold move from these two.”

“I didn’t sign up for this,” Alan said, raising his arms as if to surrender his involvement. “At least not the girl.”

“Having second thoughts after Luke survived your little car accident? Got a little crush on the sweet tart here, do you? Tough. These two have been a thorn in my side since the day I laid eyes on them. No more. I’m done playing second fiddle to a crazy old miser like Warren Evans and I can’t have these two ruining all of the work I’ve put in to this MassEnergy deal. I earned it.”

“Then I’m outta here,” Alan said. “I can’t be a part of this.”

“You already are,” Lunsford gave him a crooked grin. “You’re my fall guy, after all. You should never have tried to kill these two.”

Lunsford whipped the gun around and shot Alan twice.

Snap. Snap. The silenced bullets hit him in the chest. He fell backward against a steel sink before hitting the ground with a thud.

Turning back to Luke and Rachel, “Now we have a cozy little story to go along with your deaths. Three geeks in a lab killed each other off. Tidy. I like it.”

The tears streaked down Rachel’s face as she watched a second man die in

front of her in as many days.

“You’re a monster,” she said, standing up to face him.

“Whoa there, don’t come any closer,” he said.

She continued to walk toward him, ignoring the gun.

“You’ve always been a low tier employee at StuTech,” she said. Her voice was almost a whisper and Lunsford had to lean in to hear her. “My father told me that he only keeps you employed out of pity. It’s a wonder you’re still around, the way he treats you. Of course, your only recourse is theft and murder, so what kind of man are you?”

Lunsford nearly stumbled over a stool

as Rachel continued to advance on him, but kept on his feet. The slight distraction gave Luke enough time to reach into the front pocket of his hooded Stanford sweatshirt and pop off the cap to a sample vial from Moldova. He poured it into his hand, clamped his fist around it and put his hand back at his side.

He was now side by side with Rachel. He placed his other hand on her shoulder.

“I can’t let you do this,” he said, stepping in front of her and raising his hands above his head to surrender, knowing that Rachel wouldn’t have any of it. As she pushed her way past him, Lunsford took his eyes off of Luke and

looked back to Rachel, even though she was still behind Luke.

Luke threw his fist full of ash toward Lunsford's face, blasting him in the eyes. He immediately raised his hands to his face, trying to rub out the bits of chalky rock and dust.

Luke hit him full force in the chest and wrapped his arms around the man, taking him to the ground. The gun went flying through the air and landed on a counter, smashing glass beakers and cylinders before coming to a rest against a tiled wall.

Lunsford was blinded, but not defenseless. The older man was built like an ox and pushed Luke off of him with ease. He thrashed about wildly on

the floor, trying to make contact with his attacker, but Luke had already moved out of his reach. Lunsford was on his feet in no time. Rachel let out a small scream as Lunsford picked up a compact metal microscope and waved it around, trying to hit Luke. He followed the sound of her scream and started for her.

Trying to avoid the blunt object, Luke went to his knees and did what he'd been taught to do for years on the soccer field. He executed a clean slide tackle, tripping the man. Lunsford fell face first to the ground and into the blunt microscope he clutched in his hand. His head cracked into it and then the ground. He was out cold, but probably not for long.

Luke checked his pulse. He was still alive.

“Call 9-1-1 and go unlock the front door for them,” he said. Rachel raced to the phone.

Luke used the cord of the microscope to bind Lunsford’s hands and feet. It was only moments before Lunsford came to again.

“You little S.O.B.,” he said, unable to move on the floor. His eyes shot darts of hatred. “You think when the cops show up and find a dead guy and a man hogtied that they won’t think it was you who did it?”

“Steve, you’re not the greatest teacher, but I did learn something from you. Always cover your ass.”

Luke wiggled the mouse of a desktop computer sitting near the Earth Element Particle Analyzer. Four moving images appeared on the screen - four different camera angles from all four corners of the room.

“You just murdered a man on video and then tried to do the same to us. I don’t think there is a jury in the country that wouldn’t convict you.”

Chapter 70

It took 12 hours for the police to process the scene, review the videotape and release Luke and Rachel. They had both given thorough statements about what happened in the lab that day and the events that led up to it. They both conveniently left out the part about Amir being killed days before. But they knew they would have to likely revisit the incident again soon.

Since their stories matched, the police saw no reason to keep them locked up. The school had insisted on breaking and entering charges, so after they paid bail,

they were free to go.

“How did you know to turn on the cameras in the laboratory?” Rachel asked. “I thought we were trying to stay out of the spotlight. That sort of gave us away.”

“I wanted to make sure that I recorded my work, just in case we had to pack up in a hurry. Since you were snoozing I didn’t want to forget anything. I would have just erased the recording from the hard drive.”

“But now the recording and all of the rock samples are state’s evidence against Steve Lunsford.”

“True,” Luke pulled a thumb drive out of his pocket. “But I prepared for that too. We’ve got everything we need to

convince your father to make StuTech electrify all parts of the country, not just the ones that will make him the most money.”

“That’s perfect, but there’s one problem,” she said. “That recording is in the hands of the police. It’s evidence now and will be used in a public trial against Lunsford. He said my father was rigging the towers so they were less powerful. When that gets out, the company will be ruined. There’s no coming back from that. Nobody will trust StuTech again.”

“You think people do now? I don’t.”

“That’s not the point,” she said.

“Here’s the point. Lunsford was right. Just before he got to the lab I was about

to show you a mathematical model that proves the towers are intentionally under-producing. The police could release that recording anytime. Because of who your father is and because you were an attempted murder victim, it'll be a big publicity victory for them. They won't just sit on what they have. We need to get out in front of it, before they release it."

"So we have to save StuTech from possible ruin, to take it down on our own time?" she asked.

"Something like that, but I've got an idea that might give us both," Luke said.

Chapter 71

Mill Creek, California

There were dozens of regional and national media trucks lined up neatly in the parking lot of the high school. Reporters had descended on the tiny off-the-grid town hours earlier when a news release went out over the wire to every media outlet in the country that StuTech was going to make an announcement that would change the world. The reporters had interviewed any local resident they could find to try and get a jump on this potentially massive story, but the residents of Mill Creek were, as always, in the dark. In truth, they didn't know

anything.

The press office in Seattle denied that StuTech was making any such announcement, but the reporters came anyway, lured by the presence of Rachel Evans, who had recently escaped death from the hands of a senior executive at the company. The shooting at Stanford had led newscasts across the West Coast for days. The heir to the Evans fortune reportedly fended off two men with the assistance of her fiancé, Luke Kincaid. Little was known about Kincaid, only that he was once a star soccer player from Stanford.

The press pool had assembled in front of the boarded up store front of Creasman's Hardware on Main Street,

behind the bed of a rusty red pick-up truck. Rachel, dressed in a jet-black designer pantsuit with a blue blouse, used a wooden crate to step onto the tailgate of the truck. Luke, in jeans and a leather jacket, followed Rachel up, but stood behind her and slightly to the left. Standing in front of him was Tilly, in her yellow church dress. Her cough hadn't improved. She tried to hide it, but the medicine was having less and less effect on her. Luke could feel her wheezing as he placed his hand on her shoulder.

Gina and Kathryn stood on the sidewalk nearby next to Walter Perkins, Gina's weed distributor. It was Walter's truck parked in the middle of the street. It was near dusk and the camera flashes

lit up the corners of the street, casting long shadows. The blasts of light were an unfamiliar sight to the remaining few residents of the town who had also gathered to hear whatever news was to be announced.

Rachel waited for the red lights on all five of the news cameras to come on before beginning. She wanted to make sure nobody missed this.

“The town of Mill Creek has been off the grid for more than 11 years. As much of the country has become electrified through StuTech’s wireless technology, small towns like Mill Creek have been forgotten. The utility company that served Mill Creek went bankrupt when StuTech took over its more populated

service territory. Its customers quickly signed-up with StuTech and soon enjoyed less expensive and more efficient service from us. The original utility couldn't afford to serve just the tiny, out of way town of Mill Creek. So, like so many other towns across the country, it went dark.

“I'm not from this town, but I've met some of its residents,” she glanced back at Tilly and smiled. “They are good, decent people. They didn't ask to be forgotten, but they have been and they've suffered for it. Only about 175 people live in this town today, down from around 4,000 before they went dark. There have been 17 murders in this once-picturesque town in the past three

years alone. People fighting for survival. The mill closed, but not for lack of lumber. There is simply no electricity to turn it on. There is no electricity to do anything.

“Mill Creek shouldn’t suffer because StuTech succeeded, but it has. So today I’m announcing the end of all this. My company’s actions, that were intended to help society, have hurt too many. We need to fix it and we’re starting here on Main Street. StuTech is committing \$25 million to restoring this once proud town. It will start with free electricity to all current and former residents who wish to return. We will restore the buildings that burned to the ground when firefighters couldn’t get water pumped to

the scene. We will fix what we broke.

“The lessons we learn here will help us restore countless other towns that have been forced off the grid by our actions. StuTech is going to make this right. Across the entire country. I promise that.”

Luke and Tilly stepped up on either side of her and smiled. The camera flashes were blinding.

The news articles and photographs flooded the Internet and social media sites moments after Rachel ended her question-and-answer session with the media. “StuTech to Restore Rural America” said one outlet, another claimed, “Electricity Giant Looking Out for the Little Guy” and “Monopoly No

More.” The gushing stories generated priceless goodwill toward the company, even as it admitted to its past mistakes. It was brilliant and all Luke’s idea.

Sitting on the front porch of Gina’s home overlooking the town, Luke hoped that it would work. If just one comment from the company said it was a hoax then the plan would fail.

“And now we wait,” Gina said. “Let’s have dinner.”

As they got up to go inside the house, Luke pulled Rachel aside.

“There’s something you need to know about this place. About something I did here. I should have told you before, but I just couldn’t.”

“I know about Elliot Cosgrove,”

Rachel said. “Gina told me. She said you shouldn’t have to. Those were different times and you were protecting her from a rapist. You have nothing to explain to me. He deserved what he got.”

A look of relief came over Luke’s face. They embraced, but separated when the loud, thump, thump, thump of propeller blades overhead and the white and red blinking lights of a news helicopter came into view over the town. It kept flying up the curve of the valley and hovered over Gina’s house. Luke and Rachel walked out into the front yard to get a better look and saw it wasn’t a news helicopter.

The black and red StuTech logo was

emblazoned on the bottom of the chopper. It was her father.

“Well, that didn’t take long,” Rachel said.

Chapter 72

Warren Evans waited until the helicopter blades had stopped spinning completely and the dust had settled before stepping down onto the driveway. He leaned heavily on his cane as he moved toward the front porch of the house.

Rachel met him at the bottom of the steps.

“I think it’s about time for you and me to talk,” he said.

“Good, we’re about to make dinner,” Rachel said. “You’ve got until it’s ready to convince me I should listen.”

With that she turned and walked into the house.

“One more for dinner,” she said to Gina as she passed the group on the porch. The elder Evans slowly mounted the steps and shuffled into the house for the first meal he would share with his daughter in more than two years.

Gina and Tilly worked on a stew in the kitchen. Kathryn quietly excused herself out the back door. Luke had given her a job to complete before dinner was ready.

Luke, Rachel and Evans took seats in the living room. An uncomfortable silence filled the house as everyone waited for Evans to speak. When he did finally speak, his voice was a low,

throaty whisper that sounded every day of his 70 years.

“You caused quite a ruckus today with your announcement,” he said to Rachel. “I think it was a clever maneuver. There is no way I can backpedal from the commitments you’ve made for the company. We’d be vilified from Wall Street to Main Street.”

“That was the goal,” she said. “To force corrective action.”

“Then you’ve succeeded,” he said.

“So you’ll agree to allow the reconstruction of off-the-grid towns?”

“You’ve forced my hand,” he said. He wasn’t trying to hide the rage in his voice. “I’ll do what I can to save my company. My life’s work! Your stunt

could have taken it all from me.”

“You’ve misused your power,” Luke said. “It was time to make up for it.”

“I gave the world a gift,” Evans said. “If it wasn’t for me, half the country would be in the dark. Misused? No. I should be praised for what I did.”

“For leaving thousands of towns to rot – for people to die?”

“My invention helped far more people than it hurt,” Evans said. “Every revolution has some collateral damage.”

Those words hung in the air. Evans knew about the car accident that killed Luke’s parents. He had done an extensive background check on Luke when he and Rachel started dating. He also knew Luke had an ax to grind with

StuTech, which is why despite his skills and promise, Evans blocked Luke from the Advanced Analytics team at every turn. Luke was a variable that couldn't be controlled, which is why he had shipped him off to MassEnergy.

“My parents weren't collateral damage to Gina and me,” Luke said. “It could have been different. You didn't have to let these towns go dark. They didn't have to die.”

Evans cleared his throat and picked up a cup of hot tea that Tilly had placed on the table for him. He sniffed it, wrinkled his nose and quickly placed it back on the table.

“I wasn't driving that truck,” Evans said. “I can't predict the future either. I

didn't know back then that we'd force so many towns into a blackout. Hell, if not for Rachel's reports from the Moldova outpost, I wouldn't even know about the mine."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I asked you to visit all those outposts because I suspected there was more going on than I was being told," Evans said. "I wanted you to confirm we were just setting up to launch our products and nothing more."

"You can't possibly want us to believe that you didn't know each of those locations contained a rare earth element that you needed for wireless electricity," Rachel said.

"Yes, of course I did. That's why they

were located where they were, but my orders were not followed. I never authorized those sites to be mined for their minerals. We weren't ready. The first time I heard about Moldova's factory was when I read your report. That greedy bastard hid it."

"You mean Steve Lunsford," Rachel said.

"Yes, him and others."

"How could you not know?" Rachel asked. "You review the operational budget of every department in the company. You sign off on everything."

"But I've kept the security operations separate from the rest of the company's books. I paid it out of my private account. I trusted that Steve, my oldest

friend, was being truthful. He kept asking for more money – lots of money. I assumed it was to continue to secure the locations, not full-scale mining operations. I wanted the locations under wraps so we could develop them over time, maybe raise demand a bit first. Jack up the price.”

“What about Nevis? Why didn’t you build an outpost there?” Luke asked. “It was just like the other locations.”

“I found out about the ocean field much later on and kept it to myself. I bought Atlantis Oil to keep an eye on it. It was too exposed and too valuable to leave unattended.”

“So Lunsford didn’t know about it?” Rachel asked.

“Not until you showed up,” Evans said, glaring at Luke.

“And you didn’t know he was selling StuTech’s minerals to MassEnergy?”

“Of course not. Apparently he made a deal with a man named James Beckman. Steve provided MassEnergy the raw material in exchange for a stake in their company. Lot of good it did him.”

“Not knowing what he was up to was one thing, but how could you authorize Lunsford’s goon squad? You even forced me to spy on the competition,” Luke said.

“You needed to be watched. Still do. I told you to stay away from Rachel. You aren’t like us. Lunsford’s little spy academy was the right way to keep an

eye on you.”

“There is no ‘us’ here, *dad*,” Rachel said.

The word “dad” seemed to hit Evans like a dagger. She had never called him that.

“Well then, I think we’re done here.”

As he slowly got to his feet, there was a knock at the front door. The helicopter pilot stepped inside and turned his attention to Evans.

“Sir, we’ve got a slight problem,” the pilot said. “We’ve ruptured a fuel line. It looks like we’re going to be here for a few hours until we can fly in a replacement line and more fuel.”

Evans looked defeated. He sat back down on the sofa.

Only Luke noticed Kathryn emerging from the kitchen, wiping off her hands with a wet towel. Helicopter fuel can be so messy.

Chapter 73

With Evans forced to stay at the house for at least a little longer, Luke could finally get some answers. He explained how he'd created a mathematical model that showed StuTech's process was intentionally under-powering the wireless system, limiting its reach. Reconstruction wouldn't work unless the system could reach greater distances.

“Of course it's underpowered,” Evans said. “We could have turned up the maximum power input and output, extending the distance of the towers and stubs, but it would shorten their usable

life by more than half. We'd burn through a 20-year tower in five years. Stubs would have to be replaced every six months. It would make our internal costs skyrocket. Its not worth it."

"So then it was always possible to reach the off-the-grid areas, like right here in Mill Creek," Luke asked.

"Possible in the short term, but not practical."

"Even today?"

"Our system may be able to absorb the infrastructure costs to bring some of the off-the-grid towns back online, but what's the point? We'll never make a profit here."

"I can find a way to make the numbers work," Rachel said. "Trust me."

“Since you’re laying everything on the table,” Luke said to Evans. “Tell us about Blaine Kirkhorn. I know you met at Pueblo Bluff.”

Warren’s chin rose and he took a deep breath, as if he was trying to recall a memory from long ago. He picked up the cup of tea, this time taking a small sip, but curling his lips after doing so.

“I assumed you’d want to know about Blaine. I did meet him at the Pueblo Bluff archeological dig in the mid-1990s. He was working on the same plot of land as my team from Cornell. And to anticipate your next question, yes, he did introduce me to the rare earth element we use for wireless. But he wasn’t interested in commercializing it, which

was to his detriment in my opinion. He had the chance. I wouldn't have known it existed or how to find it if he hadn't willingly shown me that summer. He had the first crack at it, but wanted to study it and that was it. He was fascinated by its attributes and possibilities.”

“He never contacted you after you successfully commercialized the material to go wireless?” Rachel asked.

Luke couldn't tell if Evans expression showed guilt, remorse or maybe both. Evans told them how Kirkhorn had made an appointment with him after Loretta got hurt. He asked for money to do research on spinal injuries.

“I told him no.”

“Why?” Rachel asked.

“Because I did all the work on that material and I owned it,” Evans said. “It was mine. I wasn’t about to give it away. If the properties of that material were made public through medical journals or papers, we would lose our monopoly on wireless. It’s why we pushed the WES Act. Even if the material specifications were released somehow, we’d still have control of the market by owning the radio spectrum the wireless signals transmitted on.”

“You didn’t stop Kirkhorn’s work,” Luke said. “He did the medical research anyway, we just don’t have the results.”

“You don’t have the results, because I have them,” Evans said. “I had a team retrieve his papers and laptop after he

died.”

“So you wouldn’t help him when he was alive and then you stole his work when he died?” Rachel asked.

“That’s the cost of doing business. I don’t regret it. I was right to take it. Had it been left lying around you would have found it in his possessions, put a bow on it and gave it to some medical journal or pharmaceutical company. Where would that leave us? I was protecting my company.”

Rachel stared at her father in disbelief. His greed knew no bounds.

“I did review Kirkhorn’s work though,” Evans said. “It was genius.”

“I’d like to see the research,” Luke said. “We can put it to good use right

away.”

“Not a chance,” Evans said, shaking his head. “I’m not giving it up. Especially not to you. Oh, and how is Gina’s neighbor doing? Elliot, wasn’t that his name?”

Evans didn’t know Luke had come clean to Rachel about Elliot Cosgrove’s death. They’d already moved on.

“Elliot is fine, *dad*,” Rachel said, emphasizing the last word. “He moved out of town years ago. Everyone knows that.”

“But I thought that he-“

“There’s a lot you don’t know, *dad*. Like how to be a father for starters. And also how you’re about to hand me the keys to the kingdom.”

Epilogue

Tucson, Arizona

Six months later

Loretta Kirkhorn's good friend Elvin Walker wheeled her chair into the community room at Sunset Ridge. Luke was planning on visiting today and he was bringing a friend. She had a system in place for visitors now that she received guests three or four days a week. Reporters and medical researchers came from all over the world to pick her brain about her husband who became an instant celebrity after word of his paralysis research was released. She had very little to share

with her visitors about his work, but made sure they knew about the man himself, not just his research.

She wasn't entirely surprised when Luke told her months earlier the real reason her husband had divorced her so suddenly after her accident.

"He knew that the only way he could fix you was to dedicate all of his time to finding a cure. Something that would help you regain some movement or maybe even walk again," Luke had told her. "He never wanted to leave your side. The only way he could justify his actions was because of his research."

Her great regret, she told him, was that if Blaine would have just talked to her first, she could have told him that she

would rather they spend their final days together, paralyzed or not. Suffering alone was unbearable. She would have understood his desire to “fix” her. He was just that kind of man. That’s why she loved him so much even after all these years.

Loretta didn’t want Blaine’s last years to be a waste, so she had been quite pleased when Rachel and Kathryn had asked her to sign over documents authorizing MassEnergy to work on Blaine’s research. No legal paperwork had ever been filed on any refinement process of the raw vibrock material. They beat Warren Evans to the punch by filing a patent application first. Blaine’s work was now useless to Evans, who

regretfully gave up the boxes when Rachel showed up with a handcart to collect them.

Kathryn decided to return to MassEnergy to lead a research team, utilizing her years of experience in pharmaceuticals. James Beckman had fled the country when Steve Lunsford was arrested, fearing his involvement in their scheme to steal from StuTech would get him jailed too. With him out of the picture, Kathryn was given his old job as VP of Development. She was focusing on the company's new medical division and had already hired a familiar face.

Loretta and Elvin were anxious to hear how the new research was coming.

Luke met them in the community room, followed by another man with dark skin who Loretta didn't recognize.

"I've seen you on the news quite a bit lately," Loretta said to Luke. "You've become a very famous man in many small towns."

"We're trying to bring as many towns back online as fast as we can," Luke said. "I'm the project lead at StuTech and we're putting up four or five new towers everyday. It's a tremendous amount of work."

"Your boss must have you working night and day."

"She's not so bad," he said. "Being married to the CEO has its advantages."

Luke and Rachel had gotten married in

a tiny ceremony in Seattle just days after Warren Evans stepped down from management of StuTech and appointed Rachel to take over. He sited health concerns, but in reality he feared what Rachel would do to the company if he had remained at the top. She had demanded control, or she would dismantle the company bit by bit. It was easier to put her in charge than to fight her. At least then his legacy would live on, he told her.

“So what news do you have for us today,” Elvin asked Luke.

“As you know, all of Professor Kirkhorn’s work has been turned over to the medical research lab at MassEnergy, along with a hefty cash infusion to keep

them afloat,” he said. StuTech now owned a majority share of MassEnergy, courtesy of StuTech’s generous new CEO.

“It’s very early on,” Luke said, “but they seem to be making progress, now that StuTech has provided them an unlimited supply of the ARC rare earth element to work with.”

Loretta smiled, “I have no expectations about the work benefiting me, but I’m glad to hear its going well. There are many more people, younger people, who need help first.”

“MassEnergy has hired a new lead researcher who is experienced in the field,” Luke turned to the man on his left. “I’d like to introduce you to Dr. Estevan

Rigau.”

For the rest of the morning Luke and Estevan told Loretta stories about Blaine, helping her piece together parts of his life she never knew about. When it was time to leave, Estevan promised to keep Loretta current on the research.

Luke had to go too. If he hurried he could get to Mill Creek by morning. New breathing treatments and access to reliable power meant better medical care for Tilly. This year she might actually have enough breath to blow out the candles on her birthday cake. He wouldn't miss it for the world.

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