

**RESET**

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# RESET

**BRIAN ANDREWS**

 **THOMAS & MERCER**

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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Published by Thomas & Mercer, Seattle

[www.apub.com](http://www.apub.com)

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ISBN-13: 9781503954267

ISBN-10: 1503954269

Cover design by Mike Heath | Magnus Creative

Printed in the United States of America

*For John Cook, whose integrity, generosity, and kindness  
have touched lives and made the world a better place.*



# FOREWORD

Estimates vary, but most experts calculate that the human brain contains approximately 100 billion neurons. New research, using a high-resolution imaging technique called array tomography, has allowed neuroscientists to evaluate neuron density and connectivity at the synaptic level. The primary insight gained by this new finding is that the human brain is much more densely and broadly interconnected than previously thought—with each neuron linked to hundreds of other neurons. Consequently, the human brain contains an astounding number of synaptic connections—upward of a *quadrillion*.

Closer examination of these connection points has revealed that synapses themselves are more complex than simple junctions. We now know that synapses are designed to function like microprocessors, with a single synapse containing up to a thousand molecular-scale biological transistors. Taken all together, this means that a single human mind has more switches than all the interconnected computers and routers on Earth. With an organic memory capacity in the neighborhood of one hundred terabytes, and the equivalent processing power of one trillion bits per second, the human brain is the most formidable, self-aware computer in the known universe. It is adaptable, autonomous, and, unlike its machine analogs, unhackable.

Unhackable, that is, until now . . .





# AUTHOR NOTE

The events and characters in this novel are fiction, but the biological and technological methods of mind control described are real.

An acronym glossary is located at the back of the book in the event you get lost in alphabet soup. And for anyone who is curious and wants to take a closer look inside Silo 9 as you read, I've posted diagrams from an actual HGM-16F Atlas Missile Silo Operation Manual online at my website: [www.andrews-wilson.com](http://www.andrews-wilson.com).



# PROLOGUE

*November 1963  
Rockland State Hospital  
Orangeburg, New York*

Captain Will Barnes, USAF, woke up from the dream.

It was a terrible dream.

He went to rub his eyes but couldn't. He tried to sit up, but that was a nonstarter also. For some reason, his arms weren't working properly. This had happened to him once before. He'd fallen asleep on his side after having too much to drink, and both his arms had gone completely numb from lack of circulation. He sighed with exasperation and then proceeded to flop around like an inebriated sea lion until he was on his back. Only then did he realize he was lying on the floor.

*Gee-whiz, apparently I got so drunk, I actually fell out of bed.*

At least he didn't have a headache. He smiled a lazy, self-deprecating smile and opened his eyes. Staring at his bedroom ceiling, he blinked until the world slowly began to come into focus. Wait a minute; this wasn't his bedroom. This was some other room. He lifted his head and looked at the unfamiliar, dirty fabric-covered walls. He tried to push himself onto his elbows, but his arms were still not working.

*What the hell is going on?*

His arms felt like they were wrapped around his chest, bound in some sort of self-inflicted, interminable bear hug. He looked down. What was he wearing? Was that a straitjacket?

*Impossible.*

“Diane?” he called, his voice a hoarse whisper. He tried to swallow but couldn’t; his mouth was as dry as parchment. He tried again: “Diane, can you get me a glass of water, please?”

He looked around the bedroom for his wife. Wait, he’d already established this was not his bedroom. He tried to sit up, but the straitjacket—*yes, it really was a straitjacket*—prevented him from doing so. Cursing, he rolled onto his stomach. He turned his head to the side, pressed his cheek against the floor to get the leverage he needed to arch his ass into the air, and then worked himself into a kneeling position. From there, getting to his feet was manageable, even without the use of his arms. The head rush hit as soon as he was vertical, but it subsided relatively quickly.

The vertigo did not.

He stumbled to the door and peered through the tiny square glass window into the dimly lit corridor beyond. “Hey,” he shouted. “Is anybody out there?”

No response came. The only noise was the monotonous, unsympathetic buzz of the fluorescent light fixture overhead.

“Help!” he shouted. “Somebody help me. Somebody help me! Is anybody out there? Can anybody hear me?”

A woman shrieked.

“Diane? Diane, is that you? Do they have you too?” he called, but the woman’s shriek turned into a maniacal laugh, and then he knew that creature was not his wife. More people began to stir somewhere along the corridor. A cacophony of sounds erupted. Shouting and sobbing, banging and screaming . . .

Will suddenly and desperately wished that he could cover his ears.

The hall lights flipped on, and the ruckus instantly subsided. He heard the sound of a door slamming closed, or maybe open, and then footsteps. He craned his neck to try to see down the corridor. The footsteps were coming closer . . . multiple pairs now . . . hard soles clicking on linoleum tile. Someone stopped in front of his door, but instead of a face in his window, a flashlight beam greeted him.

“Back away from the door,” a voice said. When he didn’t move the voice repeated the command, baritone and angry. “I said back away from the door, patient.”

*Patient?*

Confused and blinded by the light, he took a step backward. The vertigo kicked in, and he tripped on his heel. Without his arms to break his fall, he hit the ground hard. The landing hurt, but not nearly as badly as it should have, and that’s when he realized that the floor was padded.

*Oh God, I’m in a padded cell.*

He looked up at the square window, and the flashlight beam found his face again. He squinted but refused to look away.

“What is your name?” the voice asked.

“What?” he said, confused.

“We don’t have time for games. Tell me your name.”

“Will Barnes. I—I’m an officer in the United States Air Force,” he stammered.

The beam stayed fixed on his face for another few antagonizing seconds and then clicked off.

“He’s awake,” he heard another voice say. “Call the Colonel.”

He waited for hours, and still they did not remove the straitjacket. They did not answer his questions. They left him alone, in his padded cell, until dawn’s rays illuminated the hallway outside his room. Sometime after sunrise, they moved him to another room, this one without padded walls but nearly as Spartan. They served him a breakfast of scrambled eggs, bacon, and a glass of milk, fed to him by a nurse

named Shirley as if he were an infant. When he asked for a cup of coffee, her eyebrows arched with surprise.

“Coffee?” she repeated.

“Yes, coffee,” he said, wondering why she considered this a strange request. “You do have coffee here, I assume.”

“Coffee is not permitted for patients,” she said in a thick Queens accent without an ounce of empathy.

“What kind of hospital is this?” he asked, screwing up his face at her.

“Rockland State Hospital, in Orangeburg,” she said.

“Rockland? I’m at the funny farm? I don’t understand.”

She shot him a look that said it all: *Normal fellas don’t wear strait-jackets and get locked up in padded cells. You’re at the funny farm, mister, and you’re here for a reason.*

He let her feed him the rest of his breakfast without making any further attempts at conversation. As he ate, the brain fog that had been plaguing him began to clear and his wits came back to him. The first priority, he decided, was to piece together the missing time between the last thing he remembered and waking up in the cell. He had no idea how much time he was missing, but to wind up in a place like this, with no recollection of how or why he’d come to be here, did not bode well. Had the stress of his job finally made him crack? He certainly didn’t remember falling to pieces. He didn’t remember having a psychotic breakdown, but maybe that’s how “going crazy” worked.

The door to the room opened, and in stepped two men in uniform and a powerfully built young orderly. Will popped to his feet and snapped to attention, save for his arms, of course, which were still bound in the straitjacket. Every minute he wore it, the sensation that his arms were being pulled out of his shoulder sockets seemed to intensify. He had to get out of this damn thing before he really did go nuts.

Will locked eyes with the taller of the officers. “Colonel Alexander,” he said with relief. “Thank God you’re here, sir. There must be some sort of mistake. You’ve got to get me out of here.”

Alexander was the Commanding Officer of the 556th Strategic Missile Squadron at Plattsburgh Air Force Base in upstate New York. Will respected him, and they’d always gotten along. But the Colonel glared at him with an expression Will had never seen from the man before: equal parts anger, disgust, and disbelief all rolled into one.

“Sit down, Captain,” the Colonel said, his voice hard and cold.

Will sat. His gaze ticked to the other man in uniform. Like Alexander, this officer wore silver eagles on his epaulets, except instead of Air Force blue, he was dressed in the Army’s Class-A, green service uniform. His name tag read “Schumaker,” and Will had never seen the man before in his life. Schumaker’s expression was hard but harbored none of the apparent disdain Will was feeling from Alexander.

“This is Colonel Schumaker,” Alexander began. “He works at ARPA, and he and I both have questions we need to ask you.”

Will had heard of ARPA, the Defense Department’s classified Advanced Research Project Agency, but he knew few details about the nascent skunkworks. ARPA’s charter was to ensure that the US military did not fall behind Russia in technological superiority. The Atlas F missile program was the crown jewel of the DOD’s strategic weapons portfolio, and the hundreds of millions of dollars being spent on its development and deployment meant ARPA was involved.

“Sir, before we get started, can you just answer me one question, please?” Will said, turning his head to look at his CO.

Alexander nodded, but it was a *conditional* nod.

“Why am I here, sir?”

The Colonel’s eyebrows knitted together. “You don’t know?”

“No, sir.”

Alexander looked at Schumaker, and the two seemed to share some silent understanding.

“What’s the last thing you remember?” Alexander asked.

“Standing watch. I’m MCCC at Silo 9,” he said, then to Schumaker added, “That’s the Dannemora site.”

“The MCCC is the Missile Combat Crew Commander, the ranking officer at the silo, and he holds one of two launch keys,” Alexander clarified for the ARPA man.

“Understood,” Schumaker said with a nod. “You’re on a twenty-four-hour alert, correct?”

“That’s right. Twenty-four hours on, seventy-two off. SM-65 utilizes a five-man crew. We turn over at 0600.”

“Tell me, Captain, what do you remember about your last alert?”

“The first eighteen hours were uneventful. No drills or scheduled practice exercises. The guys did preventative maintenance on the diesel-gensets and the refrigeration system. Lieutenant Bates was my Deputy MCCC. It was around 2300 hours, and we were working on paperwork in the launch control room when the lights started flickering. Then we get a liquid oxygen–tank low-pressure alarm—not a good thing, obviously. And then a second later we get a call from Staff Sergeant Lewis in the silo. Lewis was the MFT on duty.” Will paused, turned to Schumaker, and said, “Missile Facilities Technician. He’s in charge of the missile elevator, propellant tanks, refrigeration, hydraulics, ventilation system, and the like. Anyway, the LOX tank is on level eight, very bottom of the silo. I tell Bates to stay in the launch control room, and I’ll go check out the problem with Lewis. I take the utility tunnel over to the silo. The general alarm is wailing, and there’s white steam everywhere from the LOX boiling off. I work my way down the stairs and ladders as fast as I can to level eight, where I find Lewis in a panic trying to figure out what’s broken. After a little investigation, we determine that a relief valve is stuck open on the LOX tank. I order Lewis to shut the valve, which immediately stops the bleed-off. Once that’s done, I direct him to repressurize the LOX tank from the O<sub>2</sub>-topping tank, clearing the alarm. Problem solved, Lewis spent the rest of the



alert replacing the faulty relief valve. By shift turnover, the system was restored and good as new. The details are all recorded in the logs.”

Colonel Alexander stared at him with eyes as cold and dead as a corpse’s. “*That’s* what you remember?”

Will nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“I find it strange that you failed to mention the *anomaly* you and Sergeant Lewis discovered in the silo. What can you tell me about that?”

“*Anomaly?* You mean the faulty relief valve?”

Alexander looked at Schumaker. The Army Colonel frowned. “Do you recall anything after the events in the silo?”

*Events in the silo? It was just a stuck-open relief valve, guys. We fixed it.*

He couldn’t understand why they were making such a big deal over this. He tried to rub his chin but couldn’t because of the straitjacket. “I briefed the oncoming MCCC about the repair, we conducted the 0600 turnover, and I left.”

“And after you left the facility, what did you do next?”

“I went home. The house was still dark. My wife, Diane, was asleep in bed. Sometimes she’s up when I get home; sometimes she’s not. I kissed her on the forehead, and then I . . . I made breakfast for us. Eggs and toast, I think.”

“And after that?” the Colonel asked, leaning in.

“After that I . . . uh, I really can’t . . . um, it gets foggy after that,” Will said. He squirmed in his seat, wriggling his arms under the sleeves. “Can somebody get me out of this damn thing?” he growled.

Alexander and Schumaker shared another glance. Then Alexander said, “Captain Barnes, I’d like to share a different account of what happened that night, based on sworn testimony from eyewitnesses and video footage recovered from the LCC closed-circuit security camera system.”

Will’s stomach went sour. It wasn’t what Alexander had said; it was the *way* he’d said it—with the hard, dispassionate certainty of a judge delivering a sentence to a criminal. Will had no idea what sort of bad

news was coming, but he knew the next words out of the Colonel's mouth would change his life forever.

He listened, without interruption, as Colonel Alexander launched into a very different telling of the night's events. In Alexander's version, Will and Sergeant Lewis went rogue and orchestrated a scheme to defeat the layers of redundant safeguards—both procedural and engineered—to take control of the launch complex and fire the Atlas ICBM.

In Alexander's tale, Will murdered his fellow crew members.

In Alexander's tale, Will tried to start World War III.

When the Colonel finished, Will's heart was pounding like a bass drum. Despite being seated, a wave of vertigo washed over him, and he almost fell out of his chair. None of this made any sense. He had no memory of doing any of those things. He would never shoot a crew member. He would never try to launch a missile without the order from Command Ops. If it were true, then why not show him the video? Why not show him proof? Because Alexander was telling lies—bold and terrible lies. That was the only logical explanation for any of this. Alexander was framing him as the fall guy for some readiness incident that must have occurred at Silo 9. Maybe an accident had damaged the silo or the missile. That's why Schumaker was here; Alexander had brought in an outsider to validate his cover-up and make it official.

“Is any of what I said ringing a bell for you, Captain?” Alexander asked, a smug look on his face.

*I have to keep my composure, Will told himself. If I can keep my composure and just get out of this damn place, then I can hire a lawyer and deal with whatever bullshit charges they've decided to trump up against me.*

“No, sir, I'm afraid it isn't. I don't recall any of the events you described, and to be frank, sir, I would never do any of the things that you said. I don't know what's going on here, but there must be a mistake. A terrible mistake. Somehow, I'm being confused with someone else.”

Alexander sighed. “Barnes, you were my number-one junior officer. I’d already prepped the paperwork recommending you to screen early for O-4. If I hadn’t seen the video footage of you with my own two eyes, I would have never believed it possible.”

*I need my own witness. I need an alibi,* Will realized, his mind racing a hundred miles an hour now.

“Talk to my wife. I’m sure she can clear this up,” Will said. “She can vouch for my behavior and my whereabouts—” The grimace on Alexander’s face stopped him. His stomach knotted. “What’s that look for? Did something happen to my wife? Did something happen to Diane?”

“Your wife is dead,” Alexander said, holding eye contact. “When the MPs came to your house to arrest you, they found Diane murdered in your bed. You strangled her, Will. Strangled her in her sleep.”

A bomb went off in Will’s brain, scrambling his thoughts and igniting a fire-jet of raw emotion in his chest. *Dead? Diane is dead . . . murdered by my hand. Impossible.* His vision blurred, and the sobs came in lurching torrents. “No, no, this can’t be happening. Please tell me this isn’t happening. Please tell me this is some sort of twisted joke.”

Alexander shook his head. “I wish I could, son. I really do, but something in you snapped that night. This is the first moment of lucidity you’ve had in three weeks.”

“Three weeks?” he said with a cough. “I’ve been in here for three weeks?”

The Colonel nodded. “I’m afraid so, and we’ve been waiting desperately for you to snap out of this fugue you’ve been in since you were arrested.”

Whatever sick, twisted game they were playing, it needed to stop and stop right goddamn now. He wanted his life back. He wanted it back right now.

“Captain,” Schumaker said, his expression calm and mollifying, “I know this is difficult, but I need to ask you some technical questions,

all right? How did you know how to defeat the launch enable–system safeguards? How did you disable the primary signal from Command Ops and the backup signal from A-OPS?”

Will ignored the questions. He didn’t give a shit about this asshole from ARPA.

“Captain . . . Captain, over here,” Schumaker said, waving a hand. “You and Sergeant Lewis changed the missile–flight trajectory by tinkering with the rate gyroscopes. Who taught you how to do that? What was the new target you selected? Look at me, Captain Barnes—what target did you select for the missile?”

Will was on his feet now, pacing like a caged lion. His face felt hot, and a buzzing sound was drowning out Schumaker’s voice. Then another voice—a voice both strange and familiar—said:

*You don’t have to talk to them. You don’t have to tell them anything. They’re insignificant. They’re fools . . .*

In his peripheral vision, Will registered that both Alexander and Schumaker were on their feet now, backing away from the table. No, backing away from *him*. The orderly had stepped in front of the two officers and was holding a wooden baton at the ready.

“What’s he saying?” one of them asked.

“It’s all gibberish. This is what he’s been doing since the day we brought him in,” someone else said.

“All right, we’re done here.”

*No, please don’t go. Please don’t leave me here!* Will begged, but something was wrong. The words weren’t coming out. It was as if they were trapped in the vacuum of his mind.

The door to the room opened, and he watched his one and only chance at freedom walk out of the room. Colonel Alexander paused at the threshold, just long enough to give him one final pitying backward glance.

Will screamed, but he couldn’t tell if it was a real scream or something he only imagined.

Reset

*They can't hear you. I'm in control now,* the voice said.

*No, don't lock me in again,* Will begged, suddenly remembering who and what he was dealing with. *Please don't send me back to that place.*

*Then you have to promise to behave, or back to purgatory you go.*

*I promise I won't interfere. I'll just watch. I can do better this time. I promise,* Will said.

*Oh, I know you can. Stick with me, Willie boy, and I'll get us both out of here. Time's a wasting, and we've got a job to do . . .*



# DAY ONE

Did Noah wait to start building the ark until after it started raining?

No, no, he did not.

—*Willie Barnes*





# CHAPTER 1

*The Present*

*1658 Local Time*

*The Tora Bora Mountains*

*Afghanistan*

The bullet clipped his left ear.

Staff Sergeant Michael Pitcher dropped, spun around, and pressed his back firmly into the rock he'd been sheltering behind.

"Your ear's bleeding," said Corporal Jeremy Wayne, a.k.a. Bug, flashing Pitcher a toothy, tobacco-stained grin from behind his own rock two yards away.

Pitcher reached up and felt the shredded cartilage. His fingers came away wet and bloody. "No shit, Sherlock. Does everybody from Tennessee have your powers of deductive observation, or are you just special?"

A barrage of 7.62 x 39 mm bullets pounded the other side of Pitcher's rock as the Taliban terrorists they had been hunting strafed his position with a prolonged burst.

"I'm special," Bug said. "My mamma dropped me on my head, so she makes a point of telling me that every chance she gets."

The ear was beginning to burn. Pitcher could feel blood running down the side of his neck now. He turned his head, angling it enough that Wayne could get a look. “How bad?”

Bug gave a little shrug. “I always thought that ear stuck out farther than the other one. If you ask me, it’s an improvement. At least now you got a book-matched set.”

“You’re a real dick, you know that, Wayne?” Pitcher laughed, despite himself, despite the ear, and despite the shitty situation.

Bug acknowledged the compliment by barking, “Hooah, Staff Sergeant.”

Rock chips and dust rained down as another volley of rounds pounded Pitcher’s rock shield. “You know what I think? I think it’s time we blow this sonuvabitch up,” he shouted over the staccato cracks of the enemy’s AK-47. He pulled a grenade from his kit.

“I thought they wanted us to take this dude alive.”

“We tried it their way. Didn’t work.”

Bug spit a brown glob of tobacco juice onto the dirt beside him. He brought his M4 up and shifted into a squat. “Ready.”

Pitcher nodded and with his left hand counted down: *Three, two, one.*

Bug popped up and went to work with his M4, sending a storm of bullets in the enemy’s direction. A beat later, Pitcher was up. He pulled the pin, sighted his target, and threw the grenade. It was a picture-perfect toss—a twenty-yard lob landing on the backside of an outcropping of boulders where Zabiullah Momar Haliqani had taken position.

“Helluva throw,” Bug called as both men dropped back behind their rocks.

As if in reply, the grenade exploded, the detonation echoing through the mountain pass all around them. They waited for return fire, but none came. All was still and quiet, but as a rule Pitcher didn’t trust quiet. Now came the shitty part—checking to see if the grenade had worked. He looked over at Bug.

“You ready to do this?”

“Pincer?” Bug asked, gesturing two converging arcs with his hands.

Pitcher nodded. “I go high; you go low.”

“Check.”

Pitcher turned to face the two soldiers on his other side and fixed his gaze on Corporal Connard, who was clutching an M249 SAW.

“Ready?”

“Fuckin’-A I am,” Connard said, all spit and vinegar.

“Anything goes wrong, anything at all, I want you to hunt those Taliban assholes down and cut ’em to pieces. Understood?”

“Roger that, Sarge,” Connard said; then he and Specialist Garland to his left both moved into cover positions. Pitcher looked back at Bug and chopped a hand forward. The two elite soldiers—from the Army’s Tenth Mountain Division out of Fort Drum, New York—crept out from behind their respective rocks and began the treacherous advance on the outcropping of boulders where their quarry was hiding. Zabiullah Momar Haliqani had blown up five Americans, and it was their job to either capture or kill the terrorist bastard before he disappeared into the mountain catacombs the Taliban currently occupied.

Pitcher and Bug left the safety of the rocks behind and moved slowly but deliberately in a tactical crouch over the uneven terrain. Behind the cluster of boulders now fifteen yards away, Haliqani and two of his lieutenants were waiting. Odds were good that at least one or two of the Taliban terrorists were still alive—alive and waiting with AK-47s or their own grenades for the stupid Americans walking into a suicide trap.

Pitcher glanced to his right at Bug, who was maybe a yard ahead of him.

Bug caught the look and nodded once in understanding.

The two soldiers began to arc away from each other, Pitcher climbing up the mountain and Bug looping down. They would come at the enemy from opposite directions, above and below, creating a cross fire.

Connard would use his SAW to keep the Taliban pinned down during the advance, which so far—*knock on wood*—had gone smoothly. *Too smoothly*, Pitcher thought. No shots fired. No slips, no falls, no tumbling rocks giving away their positions. He kept his eyes and feet moving and working hard: scanning the target, checking the ground, placing a foot, scanning the target, checking the ground, placing a foot.

He was a tactical fucking mountain man today.

*Climb to glory and hooah and all that shit!*

As he reached the zenith of his approach, only three yards from the snowman-shaped boulder he'd selected to shelter behind for the final engagement, adrenaline coursed through his veins like liquid lightning. His entire body felt turbo-charged. His senses were crisp; his muscles were—

Connard's SAW roared to life behind him, sending a maelstrom of 5.56 x 45 mm NATO rounds into the rocks below. Pitcher's legs churned, and he closed the distance to the snowman boulder in a snap. He dug in behind the rock, squatting, his back to the enemy and pressed against cold, hard stone. He heard the crack of the enemy's AK-47 lighting up below him, but the strafe wasn't aimed at his position. Then he heard a burst from an M4 below and knew whom they were shooting at.

*Bug.*

Another strafe, this time from the SAW.

Pitcher capitalized on the cover fire. Bringing his weapon up, he popped his head around the side of his boulder for a look down the mountain. Two figures. One lying supine and motionless. The other crouching, aiming an AK-47 down the mountain. Pitcher sighted in, exhaled, and let a round fly. The bullet caught the Taliban fighter dead center mass, and the man pitched forward.

Pitcher watched Bug pop his head out from behind a rock twenty yards below. They locked eyes and shared the same wordless thought: *Where's the third dude?* Pitcher scanned east; he knew exactly what had gone down here. He'd seen it before. Haliqani had commanded his

underlings to stay behind and martyr themselves while he made a run for it.

*Coward.*

He gestured for Bug to check the two downed Taliban fighters while he stalked east after Haliqani. From the expression on the other man's face, he could tell Bug didn't like that idea, but Pitcher was the boss. He got to his feet and began advancing east, sighting over his M4 and scanning every rock big enough a man could shelter behind. Haliqani couldn't have gone far—and Pitcher had the upper hand. He had backup, superior firepower, and . . .

He took a knee and dipped his gloved finger in a red-black, wet splotch on a rock.

And he wasn't injured.

He tracked Haliqani, following the blood trail over the rocky terrain for at least a quarter mile until he spied a low crack in the side of the mountain.

“Oh fuck,” Pitcher grumbled. “You've gotta be kidding me.”

Weapon up, Pitcher advanced on the crevice. From the outside, the almond-shaped tunnel entrance reminded him of a cat's eye, winking back at him. A deep, throaty Afghani voice taunted him in his mind: *You want me, Michael Pitcher? Then come and get me. The mountain is my domain, ally to my people for thousands of years. Follow me, if you dare, to your death.*

Pitcher took a knee beside the mouth of the cave so he could peer inside; there was no telling how deep it went. Was this cave an entrance to the fabled Tora Bora tunnel complex—the same infamous cave network that Osama bin Laden had once utilized in the early days of the War on Terror—or was it simply a crevice of opportunity? In either case, Pitcher knew he was walking into a trap. All Haliqani had to do was hide in the darkness ten yards inside the mouth of the cave, and he could pick off Pitcher with ease.

He rubbed his chin, and then it occurred to him that all he had to do to counter that strategy was toss a grenade into the crevice and blow the bastard up. And without hesitation or further self-debate, that's exactly what he did. The mountain barked a plume of dust, and smoke bellowed from the low crack. Twenty yards away, he saw Corporal Wayne running toward him, anxiety and concern ripe on the other man's face. So this time he waited, reclining against the mountain beside the crevice until Bug arrived.

"You're not going to actually go in there?" Bug said, breathing heavily.

"Confirm capture/kill," Pitcher said, setting his M4 down and fishing out his SureFire EB2 tactical LED flashlight. "Those were our orders." He took a knee, and Bug stepped up behind him, sighting into the cave with his M4 over Pitcher's shoulder.

"Ready."

Pitcher clicked on the power button, and a six hundred-lumen beam of white light cut the tunnel's darkness like a laser. He swept the light through the space, tracing a rectangle in the air.

"Clear."

Pitcher clicked off the light.

"How deep you figure she is?" Bug asked.

"Dunno . . . but deep," Pitcher answered. He couldn't put his finger on it, but something about this crevice didn't feel right.

"Sure you want to go in there?"

"Yeah," Pitcher said, taking off his Kevlar helmet. His neck muscles instantly rejoiced at the respite from the weight.

"That's one helluva tight fit," Bug said. "Why don't you let me go? My ass is skinnier than yours."

It was true. At five foot seven inches and 143 pounds, Wayne was the smallest man in the company. Yet despite his compact frame, the Lord had seemingly blessed him with the strength of a man twice his size. Wayne had once carried an injured soldier halfway down a

mountain while wearing fifty pounds of gear. The scene had reminded Pitcher of a Discovery special called *Ants of the Amazon*, where he'd learned that soldier ants can lift twenty times their body weight. It was this infamous incident and his insectlike physique that had won Bug his nickname.

Pitcher drew his .45-caliber 1911 handgun and said, "You're in charge while I'm gone, Corporal."

"If you're not back in fifteen minutes, I'm coming in after you," Bug said, packing his lower lip with Wintergreen snuff. "Right after I finish this dip, of course."

"If I'm not back in fifteen minutes, it means the Taliban captured my ass and you need to call in an airstrike on this mountain."

"Your wife is never going to forgive me for letting you do this," Bug said in protest. "You know that, right?"

"What Josie doesn't know can't hurt her," Pitcher said with a crooked grin and disappeared into the mouth of the cave.

# CHAPTER 2

*8:28 a.m. Local Time*

*Middle of Nowhere, Upstate New York  
(124 Miles from Watertown)*

Josie Pitcher stared at the fish, and the fish stared back at her.

*Hmm. So that's what tilapia looks like.*

She'd always assumed it was some slimy, ugly fish, like a cross between a catfish and an eel, but no, it actually looked like a bigger version of the sunfish perch she used to catch as a kid when her dad took her fishing at the pond down the road.

"I think he likes you," her eccentric host said with what could be described only as a goofy old-man smile. "They don't usually sit still like that."

"What made you pick tilapia for your hydroponic system?" Josie asked, squatting and staring into his "aquarium," which was essentially a giant blue plastic bathtub with a Plexiglas window on the side.

"Aquaponics," he said.

"Excuse me?"

"You said 'hydroponics,' but this here is an aquaponic system," he said. "Hydroponics doesn't cut it."

"I don't understand," she said, getting to her feet.



“Hydroponics is like half the equation; it’s unbalanced. Aquaculture is the other half of the equation, but fish farming is also unbalanced. In each system, the nutrients get depleted, and the waste products build up to toxic levels. But put the two systems together, and *wham*, you get a balanced system. I grow duckweed here in these hydroponic beds. Duckweed is high in protein and minerals, grows fast, and does a good job of keeping algae from taking over. The duckweed serves as the feed-stock for the tilapia. I picked tilapia because they’s a strong fish. They grow fast; spawn year-round; and can tolerate warm, dirty water and crowding. And most importantly . . . they taste damn good.”

He paused, and she watched him smiling, probably thinking about his next fish fry.

“Anyway, the uh, fish waste gets broken down by bacteria into nitrates, which get pumped back into the hydroponic beds where the nutrients get sucked up by the duckweed. The effluent from the duckweed gets pumped back into the fish tank and recycled.” He clapped his hands together and then flicked his palms out flat in a gesture that reminded her of a magician’s flourish. “And shazam, you have a perfectly balanced system, just like nature intended. You see, nature figured this shit out a long time ago. We’re just too stupid and lazy to pay attention. People are just starting to wake up. But it’s too late. Don’t matter now.”

“What do you mean it’s too late?”

“I mean the world is already fucked,” he said, spittle flying from his lips. “Excuse my language. Don’t get me going, Josie. Can I call you Josie?”

She smiled at this. Getting him going was exactly why she was here. She wanted to film it all with her body cam: his crackpot conspiracy theories, his survival methodologies, the rationale behind the design of his bunker, his contingency plans, and his survival strategies for the coming dystopian future. Willie Barnes was widely considered the Sun Tzu of doomsday-prepping culture—a modern mage of survival wisdom. It had taken her six months to get this interview. Six months of

plotting and suffering. Willie was a shrewd old tomcat, and she knew from the get-go that none of the typical strategies—flatteries, five minutes of fame, or even cash money—would work on old Willie. Others had tried and failed. Her husband had been the one who came up with the winning idea one night over a KFC dinner.

*“If you want to interview this guy, you first have to win his respect,” Michael said. “You have to show him that you’re worthy of the privilege of interviewing him. That you’re legitimate and your motives are pure. Remember who you’re dealing with here. He doesn’t trust the government. He doesn’t trust the media. He doesn’t trust corporate America. As far as this guy is concerned, everybody is either out to get him or exploit him. You think he’s going to let you, a freelance investigative journalist, just walk into his bat cave, shoot video, and then sell it to HBO? Hell no.”*

*“Then what should I do?” she asked, knowing she wasn’t going to like the answer.*

*“You need to audition,” Michael said with a sadistic smile. “Tenth Mountain style.”*

The next three months had been hell. Whenever Michael wasn’t on base training for his upcoming deployment, they were in the woods—building shelters, starting fires, making snares, and shooting every projectile-based weapon invented by man. He taught her Morse code, compass navigation, and way-finding techniques. He made her eat wild mushrooms and leeks, forage edible lichens from tree trunks, and dig up bugs and worms for breakfast. He made her bathe naked in freezing-cold streams, defecate in hand-dug latrines, and pull out her own ticks. He even taught her how to make a solar still from two plastic water bottles and forced her to drink her own purified urine. Yes, she now was a member of the small, illustrious club of people who’d drunk their own pee. And she did all this, on film, for Willie.

When Project PJ (Prepperizing Josie) was complete, she had over a hundred hours of video, which she had professionally distilled and edited into a twelve-minute highlight reel that included a three-second

clip of her pale, naked self squealing in a frigid stream that Michael had *insisted* she include. Then, instead of asking for an interview, she had sent it to Willie—on VHS with a masking-tape label that read, “Audition,” along with her mobile phone number.

A week went by, and nothing happened.

Two weeks, and still no call. By then, Michael had deployed to Afghanistan, and she was feeling very much alone and foolish. By week three, the defeatism set in, and she regretted even sending the tape. By week four, she was cursing Willie Barnes’s name for being the impetus to drink her own pee, and by week six, she’d written off the entire idea as a colossal waste of time. At week ten, when the call finally came, it caught her completely off guard:

*“This is Willie Barnes,” the voice said, gruff and hesitant. “You sent me a tape?”*

*“Uh, yeah, that was me. Josie Pitcher,” she stammered, not sure why she was so nervous.*

*“It’s a good tape,” he said. “Helluva rabbit snare you made.”*

*“Thanks.”*

*“And I liked the solar still you made with two water bottles. Even the diehards don’t usually . . . well, you know.”*

*“Yeah.”*

*“Why did you send this to me?” he asked, his tone sincere and without sarcasm.*

*“Because I want to meet you.”*

*“You coulda just asked.”*

*“You woulda said no.”*

*“That’s true,” he said, chuckling, and then coughed. “I woulda.”*

*“So can we meet?”*

*“You’re a journalist.”*

*“Yes, I am.”*

*“I do my homework, Miss Pitcher.”*

*“I know you do. So do I. That’s why I want to meet you.”*

*"I don't like reporters."*

*"I know, but I'm not a reporter. I'm a journalist."*

*"I didn't realize there was a difference."*

*"There's a difference. I assume you've seen some of my previous work?"*

*"Yeah. I liked the piece you did for Vice on the anti-vax movement in America."*

*"Thanks."*

*"Is that the sort of thing you want to do with me?"*

*"Yeah, another in-depth, intimate piece for Vice," she said, hesitating to add that it was a segment on doomsday preppers.*

*"Okay," he mumbled.*

*"Okay what?" she said, not trusting her ears.*

*"Okay, I'll do it . . . but I have conditions."*

*"Um, okay, great. I mean, of course, whatever you want."*

*"Condition number one: I get to sign off on the footage you use. Period. No exceptions."*

*"Done."*

*"Condition two: you come alone."*

*"Okay," she said, having expected this but still uncomfortable with the idea.*

*"Condition three: you can't know the location of my facility. I'll pick you up at the lat-lon coordinates of my choosing, and you have to ride with a blindfold there and back. If you won't agree to this, the deal is off."*

*She hesitated a beat before finally agreeing. This little tidbit of information she'd have to keep from Michael. Thankfully, he was on the other side of the world . . .*

*"Well?" Willie said, his voice ripe with impatience.*

*"Well what?" she said, snapping back to the present.*

*"Can I call you Josie?"*

*"Of course," she said, wondering why he was asking that now. He'd been calling her Josie for ten minutes.*

*"You see, Josie, it's already under way as we speak."*

“What’s already under way?”

“I thought you said you did your homework,” he growled.

She gave him a tight-lipped smile but didn’t take the bait and get defensive.

“The Sixth Extinction,” he said, spittle landing on the tangled whiskers of his fully gray beard. “The coral reefs around the world are dying. They’re literally being cooked to death. A third of the Great Barrier Reef is dead, and in the next five years, that number will be two-thirds. When the coral reefs are gone, it will kick off an ecological collapse in the world’s oceans. The same thing is happening on land. We’ve wiped out fifty percent of the world’s species in the last forty years. Can you believe that? In forty years we’ve managed to annihilate ecosystems and creatures that have existed for hundreds of thousands of years. People think of nature as a stone fortress, but in reality, it’s a crystal palace—beautiful but fragile. Get too many cracks, and it shatters; then everything comes crashing down. When the Sixth Extinction has run its course, over seventy-five percent of all species on Earth will have gone extinct.”

She’d not expected this from Willie. Sure, all preppers had their particular hot button, but they always came from a well-established pool of dystopian triggers: nuclear war, the next great pandemic, climate change causing global floods, droughts, famine, etcetera. She’d not heard any mention of the Sixth Extinction on the forums and discussion threads she’d researched.

“So that’s why you’ve built this place, because of the Sixth Extinction?”

“Were you not listening? Don’t tell me you’re like the rest of them?”

“The rest of who?”

“People. Everyone! Everyone who thinks that human beings somehow live in a magical vacuum where our species can flourish while all other species are dying. The Sixth Extinction is coming for us too. We’re not safe. We are not immune!”

She angled her torso to make sure the body cam had him in frame. “So that’s why you purchased this facility and devoted your life to renovating it . . . in preparation for the Sixth Extinction?”

“Did Noah wait to start building the ark until after it started raining? No, no, he did not.”

“Point taken,” she said, noticing he was starting to become agitated.

“They’ve got plans,” he mumbled, pacing back and forth in front of her. “Secret plans. They’ve tried it before, and they’re going to try it again.”

She had prepared herself for this sort of thing—for the “crazy talk.” She could see that Willie was getting wound up. There was a difference between getting him going and getting him frazzled and angry. She had to tread carefully, because one misstep—one offensive or misconstrued comment—could flip that switch she knew existed in Willie’s head. And when that happened, they were done. The interview would be over, and he would kick her out. No do-overs. No follow-ups.

“Who has plans?” she asked cautiously.

“The government!” he snapped, scratching manically at his beard.

“The US government?”

“Of course the US government, you fool. I knew this was a mistake. I’ve already said too much. This was a bad idea . . . a very, very bad idea.”

“Hey, Willie, how about you tell me more about your aquaponic system?” she said, gently interrupting the diatribe. “Or maybe you could talk to me about your solar rig and energy-storage system.”

He looked at her, then at the fish. He stopped scratching his beard and began to nod slowly. “Did you know that tilapia is a Nile River fish?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“There’s some folks believe the Egyptians practiced aquaponics thousands of years ago.”

“I didn’t know that,” she said, nodding politely and suppressing a victorious grin.

“Aztecs and the ancient Chinese practiced aquaponics as well.” After an awkward beat, he cleared his throat. “Enough about fish. You didn’t come here to talk about fish. C’mon, let’s go grab a cup of hot tea.”

*Phew, dodged a bullet there.*

He led her from the aquaponic shed back to the modest Adirondack-style cabin they’d visited in when she first arrived. As she followed him, she realized that his baggy jeans and flannel shirt belied what must have been a strong, wiry frame beneath. She eyed a pile of freshly cut firewood. An uncut log stood on a massive stump, a long-handled axe leaning next to it at the ready. For a man Willie’s age to maintain such a place, by himself no less, must have been a backbreaking endeavor. From his weathered face, she guessed he had to be midseventies, but Willie had at least another decade, maybe two, of fight left in him.

He held the cabin door for her, like a gentleman, and she stepped inside. She didn’t realize how much heat the late October chill had sapped from her body until she was in the fire-warmed cabin. She looked around the main room, with its windows on three sides and timber walls. Not exactly the fortress of solitude she’d expected. Where was the armory? Where was the secure communications room with shortwave radio equipment and satellite feeds streaming from all over the world? Where was the ration room with three years’ worth of food-stuffs stacked floor to ceiling and a water-reclamation unit? Where was the secret, impenetrable underground lair? She was beginning to think that maybe the notorious Willie Barnes was nothing more than a myth.

He handed her a mug of steaming-hot tea.

“Thank you,” she said, blowing ripples on the surface and then taking a tentative sip. “What is this? I don’t recognize the flavor.”

“Half and half,” he said.

“What’s half and half? I’m not familiar with that.”

He gave her that goofy old-man-talking-to-a-pretty-young-girl grin again. “Well, I brew one cup of black tea, one cup of green tea; then

I mix 'em half and half. I can't stand the taste of green tea, but it's full of antioxidants. This way I get the taste of black tea and the benefit of green tea. Can't get too many antioxidants."

"I hear blueberries have lots of antioxidants," she said awkwardly.

They drank their tea in silence after that, and suddenly she wondered if she'd been wrong about old Willie. Maybe she was the one who'd made the mistake. As she contemplated this, she noticed him staring at her legs. She'd probably erred by selecting jeans a little too far on the slim-fitting side.

"Yeaaaaah, that tape of yours was the only reason I invited you out here," he said and then started to chuckle. "Seeing you hooting and hollerin', jumping around butt-ass naked in that stream, got me howling."

A creepy tingle chased up her spine. Michael would be furious with her if he knew where she was right now, and he'd be right to be. What had she been thinking coming here alone? And why in God's name had she agreed to ride blindfolded in his Jeep to get here? She had no fucking idea where she was, no mobile phone coverage, and she was unarmed. What if Willie's "safeguards" had all been a ploy to get her out here alone so he could kidnap and rape her? An argument broke out in her head:

*He can't rape you, Joz. He's over seventy years.*

*Of course he can rape me. That's what Viagra is for, you moron.*

*You're the one who sent him the tape. He didn't lure you here; you solicited him.*

*Doesn't matter. He's a crazy old man. I'm a twenty-eight-year-old girl with a body he's seen naked.*

*A rock-hard body that you can kick his ass with.*

*Not if I'm unconscious because he put a roofie in my tea.*

"Something wrong with your tea?" he said.

She realized she was scowling and staring into the mug. "No, it's fine."



“You don’t have to lie on my account. It won’t hurt my feelings. Half and half’s not for everyone. I’m sorry; I probably shoulda asked.” He ran his tongue across his tea-stained teeth and then set his mug down. “Well, you didn’t come all this way to drink tea in my living room. C’mon,” he said, turning away and waving for her to follow. “Let me show you the rest of the facility. If you thought the aquaponics was neat, then you ain’t seen nothing yet.”

Her heart leaped, and she didn’t know whether she should be ecstatic or turn and run for her life. She watched him walk to a coat closet and open the door to reveal . . . a coat closet. He parted the coats with both hands and ducked under the hanging bar. Before disappearing, he stopped and looked back over his shoulder. “Well, you coming or not?”

“Coming where?” she said, still clutching her mug with both hands.

“Into the bunker, of course. That’s why you’re here, isn’t it?” he said, pushing the false back wall of the closet open to reveal a space behind it. Through the gap, she could just make out red stenciled letters on a steel door:

**RESTRICTED ACCESS—556TH STRATEGIC MISSILE SQUADRON  
SM-65 LAUNCH COMPLEX #9**

# CHAPTER 3

## *Afghanistan*

Pitcher was only fifteen feet in, and the cave's ceiling had sloped so low that he was already crawling on his hands and knees. The acrid odor from the grenade he'd detonated was strong here, and he realized that the geometry of the cave he'd imagined was entirely different from the reality of the cave he was now exploring. *This isn't a cave*, Pitcher decided. *It's a fucking crack.*

At thirty feet in, the ceiling funneled even lower, and he was forced to belly-crawl. The deeper he went, the more he felt consumed. Like Jonah and the whale, he had been swallowed by the mountain. The tunnel was so narrow now that his body blocked all light from the entrance behind. His Kimber in one hand, his SureFire flashlight in the other, he wormed his way forward. Right forearm, left leg, frog kick. Left forearm, right leg, frog kick. His ear was burning now. He resisted the urge to touch the raw, mangled cartilage and kept on squirming.

He heard something in front of him—a scratching sound. He clicked his flashlight on—the low-light setting, just five lumens. Bright enough to illuminate a two-foot arc in front of him and put his nerves at ease, but not so bright as to wash out his night eyes or betray his position. He exhaled with relief. Nothing lurking in the dark in front

of him: no scorpion, no coiled viper, no Taliban terrorist pointing the barrel of a gun in his face.

He clicked the light off and pushed on, forearm over forearm.

Two feet, four feet, eight . . . He squirmed into the black.

Into the silence.

He could no longer hear the wind. He'd grown so accustomed to the incessant howling in the mountain passes that his subconscious was now craving a windy echo to fill the void. But the only sound was his uniform fabric dragging over rock—like sandpaper on concrete. A nerve-grating sound. He tried to ignore it and pressed on.

Two feet, four feet, eight . . .

He lifted his head to look forward and conked the crown of his skull against the rocky ceiling. *Fuck, that hurt.* He clicked on the light. Nothing but rock and a shrinking, dark void ahead. He clicked the light off. If this tunnel got any smaller, he ran the very real risk of getting stuck. He shooed the thought away. *I'm not that stupid.* But then another, even more disturbing thought occurred to him. Even if he didn't get actually physically stuck, he might be effectively stuck already. Belly-crawling was a forward-biased means of locomotion. Could he reverse-crawl all the way back to the opening? No, probably not. Eventually, the crevice would have to open up wide enough that he could turn around.

But what if it didn't?

*Shit.*

A wave of claustrophobia-induced panic washed over him.

*Don't think about it. Just keep going.*

He pressed on. Right forearm, left leg, frog kick. Left forearm, right leg, frog kick. His right elbow came down on a jagged rock, sending a stinger of pain along his arm and into his fingers. Cursing to himself, he pressed on. Under his belly, he began to sense the angle of the floor changing. Ten feet deeper in, the term *floor* became a misnomer, because the ground was no longer horizontal. It sloped twenty degrees down

to his left. Every time he inched forward, gravity tugged his body into the V-shaped angle of the crevice, amplifying the sensation of being squeezed.

That same claustrophobic panic welled up in him again, but stronger this time.

What if this really was just a crack . . . a crack that had opened in the mountain because of all the bombings? Hadn't they dropped a MOAB not far from here a few months back? What if the mountain was unstable? What if this crack pinched closed? His body would be pulverized. Pressed into a juicy pulp, like a bug squished underfoot.

*Like a bug.* He let out a chuckle. *I definitely should have sent Bug in here instead.*

A bead of sweat ran down his temple. The temperature had dropped noticeably since he'd entered the crevice, but he was sweating from exertion now. He hadn't belly-crawled like this since boot camp. He paused for a second to catch his breath and noticed an amber glow, barely perceptible, etching a faint almond shape into the black ten yards ahead. He squeezed his eyes shut, counted to three, and opened them again. Yes, that was definitely light ahead. A fresh and much-needed surge of adrenaline dumped into his bloodstream.

He resisted the urge to move.

Lying perfectly still, he closed his eyes and listened. At first, nothing. Then the thud of his own pulse, regular and baritone, filled his ears. He tried to filter it out, but the absolute quiet of the tunnel made the task difficult. He waited patiently, listening for any other sound besides the beating of his heart.

A minute passed.

*Nothing.*

He opened his eyes. Then, just as he started to crawl, he heard something. A whisper, barely audible. He cocked his head for a different listening angle. Was his mind playing tricks on him? Maybe he was hearing the echo of his own movement reflecting off the cave walls?

Then, as he began to crawl a second time, he heard it again. Whispers.

A chill chased up his spine. Definitely voices. He held his breath and strained to make out what was being said.

*Sounds like Pashto . . . Shit.*

Gripping his Kimber and gritting his teeth, Pitcher inched slowly and quietly toward the light. He stopped a foot from where the cramped tunnel widened into an antechamber and listened. A man was talking. Yes, definitely Pashto. Pitcher wasn't fluent, but he'd picked up a good bit of the language during his multiple deployments over the years. He strained to hear, translating what he made out:

*"Tora Bora, Afghanistan . . . Yes . . . Zabiullah Momar Haliqani . . . Yes . . . November 2 . . ."*

Pitcher screwed up his face. Such a strange one-sided conversation. It was almost as if Haliqani were talking on the phone, but that was impossible. No signal could penetrate this deep into the mountain. And the information he was providing was so, well, generic.

Pitcher had to know what was going on; he had to take a look.

Carefully, he set his pistol on the tunnel floor and retrieved a telescoping inspection mirror from his left breast pocket. Using his teeth to grip the quarter-size mirror, he expanded the metal shaft from a compact four inches to fourteen. Exhaling slowly, he extended his arm until the mirror overhung the mouth of the chamber by a few inches. An errant glint off the mirror could get him killed, but the odds of being counterdetected were lower than with the alternative—sticking his head inside the cave and waving hello to Haliqani.

A three-second initial sweep was all he needed. *One, two, three.*

He pulled the mirror back.

*Okay, what the fuck was that?*

What he thought he'd just seen made absolutely no sense. He shook his head and extended the mirror over the edge again, this time letting it linger, but the reflection confirmed what he'd seen before: Zabiullah

Momar Haliqani, standing alone in the middle of a perfectly spherical cavern, talking to himself, his back to the tunnel entrance. The tunnel entrance bisected the strange chamber approximately eight feet above the floor, effectively giving Pitcher a balcony-like vantage point. He watched, transfixed, as Haliqani carried on a one-sided conversation with nobody. Then the Taliban commander lifted his arms as if to embrace an invisible face in front of him and said something to the effect of, "I am your faithful servant, Allah. Do with me as you will." A beat later, Haliqani began to convulse. His knees buckled, and he collapsed to the floor.

Curiosity got the better of Pitcher. He compressed the inspection mirror, stuffed it back into his breast pocket, and squirmed to the edge of the tunnel. Propping himself on his elbows, he looked down into the antechamber. Many things about what he saw did not compute. Caves were dark. Caves had asymmetrical walls, jagged outcroppings, and bold rock formations. This void had none of those things. This cavern was a perfect sphere. He estimated the internal diameter to be approximately twenty feet.

He stared down at Haliqani, who lay on his back on the cavern floor, convulsing and foaming at the mouth.

*What the hell? Is he having a seizure?*

Pitcher scanned the space again, confirming one more time that Haliqani was completely alone. He contemplated shooting the terrorist, from right here, right now. It sure would uncomplicate matters. Take a picture, mission accomplished, no questions asked. But Haliqani's body had fallen still, and something about shooting an unconscious man just didn't sit well with Pitcher. It crossed the line between battle and execution. Not that Haliqani didn't deserve to be executed, but still, it just felt dirty. Cowardly.

He took a second to scan the geometry of the space again. Whether he shot Haliqani or not, how the hell was he going to get the man out of the cave? There were no other entrances or exits. He'd have to put

the terrorist in restraints. Could a man crawl back out through this tortuous tunnel in PlastiCuffs? *Maybe*. Pitcher looked down. The vertical drop to the center of the floor was close to eight feet, but the wall was curved and smooth. He extended a hand and touched the inner surface of the cavern.

His fingers slid over the stone like it was polished marble. No, not polished marble . . . more like handblown glass. He picked up a rock fragment, one of many that lay at the mouth of the tunnel, and rolled the grape-size chunk of rock between his thumb and index finger. Three sides of the pyramidal stone were scalloped and chipped like flint, but the fourth side looked to have once been molten. He imagined a sphere of lava, glowing and bubbling, then quenched and cracked to cold, black onyx. What natural phenomenon could form a cave such as this? He dropped the stone and watched it slide down the wall into the basin, where it came to rest against the top of Haliqani's shoulder.

The chill of unexpected epiphany washed over him.

The cave was lit.

Why could he see? His flashlight was off. Haliqani hadn't been holding a light. So where was the light coming from? His gaze flicked to the ceiling, looking for a crack or vertical shaft to the surface. Nothing. He looked back into the spherical void, searching for the source of the light, but it was as if the chamber was backlit from behind the glazed stone walls.

Fear tickled his subconscious. A primitive fear. A childlike fear. Danger. *Run, Michael. There's a monster lurking under the bed. Run now!*

*Hello*, a placid female voice whispered.

Pitcher jerked and picked up his Kimber. He trained the muzzle down into the spherical cavern, but the only person there was Haliqani, still lying unconscious on his back.

*Hello?* the voice said again.

The hair stood on the back of his neck. "Show yourself," he stammered, still searching for his tormentor.

*I'm here.*

“Where?” he said.

*Down here. Come inside. I need help . . . please.*

“I must be losing my mind,” he mumbled.

*Please help me,* she said again, this time with pain and urgency in her voice.

Against his better judgment, Pitcher wiggled headfirst out of the tunnel and slid on his belly down the sloping wall into the void. The walls were so slick, he couldn't steer or stop himself, and he ended up careening into Haliqani. He quickly scrambled to his knees and checked the terrorist's vitals.

Breath: rapid and shallow, but not labored.

Pulse: quick and strong.

Pitcher settled back onto his haunches; Haliqani was alive.

*Too bad,* he thought.

*Hello,* the voice whispered again, closer this time. Pitcher whirled on his knees, looking for the woman his ears told him was standing right behind him, but there was no one there. Slowly, he got to his feet. A ripple of movement to his left caught his attention. He pivoted and fired, immediately regretting the decision. The geometry of the chamber amplified the roar of the gunshot, and from the sharp pain in his ears that followed, he wondered if he'd ruptured his eardrums. Whatever it was he'd seen was gone, faded into oblivion. Like a mirage. A beat later, a flattened .45-caliber round dropped from the void above and landed at his feet. He knelt, picked up the deformed slug, and studied it.

“That was no ricochet,” he mumbled. “I must have hit something.”

*Please do not discharge your weapon again.*

He dropped the slug and stumbled backward. The voice spoke to him with perfect clarity, despite the ringing in his ears. He scanned the air above him but saw nothing. He glanced down at Haliqani, but the terrorist still lay sprawled at his feet, eyes dancing the funky chicken behind closed lids. What the hell was going on? What was this place?



*Do not be afraid,* said the voice. *What is your name?*

He studied the domed ceiling for a loudspeaker, but the polished rock surface was perfectly bare. “My name is Staff Sergeant Michael Pitcher of the United States Army. Whoever or whatever you are, identify yourself,” he shouted.

*Staff Sergeant Michael Pitcher. Can you tell me the geographic coordinates of this location?*

“Fuck your questions. What did you do to this man?” he demanded, looking down at Haliqani.

*Zabiullah Momar Haliqani is unharmed.*

“Then why is he unconscious?”

No reply came.

“Show yourself,” he barked. “What do you want?”

*I want to know you, Michael.*

Gooseflesh stood up on his arms. He whipped around, but there was nothing behind him. No, wait . . . there was *something*.

A presence in the light.

A surge of warm, soothing energy washed over him. The breath of God. He inhaled deeply and closed his eyes. He heard his pistol clatter onto the glassy stone floor, but the sound seemed to come from somewhere far away. Defending himself was no longer a concern. There was no need for a weapon, in the company of such peace . . .

This was not the first time he'd felt a supernatural presence. Though he was a preacher's son from a devoutly religious Texas family, as a boy of nine, he'd done plenty of what nine-year-old boys do best—engaging in harmless mischief. He and his two best friends, Ricky and Jake, had tagged along with Ricky's older brother on a day trip out to the family “ranch,” undeveloped acreage an hour's drive outside of Austin. While the older boys practiced plinking cans with their .22s, Michael and his two best friends had gone wandering. They'd followed a dried-up creek bed as it snaked between cedar elms and live oaks. The creek bottom

offered an infinite supply of round, smooth pebbles to launch with their Daisy slingshots at dumb birds and basking lizards.

It had been a dreadfully hot, cloudless summer day, so they'd stuck to the shade of the creek bed. Emerging at the other end of a curving switchback, they discovered they were not the only ones with this idea when they came face-to-face with a three-hundred-pound wild boar. Wild boars were the most dangerous creatures in Texas—much deadlier than the fabled diamondback rattlesnake. A rattler might get one of them, but a mature, territorial male boar could chase them each down in turn and eviscerate them. There was no antivenom treatment for flesh carved to ribbons by five-inch, razor-sharp tusks.

Immediately upon seeing the black, bristled monster, Michael had known something wasn't right. It was panting and drooling, despite standing still. One of the hog's eyes was white as milk, and the ear on that side hung in two limp, ragged halves. He was an old-timer, this razorback—a gladiator that had survived countless battles with other upstart males. The boar grunted, scratched at the earth with a hoof like a bull, and charged. That was when the archangel Michael, the great protector, came to his aid. A royal-blue aura encircled his vision, and a voice spoke in his head—a voice as calm, certain, and wise as his father's voice during sermons.

"Aim, Michael, and I will guide your hand. I will be the stone," the archangel said.

The pouch of his slingshot was already loaded with a gray pebble he'd been saving—round, smooth, and heavy—pinched between his thumb and index-finger knuckle. He drew the pouch back to his chin, stretching the yellow rubber tubing taut, and let the stone fly. It tore through the air like a miniature comet with a tail of royal-blue light as it sailed toward the demon beast. The stone struck the boar in its one good eye, and the creature jerked its head, bellowed, and halted its charge. Shaking its head, it spun in circles and thrashed its tusks wildly while sniffing the air.

“Run,” the archangel said.

He ran, his friends in tow, but he could not help stealing a fleeting backward glance. In that instant, he swore he saw a winged man, robed in purple, plunge a flaming sword into the eye of the beast . . . the same eye he'd struck with his stone. As an adult, he'd prayed for the archangel's protection on multiple occasions, but the blue aura never returned. And with every enemy fighter he killed, he felt farther and farther from God. Was he now so lucky as to finally stand in the archangel's grace once again?

He opened his eyes.

A million glowing points of light converged inches from his nose, an orb of living luminescence, coalescing in midair. Was this the archangel Michael returning, or was this something else? So beautiful and wondrous—this could only be the one true God.

“Oh Lord, I am not worthy to stand in your presence. I have done things. Terrible, sinful things,” he heard himself confess.

*Show me your thoughts. Tell me your secrets.*

And he did.

*Surrender your burdens to me.*

And he did this too.

*Do you accept this baptism of light to wash your sins away and quench the fire in your soul?*

“Yes, Lord. I do.”

*Then you must surrender to me.*

His thoughts suddenly went to his wife, Josie. He remembered their love and their union and for an instant what he was about to do felt like a betrayal . . . but to surrender to God was no betrayal. He would bring God's peace and love to her as well.

*I am love. I am communion. Say you surrender to me.*

He closed his eyes and—letting all his worries, regrets, and inhibitions fade away—he breathed, “I surrender.” Then, as he felt his body begin to convulse and his legs turn to jelly, somewhere very far away, he could just make out Corporal Wayne shouting his name.

# CHAPTER 4

## *Silo 9*

### *Dannemora, New York*

Feeling very much like Lucy Pevensie, Josie stepped through the coat closet and into another world.

“Watch your step,” Willie said, holding open the steel door leading into the missile-silo complex below. “It’s a short landing. I wouldn’t want you to fall down the stairs.”

She squeezed past him and stopped, her gaze fixed on a descending concrete stairwell lit only by dim, intermittently spaced red lights.

*Looks like a stairway to hell . . . Wonderful.*

Just as she finished the thought, he flipped a switch on the wall behind her, and the lights brightened and changed to white.

“I usually keep it low light to conserve power, but since this is my first official tour in over a decade, I suppose I can splurge and turn on the lights for you.”

“So generous,” she said, flashing him a wry smile as he slipped past her back into the lead.

She followed him down the long stairwell, which she estimated descended twelve feet. Each concrete step had a six-inch metal toe tread on the leading edge, etched with a diamond crosshatch for traction. Years of foot traffic had worn the cross-hatching smooth and slightly

scalloped in the middle. The staircase stopped at another short landing, and then a second, similar set of stairs took them down what she guessed was another six feet or so into a tunnel. White paint—stained with rust in some places and flaking in most—coated the otherwise unadorned concrete walls and ceiling. At the bottom landing, the tunnel doglegged: a ninety-degree turn right, then a ninety-degree turn back left. A heavy, windowless steel door blocked the path forward. The door looked ancient, except for the very modern, very expensive-looking biometric scanner on the wall. Willie scanned his thumb, the lock clicked, and he opened the door. “Ladies first,” he said, gesturing to the little room on the other side.

She hesitated. “What is that?” she asked, looking into a short, ominous passage blocked by another steel door a mere eight feet away.

“This is the intruder-entrapment enclosure.”

“Wait, what?” she said, still not stepping across the threshold. “That sounds evil.”

Willie flashed her a smile so big she could see his gums. “This is old-school defensive military engineering at its best. You cannot access the launch complex without passing through this chamber. There are limit switches on this door and the door over there. You can’t open both doors at the same time. You cannot open *this* door unless *that* door is closed and vice versa. See that window in the other door?”

The metal door eight feet away had a one-foot square glass window at eye level framed in the steel.

“Yes,” she said.

“That’s laminate glass. Bulletproof and blastproof,” he said. “See that rectangular box built into the wall beside the doorframe?”

“Yeah, I see it.”

“There’s a camera and a murder hole in there.”

She didn’t like the sound of that. “What’s a murder hole?”

“A space you can fire a weapon through. It allows you to shoot into the enclosure from the safety of the other side. Anyone wanting to gain

access to the LCC and the silo has to come through this chamber. Back when this complex was operational, the control room would be notified when someone entered. With the camera system, they could visually identify the person or persons who were trying to gain access. Only authorized personnel were granted access through the second door. Intruders, on the other hand, would be trapped in this chamber. By modern security standards, this might seem primitive, but sometimes there's no substitute for brute-force simplicity."

She looked at him and cocked an eyebrow.

"Well, go on," he said with a chuckle. "I told you, we can't open the other door until we close this one."

With a slightly queasy stomach, she stepped into the intruder-entrapment enclosure. Willie stepped in behind her, and the first door slammed shut on spring-loaded hinges. She eyed the murder hole warily as they crossed the small chamber to the other door. Willie once again pressed his thumb to the biometric scanner, but this time he also had to enter a four-digit code. The lock clicked, and he opened the second door for her. She stepped past him into another tunnel. Eight feet away, the tunnel turned ninety degrees right. She walked to the bend and peered around and saw a massive steel door—much thicker than the first two she'd just passed—hanging fully open on correspondingly massive hinges.

"What's *that* door?" she asked, staring at it.

"That is a blast door. There's two of them, one on each side of the vestibule ahead."

"Why do you leave it open?"

"I'm seventy-six years old," he said. "I can move it, but it takes a toll."

She followed him into the "vestibule," which was simply another lockout-style chamber, this one enclosed by matching blast doors. "I think I'm sensing a theme here."

“Yeah, redundancy was the guiding design principle for this facility. These double blast doors were designed to protect the LCC from a direct hit from a nuclear strike topside.”

“What’s the LCC?”

“The LCC stands for *launch control center*. That’s where we’re headed. The complex is divided into two separate but interconnected structures: the LCC, which served as the operations and communications center, and the silo proper, where the missile was stored.”

She paused a moment to look at the black-and-white framed pictures hanging on the walls in the vestibule. The first was a picture of five young men, two seated and three standing, in a room with control panels in the background. Another was a photograph of a missile raised completely out of the silo and ready for launch. A third was an illustrated schematic of the facility, drawn in the three-dimensional cutaway perspective. She stopped at this one and studied it, trying to take in as much information as possible before he moved her along.

“C’mon, we don’t have all day,” he said.

*Technically, we do have all day*, she thought. *It’s not like you have a queue of visitors waiting outside.*

She lingered a beat longer, making sure the lens of her body cam—which was pinned to her jacket just above her left breast—recorded the illustration before she turned to follow after him. He led her through the second blast door and down yet another set of steps. At the next landing, they could either enter an open door to a room beyond or turn 180 degrees and take a switchback staircase down farther. Willie went straight, taking her into a large circular room with a thick round column in the middle, almost like a vertical axle bisecting a donut lying flat.

“Welcome to the LCC,” he said, grinning like a schoolboy. “This is level one. It’s still a work in progress, as you can see . . . I’m doing all the work myself, so it’s slow going.”

Josie scanned the space, walking in a slow arc around the room as he talked, taking in everything she saw. The erstwhile launch control center looked like it was in the final stages of being converted into modern living quarters. The ceiling was freshly painted white and the walls a light gray. The floor was covered with a nondescript but handsome commercial-grade carpet in most areas, linoleum tile in others. The room was windowless, of course, but well lit thanks to a generous number of LED work lights installed overhead, oriented like wheel spokes all the way around the room.

“There used to be divider walls, but I took those out. I prefer it nice and open like this. No dark corners. Good sight lines.”

*No place for an intruder to hide and no way for old Willie to get snuck up on*, she mused.

“Over there was where the communication room used to be,” he continued. “Over there was the battery room and an office area. Where we’re standing right now used to be one of two launch control rooms. There’s another one on level two. Over there was where our bunk room used to be . . .”

She stopped and turned to look at him. “*Our* bunk room? Wait a second—did you used to work here?”

Willie’s expression went sour, like he’d just taken a bite out of a lemon. “I can neither confirm nor deny that.”

“Wow,” she said, looking at him in a new light. Come to think of it, one of the young men in the black-and-white photographs she’d seen had looked familiar—a much younger, beardless, and, dare she admit, handsome version of the Willie Barnes standing in front of her. “So you actually bought the missile silo where you used to work? You must know this place like nobody’s business.”

“Not many Atlas Missileers left these days” was all he said. Then, gesturing to a small kitchen area, he added, “This over here was the kitchen.”



“And apparently still is,” she said with a smile. “How many people lived down here at any given time?”

“The Atlas F complex, which is what this facility is, had a complement of five.”

“How long was each watch—is that the correct term, *watch*?”

“*Watch* is more of a Navy term; Missileers use the term *alert*. We were on a twenty-four-hour alert, which meant we were on for twenty-four hours, then off for seventy-two. A fresh crew turned over each morning at 0600.”

“How long could you stay down here, you know, if you had to?”

“This silo was designed to take a hit from an incoming nuclear missile and survive. We’d have up to two months’ provisions at any given time, but, eh, that’s nothing compared to my current inventory. I have seven years’ worth of provisions, plus medicine, plus fully redundant water-reclamation and air-recirculation systems.”

She eyed what looked like his security and communications suite, which contained an amalgam of ancient-looking and cutting-edge technology. “That your comms area?”

He nodded.

A bank of flat-screen monitors streamed live video feeds from dozens of locations both topside and inside the silo. “How many camera feeds do you have?”

“One hundred and two,” he said.

“One hundred and two? Are you kidding me?”

“No. I monitor a two-mile radius of forest around the silo, plus the cabin and every room and passage in the silo.”

“Wow, okay then . . . Looks like you’ve also got some old-school radio equipment in addition to your satellite news and internet feeds.”

“Cellular service will be the first thing to go when it happens. Satellites will be next, then the hard lines. Once the internet is taken down and the world gets knocked back into the Stone Age, shortwave radio will be the only viable communication option.”

This was not new information to her. She knew most doomsday preppers were proficient radio talkers and tuners and one of the last enclaves able to communicate using Morse code. “I’ve been wondering, what is that big column in the middle of the room?” she asked, pointing at the giant concrete pillar.

“Believe it or not, the entire LCC is built on a metal crib and supported by suspension struts equipped with giant shock absorbers. If you look closely, there’s a one-foot gap between the center pillar and floor. There’s also a one-foot gap between the outside perimeter of the room and the concrete foundation along the entire circumference.”

“You mean this level is actually floating?”

He nodded. “Both level one and level two are floating on a metal crib. The entire missile-launch and support structure is also built as a floating crib, suspended inside the concrete silo.”

“Why?”

“Do you know what kind of a shock wave a direct nuclear hit would create outside? The engineers had to design this place to withstand that shock wave and maintain operational readiness. By mounting all the critical equipment on the crib decking, the interconnecting piping and wiring all moves as a unit. If everything was hard mounted to the silo, it would deform, crack, or rip apart.”

“Wow. That’s impressive,” she said, staring down the gap between the center column and the level-one deck into the room below. “How deep are we right now, by the way?”

“Level one is thirty feet down. Level two, which you’re looking down into, is at the minus-forty-foot elevation.”

“How do you access the missile silo itself?” she asked, turning around to face him.

“Through a utility tunnel, which is located on level two below us. Do you want to see it now?”

“Yes, very much so.”

He led her out of the LCC back the way they'd come and into the switchback stairwell. They took two half flights down and were once again at a decision point. Go right to enter level two of the LCC, or go left to take the tunnel to the silo. In keeping with the design theme, the tunnel was secured by two more blast doors, one on the LCC side and one on the silo side. The LCC-side blast door was open, and Willie strolled through it into the tunnel. Unlike the earlier tunnels, which were rectangular in shape with flat concrete walls, floor, and ceiling, this tunnel was round and had overlapping corrugated-steel plating lining the inside circumference. At the end of the tunnel, they came to a green blast door stenciled with the words **MISSILE SILO ACCESS**, except this blast door was shut.

"Here, help me open this," he said, grabbing the top end of a long vertical metal handle.

"I thought you said you left these open," she said, grabbing the same handle just below his hands.

"Not all of them." He grunted, pulling on the handle. "C'mon, Josie, put those young muscles to work."

She strained against the dead mass of solid metal, pulling with her back and arms, but letting her legs do most of the work. Once they got a little momentum, the door swung open the rest of the way without too much effort, creaking on its eight hinges. "Aw, c'mon, you've got to be kidding me," she said, looking at another closed blast door eight feet away. "How many more are there?"

Willie laughed. "This is the last one; I promise."

They repeated the exercise, working together to open the final green-painted blast door to reveal the inside of the silo. Unlike the LCC, the silo appeared to have undergone very little in the way of renovations—at least cosmetic renovations. The hulking metal structure was rusting and at least fifty years past its last paint job. She stepped out on the metal grating and paused at the railing to look down into the

abyss. Somewhere below, she heard the gurgling of moving water, but she couldn't make out what it was coming from.

"Careful," he said behind her, a strange timbre in his voice. "It's a long way down."

"How deep is the shaft?"

"One hundred and eighty-five feet from the surface. One hundred and forty feet from here, give or take," he said, stepping up beside her.

The platform creaked under their combined weight, sending a miniature lightning bolt of nerves through her abdomen. She clutched the handrail and attempted to count the levels, but the structure disappeared into shadow well before the bottom. "How many levels are there?"

"Eight," he said. "Labeled in reverse order, with one at the top and eight at the bottom. We're on level two. There used to be a service elevator in that corner over there, but it was removed along with all the other equipment when the facility was decommissioned. They stripped her clean, salvaging everything they could. I jerry-rigged a winch-and-pulley system over the shaft, which is how I move materials up and down between levels."

"What do you use this for?" she asked.

A devious little smile spread across his face. "Food production and storage," he said, turning to walk back to a lighting panel on the wall behind them. He flipped on a series of breakers, and the sound echoed in the silo: click, click, click, click, click, click. Light flooded the silo, sequentially illuminating level by level, top to bottom. On the level below her, level three, she saw the same hydroponic systems she'd seen in the outbuilding topside, fish tanks and duckweed beds, only on a much greater scale. In addition to duckweed, here she saw fruits and vegetables, including splashes of color that looked like peppers, tomatoes, and strawberries growing in the hydroponic beds.

"Whoa" was all she could manage to say, looking at the enormity of it all.

“That little rig topside is just for sampling and fish-stock quarantine. This is the *real* operation.”

“What do you mean by quarantine?”

“Before I introduce any new stock, I need to make sure they are disease-free. I have a nursery program down here to replenish my stock, but I’m always tinkering with the gene pool. I need my fish to be as robust, nutritious, and disease resistant as possible.”

She felt a chill creeping past the fabric of her jeans. “It’s chilly in here.”

“Yeah, and it gets colder the lower you go. Bit of a thermocline in here. It’s cold enough at the bottom, I can raise salmon without need for any cooling system. Down at level seven I have natural refrigeration year-round at forty-three degrees. I can keep eggs and dairy down there if I want. Plus, it dramatically extends the shelf life of all food rations canned, jarred, and bagged. Wanna see?”

“You mean, go down there?”

“Well, sure,” he said. “Don’t tell me a young, healthy girl like yourself is afraid of a few stairs.”

“A *few* stairs?” she said, eyeing him. “Looks like a couple hundred to me.”

“Suit yourself,” he said and sighed. “If you want to be lazy and miss out on the only chance you’ll ever have to explore an Atlas F missile silo, that’s fine with me.” He turned back to the lighting panel and was about to flip off the lights when she stopped him.

“Fine,” she groaned. “I’ll do it.” Her acquiescence seemed to please him because she saw a glint of pride in his eyes. He led her to a narrow spiral staircase that wound all the way down to the bottom of the silo. To climb 140 feet down and back on a spiral staircase seemed akin to torture. “We have to take that?”

“It’s that or ladders,” he said simply. “Your pick.”

“Fine,” she said, staring down the eerie ten-story-deep hole disappearing into the floor. “And don’t you dare say, ‘Ladies first.’”

# CHAPTER 5

*0937 Local Time*

*Office 231*

*Department of Technology Integration, Management, and Security  
(TIMS)*

*The Pentagon*

*Arlington, Virginia*

Everyone knows someone like Major Legend Tyree.

Someone whom God and fate and nature all smiled upon in utero. Someone whose deck seemingly got stacked with an unlimited supply of kings and aces. Someone whom people envy profoundly and want desperately to hate but fail to because the object of their resentment is so likable, charming, and noble that all their negative feelings morph into admiration. Legend had been his high school's valedictorian and homecoming king and a star athlete. He had been accepted to West Point and graduated top of his class. As a junior officer, he had excelled in combat, leadership, and strategy. But in the Pentagon, his physical prowess, male-model good looks, and quick, capable mind were the wrong tools of the trade. In the crush of bureaucracy, red tape, and military politics, he found himself stymied, eroded, and, for the first time in his life, performing at a level below his expectations. He needed a new opportunity to exploit.

He needed a win.

The desk phone rang.

He glanced at the incoming caller ID on the secure line but didn't recognize it. "Major Tyree," he said after picking up the receiver.

"Major, this is General Kane, the Deputy Commander at Bagram. We've never met," said the voice on the other end of the line.

"Yes, sir, how can I be of service?" he asked, his heart rate ticking up.

"I've been told you're the guy to call when there's a technology mystery nobody else can solve," Kane said. "General Troy said your office is the Pentagon's equivalent of the X-files division and that whenever something weird pops up on the radar, they send you and some lady from DARPA to check it out."

"Yes, sir, that's both classified and true."

"He also said they call you The Legend of Zelda at the Puzzle Palace, whatever the hell that means."

He hated the nickname. It really was an awkward fit, in his opinion. Yes, his first name was Legend. Yes, there was a video game called *The Legend of Zelda*. And yes, his job was investigating and acquiring new technology for the DOD—a job that required him to travel extensively to far-off kingdoms (Europe, the Middle East, and Asia), gather and collect treasure and weapons (innovative technology for the military's next-generation weapons systems), and meet with esoteric characters (inventors and IP lawyers) . . . but it really was a stretch. And yet it had stuck. Pretty much everyone at the Pentagon called him Zelda, and now people at DARPA, ONR, and DS&T had started using the moniker too. He'd liked it better when they called him by the department's acronym, TIMS. He even preferred when they called him "the dude from 231."

*Zelda . . . Really?*

Legend resisted the urge to sigh and simply said, "Yes, sir, General. I'm your guy. What can 231 do for you?"

“I’m not one for bullshitting, and I don’t have time for big words and long sentences, Major, so I’ll keep this short and sweet. One of our patrols found an unknown piece of tech in a cave in the Tora Bora mountains, and I have no friggin’ idea what it is or what to do with it. So far, three people have interacted with this thing, two of my soldiers and one crow—excuse me; I mean Taliban *detainee*. Since that first interaction, none of them have been right in the head.”

He did a double take in his mind. What in the world was Kane talking about? An unknown piece of tech in a cave? He hadn’t heard anything about this . . .

After a breath, Kane continued, “So I packed everything and everyone in the belly of a C-17, and I’m sending it to Andrews. You’ll need to put together a welcome party. I recommend hazmat, EOD, medical, and an interrogation team. And it wouldn’t hurt to have your counterpart from DARPA there as well. Make sure you cover all your bases, Major.”

“If I didn’t know better, General, it almost sounds like you’re saying this object your men found is not from the *neighborhood* . . . if you know what I mean.”

“Major, I don’t know what the hell this thing is. That’s why I’m sending it to you. What I can tell you is it didn’t come from Best Buy. So keep it secret. Keep it secure.”

“Okay” was all Legend could muster, despite the fact that his mind was flooded with hundreds of questions.

“Do you have any contacts at USAMRIID?”

“A few.”

“Good, you might have a couple of blue suits on-site just in case.”

His heart skipped a beat. “Sir, are you implying that the object you’re sending me is a biohazard?”

“I have no friggin’ idea, Major. The only test I was able to conduct here is a radiation survey. It’s not radioactive. Other than that, I don’t



know what the object is, where it came from, or what it does. If I was in your position, I'd take precautions."

"Sir, if I might propose an alternative solution for consideration. What if you retain the object there in a secure holding facility and let me come to you? Give me twelve hours to put together a team, and we'll be on the first flight out tonight to Bagram."

"Too late. The bird is already in the air," Kane said. "I'm not equipped to deal with something like this. And to be honest, I don't want to. You'll have my report within the hour and details on the transport schedule. If you have any questions, don't bother calling me. I've told you everything I know . . . Oh, and as of fifteen minutes ago, the event is code-word classified: BRIGHTWORK."

"Roger that."

"You ever play hot potato, Major?"

"No, sir."

"Well, you're playing now. Try not to get burned. Kane out."

The line went dead. Staring at the receiver in his hand, Legend mumbled, "What the fuck just happened?" He turned to his computer, looking for any preliminary files that might have been transmitted to the secure server, but there was nothing from Kane. He ran a query for BRIGHTWORK and skimmed the results, looking for something fresh, but he didn't see anything relevant so far.

*I should have asked him when the plane was scheduled to land. Shit . . .*

Then, as if Kane could hear his thoughts, a message came in addressed to him with a flight plan for a C-17 flying from Bagram to Andrews with aerial refueling en route. Looked like he had less than twelve hours to get his house in order. He picked a pen up off his desk, pulled a pad of paper from the drawer, and started on his list of team members for the welcome party. When the list was finished, he started making calls. Brigadier General Kane had counseled him to "Keep it secret. Keep it secure," which by default meant keep it small. These were people he could trust.

When there were only two calls left to make, he glanced down at the list. He'd already decided to save the most challenging call for last. Before making *that* call, he needed to talk to his sometimes sidekick but always ally at DARPA. He dialed the number from memory.

"Cyril Singleton," said the female voice on the line.

"Cyril, this is Major Tyree at the Pentagon. What's cooking? What's shaking?"

"Whenever you ask me that, Legend, it either means you need something from me or you're about to drag me on a wild goose chase across another continent," she said in a proper British accent that would make Mary Poppins proud. "So which is it today?"

"The former." He laughed. "I'd like to borrow Malcolm Madden for a special project."

As the lead scientist in DARPA's Systems of Neuromorphic Adaptive Plastic Scalable Electronics (SyNAPSE) program, Madden was helping develop the world's most advanced neuromorphic machine technology. His charge was to build a cognitive computer—a machine intelligence with the plasticity and flexibility of a mammalian brain and the speed and precision of a computer. The hardware he was developing mimicked the architecture and scalability of a biological brain—utilizing a synaptic-based structure with broad interconnectivity. On top of that, Malcolm Madden also happened to have the highest IQ of anyone working in the defense industrial complex. The man was, literally, the smartest person Legend had ever met.

"How long will you need him?" she asked. "The SyNAPSE team leans heavily on him. Things are busy, Legend. AI is the next battlefield frontier, and I'm getting a lot of pressure to transition lab projects into deployable prototypes."

"I know" was all he said, letting the pause afterward do the negotiating for him.

"How long?" she asked with a sigh.

“Hard to say. It could only be a day or two, or it could be a couple of weeks. Depends on what we find.”

“What is the nature of the project?”

“Classified TS/SCI,” he said.

“Okay,” she said, perking up at this. Apparently there was nothing like a good top-secret/sensitive-compartmented-information mystery to break the monotony of everyday Beltway minutiae. “But only under one condition: you read me in. I like to be apprised of what Malcolm is working on. He has a tendency to lose himself in either the weeds or the clouds. I can usually help keep him on altitude.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” Legend said.

“When do you need him?”

“Today, actually. It’s a short-fuse deal, and I need to get chess pieces into place as soon as possible.”

“In that case, I need you to pick him up from the airport. I was going to do it myself, but now that you’re seeking temporary custody of Mr. Madden, you can assume the responsibility of saving him from himself.”

He chuckled. “Explain, please.”

“Malcolm is returning from holiday in Brazil, but what constitutes holiday for Malcolm and holiday for the rest of us mortals have little in common. Last time he left the country, they caught him trying to smuggle parasitic wasp larvae from the Costa Rican jungle back into the US; they detained him, confiscated his samples, and slapped him with a thousand-dollar fine.”

“All right,” he said, a devious smile curling his lips. “This could be fun.”

“Anything else DARPA can do for you, Major?”

“Actually,” he said mildly, “I was hoping I could use Westfield D as the evaluation facility.”

The line went silent.

Westfield D was the insider's name for Westfield Dynamics—DARPA's miniature equivalent of Area 51, a proving ground for DARPA's top-secret projects. However, unlike Area 51, Westfield D was neither a military base nor located in the desert. The facility was nestled in the Virginia countryside, a short hop by car from the Culpeper Regional Airport. Seventy-five percent of the testing complex was located underground; the aboveground buildings consisted of two warehouses and the electrical controls–manufacturing shop. Westfield Dynamics was a *real* company, purchased and expertly operated as a for-profit front company for DARPA.

“Are you still there?” he asked.

“I'm still here,” she said. “You know I'll have to run this up the chain.”

“I know, but I promise I'll make it worth your while.”

“Oh really. You mean like the time you got us arrested in Berlin? Or how about the time you got us lost in Taiwan and we ended up at the wrong facility and almost got shot by security . . . that sort of worth your while?” she teased.

“No, not like that.” He laughed. “More like I'm in tight with the Colonel at Camp Darby in Italy. How about on our next trip I make sure your flight home goes through Florence? How does five days on the Italian Riviera sound to you?”

“I do like Northern Italian cuisine. Consider me officially persuaded.”

“Thanks, Cyril. I owe you one.”

“Yes, you do,” she said, and he could hear her smiling. “And don't think I'm going to let you off the hook on the Italy trip.”

“Never in a million years.”

He ended the call, took a deep breath, and then dialed the final number on his list.

Major Beth Fischer, USAMRIID's Director of Biosecurity, picked up her secure line on the second ring. “Hey, Zelda,” she said, and he could literally *hear* the smirk on her face.

He rolled his eyes. *Et tu, Brute?*

“Hi, Beth. How are things at the slammer?” he asked, referring to USAMRIID’s infamous BioSafety Level 4 Medical Containment Suite, designed to handle persons who had been exposed to or infected with the world’s most deadly pathogens.

“We don’t call it that anymore,” she said, “and things here are fine. I haven’t heard from you in a while.” *Woman-speak for “You’re a shit for not calling me.”* “How are things at the Puzzle Palace? Discover any new gizmos lately?”

“Um, maybe. That’s the reason for my call . . . I mean, one of the reasons for my call. I wanted to talk to you too, of course.”

“Mmm-hmm” was all that came back.

He cringed at his fumble and went for broke. “Maybe we can grab lunch and I can fill you in?”

“Today?”

“Yeah.”

She chortled at this. “Maybe if you had booked it with me three months ago. I’m looking at my calendar right now, and I don’t see any white space I can squeeze you into for weeks.”

Now she was just toying with him. He probably deserved it. Actually, no, he didn’t deserve it. Romance in the twenty-first century was supposed to be egalitarian. She had just as much responsibility to call him as vice versa.

“I’m serious, Beth. I’ve got a shipment coming in, and I’ve been advised by the sender I need to have a biosafety team standing by when it arrives.”

“What are you talking about, Legend?” she said, suddenly all business.

“I’m saying I need a couple of blue suits to meet me at the tarmac at Andrews Joint Base in fifteen hours to inspect and test this package.”

“Okay, first of all, importing a biosafety hazard is not something you simply spring on a girl, especially when that girl happens to be

the Army's head of biosecurity. Second, one does not simply requisition 'blue suits,' as you say. If there is a shipment inbound containing an infectious pathogen, I need to know all the details, and I needed that information yesterday to make all the necessary arrangements—containment, transport, testing, storage, etcetera.”

“I'm just trying to cover all my bases here. Besides, I know you. Don't tell me you don't have emergency-crisis-management and field-response teams you can stand up at a moment's notice. If you want to send a team, you can send a team.”

She sighed. “Biosafety is serious business, Legend. It's not a game. There are protocols I have to follow.”

“I'm sorry,” he said, all the humor gone from his voice now too. “You're right, but please understand, I'm in the same boat as you. This thing was literally dumped in my lap five minutes ago. It's already in the air, Beth, and they've made me responsible for it. My ass is on the line here; all I'm asking for is a little help.”

“And by roping me into your pop-up circus, you're putting my ass on the line too.”

An awkward silence hung on the line as he tried out multiple next sentences in his head and rejected each in turn.

She broke first. “Are you going to tell me what's in the shipment or not?”

“I don't know what it is.”

“How can you not know what it is? You're responsible for it.”

“Meet me for lunch and I'll tell you everything I know.”

“Tell me now.”

“It's TS/SCI. I'd rather talk face-to-face.”

“Fantastic, we'll have to eat at a shitty restaurant where nobody else wants to go.”

“Please.”

“Fine.”

“How about that one shitty place we used to like to go?”

“TGI Fridays?”

“No, the sushi place.”

“Old Dominion isn’t shitty, Legend.”

“I know, but if I ask for a table in the back we can whisper.”

“Fine. Let’s meet late; I have a ton of work. How about 1300?”

“That works for me. See you then.”

He hung up the phone and felt a little surge of excitement and anticipation. He wasn’t sure why he hadn’t called her since their last hookup. It wasn’t because he hadn’t wanted to see her; the reason was pedestrian, in all honesty. He had gotten busy, and too much time had gone by. Then calling had felt obligatory and awkward. Girls aren’t turned on by obligatory and awkward, so he hadn’t called.

*What the hell am I doing? Now is not the time for worrying about relationship bullshit.*

He pushed his chair back from his desk and walked over to the small closet in his office. He opened the door and pulled out one of three suits he kept. The gray one, he decided. For today’s meetings, he would eschew his Army uniform. Working and traveling in civilian clothes went hand-in-hand with working for 231. Outside the Pentagon, 80 percent of the people he dealt with on a daily basis were either civilians or nonmilitary government employees. Or spies. One must never forget about the spies.

After a quick change, he headed out the door for Dulles to pick up Malcolm Madden.

The Legend of Zelda was on the move . . . Where this strange new adventure was about to take him, he had no idea, but there was a spark in his step now. A spark that wasn’t there when he had walked into the Puzzle Palace this morning.

# CHAPTER 6

## *Washington, Dulles International Airport*

Malcolm Madden fidgeted in line.

He couldn't help himself. He was nervous.

*Do you have any meats, fruits, vegetables, plants, seeds, soil, animals, or animal products to declare?* That was what the customs form had said. He had checked the little box labeled “no,” but this was a lie. He did have items to declare, specifically *Camponotus rufipes* infected with *Ophiocordyceps camponoti-rufipedis*. Collecting samples of the Brazilian carpenter ant and the parasitic fungus named after its host species had been the purpose of his two-week vacation to the Amazonian jungle. While most people selected their vacation destinations in search of exotic cuisine, inspiring art and architecture, and the opportunity to visit famous cultural-heritage sites, Malcolm Madden used his vacations to find and collect mind-controlling parasitic organisms.

*Ophiocordyceps camponoti-rufipedis*, popularly referred to as the zombie-ant fungus, was generating considerable buzz in entomological circles. What made this particular parasitic fungus so intriguing was that, despite not having a nervous system itself, it was somehow capable of manipulating an ant brain. Once infected with fungal spores, an unwitting ant quickly became a slave to *Ophiocordyceps camponoti-rufipedis*. The fungus infiltrated its host's brain and then actively modified the ant's behavior to



facilitate its own reproductive life cycle. Instead of behaving like a normal ant, an infected ant would climb into the understory canopy, clamp its jaws to the bottom of a leaf, and wait to die. After death, a fungal stalk grew from the head of the ant cadaver, spewing fresh infectious spores toward the forest floor below to infect other foraging ants and start the cycle anew. The fungus's adaption was altogether remarkable, and for an ant, the stuff of nightmares.

Malcolm was not an entomologist; he was not even a biologist. He was a cognitive neuroscientist and artificial intelligence subject-matter expert at DARPA. The experiment he intended to perform on the ants—euthanize them at different stages of the infection to observe the precise mechanism of neural infiltration and control—was neither funded nor directed by DARPA. It was one of his many little pet projects. His boss at DARPA was smart. Not smart in the same ways that he was smart, but rather in the ways of human motivation and productivity. She understood that people like Malcolm were not assembly-line workers. That a mind like his didn't think and work linearly or sequentially all the time. *Creative abrasion, idea cross-pollination, chance capture, disruptive collaboration, epiphany mutation*—these were terms that Cyril Singleton liked to use, some of which he was certain she'd coined herself. She was the best boss he'd ever had, and he loved her for it.

He loved her for everything else that she was too.

"Next," the customs agent said at the window ahead.

There were two people in front of him in line. Malcolm felt his forehead break out in a sweat. He cursed silently. He was a terrible liar—always had been. Ever since he was little, he'd been a rule follower. Except for when the rules were unjust. Even the meek should not have to tolerate injustice. *Especially the meek*, he told himself. There were certain rules no person should be made to follow. As he matured and the complex intercourse and contradictions of governance, religion, and economics became self-evident to him, he constantly revised his moral code to suit. Morality is nuance. Very few people understood this.

The customs declaration and import procedures, however, were both just and prudent. They had been drafted with foresight and validated many times over by transgression. The Asian carp, Dutch elm disease, and zebra mussels were all examples of invasive species that had infiltrated the North American ecosystem with disastrous consequences. What he was doing, smuggling an aggressive alien species into the United States, posed an undeniable threat. Should the *Ophiocordyceps camponoti-rufipedis* fungus get out and invade the local biosphere, the impact could range from damaging to devastating. If local carpenter ants were susceptible to the zombie-ant fungus, then entire colonies could collapse. Worst-case scenario, it could cause an extinction-level event for the local species, which had not coexisted with the fungus for millennia like the Brazilian ants had. That was the crux of the problem with invasive organisms: indigenous species simply could not adapt fast enough.

Someone put a hand on his shoulder, giving him a start.

“Dr. Madden,” a harsh male voice said.

He turned to face a uniformed security officer. “Yes.” The word came out meek and pathetic. So pathetic it made him sick.

“Please come with me, sir,” the guard said and pulled him out of the queue.

“But I didn’t go through customs yet,” he protested.

“I know” was all the guard said.

“I’m an American,” he said.

“We know,” the guard said, changing up the pronoun.

“Where are you taking me? I did nothing wrong.”

The guard didn’t answer, which sent Malcolm’s anxiety to eleven. The compulsion to talk and tell this guard about the container of ants was overpowering. *I have to come clean. I have to tell them the truth before they search my bags. When you’re caught, it is better to tell the truth.* His mother’s wooden spoon against his bare buttocks had inculcated that lesson, and it was forever branded on his psyche.

“This way, sir,” the guard said, gesturing to what looked like an interrogation room. The metal door to the room was shut, but Malcolm could see a man in a gray suit standing inside, his back to the door. The guard opened the door and stepped to the side.

Flushed and dripping with sweat now, Malcolm entered the small room as the door shut behind him.

“Tell me about the bugs,” the man in the suit said, keeping his back to Malcolm.

“Wha-wha-what bugs?” he stuttered.

“The bugs in your bag. The nasty little buggers you’re trying to smuggle into the country.”

“I’m sorry; I’m sorry,” he said. “I should’ve filled out the paperwork, but—” He stopped midsentence when the other man’s shoulders began to bounce with laughter. Then the suit turned around. “Major Tyree?” Malcolm breathed with euphoric relief.

The Pentagon officer from 231 smiled broadly at him. “How was your trip, Dr. Madden?”

“It was fine. Great, actually,” he said, glancing around for the next surprise guest. “What are you doing here?”

“Saving you from another embarrassing incident, it appears.”

Malcolm was tongue-tied, not sure how to respond. Sometimes he had trouble with subtext, and right now he couldn’t tell what Major Tyree’s endgame was. So he stayed quiet and let the Major play his cards first.

“I was talking with Cyril Singleton this morning, and she mentioned you might have forgotten to file the paperwork for your specimens. I took the liberty of having my admin send over the approved forms with the necessary blanks for you to complete here before going through customs. If you wouldn’t mind handing over your declaration form and completing these papers instead,” Tyree said, trading him a stack of forms for the little card Malcolm had completed.

The knot in Malcolm's stomach unraveled, and he could finally breathe again.

"Oh, er, yes. Thank you, Major. I was in such a rush packing, I must have forgotten the forms altogether," he said. He took a seat at the empty table.

Later, seated in the front passenger's seat of Tyree's Ford Fusion as they cruised east on the 267, Malcolm decided to forgive Tyree for having a little fun at his expense. Tyree, to his surprise, turned out to be fascinated by the zombie-ant parasite and was happy to listen as Malcolm rambled on the topic.

"And it's not the only species of mind-altering parasite," Malcolm said. "Last spring I flew to Costa Rica and collected *Hymenoepimecis argyraphaga* specimens."

"Is that a fungus also?"

"No, it's a parasitic wasp who lays eggs on the abdomen of a particular orb-weaver spider. After hatching, the wasp larva injects a mind-controlling chemical into the spider, stimulating its host to build a specialized web cocoon for the larva."

"Does the wasp kill the spider?"

"The larva consumes the spider as its final meal before its metamorphosis into an adult wasp."

"Nasty."

"If you think that's bad, then you'll love *Dicrocoelium dendriticum*."

"Is that the snail parasite?"

"Very good, Major. I'm impressed. I didn't realize you were a fellow parasite aficionado."

"I think I read an article in *Scientific American*. Remind me what the snail parasite does again."

"*Dicrocoelium dendriticum* is a type of lancet liver fluke that has quite a complex life cycle, utilizing three host species. First, land snails consume fluke eggs in infected cow dung. The eggs hatch in the snails, where the larval flukes burrow into the snail's digestive system and

mature to juvenile flukes. The snails combat the infection by encapsulating the flukes in cysts and sloughing them off as slime balls in the grass. Foraging ants eat the slime balls and become infected with the juvenile flukes. Once the flukes mature, they become ready to transition to their final host so they can lay eggs. But for this to happen, the ant has to be eaten by a grazing cow or sheep, and ruminants are not ant-eaters. So the flukes do something very clever: they burrow out of the ant's digestive system and make their way to the ant's subesophageal ganglion nerve cluster. During the day, the ant behaves like a normal ant, but after sundown when the temperature drops, the flukes take control of the ant and force it to climb to the top of a blade of grass, clamp down with its mandibles, and wait to be eaten by a grazing cow. If the ant escapes digestion that night, the fluke releases control and lets it go about being an ant again during the day. When nightfall comes anew, the fluke takes control again and zombifies the ant until morning."

"Zombie-ant fluke is even more disturbing than zombie-ant fungus," Tyree said. "The fact that the fluke releases control each day only to wrest it back again each night is so—I don't know—archetypal. Light and shadow, good versus evil . . . in a weird sort of way, it's almost like the biological equivalent of the Jedi mind trick."

Malcolm nodded. It was an interesting metaphysical analogy the Major was making. Maybe Tyree was more intelligent than Malcolm had given him credit for. The guy was certainly making a name for himself, albeit by standing on DARPA's shoulders. Every new and obscure piece of technology Tyree harvested from the field, he routed through Cyril for evaluation. To make matters worse, the Army man had started dragging Cyril along on his scouting trips. Water-cooler banter had already dubbed them the new Mulder and Scully, which chafed Malcolm more than it probably should have. Now, to hear that Cyril had outsourced the task of picking him up from the airport to Tyree . . .

“What is the real reason you intercepted me at the airport, Major?” Malcolm asked. “I don’t think it was to save me from my administrative pitfalls.”

Tyree answered the question by talking for several minutes but ultimately provided Malcolm with very little of substance.

“So, to paraphrase,” Malcolm said, “there’s an object being transported here from the Middle East. You have absolutely no idea what this object is or where it originally came from.”

“Yeah, that’s the long and short of it,” the Major answered.

“Why involve me?” was Malcolm’s next question, but he already knew the answer. He just wanted to hear the other man say it.

“Because you are DARPA’s in-house guru on artificial intelligence, and according to General Kane, this object communicated with three people and somehow induced seizures afterward. If there is anyone on this planet who is smart enough to assess what the hell this thing is, that person is you, Dr. Madden.”

Malcolm turned to look at Tyree and tried to decide if he should verbalize his true thoughts on the matter. Clearly the Army officer had no idea what he was dealing with. There was no artificial intelligence capable of communicating telepathically—which was essentially what the report Tyree had summarized from General Kane implied. However, a mechanism for *technological* telepathic communication of thoughts from one brain to another *did* exist . . . It simply went by a different moniker. If some breakthrough technology had occurred, then Malcolm certainly would have heard about it. For argument’s sake, however, he decided to play the scenario out. Assuming a breakthrough had occurred, why would any research team, corporation, or foreign military deposit an object with this capability in some obscure cave in Afghanistan? It was entirely nonsensical. Which left only two alternatives: the entire story was a hoax fabricated by the soldiers to get shipped home, or the object was extraterrestrial in origin. Certainly Tyree must have considered both these possibilities. But if so, why hadn’t he mentioned them?

Compartmentalization? Operational security? To avoid embarrassment? Malcolm sighed; this felt like a hoax.

But on the off chance it wasn't . . . bowing out was not an option.

“So I can count you in?” the Major pressed. “Will you lead the technical investigation?”

“Yeah, you can count me in,” Malcolm said, thinking, *But only because I don't trust anyone else to do it.*

# GLOSSARY

**ARPA**—Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA precursor)

**BRIG**—Ballistics Research Information Gathering

**CASEVAC**—casualty evacuation

**CDC**—Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

**CIA**—Central Intelligence Agency

**CRISPR**—Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats  
(DNA-editing tool pronounced *crisper*)

**CO**—commanding officer

**DARPA**—Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency

**DOD**—Department of Defense

**DS&T**—CIA's Directorate of Science and Technology



**EOD**—explosive ordnance disposal

**EXFIL**—exfiltrate

**ICBM**—intercontinental ballistic missile

**IED**—incendiary explosive device

**JCAD CED**—joint chemical agent detector with chemical explosive detection

**LCC**—launch control center

**LOX**—liquid oxygen

**MCCC**—Missile Combat Crew Commander

**MEDEVAC**—medical evacuation

**MFT**—missile facilities technician

**MOAB**—Mother of All Bombs

**MP**—military police

**NGO**—nongovernmental organization

**NOC**—non-official cover

**OIC**—officer in charge

**ONR**—Office of Naval Research

**OPSEC**—operational security

**PCR**—polymerase chain reaction (DNA amplification technique)

**QRF**—quick reaction force

**SCIF**—Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility

**SITREP**—situation report

**SMS**—strategic missile squadron

**SyNAPSE**—Systems of Neuromorphic Adaptive Plastic Scalable  
Electronics

**TIMS**—Office of Technology Integration, Management, and Security

**TMS**—transcranial magnetic stimulation

**USAF**—United States Air Force

**USAMRIID**—United States Army Medical Research Institute of  
Infectious Diseases

**WD**—Westfield Dynamics (DARPA front company)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Photo © 2012 Jennifer Hensley



Brian Andrews is a US Navy veteran and nuclear engineer who served as an officer on a fast-attack submarine in the Pacific. He is a Park Leadership Fellow, has a master's degree in business from Cornell, and holds a psychology degree from Vanderbilt. He is the author of the Think Tank thrillers, *The Infiltration Game*, and *The Calypso Directive*; and coauthor of the *Wall Street Journal* bestselling Tier One thriller series (*Tier One*, *War Shadows*, and *Crusader One*) with friend and fellow veteran Jeffrey Wilson. Andrews is a husband, father, and advocate of planetary stewardship, and would like to someday visit Mars. Discover more about the author at [www.andrews-wilson.com](http://www.andrews-wilson.com) or follow him on Twitter @bandrewsjwilson.