



The God Virus

Skip Coryell

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The God Virus

The 1,000-year night begins...

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Reaffirming Faith in God, Family, and Country!

For Sara Sunbreak.

The light of my life.

CHAPTER 1

The Treachery - September 7

STEVEN Maxwell was a Cyber Terrorism Specialist for the United States Department of Homeland Security. To put it plainly, he was a government geek. To be even more specific, he was assigned to the National Cyber Security Division. His job was to simulate attacks on the private sector power grid and then develop procedures for defending against any cyber weaknesses he discovered.

And Steven Maxwell was very good at his job.

Despite that, he had grown unhappy with his position and with his meager pay. If that had been his only complaint, he would have simply gone to the private sector and gotten a raise. But the roots of his discontent ran deeper, much, much deeper. And that's why he was sitting in a coffee shop, waiting for a man he'd never met, contemplating a terrorist act, the same kind he worked so patriotically to guard against every single day. He looked around him now. It was an open room, with tables all around him, and he felt hemmed in by people. It's not that he hated people. He liked them as everyone else did, on a case-by-case basis. The woman to his left was typing on a laptop. It was cheap hardware and Steven turned his nose up. She was cute though.

He looked back down at the walnut-veneered table top beneath his folded hands, sitting calmly beside his Blackberry. The question nagging him right now was this: Was he a traitor? Was he capable of selling out his country?

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Steven pushed the self-indictment aside. No, he could never betray his nation. But still...he was here wasn't he? The man had left a message and Steven had responded. He hadn't said no. On the other hand, he hadn't said yes either. Besides, it wasn't all black and white. The country was already lost. The government deficit was closing in on thirty trillion dollars, and hyperinflation was beginning to set in. If the Chinese ever called in their loans, the game would be over. He mused about it for a second. And then there was the proposed government take-over of the internet. Not just regulation, but an actual iron-fisted, jack-booted cyber-shackled software tyranny. From what he'd been seeing around the office, the higher ups had been preparing for it for years, and now they were ready to erase the final vestige of American freedom. Maybe he was doing the country a favor by bringing down the house of cards now before the commies took the first shot. Yes, maybe he wasn't a traitor? Perhaps he was America's first cyber savior? Interesting thought. He had to admit that the hacker part of him would revel in laying low the powerful.

The blonde waitress walked over and placed a napkin down in front of him and then his glass of Mountain Dew on top. She was shapely, with a face that merited a second glance. He smiled weakly without looking up.

"Thank you."

The waitress walked away silently. Steven stared at her butt as it moved out across the room. He had always been polite. He looked down at the green liquid, watching the fizzy bubbles break free one at a time from the side of the glass and float quickly up to the surface beside the crushed ice. He smiled nervously. Yes, he'd always been polite ... not very confident though, especially with the ladies. He wondered why they never asked him out?

He ran his fingers through his greasy, long hair and took a sip of his Dew before glancing down nervously at the time on his Blackberry. The man was late. He put his drink back

down on the table, and that's when he saw the writing on the already-dampening napkin in front of him. He picked it up. It was written in black ink, a barely-readable scribble of characters. He squinted his eyes to read it.

*"Go out the back door.
Turn left down the alley
Wait by the dumpster."*

Steven looked up nervously, placing his palm over the napkin so no one could read it. He glanced around the café, wondering if they could see him right now. He was scared, but it was a thrilling fear, one that gave him chills and made him feel more alive than usual. He got up and pretended to walk to the restroom, but then he kept going down the dark hallway and out into the shadowed alley. The wooden door slammed shut behind him like a vault, and he cursed himself at his lack of stealth. The warm, muggy air hit his face and he breathed in the late summer humidity. His asthma didn't like it. He looked to his left and then to his right. No one was there, so he walked over to the dumpster, barely discernible ten yards away. He got the feeling someone was watching him, and he caught himself wondering if anyone was hiding inside the trash. He laughed nervously at his paranoia. That was silly. He was just going to talk to a gentleman about a business deal. It's not like they were spies or anything.

That's when he felt the barrel of the gun press against the back of his left ear. He froze, and all he could think was, *I knew it! He was hiding in the trash!*

"Don't move, Mr. Maxwell. I'd hate to blow your head off before we have a chance to hire you."

The man had a chilling voice, like Anthony Hopkins in *Silence of the Lambs*. The adrenalin surge hit him hard and unexpectedly, and that's when Steven felt the wetness run down his legs and soak into his socks. Right now he felt like more geek than spy. Finally he found his voice. It wavered when he spoke.

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“Why the gun?”

The man laughed, but ignored his question.

“In ten seconds a van will pull up at the end of the alley. You and I will walk slowly over and get in the back. You will cooperate. You will not cry out. Do you understand?”

When Steven nodded, the gun barrel rubbed softly against the hair on his scalp. It almost tickled. He heard the van’s engine before he saw it. The gun pushed him forward and Steven walked. A few seconds later he was pushed inside and the door slid shut. He didn’t resist as a pillow case pulled down over his head. It seemed odd to him, but as the van sped away, all he could think was *I hope I don’t get in trouble for not paying for my drink.*



“We’ve been watching you closely, Mr. Maxwell.”

The man paused but Steven didn’t answer. He wasn’t sure it was a question. Besides, on the ride over they’d already hit him twice for speaking, and he wasn’t about to risk it again. In the past twenty minutes he’d been kidnapped at gunpoint, bagged, beaten, and now he was duct-taped to a chair. His first thought was *I’ve decided not to be the cyber savior of the world. I like my boring, government-geek job with low pay. In fact, I can’t wait to get back to my small, cramped cubicle and churn out work that will be unappreciated by my boss and my peers.*

“I spoke to you, Mr. Maxwell and you didn’t respond. That is very rude.”

“Uh...” Steven hesitated, unsure what he could say to avoid another beating.

“Take the bag off his head so I can understand him, please.”

The voice of this man was different than the Hannibal Lecter who’d abducted him. It was soft and measured, almost seductive in nature. He felt the bag being ripped off his

face and the bright light hit him full in the eyes. He blinked several times until his pupils adjusted. The man across from him was sitting in the dark, just a shadowed form. Steven glanced up and the light overhead seemed to shine down on only him, blinding him, laying him bare, illuminating every shadow of his wrinkled soul.

“Now, Mr. Maxwell. Let’s try this again, shall we? You would like to have a civil discussion with me, wouldn’t you?”

Steven nodded his head up and down.

“I asked you a question, Mr. Maxwell, and if you don’t answer me, then I’ll take it as a rude gesture on your part.”

Then Steven heard the Hannibal Lecter voice speak for the first time since the alley, this time in a hushed whisper.

“He nodded *yes*.”

His inquisitor smiled.

“I can’t hear your head rattle when you nod, Mr. Maxwell. I’m blind.”

This time Steven found his voice.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

The man in the chair leaned forward as he spoke.

“Good, human compassion. I like that. No need to pity me though. I hate pity. It’s only deserving of the weak, and I am anything but that.”

He leaned back in his chair again before continuing.

“As I said before, Mr. Maxwell. We’ve been watching you closely, and we know that you are less than thrilled with your job, your boss, your pay, and, most importantly, the U.S. government.”

The man paused.

“Mr. Maxwell, please be kind enough to wait for my pause, and then respond. Things will go much smoother if we have a conversational protocol. Do you agree?”

Steven started to nod his head, but caught himself.

“Yes, sir.”

“Oh my! You are so polite! I like that.”

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“Thank you, sir.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere. You should respond now to my previous statement, Mr. Maxwell.”

Steven thought for a moment, then spoke.

“Yes, all that’s true. But how do you know all that?”

The man just smiled but ignored the question.

“We are here to help you, Mr. Maxwell. You’ve spent your whole life working hard and excelling at what you do, but no one has rewarded you. You graduated valedictorian of your high school then on to MIT where you graduated early, Magna Cum Laude. You spent ten years at Microsoft before being recruited by Homeland Security, and you’ve been there for six years without a single promotion.”

The man paused.

“Steven?”

“Uh, yes sir. That is all correct.”

“Good. You never married. You don’t even date, although you do surf pornographic websites when your urges get too much to bear.”

He paused. Steven lowered his head slightly.

“Yes sir.”

“Nothing to be ashamed of, Mr. Maxwell, everyone looks at porn.” He laughed out loud. “Well, not everyone. I’m blind, and braille just leaves way too much for the imagination, if you know what I mean.”

He paused again.

“Yes sir.”

“Now what I want to do, Mr. Maxwell, is to compensate you for the wrongs perpetrated against you by society. I’d like to place the sum of ten million dollars in a numbered Swiss account in your name. In return, all I need from you is a favor. A simple favor, really, only five minutes of your time. Are you interested, Mr. Maxwell? Shall I continue?”

Steven looked back up and thought for a moment. He remembered his boss at work, how he watched his every move, how he timed his breaks and lunch hours, how his peers

laughed at him behind his back, and how the women never looked at him the way he looked at them. He weighed the morality of what he was certain they were going to ask him to do, because, in truth, he'd thought of it on his own many times. Getting back. Getting revenge. Getting rich. Bringing them all down to size. Then he spoke.

“Yes. Please go on.”

The blind man smiled like a cat with a mouse between his paws.

“You have to understand that once I share this with you, that you must go through with it. If you don't, if you back out, if you turn on us, then my associates will visit you again, and they will do so with less subtlety than today. Understood?”

Steven nodded out of habit but quickly followed up with words.

“I understand.”

“Good!” The blind man nodded to the person with Hannibal Lecter's voice, who then stepped forward into the light. Steven looked up and saw the black balaclava over his face, but cringed when he met the man's gaze. His eyes were cold, distant and hard. He never wanted to see this man again. Steven was reminded of the cold, wet urine on his pant legs which contrasted with the hot sweat on his brow and chest.

The man reached into his jacket pocket. He remembered the gun and Steven stiffened in fear. He pulled out a small memory stick and placed it in Steven's front, shirt pocket. The man's eyes smiled like ice, then he backed away and resumed his place beside the blind man who started talking again.

“On that memory device is a piece of software we'd like you to load into the proper computer system. We have chosen you because you have intimate knowledge of all power grid vulnerabilities. You know when, where and how to overcome all failsafes and defenses. Do you understand, Mr.

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Maxwell?”

Steven looked around nervously. “You want me to take down the grid.”

For the first time, the man nodded before he spoke.

“Yes, Mr. Maxwell. Will you do that for us, please?”

Steven didn’t need to think about it for too long. He hated the government. He hated his job. He hated his life. And here was a chance to change it. This was his shot at happiness. He could be important. On the flipside, he comprehended that if he refused, they would kill him right there in the dark room. His body would be dumped somewhere cold and lonely and perhaps it would be eaten by fish or crabs. He considered both options and chose piña coladas on the beach in a warm, sunny island over sleeping with the fishes. Not only was he polite, but he’d also graduated Magna Cum Laude. He was no dummy.

“Of course, sir. I wouldn’t want to be rude.”

The blind man laughed out loud.

“I like you, Mr. Maxwell. I like you a lot. My associates will see you get home safely now.”

The man stood.

“Oh, this must be done tomorrow at 4PM Eastern Standard Time. Is that good for you?”

This time Steven smiled.

“Yes sir. Nice meeting you, sir.”

The blind man laughed as Hannibal Lecter led him away into the darkness.

“He’s a polite man, such a polite man.”

CHAPTER 2

Menomonie, Wisconsin - September 7

DAN Branch raised the binoculars to his eyes and what he saw broke his heart. Oddly enough, it also made his blood boil. He loved his wife, and he was going to kill her with his bare hands.

He watched as she leaned across the table at the local Applebee's and kissed the other man full on the mouth. Dan ground his teeth but couldn't bring himself to pry the binoculars away from his eyes. In a fit of anger, the only question on his mind was "Which one of them do I torture first?"

Dan took a deep breath and lowered the binoculars. In his heart of hearts, he knew it would be foolish and wrong to do anything right now. He needed to calm down. He needed to get some distance. After all, this wasn't her first affair. Dan thought about that for a moment. *Affair*, it was such a harmless, such a benign word to affix to an act that almost always resulted in the destruction of a family, in the pain and loss of divorce, and in the heart-wrenching confusion that kids would feel for a lifetime. Instead of *affair*, maybe they should call it *treachery*. But somehow he just couldn't imagine his wife saying, "Hi honey. I'm having a *treachery* and I'm going to divorce you, break your heart and warp our children for life. You don't mind do you?"

He reached down into the cup holder and picked up the mocha Frappuccino. He liked the glass bottle. It just seemed cool to him. He took a sip of his all-time-favorite drink, but

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the liquid had somehow lost its flavor.

Dan took the binoculars off from around his neck and laid them beside him on the seat of his old Ford, F-150 pickup truck. The body was rusted out, the frame was a bit bent, the windows sometimes rolled down but wouldn't go back up unless you pulled with one hand and rolled with another. But the radio worked very well.

A mighty sigh left Dan's tortured lips, and a tear rolled down his right cheek. He wiped it away, but another quickly took its place. He had to divorce her. He knew that. He had forgiven the first fling, but how could he let it go this time, assuming she even wanted to stay married to him, which he doubted. The woman had always confused him. She was so nice when she wasn't drinking too much and sleeping with other men.

It was 8 o'clock at night in early September with a heat wave hanging on like Velcro, so he had both windows open to keep the heat from killing him. The truck had an air conditioner, but it didn't work. He had married Debbie 6 years ago in a park just outside of town. It had been a beautiful wedding, but Debbie had gotten drunk at the reception and passed out on their way to the motel. The marriage had gone downhill from there.

He raised the binoculars up again and saw them holding hands atop the table. Suddenly, he felt very stupid and ashamed. She was making a fool of him for the whole town to see. Other people had to know. He could tell by the sympathetic looks they gave him at church and at work. He hated the pity. He put the binoculars down again and turned the ignition key. The truck turned over a few times and then clicked like the staccato of a machine gun.

"Darn it, you lousy piece of crap!"

He popped the hood latch, hopped out of his truck and slammed the door behind him in anger. The battery was old, and this would keep happening until he could afford to buy a new one. He opened the hood and looked down at the battery

cables again. They were a little loose. Dan got a Crescent wrench from the toolbox in the truck bed and tightened them down. Just as he was finishing, he heard a voice behind him.

“Hey Dan. You need a hand?”

He turned around and saw Chris Flanders, his friend from work. He forced a smile onto his face. He didn’t want Chris to know what he was doing here or that his wife was cheating on him.

“Hi Chris. Just have a loose cable. It should start up once I tighten it down. Just finished up.”

Chris put his truck in park and shut off the engine. Dan’s heart sank. *Great.*

“Well, I’ll just stick around until I know everything’s okay. What are friends for, right?”

Dan nodded. “Yeah, right. Thanks.” He quickly hopped back into the cab and turned the ignition, but nothing happened. He slapped the steering wheel with his hand and then bounced his forehead off it for good measure.

“Ouch! Man that hurts!”

Outside he saw his friend shaking his head. Chris walked up to the open window. He was a big man, 28 years old, and always seemed too happy. Chris had that sympathetic look in his eyes, and Dan felt his stomach sink.

“Dan, I just came from inside the restaurant, and I saw Debbie in there sucking face with that no-good McKinley fella from Eau Claire.” He reached through the window and placed his big, meaty hand on Dan’s left shoulder and squeezed firmly. “You don’t gotta take that crap from her. You need to do something, man!”

Dan looked up, and the tears were welling in his eyes again. But he shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

“What can I do, Chris? I’m at the end of my rope here.”

Chris smiled. “That’s his truck over there. The fancy, new, midnight blue four-wheel-drive with the custom flaming eagle paint job on the hood.”

Dan turned his face to look at it. “Yeah, okay. So he’s got

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a nice truck. So what.”

Chris shook his head impatiently. “Give me a break, Dan. Don’t you have any self respect at all?” He turned away as if controlling his frustration. Then a moment later he turned back again. “Okay, here’s the deal. I’ll show you what to do the first time, but after this you’re on your own. Agreed?”

Dan cocked his head to one side but finally nodded his head. “Okay, I guess.”

Chris smiled. “Just watch and learn, my friend.” He reached in through Dan’s window and picked up the 12-inch Crescent wrench off the dash and walked over to the truck of Debbie’s lover.

Dan sat inside his beat-up truck and watched in awe as his friend began to abuse the man’s shiny, brand, new truck. First, Chris worked over the front end, breaking the headlights and the turn signals. With his free hand he pulled out a jackknife and slit all four tires. Dan watched as the truck suddenly became about 8 inches shorter. Crack! The windshield was gone. Then as a final coup de grace, he scraped his knife several times across the flaming eagle on the hood. It sounded like fingernails on a chalkboard. The 3,000-dollar custom paint job was ruined.

Chris backed away and then nodded in satisfaction before walking back over to Dan. He reached in and set the wrench back on the dash.

“Ya see, Dan, none of what I just did will keep your wife from cheating on you, because she’s a worthless, conniving bitch. But when people treat you like that and you do nothing, it leaves you damaged on the inside. You can’t bury the anger. It’s toxic man. Like a cancer it’ll eat you alive.” He paused as if forming his thoughts. “You have to dump her. It’s the only way she’ll respect you. And respect is a lot more important than love.”

Chris turned to walk away, but then stopped and canted his head back toward him. “Stop by the house if you need to get drunk at a safe place. I’ll buy the beer.”

And then he got into his truck and drove away. Dan looked back over at the demolished truck and shuddered. All he could say was “Wow!”.



DHS National Cyber Security Division - September 8

The next day Steven Maxwell glanced down into the lower-right-hand corner of his computer screen. The time was 3:52PM EST. He reached down into his jacket pocket and his fingers closed over the thumb drive. Thumb drives were restricted here at DHS, so he'd been forced to smuggle it in. In truth, he liked the fear, even though the risk was great. Late last night he'd looked at the contents of the drive. There was the promised piece of software, which he immediately tried to open. It was locked. Then he saw a README FILE which he opened. It came up in MS Wordpad. In big, black characters it said:

4PM EST
You know what to do.
We are watching you!

Steven looked up and scanned the other cubicles around him. Where are they? Can they really get inside here?

“Steven! Did you finish debugging that tracer module yet!”

Steven jumped forward in his seat, almost falling off onto the floor. He pulled his hand out of his pocket to catch himself from falling. As he did so, the thumb drive fell to the carpet. He quickly placed his foot over it, hoping his boss hadn't seen it.

“I asked you a question, Steven! Did you finish the module or not!”

Steven knew it wasn't really a question, but a command. He lowered his head into his best bottom-of-the-pecking-order fashion and nodded his head slowly. He was very care-

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ful not to make eye contact.

“Yes, sir. I was just getting ready to send it on to you for review.”

His boss smiled triumphantly.

“Good! I need it by 4:30 so I can run a test on the full tracer tool. Make sure I get it by then.”

Steven nodded meekly.

“Yes sir. I will.”

His boss walked away. Steven watched him go and glanced back down at his computer clock. It read 3:57 PM. He looked around to make sure no one was watching. Then he picked up a pen and clumsily dropped it to the floor. He slowly reached down to retrieve it and scooped up the thumb drive as well. The clock changed to 3:58PM.

He took the cap off the drive and inserted it into the USB port on his computer. He looked around again, trying not to look nervous. Of course, to anyone watching, he simply looked like a man who was nervous, but trying not to look nervous. The MS Explorer window came up and he looked at the two files. One said README. The other said THEGODVIRUS.EXE. The clock clicked over to 3:59PM.

What did the God Virus mean? What would it do? Would it bring down the whole power grid? If so, for how long? He'd been thinking about it half the night. He wanted so much to be able to explore the code. Apparently, the only way to find out was to double click.

A stubborn, cold sweat formed on his brow and he quickly wiped it away with his polyester shirt sleeve. He placed his right hand on his mouse and moved the pointer over the file. He hesitated, the small, black arrow poised like an electronic dagger, ready to stab. The digits on his computer clock rolled over to 4:00PM with a deafening crash. Time was up.

His right forefinger moved down and rested on the mouse button. He waited. He thought. He contemplated. He mused. But there was no answer. It was what it was, and the only way to find out was to...

Steven thought of his boss and double clicked.



Menomonie, Wisconsin

The next night Dan walked into his house and heard loud music coming from his 14-year-old step son's bedroom. He walked to the door and knocked politely, but there was no answer. He knocked again.

"Jeremy! Can you turn that down please?" There was still no answer, so he opened the door. On the bed, in a tangle of naked arms and legs was his step son with the 12-year-old neighbor girl in the height of adolescent ecstasy.

"Jeremy!"

The boy looked up and immediately became angry.

"Get out of my room! Now!"

Dan's jaw dropped open, and he backed out and closed the door. Inside the room, he could hear the squeaking of springs over the chorus of some really angry music. Normally he would walk away, but this time the image of Chris Flanders came to mind. He saw the Crescent wrench come down on first one headlight and then the other. He heard the knife scraping over the paint job, and a newfound resolution steeled itself inside him. He hesitated, took a deep breath and opened the door.

"Get outta my room, old man!"

Slowly and ever so calmly, Dan walked over to the corner of the messy room and picked up the ball bat. He smiled and looked Jeremy full in the eyes. The boy's face took on a confused look. Dan took a full swing at the stereo and the music suddenly stopped. Dan swung again and again and again.

"What are you doing to my stuff! Are you crazy?"

Dan looked up.

"Tonya, it's time for you to go home now."

The young girl clutched the blanket over herself as she

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picked up her clothes and hurriedly put them back on. The look of terror was ever so present, and Dan had a feeling she would never come back.

Jeremy stood up, totally naked. He was a big kid for fourteen, muscular, and broad-shouldered. He took a step toward Dan and raised his fists. Dan dropped the bat and punched his step-son in the face three times before the boy went down in a heap, clutching his hands over the blood.

Tonya skirted past him out the door.

“Have a nice day, Tonya. Tell your parents hello.”

Then he looked down at Jeremy, naked and writhing on the floor. “I’m sorry, son, but you’ve had that one coming for a long time. Sorry to make you wait so long.”

Jeremy pulled his hands away from his face and screamed as blood poured out his nose and mouth.

“I’m going to tell my mom, and she’ll call the police! She’ll take pictures of this and you’re going to jail!”

Dan nodded resolutely.

Yes, I suppose so. But the thing is, Jeremy. I really don’t care what she does. I don’t care if I go to prison for a few years, so long as I respect myself. But I do care if my step son is screwing the neighbor girl in my house, which is against the law by the way, so you’ll be joining me in prison. I also care if my wife stays out all night with other men. I care if she yells at me. I care if a young boy disrespects me in my own home. I care about all those things. However, I no longer care what the police might do to me if you call them.”

Dan crossed his arms over his massive chest and smiled.

“So, I suggest you get dressed and clean up your room. It’s a pig sty in here.”

Dan turned and closed the door behind him. He went to the kitchen, opened the refrigerator door and pulled out an ice-cold mocha Frappuccino. He tore away the cellophane, twisted off the cap and took a long swallow.

“Smooth!”

And the drink never tasted so sweet.



Arlington, Virginia

Steven was home now, lying in bed, waiting for something to happen. The blue, cotton sheet was pulled up tightly over his face, exposing only the red-streaked orbs he called eyes. His head pressed anxiously into the down-filled pillow until his neck muscles ached. The night was muggy and hot, and he had the air conditioner on full blast, but it still only brought the temperature down to 75 degrees. He needed to buy a new one. He just wanted this to be over.

Steven sat up in bed, swung his legs over the side and walked over to his computer desk. The only light in the room came from his computer screen. He pressed the “refresh” button, hoping to see new email. Nothing. He reached over and picked up his Blackberry. No text messages. No phone messages. Nothing! He was in the dark.

As he stood there, hovering nervously over the desk, his computer suddenly switched to battery power. Steven seemed confused by it. He knelt down and checked the power cord only to find everything in place. Then he picked up his Blackberry and tried to call his office phone. The phone was dead. A rush of adrenaline coursed through his bloodstream as he walked hurriedly over to the window. He looked out into the city and saw...only blackness.

Along with the adrenaline came uncontrollable anxiety. He got up. He sat down. He got up again, only to seat himself once more. Steven tried his computer, then his Blackberry. Nothing. Oddly, he felt a growing sense of accomplishment. He didn't know what he had done, nor the extent of it. Steven only knew that he'd done something. He'd affected the world and the people around him for the first time in his life. For a moment, he thought he felt something akin to pride. It was a new experience for him. But the feeling was short-lived. As Steven stood there in the dark, he heard a click at his door, then the slow creak as it opened.

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In a final moment of enlightenment, he knew they had come for him. The sense of pride faded, and was replaced with terror as he watched the blacker-than-night shadow walk slowly toward him. Steven felt like a kid in his room at night who was having a nightmare. He knew the only way to end the terror was to move, but he was paralyzed into stasis.

Steven felt the black balaclava move toward him. He sensed the presence of the gun. His eyes saw the flash of light. Then another. And another. He stood there for a full 10 seconds, then, slowly, ever so slowly, his head filled with dizziness and he collapsed to the floor.

His last sensory experience was the feeling of the gun barrel pressed against his left eye. There was a final blast, a shock, and then total, ethereal darkness.

The man with Hannibal Lecter's voice smiled beneath the mask and then turned and walked away into the thousand-year night.



The White House

“Mr. President, sir.”

President Bob Taylor looked up from the chair and grunted at his aide without speaking, all the while thinking *Why are you bothering me?*

“We have a situation, sir.”

The President looked at him impatiently. Yes, and...”

The aide spoke with a nervous edge to his voice, afraid that delivering bad news of this magnitude might not be conducive to a long and happy career in politics.

“The country is under attack, sir.”

“Excuse me?”

“Yes, sir, under cyber attack.”

Bob Taylor was about to demand more details when the lights in the oval office flickered, died, and then came back on again as emergency power kicked in. A worried look

came over his face.

“It’s the power grid, sir. The Joint Chiefs and some of the cabinet are meeting you in the situation room in 15 minutes. It doesn’t look good, sir.”

The President thought for a moment, then braced his hands on the desk as he stood. The President was a tall man, handsome, and many thought, too young to be President, especially during a crisis. He walked around the desk and hurried out of the room with the aide following him. The two Secret Service men were waiting outside the door and escorted him down to the Situation Room.



Back in Menomonie, Wisconsin, Dan Branch waited on the sofa in his underwear for the police to come and arrest him for a crime he hadn’t committed. While it was true he hadn’t destroyed his wife’s boyfriend’s truck, he had beaten up her son. He was pretty sure that was still a crime.

The remote control was in one hand and a mocha Frappuccino in the other. Dan was utterly convinced this would be his last Frappuccino for the next few years, as he was certain they didn’t serve Frappuccino in prison. Despite that, there was a smile on his face, and he felt pretty darn good. He wondered to himself *Can I go to hell for thinking like this?* He stopped channel surfing at the local Fox News station and listened to the talking head.

“The blackout appeared to begin on the eastern seaboard and has slowly spread inland. Experts say it’s still too soon to tell how far the power outage will spread and how long the power will be out on the East Coast.”

The announcer was a beautiful blonde, the one that Dan had always enjoyed watching. He instantly forgot about his own troubles and was absorbed in the news of a major power outage.

“We go now to our Fox News affiliate WPGH in

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Pittsburgh to Professor Roy Percy. The professor is the foremost expert on power grid modeling and simulation.”

Professor Percy showed up on the split screen. He wore a grey cardigan sweater and sported a bald head and black-rimmed glasses. Professor Percy was extremely overweight and had a very serious look on his face.

“Professor Percy, thanks for joining us today.”

The professor nodded but said nothing.

“What can you tell us about the nature of this power outage that seems to be hitting the entire eastern seaboard?”

The professor shifted in his seat uncomfortably and pursed his lips tightly before speaking.

“This is widespread. It’s serious. I would say that it’s a matter of extreme national security.”

The blonde reporter seemed confused by his statement.

“National security? This is a power grid problem. Isn’t it?”

Professor Percy turned away from the camera for a second in order to form his thoughts.

“Yes, Eileen, it is a power grid problem. But the Capitol of our nation is without power, so the continuity of government is of major concern right now. We have no idea when the power will be restored, what caused the power loss, or even if it can be contained.”

“So are you saying that this outage could actually spread to other parts of the United States?”

“Absolutely! For all we know this could be a cyber terrorist attack by another nation. The East Coast could be just the beginning of a very long, dark night for America.”

The reporter hesitated and looked skeptical.

“Professor, assuming this was a terrorist attack, what country is capable of doing something like this?”

“The most likely candidate is China as we’ve long known they’ve been developing a cyber-attack scenario for several years now. Many times in the past two years the Department of Homeland Security has linked smaller cyber-forays into

our power grid as originating from inside China. Kind of like a testing of their software and capabilities. They've been feeling us out, getting to know our weaknesses and vulnerabilities. I'm not the least bit surprised by this outage. Whether it's attributable to cyber terrorism or not, there are just way too many vulnerabilities in our power grid, and ..."

Suddenly, the professor's voice stopped in mid sentence and the split window turned blank. The blonde reporter seemed surprised and looked around the room for confirmation of what had happened. None came.

"I'm sorry folks, but we seem to have lost our connection with WPGH in Pittsburgh. We'll try to re-establish our connection. Stay tuned for more news when we come back."

The blonde reporter was replaced by a commercial featuring a singing, animated greensaver light bulb. Dan put the remote down on the coffee table and leaned forward. He thought to himself, *What in the world is going on?*

Just then his cell phone vibrated on the glass table top in front of him, making it move almost an inch with each pulsing vibration. His heart skipped a beat. Only one person sent him text messages, and that was Debbie, usually when she was going to be out all night, but didn't want to tell him with a phone call where he could ask questions. He picked up the cell phone and read the terse, unexpected message.

Alas Babylon! Uncle Rodney

Dan's heart leaped into his throat. He hadn't spoken to his uncle in six months. More importantly, he knew the meaning of the message. It was a code that his uncle had set up with him long ago.

And it was not good.

CHAPTER 3

Menomonie, Wisconsin - September 9

IT was 2AM as Dan pushed his overflowing cart towards the checkout lane at the local Wal*Mart. The store was usually empty at this late hour, but tonight things were different. The store had become packed within the last 10 minutes, with people frantically moving from aisle to aisle, loading up carts with food, flashlights, batteries and other supplies. Dan could see the fear in their eyes and feel the tension in the air. People had been watching the news about the power outages. They knew it was moving westward like an unstoppable wave and were stocking up just in case. Dan was suddenly happy that he'd come here so quickly. By morning the merchandise in this place was likely to be cleaned out.

As he moved to the checkout lane, he took one last look inside his cart. Among other things he had a case of Spam, two cases of pork and beans, ten 4-pound bags of rice, a camp stove, fuel, one hundred rounds of 12 gauge shotgun ammo (a mixture of buckshot, slugs, and field loads) fifty rounds of number 3 buckshot in four-ten gauge as well as fifty rounds of four-ten slugs, and one hundred rounds of nine millimeter pistol ammo. He also had an axe, a large Buck hunting knife, two sleeping bags, a machete, and last, but not least, one heavy duty truck battery.

The cashier's eyes looked tired as he rolled up to the checkout counter and began loading the supplies onto the

conveyor belt. Right about now Dan was appreciative of his Uncle Rodney for keeping him fifteen minutes ahead of the shopping horde. He glanced discreetly over at the cashier, and she was staring at him out of the corner of her eyes as she worked quickly to scan each item. Dan shook his head from side to side as he unloaded the cart. His checking account was already overdrawn, and now he was about to compound the problem by maxing out his Visa card.

He thought to himself *Alas Babylon*.

The cryptic message still echoed in his head. Dan knew his old uncle was different than most people, but still ... Uncle Rodney had never been one to panic. Dan groaned as he picked up the multi-fuel campstove. In a pinch it could also burn unleaded gasoline as well as the traditional Coleman fuel.

“Aren’t you Debbie Branch’s husband?”

The beeping scanner had suddenly stopped and the middle-aged cashier was looking over, trying to make eye contact with him. Dan avoided her gaze by continuing to load a large, blue poly tarp onto the belt.

“Ah, yeah, Debbie’s my wife.”

The lady nodded and started scanning again.

“Yep. I thought so. I cut her hair yesterday. I got a second job over at the “Clip Joint”, but it’s only part-time ya know. At least for now. As soon as business picks up there I can quit this midnight shift job and do hair full time.”

Dan didn’t say anything. He looked behind him at the crowds of people filling up their carts. They would be lining up behind him soon. He didn’t want to encourage her, but despite his silence she just kept on talking.

“So what did you think of her new hair-do?”

Dan nearly dropped the bag of rice he was lifting. He hesitated a moment. The truth was she hadn’t been home in three days, so he hadn’t seen her hair close up, but he certainly didn’t want to explain that to a total stranger.

“She was real excited about it, almost like a silly school

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girl going on a first date or something.”

Dan shuddered at the cashier's words and blood raced to his cheeks. He thought to himself, *Yes, it was a date, but certainly not the first or the last.* He smiled before speaking.

“You did a great job. Best ever I think.”

The cashier smiled. “Yeah! That's what she told me too! She said she wanted something sexy, something that would light up the bedroom when she pulled up the covers, if ya know what I mean.” She winked at Dan, and he was hating the woman more than ever now. He picked up the twenty-four inch long machete and gazed at it before finally placing it on the belt.

“So what you gonna do with all this stuff? Goin' campin' er something?”

Dan's frustration mounted as he lifted a case of Spam and then a one-hundred round box of shotgun shells onto the belt. The cart was empty now, and he was about to say something rude when someone spoke behind him.

“Excuse me, sir.”

Dan turned and looked at the Menomonie Police Officer who was standing in line behind him with a bottle of Mountain Dew. Dan redoubled his patience and forced a disarming smile.

“Yes, officer. Did you want to go ahead of me?”

The man looked into Dan's eyes as if trying to read his mind. The officer shook his head. “No, I was just wondering why someone would need all that ammunition. Hunting season's a ways off yet.”

Dan continued to smile and didn't miss a beat with his reply. “Oh, yeah I suppose it does look unusual. But you see I'm leaving for Montana in a few weeks for a big hunting, fishing and camping trip. It's a once in a lifetime deal.”

The officer almost smiled. “Yes, I go there every year with my two oldest sons. It's a good time.”

Dan nodded and started to turn away.

“But that shotgun ammo you've got isn't the best choice.

You might be better off with a high-powered rifle out there.” He looked at Dan skeptically, but Dan didn’t return his gaze.

“That’ll be eight hundred sixty two dollars and seventy-three cents.”

Dan turned around and pulled out his wallet. When he swiped the Visa card he prayed to himself, *Please, God, let the card clear just this once*. He had no idea what his wife had already charged with it. For all he knew she’d already sucked the credit cupboard bare. Dan waited a few seconds, but the cashier just stood there. The card reader screen in front of him seemed to be stuck on “Please Slide Card”. Sweat beaded up on his forehead. The cashier reached over and held out her hand. “Let me see that card for a second.”

Dan hesitated, looked over at the cop, then let her have the card. “What’s wrong?”

The woman looked at the card, turned it over in her hand a few times, then smiled. “Yeah, just what I thought. The magnetic strip is all dirty and it’s not reading it.”

Dan relaxed a bit. “Can you punch the numbers in by hand?”

The woman laughed. “Men! You’re all alike! I could punch in the numbers by hand, but then you’d still have this problem the next time you bought something! I got a better idea.” She raised the card up to her mouth and slobbered out a gob of spit onto the magnetic strip. Dan grimaced and turned away. Then she used her shirt tail to scrub off the dirt. “There! Try it now!”

Dan reached out and reluctantly grabbed the card, being careful not to touch the magnetic strip as he swiped it through the reader.

“Waiting for Approval...”

“Waiting for Approval...”

“Waiting for Approval...”

Dan began sweating again as the police officer moved closer. Finally, the screen gave him mercy.

“APPROVED!”

The God Virus

The cashier laughed out loud.

“Man you were really sweating on that one weren’t you.”

Dan faked a smile, but inside his head he picked up the machete and hacked off her head, then laughed as it rolled around on the tile floor.

“Yes, you really had me going on that one.”

Dan took his receipt, placed all the bags into the cart and nodded back to the police officer before walking away.

When he got to the parking lot he picked up his pace, hoping to get out of there before the cop made it out. After everything was loaded into the back of the pickup, he got in and drove away, leaving the obnoxious hairdresser and the nosy cop behind him.

Three blocks from the Wal*Mart Dan saw the police strobe light up the night behind him. He slammed his fist on the dash and cursed out loud before pulling over. He kept his hands on the steering wheel as the policeman walked up to the driver’s side window.

“License, registration, proof of insurance please.”

Dan looked over and recognized the cop from Wal*Mart. He was smiling. Dan reached back with his right hand to get his wallet, all the while noticing that the officer had his own right hand on the butt of his pistol. Dan moved slowly, but didn’t say a word.

The officer looked down at the documents briefly.

“Please stay inside your vehicle. I’ll run these and be right back.”

Inside, Dan was fuming. *How could it get any worse?* His wife was screwing another man; his son was screwing the neighbor girl; but the only one screwing Dan was the Wal*Mart cop. To top it all off, his Uncle Rodney, the man who’d raised him after his father’s death, had just told him to come on home, because the world was about to end. Immediately he winced. He knew better than to ask what more could go wrong. In Dan’s world, it could always get worse.

Dan looked up and the police officer was standing outside the window again. It startled him and he jumped, all the while wondering, *How do they sneak up like that. It's like they take a class in sneakiness.*

“Mr. Branch, you don't mind if I take a look inside your truck, do you. I'm sure you have nothing to hide.”

Immediately a red flag came up inside Dan's head. His Uncle Rodney had home schooled him, and he knew his rights.

“Actually, sir, I'm very tired, and I'd like to get home to bed.”

The officer's jaw tightened, and Dan could tell he wasn't used to being refused.

“If you have nothing to hide, sir, then I see no reason why you wouldn't allow me to search your vehicle.”

Dan sighed deeply. He knew this wasn't going to end well.

“Officer, with all due respect to your position and to you as an individual, you do not have permission to search my vehicle.”

A determined look spread over the officer's face, and then he frowned.

“Keep your hands where I can see them and step out of the vehicle, sir.”

Dan thought about asking him why, but he knew better. The best way to handle this was to comply with all his commands, even though his civil rights were being violated. Then he could file a complaint later on with the man's superiors.

“Of course, officer. I'll step out now.”

Just then the entire city went dark. The only light came from the spotlight of the police cruiser behind him.

“What was that?”

Dan didn't answer the policeman. The officer glanced down at Dan and ordered him not to move. Dan kept his hands on the steering wheel in plain sight. The officer hesi-

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tated, then he reached up to his right shoulder and keyed his mike.

“Dispatch, this is Unit 17. “

There was nothing but static in response. He keyed the mike again.

“Dispatch, this is Unit 17. Is anyone there?”

Inside, Dan smiled. His Uncle Rodney had been right. There was a moment of indecision on the officer’s part, then police sirens broke the silence further back inside the city limits.

Just then his microphone came back to life.

“Attention all units! Attention all units! We are now on auxiliary power. Return to base. I say again. Return to base immediately!”

The police officer threw Dan’s driver’s license and documents through the window and ran back to his cruiser. Dan listened as the tires squealed on the pavement and the siren started up.

A few seconds later, Dan was all alone on the side of the road. He let his hands drop off the steering wheel, and then he leaned his head out the window into the warm, humid, early September air. Looking up into the sky, he was awed at the sight of thousands of stars. He thought of his wife lying beside another man, and he knew he should be sad about it, maybe even crushed, but ... right now, all he could think about were the stars. They were beautiful.

He reached down and turned the ignition, but all he heard in response was the staccato clicking of a dead battery. He let his head drop down onto the top of the steering wheel and laughed out loud. Dan reached down onto the floor on the passenger side and grabbed the Crescent wrench. Thank God he’d just bought a new battery with money he didn’t have.

He stepped out of the car, looked up into the night sky and smiled. Yes, it could always get worse.



The White House - September 9

The situation room was buried deep beneath the White House. It was soundproof, bugproof, and electronically secure in every facet. The President sat at the head and each chair around the big table was already occupied. The meeting had been going on for fifteen minutes.

“So, Terrence, does the NSA agree with the FBI’s assessment of the situation?”

The President leaned back in his big, leather chair to listen to the response. Irene Sebastian was a lean woman with ever-whitening hair. Five years ago, before taking this job, it had been jet black.

“Yes, Mr. President. We agree that this is an act of cyber terrorism. But we just don’t know who is responsible. It could take weeks to figure that out.”

President Taylor looked over to his Department of Energy. “Frank, how far is this likely to spread?”

The head of the Department of Energy was a bald man with a large, bulbous nose. He took out a handkerchief and blew before answering his Commander-In-Chief.

“I don’t know, sir. I don’t have a clue. This has never happened before.”

The President looked displeased. He glanced over to his CIA Director, Anthony Hooker. “Tony?”

“Sir?”

“Who did this to us?”

He squirmed a bit in his chair but maintained eye contact with the president, which was no mean task at the moment.

“We’re not sure, sir. But we do have a list of candidates. We’re checking them out right now.”

The President tried to maintain his patience, but it was failing.

“And the candidates are?”

“China is the most obvious choice, sir, with Russia close behind. We have a lot of other enemies, but none as sophisticated as the Chinese. It’s possible that some of the richer oil-

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producing countries in the Mid-East could have purchased the technology, but not likely. My best bet is China.”

The President moved his gaze over to his immediate right at the Director of Homeland Security.

“Eleanor, is there any chance this was domestic terror?”

Eleanor Freeland was in her mid-sixties with gray hair and a slender frame for her age. Her face was creviced with wrinkles and stress marks, and her piercing blue eyes lit up when the President talked to her.

“No, Mr. President.”

“And how can you say that which such surety. You didn’t even think about it.”

She smiled dangerously.

“Because, Mr. President, in order for it to be domestic, it would had to have originated from inside my Cyber Security Division, and those people have been vetted with extreme prejudice. We run a very tight ship over there. I would say there’s hardly any chance of this being an inside job. I agree with the FBI and the CIA. I think it’s China.”

The President threw up his hands in exasperation.

“What proof do we have? I can’t attack China without proof? And if they are responsible and I don’t do something, then they could follow up with a nuclear strike to finish us off while we’re crippled.”

The Commander of the Joint Chiefs thought this the right time to pipe in.

“Mr. President, if I may.”

The President nodded curtly.

“Mr. President, we have time to think about this. The blackout is contained to the East Coast, and most of our nuclear assets are located either deep inside the heartland or out to sea in submarines. We can wait a while and still order a counterattack if need be. There’s only one problem.”

“Continue.”

“What if it is the Chinese? What if the blackout spreads to our missile silos, to NORAD, to command and control all

across the country. If it was the Chinese, I'd bet my money they're getting ready to follow up with a first strike as soon as the blackout reaches the plains states. And the first place they're going to hit, Mr. President, is right where we're sitting. Washington DC will be toast, and from a military standpoint, there's not a thing we can do to stop it."

For the first time in his presidency, Bob Taylor showed his fear. He didn't answer the Joint Chiefs. He didn't know what to say, and he certainly couldn't say what he was thinking at the moment. Namely, *I'm scared and I don't know what to do.*

Off to his left he heard whispering. He turned and saw Eleanor Freeland speaking with a short, unassuming man who sat behind her. The President waited a few seconds before interrupting.

"Okay, Eleanor, what's so secret you have to keep it from the President of the United States?"

Eleanor nodded to the man behind her then waved her hand to shut him up. He immediately silenced, and she turned back to face the table before speaking.

"It's nothing, Mr. President, just a suggestion that I believe is untenable and premature."

The President didn't like that answer.

"Hmm, well the problem I have, Eleanor, is that I seem to have zero options right now, so I'd really like to hear anything that might give me a handle on this thing."

He pointed to the man behind her.

"So who's your little friend who likes to whisper while I'm talking?"

Director Freeland tried to regain her composure before speaking.

"This is Sam Hollister, he's the Assistant Director of our Cyber Security Division."

The President interrupted her.

"Why isn't the Director here? Shouldn't he be?"

She nodded.

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“Yes sir, but he’s in Los Angeles on an inspection tour. Sam has been with the division since it began and is fully briefed on all the division’s activity.”

The President narrowed his eyes.

“Okay Sam, what do I need to know?”

Director Freeland started to speak, but the President cut her off with a wave of his hand.

“Let the man speak, Eleanor. I want the benefit of his opinion. Lord knows, no one else in here can give me anything else to work with.”

Sam Hollister glanced at his boss and she answered him by lowering her head. He turned to face the President. His voice wavering as he spoke.

“Mr. President. I was just reminding Director Freeland about a counter-cyber-terrorism tool we’ve been developing over the past 3 years.”

He hesitated, but the President prodded him on with a look.

“It’s not a defensive tool, sir. It was developed to operate in a first-strike scenario.”

Bob Taylor leaned back in his chair again,

“You’re talking about the Ludlow Virus?”

Sam raised his eyebrows in surprise. The President smiled.

“Don’t be shocked, Mr. Hollister, I am the President of the United States, and contrary to the mainstream press, I’m not a complete idiot. I read every report that crosses my desk, including ones written by you. So, tell me. How can this “tool” help us with our potential dilemma with the Chinese?”

Sam looked over at his boss again, but she looked away as if washing her hands of the whole affair. He sighed and plunged forward.

“Since the Ludlow Virus was designed as a first-strike option that is virtually untraceable, it allows us to attack without the recipient nation knowing exactly who is responsible.”

The President interrupted him.

“How is that possible?”

Sam threw up his hands.

“Just look around you, Mr. President. We have been attacked and no one in this room, not the greatest minds in America, knows for sure where it came from. When delivered discreetly, no one need ever know it came from us. And it would shut down whatever country we send it to, just like this foreign virus is shutting us down.”

Eleanor Freeland noticed the look in her President’s eyes and she didn’t like it. She’d seen it before and she knew that he was seriously contemplating use of the Ludlow Virus. She quickly spoke, trying to head him off from a hasty conclusion.

“Mr. President, I need to remind you that so far we’ve contained the power failure to the East Coast. If it stops there, we’d be sending a nation with 1.3 billion people back into the stone age. Many of them would die from disease and famine.”

Just then, as if on cue, a Secret Service agent walked in and handed a note to the Secretary of the Department of Energy. All eyes moved to him as he unfolded the paper and read it silently. His face grew ashen. The President was the first to break the silence.

“Frank? Talk to me.”

Frank looked up and spoke in a solemn voice.

“I’m sorry, Mr. President, but we’ve just lost all power east of the Mississippi River and south on down to the gulf. And it’s still spreading.”

President Taylor leaned forward with his elbows on the table. No one spoke. They just watched as he gazed ahead at nothing in something akin to a thousand-yard stare. Finally, Eleanor prodded him.

“Mr. President? Are you okay?”

He jumped as if startled. Then he looked over at Sam Hollister.

The God Virus

“Mr. Hollister. Tell me more about this Ludlow Virus. How does it work? How fast is it? How would we get it loaded? In layman’s terms please.”

Sam Hollister began to talk, but Eleanor Freeland couldn’t hear him. She was too busy thinking about the severity of what they were contemplating. And then from somewhere deep in the recesses of her mind, she heard the voice of long-dead Jim Morrison. The DOORS song *The End* kept playing to her over and over and over.

*This is the end Beautiful friend
This is the end My only friend,
the end of our elaborate plans,
The end of everything that stands,
the end*

CHAPTER 4

Menomonie, Wisconsin - September 9, 4AM

DAN Branch sat alone in the dark eating a large bag of Buffalo Ranch style Doritos and drinking Mountain Dew. He never mixed Frappuccino and Doritos. It just wasn't right. It had been two hours since his incident with the Wal*Mart cop. After changing the truck battery, it had started right up, and he'd driven straight home. Thankfully he'd already filled up his gas tank along with four other five-gallon cans. He knew that no one would be buying gas anytime soon now that there was no electricity to work the pumps. He'd listened to the news on a Minnesota station on the truck radio which confirmed that all power was out east of the Mississippi river, and no one knew the cause or when it would come back on.

In the back room he could hear his stepson snoring. Jeremy had left hours ago after their skirmish, but then returned while Dan had been at Wal*Mart. Dan assumed he was drunk and would be sleeping until morning. Just thinking about his stepson and their altercation made him sad. Over six years ago when they'd first met, Dan and Jeremy had gotten along well, very well, and Dan had found himself excited at the prospect of raising Jeremy as his own son. That had lasted until about two years ago when the boy had fallen into the wrong crowd and started up on drinking and drugs. Dan had never really thought of Jeremy as a stepson, and he felt pretty guilty right about now for punching him,

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even though he'd had it coming in a major way. In truth, Dan still loved the boy ... and his mother.

His thoughts returned now to his Uncle Rodney and the ciphered message. He knew his uncle was sincere, and that he wouldn't joke about a thing like this. And the fact that half the country was sitting in the dark right now supported the idea that this was indeed a true crisis. But ... *Alas Babylon...* Could it really be that bad?

From age twelve Dan had been raised by his uncle in northern Michigan after his father had died of cancer. Dan had never known his mother or any of her relatives. As a child he'd accepted that without question, but since then, he'd realized how odd that was. His mother had just up and left him. To this day, that very thought was a mood-altering experience for him.

As he sat alone in the dark, he thought to himself, *Am I being left again by the woman I love?* The answer rang back painful and obvious. *It's 4AM. Do you know where your wife is?*

On one occasion he'd asked his father about his mom, but only once. That was the only time he'd ever seen his father cry. He suspected that Uncle Rodney knew the inside story, but he'd never had the guts to bring it up after that. Besides, the past was the past, and he'd best leave it there. Nothing but pain in the wake of that ship.

He heard the creak of Jeremy's door as it opened. Dan waited a moment, then turned on the big flashlight sitting on his lap. The room lit up and Jeremy covered his eyes and turned his head away.

"What the hell are you doing? My head is killing me! Turn off the light!"

Dan left the light on, but did lower it away from Jeremy's face.

"You okay, son?"

Jeremy stopped and turned back toward him. Dan could see the black eye and the swollen face even in the dimness.

“Of course I’m not okay! My dad just beat the crap out of me, and my head is killing me!”

Dan sighed.

“Yeah, well, sorry about that, son. But you should know better than to come at me while I’m holding a ball bat. That was really stupid. I could have killed you with that bat.”

Jeremy didn’t say anything. He just stood there. Dan got up and moved over to the wall where he stood. He was surprised to hear whimpering.

“What’s the matter?”

“Just leave me alone!”

He reached out and touched Jeremy’s shoulder, but the boy pulled away and pressed himself up against the wall.

“Don’t touch me!”

Dan nodded. “Yeah, okay, fine. I can understand that.” He paused and then continued. “But I think we need to talk about something.”

“I got nothing to say to you, old man!”

Dan smiled sympathetically and he shook his head, more in pity than anything else.

“So you’re admitting that you just got your butt kicked by an old man?”

Jeremy said nothing, so Dan continued.

“Listen, Jeremy, we’ve got some real problems here. This blackout isn’t only here in Menomonie. I was listening on the news until the outage, and it’s happening all over the country.”

Dan waited a few seconds. Finally, Jeremy lowered his hands from his face and glanced over at his stepfather.

“You serious?”

“Yes, I’m afraid so.”

“How could that even happen? I mean, it’s never happened before, right?”

Dan nodded and placed his hand on Jeremy’s shoulder again. This time the boy shrugged, but didn’t move away. Dan’s hand remained on the boy’s shirt.

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“Jeremy, this could be really bad.”

His son looked back toward his room.

“I got some candles.”

Dan sat on the couch again, and a few minutes later Jeremy returned with two lit candles. He set them on the coffee table and they cast eerie shadows all across the room. It reminded Dan of times when he was a kid when the power would go out in Michigan during a thunder storm. Back then it had been exciting. But not today. This was different.

“Do you think it was an EMP burst?”

Dan had been trained in the basics of NBC warfare years ago in the Marine Corps, so he knew a little about EMP, but he was surprised by Jeremy’s question.

“How do you know about EMP? Do they teach that in school?”

Jeremy shook his head. “No, I saw a TV show about it called *Jericho*. It was about a nuclear missile going off over the United States, and it fried every circuit board in the country. Nothing worked anymore. Not Facebook, not Twitter, YouTube. Nothin’!”

Dan nodded his head. “That’s the Compton effect.”

Jeremy looked over at Dan.

“Yeah, how’d you know that?”

“I learned all about nuclear, biological and chemical warfare when I was in the Marine Corps.”

Even in the dim light Dan could see Jeremy’s facial expression change.

“Oh...yeah. I forgot you were a Marine.” He paused. “No wonder I can’t whip you.”

Dan smiled involuntarily. Then he chuckled.

“Don’t worry. Time is on your side. Soon you’ll be kicking my butt every day and twice on Sundays.”

Jeremy smiled as well.

“Don’t try to be nice to me. I’m still mad at you. You beat me up pretty bad.”

Dan shifted his butt on the couch so he was facing the

boy straight away. He let out a long sigh.

“I was wrong to hit you. But I was mad, and you were way out of line. You’ve got no business taking advantage of that girl. It was immature selfishness on your part. What if you’ve gotten her pregnant?”

This time it was Jeremy’s turn to laugh.

“She’s not pregnant. I was wearing a rubber.”

Dan narrowed his eyes. “Where did you get them?”

A stupid grin spread across Jeremy’s face, causing him to wince out loud when it reached his battered cheek.

“I took them out of your sock drawer.”

Dan shook his head from side to side.

“I hate to break this to you, sport, but those rubbers are five years old and full of holes.”

Jeremy’s smile began to fade.

“I don’t believe you.”

“You don’t have to believe me. We’ll just wait a few months and find out for ourselves. Are you ready to be a father, get a job, settle down?”

Jeremy didn’t answer for almost a minute, and Dan decided to let him squirm for a while. He still loved the boy, but he needed a good scare for his own good.

“I guess I screwed up.” He shook his head as he spoke. “I just really like sex. I didn’t know it was going to be so nice.”

Dan nodded. “Yeah, I know. But sex at the wrong time can really screw up your life, not to mention the girl you’re with.”

The boy moved his right hand up to his chin and held it there in thought.

“We can talk about that later, Jeremy, but right now we need to figure out what to do about the power.”

Jeremy still didn’t answer, so Dan kept talking.

“Can we call a truce right now until this crisis is over?”

Dan extended his right hand outward and held it there, waiting for the boy to take it. Jeremy hesitated, looked at it, then he thought about the darkness. He would never admit

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it, but he was deathly afraid of the dark. He reached out his hand and squeezed as hard as he could. Dan squeezed back, matching him pound for pound. In the end, Jeremy relaxed his grip and let his hand drop. It was all crimped together from the pissing match he'd just lost.

“Okay, but just until Mom gets back. Then all bets are off.”

Dan smiled and offered him some Doritos.



The next day Dan woke up at 1PM to the sound of gunfire in the distance. He propped himself up in bed on one elbow and was immediately awake. He'd expected this to happen, but not so soon. If it had been only him, Dan would have loaded up and left town last night, but Jeremy had refused to leave without his mother. The sun was high in the sky and shining in on his face through the window. He looked over and saw the empty space beside him.

She hadn't come home last night ... again.

Dan thought about what that meant. *She slept with the man from Eau Claire and is probably nursing a hangover this morning.* His mind drifted back eight years to when they'd first met. Dan had been visiting the local Baptist Church and he'd seen the most gorgeous, slender blonde woman at the end of the pew where he was sitting. She'd looked back at him and smiled.

Three hours later Debbie had showed up at his door wearing a mini skirt, stiletto heels and black, fishnet stockings. Apparently she'd copied his name and address off the hospitality book they'd passed down the row. Everyone signed it, but Dan had never imagined signing the church book would result in the wildest time of his life. It had given him a whole, new outlook on church hospitality.

He had been twenty-six years old at the time, and was taking night classes from the local University. He was ac-

cepted into the Engineering Technology program, but never really got around to taking any actual engineering classes. Oddly enough, he was more interested in the humanities, and kept taking history and literature electives, making him wiser, but bringing him little closer to graduation. Prior to his college days he'd spent four years in the Marine Corps as a grunt. Now, at age thirty-four, he was at a dead-end factory job, with a shattered marriage, and the world was about to end, not with a bang, but a whimper.

One day, after 3 months of incredible bedroom passion, Debbie had announced she was pregnant. The next week he'd married her. Dan was old-fashioned at heart and known it was the right thing to do. He looked back on that now and shook his head in disgust. He'd also known the right thing to do was to wait for marriage to have sex, but that idea had gone out the window when she'd kicked off her stiletto heels and wrapped her long, slim legs around him.

In retrospect, any person who viewed church as a pick-up bar probably wasn't marrying material. Debbie had been twenty-one at the time and her son, Jeremy, had been six years old. Dan punched his pillow several times in frustration. *I was such an idiot!*

Just then he heard police sirens downtown, and looked up as Jeremy walked in his bedroom through the open door.

"Can you hear that? I just went over to Jason Mather's place and he said the college kids were looting downtown. The police are running out of places to put them."

Dan nodded his head. They were renting a small house on the Red Cedar River about a mile out of town. He knew that would buy them a little time, but he also knew that within a few days downtown Menomonie would be gutted, and the police would no longer be able to control all the hungry and terrified people. Once the population realized the lights weren't coming back on anytime soon, law of the jungle would take over, and the Golden Horde would spread out across the countryside. Thank God they were in

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northern Wisconsin and not closer to Chicago. His Uncle Rodney had taught him that The Golden Horde referred to the Mongolian conqueror, Batu, who had spread out across Russia during the thirteenth century. His Uncle had said that after the collapse, it would be an American horde that spread out across the land like locusts, consuming and destroying everything in their path. Dan knew their only hope of making it to Michigan was to stay ahead of the horde.

“We have to get out of here, Jeremy. In a few days Menomonie is going to be a war zone and we don’t want to get caught up in it.”

Jeremy glanced over at the empty half of Dan’s bed. Dan lowered his head.

“She didn’t come home last night did she.”

Jeremy looked out the window.

“I guess I didn’t expect her to, but...I was just hoping, ya know.”

Dan nodded. “Yeah, I know. I’ve been hoping for a long time.”

Jeremy’s eyes misted over, and it was hard for Dan to believe this was the same kid he’d punched out just yesterday. He sat up in bed and swung his feet out onto the floor before finding his pants and pulling them on.

“We’ll spend the rest of the afternoon packing up the truck and getting things we need, then slip out of town after dark. We’ll take back roads all the way. They should be less dangerous than the interstate.”

Jeremy plopped himself down on the chair beside the bed. He had a faraway look in his eyes.

“I’m staying here.”

“Excuse me?”

Jeremy looked over at him.

“You know I can’t leave mom here by herself.”

Dan stood to his feet and zipped up his trousers. Then he slipped on his boots and began lacing them up.

“It’s a mistake, Jeremy. She may never come home, and

even if she does, she won't be here long. She's a wanderlust, son, and she's just not the settling-down kind."

"Then why did you marry her?"

Dan flinched as if stung by a bee.

"Because I was stupid. I thought with my Johnson instead of my brain."

"That must be old people talk, because I don't even know what that means."

Dan finished lacing his boots and walked over to the dresser. He pulled out a grey t-shirt and pulled it over his head.

"It means that the weakest part of a man is just below the waist."

Jeremy cocked his head to one side.

"You mean you were screwing my mom?"

Dan turned his head away in shame and embarrassment.

"Don't rub it in! I feel stupid enough as it is right now."

Jeremy looked down at the floor.

"So, let me guess, my mom faked a pregnancy, and you felt obligated to marry her. Am I right?"

Dan tucked his shirt in and put on a belt.

"Something like that."

Jeremy laughed softly.

"That's the oldest trick in the book. And you had the nerve to lecture me about Tonya."

"I'm running into town to check things out. When I get back I'll start packing up the truck. It would be nice to have your help if you're still here."

Dan walked out the door, and Jeremy called after him.

"Can you pick up some more milk? Everything in the frig is all warm."

Dan shook his head from side to side and muttered to himself. "Warm milk. That's the least of our worries."

CHAPTER 5

The City - September 9

MENOMONIE, Wisconsin was first settled in 1830 when James H. Lockwood and Joseph Rolette built a lumber mill near the confluence of Wilson Creek and the Red Cedar River. Over the years, Menomonie had been claimed by Spain, France, England, and the United States. The latter finally won out, and the city had now grown to a population of over 14,000 people. Up until twelve hours ago, for the most part, those 14,000 residents got along pretty well, but once the lights went out, about 6,000 of them went nuts!

When Dan turned right off river road on the outskirts of town, he knew he was going to have trouble. Black, billowing smoke rose up from the heart of town. There was a conspicuous absence of sirens that bothered him. He could hear plenty of screaming though, and then a few more gun shots. He wondered to himself, *How could it break down so quickly?*

Then off to his right he saw a police car with its strobe lights still blinking. There was an officer lying face down on the side of the road, and he wasn't moving. Dan's first instinct was to stop, and he did so. Before getting out of the car he looked around carefully. His nerves were tighter than a gnat's butt stretched over a barrel. When he walked up closer, he saw the dark liquid drying in the hot sun beside the cop's head. On closer inspection, Dan could see half the man's face had been blown away, probably by a shotgun.

Flies buzzed around the officer's head, landing, then taking off, then landing once again, only to repeat the deadly dance over and over as heat radiated up off the black pavement. It was then he recognized the corpse of the Police Officer who'd pulled him over last night after shopping at Wal*Mart.

At that moment, Dan took back all the skepticism he'd ever given his Uncle Rodney. All the while Dan was growing up, he'd seen the way people had responded to his uncle's eccentricities. Some had even laughed behind his back, saying it was some kind of neurosis he'd picked up in Vietnam. He doubted they were laughing at him now. Before, he'd never taken the man seriously, but now, only twelve hours into a world without electricity, he suddenly believed. With the conviction of Noah, building an ark in the desert, he believed with all his heart.

Dan looked over at the police car. It was filled with bullet holes and steam rose up from the hood. Things were scattered out onto the pavement, and he knew it had been ransacked of anything valuable or dangerous. The cop's jacket was crumpled in a heap a few feet away, and Dan walked over to it. He picked it up and brought it back to the body, where he laid it over his mangled head. Dan read the man's name tag: Sergeant Jim Miller.

Yesterday Sergeant Miller would have called for back up and a SWAT team and 50 officers would have saved him. Today, it was a different world, and any person with a gun and enough savvy to stage an ambush could kill a cop with impunity. Dan realized that if the police weren't safe here, then neither was he. He'd seen enough. Dan jumped back into his truck and came to a decision. He fired up the truck and did an illegal U-turn ... because everything was legal now. Without the rule of law, all things were legal to those who had the power.



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“Somebody killed a cop?”

Dan nodded his head without speaking. He was sitting in the living room on the couch with his head down almost between his knees, trying to get over what he'd just seen. Jeremy sat across from him in the recliner, leaning forward, trying to get his father to talk about it. He would never admit it, but his young heart was excited by all that had happened, even though he knew it was wrong to think so.

“How did it happen?”

Dan shook his head back and forth. “I don't know. It just did, okay, and I don't want to talk about it anymore.” He got up slowly. “We should be packing our stuff and loading up the truck right now, because we're leaving by day's end.”

Jeremy popped up beside him. “But my mom! What about her? We can't leave my mom here by herself!”

Dan turned on him with more vehemence than he knew was in him. “She's not alone, Jeremy, remember? She's with another man, and she may or may not be back.” Dan took his head in both hands and squeezed his temples in an attempt to make the throbbing go away. Jeremy grabbed his wrist.

“Please, Dad. Please. She's my mom. I know she's been bad to you, but ... I still love her.”

Dan stared out over Jeremy's head into the blue painted wall behind him. His body was in the room, but his mind was somewhere else. “I can't, Jeremy. Even if I wanted to get her, I have no idea where this guy lives in Eau Claire. We'd never find her.”

Jeremy let Dan's wrist drop. “I know where she is, Dad. I can take you there.”

Adrenaline surged into Dan's blood, and his muscles tightened up like knotted rope. “How? How could you know where he lives?”

Jeremy looked down at the floor and spoke to the dirty, yellow, shag carpet in a hushed voice. “I've been there before, several times.”

Dan tightened his jaw. “So you knew all along about her

affair?"

"The whole town knew, Dad! Mom's been cheating on you for years. How could you not know that?"

In his heart, Dan had known all along, but it's one thing to know, and quite another to accept what you know. "It's too dangerous in Eau Claire. If people are berserk in Menomonie, can you imagine how crazy things are in a bigger city? We have to assume the worst."

Dan started to walk away, but Jeremy's next words stopped him cold. "He lives four miles outside of town in the country. We can take back roads all the way, and we should be safe."

Dan turned around and stared back at his son, but Jeremy wouldn't make eye contact.

"Please, Dad, just try and if she won't come or we can't find her, then I'll go to Michigan with you."

Dan heaved out a sigh and rubbed his eyes with his left hand. Suddenly he felt very alone ... and very betrayed. He looked back up and choked back his emotions.

"All right, son. Let's load up the truck first. Then we'll get going, but if we can't find her, then we head north to the upper peninsula."

His son nodded, and without saying another word they both went off to pack.

It took them six hours to get everything loaded up. Dan drained the hot water heater in order to fill up all the plastic bottles he could find, then he drained the gas out of the old Buick that had been sitting in the front yard for over a year. Before loading everything into the truck bed, they lifted the cap onto the back and bolted it securely in place.

As the sun was getting low in the sky, Dan made his final check around the house. He walked back to the bedroom and looked at the bed where he'd slept with Debbie. The covers were all messed up, and he didn't bother to fix them. Dan knew if he drug this out he would cry in front of his son, so he slowly backed his way out of the room. He closed and

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locked all the windows, and turned off the main breaker switch just in case power came back on while they were gone.

As he walked out of the kitchen, the Bible on the counter caught his eye. He stopped and reached down to stroke its leather. He thought, *Why not?* and picked it up on the way out. It couldn't hurt to take God along on the trip.

Once inside the truck, he fired up the engine and didn't look back. Jeremy glanced down at the large pistol on Dan's waist. "You're not going to shoot anyone are you?"

Dan didn't answer. He just gripped the steering wheel as hard as he could and took the back way out of town. He was painfully aware this was a new world with new rules. The old law said "No Guns Allowed", but the new law said, "No Guns - No Survival!" And Dan chose to survive.



As Dan drove through the back roads of Dunn County, he did so with reservations. On the one hand, he knew that if he left his wife here in Wisconsin, he would always feel guilty about it, would always wonder what happened to her and if one more try might have made the difference. Despite the fact she was with another man, and had, in effect, already broken their marriage vows many times before, he still felt conflicted. On the other hand, he had no desire to see her with this man again. It had killed him in the Applebee's parking lot to see them kissing. A big part of him wanted to drive north and forget he'd ever seen her, to leave her cheating heart and all the chaos that followed her behind him forever. Nonetheless, he did still love her. Love was a funny thing. He loved her and wanted to kill her simultaneously. He wondered if that was normal.

"So why did you grab that Bible?"

Dan was snapped out of his thoughts. He didn't want to talk right now.

“I don’t know. I saw it on the counter and something just came over me all of a sudden and I wanted it with us on this trip. Like maybe if we had it that God might help us out a little bit.”

His son shook his head back and forth and laughed out loud. His response annoyed Dan.

“What’s wrong? Why is that so funny?”

Jeremy looked down at the Bible on the seat between them. “I don’t know. It just seems funny that you packed up six guns and a thousand rounds of ammo, but decided at the last minute to bring a Bible.”

Dan grunted out loud. “Nothing odd about that. Christians need guns to protect themselves from bad people just like the atheists do I suppose.”

Jeremy turned his head and hung his right arm out the window as they passed a field of corn that was over seven feet high and beginning to yellow. There was a distinct smell of cow manure in the air.

“Are you going to shoot Pete when you see him?”

“The man’s name is Pete? I didn’t know that?”

“Yeah, his name’s Pete. He’s a tool and die maker.”

Dan glanced over for a second, then quickly back to the road. “Is he a nice guy?”

His son turned his head, and the shiner on his eye showed up pretty good in the fading sunlight. “Well, he’s pretty nice. At least he hasn’t beat me up yet.”

Dan forced a playful smile on his lips. “Well, he doesn’t know you yet. Give it some time.”

“That’s not funny, Dad!”

He laughed nonetheless. “Yeah, I know. Sometimes I make light of things to keep from crying.”

Jeremy brought his arm back inside the window. “You cry sometimes? I didn’t think old people did that.”

“Stop calling me old! I’m only 34. And yes, I’ve been crying a lot lately. Seeing the woman you love with another man will do that to you.”

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Jeremy shrugged. “I suppose. I don’t really know much about love. It seems over-rated from what I’ve seen between you and mom.”

Dan was quiet for the rest of the drive. Ten minutes later Jeremy pointed at a gravel driveway. “Turn left here.” Dan pulled in, drove about 50 yards before coming to a stop on the grass. A run-down, double-wide trailer was off to their right. “There’s mom’s car. I don’t see Pete’s truck.”

Dan answered with a grimace. “It’s probably in the auto-body shop.”

“Why would it be in the shop?”

But Dan ignored him.

“Maybe you should stay out here, Dad. They might not like seeing you, and I think mom might act better if it’s just me.”

Dan nodded but said nothing. He was completely happy staying out in the truck. The last thing he needed was to see the two of them together again. Jeremy got out and slammed the truck door. He walked a few steps then turned back.

“Don’t come in with that gun, okay. I don’t want you shooting anyone.”

Dan nodded. “Be careful, son. If she doesn’t want to come, just back on out and we’ll get out of here.”

Jeremy walked away without looking back. When he reached the porch, he opened the door and walked in as if he’d been living there for years. Dan thought to himself, *Yeah, Pete must be a real nice guy. All adulterers are like that. Real sweethearts!* Dan sighed out loud, as if every cubic inch of air was leaving him in one mighty gasp. He looked down at the Bible on the seat. He touched it with the fingers of his right hand. Then his hand brushed against the holstered pistol on his right hip. It was a Taurus Judge, a five-shot revolver chambered in four-ten shotgun shells or 45 long Colt. It was large and bulky, but packed quite a punch at close range. The first three chambers he had loaded with number three buckshot. The last two were slugs. Jeremy was

right; it did look odd to him, the huge gun on his hip only inches away from the word of God. Bibles and bullets. He wondered, *Was he a hypocrite?* Then he laughed to himself. Of course he was a hypocrite. Wasn't everyone?

“BOOM!”

The gunshot rang out, breaking the silence of the sunset behind him. Then he heard screams. Without thinking he jumped out of the truck and ran toward the house. When he reached the trailer door, he was surprised to see the big pistol already in his right hand. He hesitated, more screams, then he threw open the door and jumped inside not knowing what to expect. The living room was empty; it was a pig sty with pizza boxes and beer cans all over the floor. “BOOM!” Part of the wall to his left exploded, showering his face with powdered dry wall. It came from the next room over.

“Mom! No! Please!”

Dan moved to the doorway. He had the gun tight in both hands out in front of him and peeked carefully around the corner. He saw Debbie swing the gun over in his direction. “BOOM!” He jumped back just in time, but dry wall and wood splinters smashed against the left side of his face, blinding him for several seconds. He worked quickly to wipe the blood and dust from his eyes. He could hear Jeremy pleading with her.

“Mom, please. We're going to Michigan where it's safe. We want to take you with us. We still love you mom!”

“Shut up you little puke! I don't want to hear it from you! Now get out of here before I shoot you both.”

Dan crawled slowly back over to the door. He had seen her up on the bed. Pete was lying next to her with his eyes closed. By the color of his skin, Dan was sure he'd been dead for quite a while. His son and his wife were both crying inside the room.

“Why did you bring him here! I didn't want him to see me like this! Now he won't love me anymore!”

Dan wasn't sure she was talking to him or to Jeremy. She

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always talked crazy like this when she was drunk, but she'd never used guns before. She didn't even like them.

"Don't shoot me momma!"

"I want you outta here, boy! You just go back home and wait for me there."

Dan peeked around the corner and saw Jeremy nodding his head. Tears were running down his cheeks and his black hair was covered in dry wall dust. A huge, gaping hole was above him, letting in light from the outside. Dan thought quickly. If he rushed her, she'd shoot him for sure. If he did nothing, she might shoot Jeremy. She was crazy when she was drunk. A thought came to him quickly, *Had she killed Pete?*

"I'll leave momma. Okay? Just don't shoot me. I'll go home and wait for you."

Debbie lowered the shotgun.

"Yeah, and don't forget to feed the cat."

"We don't have a cat, Momma."

The gun came back up.

"Don't argue with me, son! Now get home and feed the cat! And cook me up one of those TV dinners with macaroni and cheese and fried chicken. The dark meat, not the white!"

He watched as Jeremy got up slowly and walked toward the door. The gun followed him as he went.

"Okay. Bye Momma. See you when you get home. Don't be late."

Jeremy reached the door and walked past Dan, who was already crawling backwards. Once outside, they walked back to the truck. He held his son as he heaved sob after sob upon his father's shoulder.

"She was gonna kill me, daddy!"

Dan stroked the back of his head. "Shhh, hush now. It's going to be okay." Jeremy hadn't called him daddy in years. "We're just going to wait out here until she passes out, then we'll sneak back in and carry her out. Okay?"

Jeremy nodded with his face pressed tightly against his

father's muscular shoulder. For the longest time neither man moved. They just stood there hugging each other in the fading sunlight, waiting for the drunkard to sleep it off.

Two hours later, Dan walked back into the house alone. Five minutes later he came out carrying his wife's body. She was already dead.