

BIOME: ATTACK

By Bradley Jarvis

Copyright © 2018 by Bradley Jarvis

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review or scholarly journal.

DEDICATION

To Debbie, for her support and love

To Mike, who helped me through the hard times

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE	1
CHAPTER 1	5
CHAPTER 2	10
CHAPTER 3	22
CHAPTER 4	33
CHAPTER 5	44
EPILOGUE	62
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	65
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	66

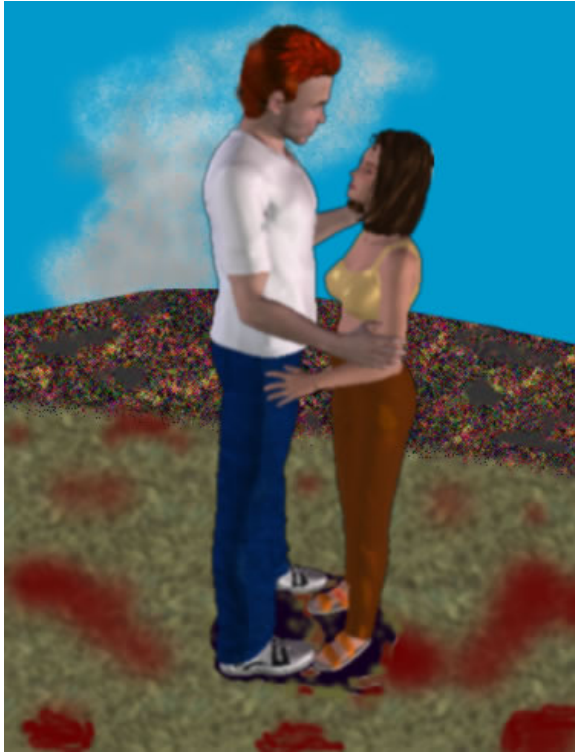
INTRODUCTION

Events in this book take place in the world of the novel *Lights Out* (also by Bradley Jarvis).

BIOME: ATTACK is a continuation of a flashback presented in the first chapter of the e-book *Biome Part 5: War* and reproduced in the prologue of this book.

All places, persons, events, organizations, and technologies described in this book are fictional, regardless of any resemblance to reality.

PROLOGUE



Alex heard a thunderclap and burst out of the campground restroom to see a giant plume of smoke rising above a hill of trees whose leaves had just reached their peak autumn colors. There wasn't a cloud in the sky.

A family of four looked nervously in the same direction, but one other person concerned him. His new girlfriend Amy was on a small knoll, its dry red soil and dying grass looking as out of place as her summer slacks and tank top.

"Did you see that?" she asked when he joined her.

"No," he said, having already estimated the distance to the base of the plume along with the wind conditions. He turned at the sound of an approaching helicopter.

"I saw a flash right before the smoke," Amy said.

"Like a bomb?" he asked.

“No. It was above the ground.”

Suddenly there was a large explosion in the air. He instinctively threw himself at Amy, pinning her to the ground, and braced for the impact of debris from the helicopter that had been at the center of the blast.

Amy wriggled underneath him as he realized they were safe. Rolling to a sitting position, he caught his breath and looked around. No one seemed to be injured, and what was left of the helicopter had apparently fallen behind the tree line near the original fire.

He let Amy help him to his feet, and felt a surge of joy as she pulled him to her and gave him a deep kiss.

“Thanks,” she said, smiling up at him.

“Any time,” he said, smiling back.

“What just happened?” she asked after a moment.

“I think we’re under attack,” he said.

“By who?” she asked as he pulled his cell phone out of his pocket.

“I don’t know,” he said as he peripherally noticed the others checking their phones. There was no service, not even digital roaming. “The cell towers are out, so this is bigger than just an attack on the helicopter.”

“That first explosion...” she started. “Was possibly a missile that missed,” he finished.

He knew his first responsibility was the safety of the people in the campground, who were very exposed to both the spreading fire and the source of the missiles. “How many other campers are around here?” he called out to the adults. Amy followed him as he ran to join them, holding out his badge.

“I think we’re it,” said the man. The teenage girl and her younger brother nodded. “You might want to check out the other side of the river, just to be sure,” the woman suggested.

Alex glanced beyond the river as flames just become visible over the hill. “What kind of vehicle do you have, and how fast can you get it on the road?”

“We’ve got a pickup with camper,” the man said. “We can leave right away.”

“I saw a few buildings about two miles north. Head there and

call 911. Hopefully they've got a land line. What are your names?"

"Harvey and Toni Howard," the woman said, turning to leave.

"Can you take another person?" Alex asked. Amy shook her head.

"Sure," Harvey said.

"Go," Alex told Amy. "I'll take the car and be right behind you, as soon as I check the sites."

"No," Amy said defiantly, "you'll need help."

"I can't risk you getting hurt," Alex insisted as the Howards looked back expectantly. "I'll be ten minutes behind you, tops."

"I'll be at the buildings," she said after a moment, disappointed but resigned. "Don't be late!"

Alex stopped at each of the five camp sites and looked for signs of recent use. He found a middle-aged woman named Martha at the fifth one, sitting on a log with a bloody cloth wrapped around her right leg.

He sterilized and bandaged a large gash on the leg as she explained that she had been taking a break from hiking when a shard of metal rained down from the disintegrating helicopter.

"You're going to need stitches," he said, "but we have to get out of here *fast*." The smell of smoke was growing strong, indicating that the fire was moving in their direction.

He helped her into the passenger seat and sped across the bridge just as embers began to fly around the car.

Half a mile down the road, he was forced to stop at a roadblock manned by armed military personnel who he instantly recognized as Air Force security officers.

He got out of the car and was confronted by a muscular brown haired woman just a few inches shorter and about a decade younger than him. "Get back in the car, sir!" she ordered.

"No," he said evenly. Just then a helicopter flew over, and he waited for the noise to die down. "*You* let me through. I have a medical emergency here."

"What kind?" she asked.

"A large cut on her leg."

She looked into the car, and then called out "Medic!" One of the men approached, carrying a bag.

"Are you Alex Rideout?" she asked.

BIOME: ATTACK

“Yes,” he said, relieved that Amy had told her to expect him.

“I’m Special Agent Ambrose. We have some questions for you.”

CHAPTER 1



Amy stood anxiously next to an old log cabin that had been refitted as what could generously be called a convenience store, while the Howard family stocked up on snacks inside. A tiny home made from a shipping container stood nearby with a large American flag mounted to its side and waving lazily over the roof.

She looked at her watch, noting that it was now twelve minutes since she had left Alex. “You’re two minutes late,” she said softly.

Suddenly there was a low rumbling in the distance. She felt instant disappointment when she realized it was coming from another direction.

A pair of large trucks in green camouflage drove up and blocked the road leading to the campground. “What are you doing?” she shouted to one of the drivers.

“This road is closed,” he said, opening his door. A woman stepped the passenger side and disappeared behind the truck.

“You can’t do that!” Amy said, walking up to him. “There are people on the way here who need help!”

“Please step back, ma’am,” he said, standing in her way.

“Look, Sergeant Baker,” she said, reading his name tag, “my

boyfriend is a cop. He was up at the campground looking for campers who might be in the way of the fire.”

The man relaxed and pulled a radio from his belt. “What’s his name?”

“Alex Rideout,” she said. “He’s with the Colorado Springs police department.”

“And what’s your name?” Baker asked.

“Amy Pacer.”

“Delta,” he said into the radio, “be advised there is a police officer named Alex Rideout near the site performing search and rescue, over.”

“Understood, over,” a female voice replied.

Amy watched the woman and two men from the other truck place orange and white barricades several feet beyond. She then had a sickening thought. “The fire department is on its way. Are you going to let them through?”

“No need, Ms. Pacer,” he said, “we have our own fire crew on the way. Please wait in the store, and I’ll let you know when we find him.”

“What did he say?” Harvey asked her when she returned.

Amy froze, unable to answer. The shop owner standing behind him, a kind elderly man who had introduced himself as Ed, was casually holding an automatic rifle.

“Don’t mind Ed,” Harvey said, reassuringly. “He’s with them.”

“This is just a little added protection,” Ed said, smiling.

“Protection from what?” Amy asked, staring at the rifle.

“I was hoping you could tell us,” Harvey said.

“He told me that they’re just here to fight the fire.” As if to prove it, rotors from a helicopter grew loud overhead and receded in the direction of the campground.

“That’s weird,” Harvey observed.

Amy was still fixated on the rifle. “Can you please put that down, Ed?”

“I have my orders,” he said.

“Where are Toni and the kids?” she asked Harvey after forcing herself to look around the store.

“Back room, with the other one.”

“The *other one*? What other one?”

"Please stay calm, Amy," Ed said. The smile was gone.

"They're fine," Harvey said, oddly unfazed.

A radio behind the desk burst with static. "We're all clear!" Baker's voice said.

Ed shouldered the weapon put it behind the desk. "Sorry to scare you," he apologized earnestly as the children joined them, followed by their shaken mother and a young woman who bore a striking resemblance to Ed. "Both me and my daughter Lindsay."

Baker entered the store. "Ms. Pacer, Mr. Rideout is okay," he said, and turned to the Howards. "You're all free to go."

"Thank God," Toni said.

"We would appreciate you not saying anything about this," he added.

Harvey eyed his sidearm. "Can you tell us what 'this' is, Sergeant?"

"You didn't tell them?" Baker asked Ed, who shook his head. "The country is under attack," he told Harvey, "and this is part of the battlefield."

Baker was gone when a familiar blue sedan rolled past the remaining truck and up to the store. "Alex!" Amy yelled, and ran outside.

"Hi!" Alex said as he parked. She hugged him as soon as he got out of the car.

"You're very late," she said into his ear.

"Sorry about that. I was interrogated at a roadblock by a tough Air Force cop."

Amy let Alex go and stepped back. "They said you saved someone."

"A wounded hiker at the last campsite. It wasn't too serious."

"How are *you* feeling?" Amy asked.

"Good," Alex said, "I'm glad you're okay. I was worried about you."

She glanced back at the store. "It got a little tense, but I had the easy part."

He paused, looking concerned. "What happened?"

"Some... miscommunication."

"Like what?"

"Nothing." She shook her hair nervously. "Did they tell you

what's going on?"

"You mean what we saw at the campground?" Alex asked.

Amy nodded. "And why. We were told that *the country* is under attack."

"That's what I heard too," he said.

"Did they tell you who's behind it?"

He almost imperceptibly flinched. "They're still figuring it out."

She glared at him. "Really?" He was clearly holding something back.

"The helicopter was shot down by a drone," Alex said.

"And?" Amy asked.

"It wasn't one of ours."

She thought about the implications of what he said. "Did they find the drone?"

"They wouldn't tell me anymore, except they don't know whose it was."

She pulled her phone from her pocket and held it in front of him. There was still no signal. "Did they have an explanation for this?"

Alex said, "I asked if the drone might be blocking it somehow, but they said they didn't think so."

Amy frowned. "Not a lot of help, were they?"

He shrugged. "We should go back now. Why don't I drop you off at home? Then I'll check in with work and see if they know what's going on."

She cocked her head in the direction of the store, thinking of Ed. "You might already have a lead. In there."

Amy anxiously watched through the store window while Alex talked with Ed. After five minutes, Alex made a call from the landline Harvey had used to report the crash and fire. A gust of wind gave her a chill as another helicopter flew overhead with a pair of large tanks hanging from its sides.

Alex emerged from the store just as she finished zipping up the windbreaker she had kept in the car.

"What did Ed say?" she asked him.

Alex shook his head. "Ed doesn't know much, but he's good at making up the difference."

"What does that mean?"

“You know. Making it up.”

She stared at him, disbelieving. “But he was under orders, right?”

“More like a strong request, but he thought so.”

“What about the department?”

“As I expected, they want to brief me in person as soon as possible.”

“Is everything... okay?” She had been unable to bring herself to use the phone with Ed nearby.

“I read between the lines that nothing is obviously wrong, so officially ‘yes’.”

CHAPTER 2



Amy's friend and roommate Barb Johansson was outside their apartment when Alex drove off. "How was your trip?" she asked Amy.

All Amy could think was that nothing looked different. The traffic was typical for a Sunday afternoon, and there was no sign of smoke. There had been no news on the radio or on any of the Web sites she visited on her phone as soon as service was available.

"Earth calling Amy!" Barb said, annoyed.

"Sorry," Amy said, acknowledging her.

"How was your trip?" Barb asked again.

Amy and Alex had agreed not to tell anyone else what happened until he could get a readout from his commander at the police department. "The colors were beautiful," she told Barb. "How was your morning?"

"Power's out," Barb said, and Amy stopped breathing. "Just our building, if you can believe that!"

Amy resumed breathing. "Did anyone tell you why?"

Barb threw up her hands. "The usual B.S. about people using their air conditioning too much. God, it's in the eighties, in November. What do they expect?"

A strong gust of air reminded Amy why she still had her windbreaker on. The apartment complex was near the edge of the city, where the wind had plenty of open space to accelerate after

passing over the nearby mountains.

Amy turned to face her friend. "How was church?"

"I skipped it, just like you. Unfortunately not for the same reason."

"Why did you skip it, then?"

"Their sewage system backed up. It would have been a health hazard to hold services." Barb wrinkled her nose. "Not to mention, the smell."

Amy's stomach growled in protest that snacks were a poor substitute for lunch.

"How about we find a fast food place to get some air and some food?" Amy asked.

"My fun fund is running low," Barb said. "Are you paying?"

"Sure."

They were both on tight budgets, saving for the holidays in case they didn't get overtime at the store where they both worked, but she had a little extra this week thanks to Alex generously cooking dinner at his house.

Amy decided to change into a dress her conservative acquaintances would find more appropriate for a Sunday than the tank/halter top she had worn for Alex.

The apartment was as warm as the outside, but without the breeze it felt hotter. She normally wouldn't have been surprised by the power outage, but after being told that the country was under attack with things blowing up around her, she was less likely to attribute such a thing to more benign causes.

Like her dress, Amy's eleven year-old compact car was her favorite color: orange. The car was on the verge of having engine problems, but she refused to ride on Barb's motorcycle until it was absolutely necessary. It also had air conditioning.

"What's up with you?" Barb asked when she took too long to get through an intersection on their way to the restaurant with their favorite selection of inexpensive salads.

She had been searching for irregularities and noticed that a traffic light changed faster than usual. "Just being careful."

"Careful? You?"

"I'm careful!" Amy protested.

Barb crossed her arms. "Right."

Amy was able to avoid the subject the rest of the way, and found another distraction as soon as they entered the restaurant.

"There's Ron and Tammy," Amy whispered, spotting an obnoxious couple from work sitting in a booth across the room. Barb ignored her and stared straight ahead, apparently having already noticed them.

Wearing the orange dress turned out to be a big mistake. It was like a bright sign drawing everyone's attention to her, including Ron, who waved at her as Barb ordered their food using cash from the fanny pack Amy used as a purse.

She let her eyes wander toward the kitchen, pretending she didn't see Ron, and felt a jolt of adrenaline. Red lights were flashing around the grill, and a pair of teenagers were acting like they were in a panic. Someone closed the door before she could see more.

"What's going on back there?" she asked the girl taking their order.

The girl turned to where she was pointing. "What do you mean?"

"The emergency, in the kitchen!" She watched helplessly as Barb started to say something, an alarm screamed one sharp note and stopped, and the kitchen door flew open with a bang. In that last moment she regained control and instinctively tackled Barb to the floor.

She rolled to see flames shooting over the counter. The girl on the other side was screaming, but Amy's focus shifted to an array of sprinklers on the ceiling that weren't working, and then to a fire extinguisher mounted on a plaster-covered column forty feet away. She crouched and sprang toward the extinguisher, reciting in her mind the procedure she had learned for using one.

Seconds felt like minutes until she found herself spraying white foam at the fire, hoping that the extinguisher was the right type for the fire's source. Luckily it was, but she knew there wasn't enough of it.

"Cover your face!" she shouted at the girl, whose clothes appeared to be burning, and sprayed her when she complied. She then kept the flames at bay while Barb helped the girl outside. When the extinguisher stopped working, Amy took a look around to make

sure no one was around before bolting for the door. Behind her, the kitchen was an inferno which no one could have escaped.

When she got outside, Amy noticed that three of the restaurant's employees had herded the others out to the street, and one of them was shouting at her to get as far from the building as possible. She broke into a run, and when she was half-way to them something at the other side of the building exploded.

Amy caught her breath and looked for Barb and the girl. A handful of people clustered around a car while a woman got a duffel bag out of its trunk. A man out of view ordered her to put clothes on the back seat, place the girl gently on top of them.

Someone shouted, "Does anyone have a blanket, something warm?"

Amy recalled her windbreaker on the seat in her car. She sprinted to the car while pulling the keys from her fanny pack. As fast as she could, she returned with the windbreaker and then looked for the man. It was Ron.

"Thanks, Amy," he said with a grin, and carefully laid the windbreaker on top of the girl in the back seat. From what Amy could see before he did, she had several red spots that looked like superficial burns.

The owner of the clothes was in the driver's seat, and had the nearest hospital already displayed on her GPS.

"Remember what I said," Ron told the woman, and to the girl he said, "You'll be okay, Margaret."

Margaret saw Amy behind him and smiled at her. "Thank you," she whispered.

Barb and Tammy had been watching from a respectful distance, obscured by the car until it pulled onto the street.

"That was really something," Barb told Amy when it was gone, tears in her eyes.

Amy grinned, suddenly feeling tired. She felt, rather than saw, the others walk up behind her. Then they began to clap.

She turned, blushing uncontrollably, and raised her hand for them to stop. "I didn't do anything any of you wouldn't have done." She looked at the restaurant, which was now engulfed in flames. Smoke was billowing up, and sirens in the distance made it clear that the fire department was finally on its way. "We better get

our cars out of the way so the professionals can deal with this.”

“Shouldn’t we stick around?” Barb asked as they began walking to her car.

“I’ll tell Alex about it. It’ll be better than a police report.”

“Amy, wait!” Ron called. Tammy was by his side.

“I’ve got to go, Ron,” she said, and paused. “Good job over there.”

“I did the easy part,” he said. “See you at work tomorrow?”

“Of course.”

Barb insisted on driving them straight to the police department.

“I’d rather not go there,” Amy said, watching the emergency vehicles pull into the parking lot through the passenger side mirror. Ahead, a TV news van was speeding toward the scene.

“You’ll see Alex sooner,” Barb suggested.

“I’m still hungry,” Amy pointed out.

“Okay...” she said, scanning the road, and then gestured toward a coffee shop whose giant sign dominated Amy’s side of the road within two blocks. “How about that one?”

“No,” Amy said, “but I like the idea of someplace without a kitchen.”

Ten minutes later they were sitting across from each other in a small coffee shop several blocks off of any main road. They had both headed straight to the restroom to clean up. Fortunately there wasn’t much of that to do.

This time Amy ordered a cold sandwich and some pastry, along with a large fruit smoothie. Still wanting a salad, Barb settled for having just a smoothie.

“Okay,” Barb said while Amy dissected her pastry into bite-size chunks, “what gives? I think you were expecting something like that to happen.”

Amy looked up, still tired, and still uncomfortable with sharing what she was thinking. She chose to take a detour. “Do you remember how Derek used to joke about my obsessing over things other people ignore?”

“Yeah, your brother could be pretty mean, all the way through high school. Then he was just a pain.”

Amy grinned, remembering it fondly as Derek being Derek. She continued, “‘Overdeveloped pattern recognition’ is what he called

it, bordering on seeing things that don't exist. It's not just what other people *ignore*, it's what they see and *choose not to question*."

"Got it." Barb leaned toward her. "You think you're seeing patterns now?"

"Not just patterns. Events."

"Wow, so I was right." Barb sat back. In a quieter voice she said, "You think the fire was one of those events."

"It's just a feeling, one that I've had all day."

Barb took a slurp of her smoothie. "Does Alex know about this?"

"He might have a clue or two."

Barb smiled knowingly and slapped the table, causing Amy to flinch and nearly spilling her smoothie. "And he still loves you! God, you're lucky."

Amy blinked, realizing that she was right. "I guess I better call him."

"Call his private number," Barb advised. "The fire and police departments wouldn't answer before, not even nine-one-one."

"You're telling me this *now*?" Amy stared at her accusingly. She wanted to process what that meant, but first she had to make the call.

Alex answered within seconds, as if he'd been expecting her call. "Are you okay?" he asked without preamble.

"Yes, I'm fine," she said.

"Where are you?"

"A coffee shop. I'm with Barb."

"Where, *exactly*? Give me the address." She told him, and he commanded, "Don't move!"

"Okay," she said meekly, and ended the call. To Barb she said, "I think he's angry," and smiled sheepishly.

Three minutes later, Alex barreled through the door, his older partner Mark Robinson in tow.

Amy was seated with her back to him, and turned as he strode up to her. "Want to join us?" she asked innocently, and then noticed something that made her feel deeply ashamed.

His stone cold voice belied the hurt in his eyes. "WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?"

Thinking battled with feelings as she considered telling him the

connections her racing mind made in the time it took for him to get there. The feelings won, for the moment. “There wasn’t much thinking involved,” she admitted.

She could tell he was fighting a smile. “I’ll bet.”

“I can vouch for that,” Barb said.

“We’ll take you up on that offer to join you,” Robinson said.

Alex slid in beside Amy and Robinson sat next to Barb. “So,” Robinson said to Barb, “just to be clear, you left the scene of a fire.”

“Yes, we did,” she responded. “How did you find out we were there?”

Amy and Barb locked eyes. “Ron,” they said together.

“That would be Mr. Harman?” Robinson asked.

“That’s him,” Barb said.

“Can you tell us what happened?” Alex asked Amy gently.

A young waiter approached Alex and Robinson. “Can I get you anything?” he offered.

“Just water,” Alex said, and Robinson nodded for the same.

Amy decided to be brief. “We were ordering food and a fire broke out in the kitchen. I grabbed a fire extinguisher and kept it from spreading while everyone else got out. Then I left too.”

“That’s it?” Alex asked.

She winced, remembering the scene in the kitchen. “There were at least two teenagers in the kitchen when the door closed.”

“The door closed?” Robinson asked.

She nodded. “And then it blew out. All I saw was fire, and then I got busy when none of the sprinklers went off.”

“That true?” Robinson asked Barb.

“Sure thing,” she replied.

Amy saw something in Alex’s face and tensed up. “You’re not surprised,” she guessed.

“Neither were you,” Barb blurted.

Amy glared at her friend, more out of reflex than anger, while Alex confirmed her guess by shifting in the seat wordlessly.

“Were you expecting that?” There was a tinge of suspicion in Robinson’s question.

“No,” Amy said, turning to him, “not specifically. Just...”

“She had reason to think weird things would start happening,”

Alex interrupted. He reached under the table and took her hand.

Barb stared at them both. "Okay, *what is going on with you two?*" She licked her lips, her eyes wide with recognition. "It was your trip, wasn't it? Something happened up there!"

Amy and Alex traded glances. "Mark knows," Alex said.

"So it's true?" Robinson asked Amy, who nodded.

"What's true?" Barb demanded.

Amy looked at Alex, who nodded, indicating she could tell Barb about their experience at the campground. She decided to keep it simple. "We saw a helicopter get shot down by a missile from a drone. The Air Force showed up and told us that the country is under attack."

Barb froze, her expression a mix of fear, disbelief, and anger. "Are you serious? Why didn't you...?"

Amy cut her off. "They told me not to say anything about it. Alex was going to check..."

"Still nothing official," Alex interrupted, "but command knows that something's up, and has put us all on alert for unusual events. Like what just happened to you."

"What did they say when you told them about the attack?" Amy asked him.

"The same as Mark: skepticism. But it wasn't total, because I was told not to make it public until it was confirmed by higher-ups."

"Fake news," Robinson said. "That's what they said would be the official position if it got out before then."

"Maybe even after," Amy grumbled.

"I'm inclined to agree with them," Alex said, surprising her.

"Are you crazy?" Barb exploded. "This needs to be all over the Internet. Let people make up their own minds!"

Amy looked seriously at Alex. "I'm surprised it isn't already. We weren't the only ones to see it."

"The Howards and the hiker," he said. "That's not going to happen."

"Why?" she asked suspiciously, and recalling Harvey's docility in the store instantly guessed the answer. "They got to them." Her palms began to sweat, and she pulled her hand out of his. "Did they get to you, too?"

“No one got to me,” Alex said calmly.

“He didn’t say you were wrong about the others,” Barb pointed out to her.

“Ed told me,” Alex said bluntly, “and I believe him.”

“Who’s Ed?” Barb asked.

“The manager of the store,” Amy said, “a creepy guy who held me and the Howard family at gunpoint for a while.”

“You were held at gunpoint?” Robinson asked her and turned to his partner. “Why didn’t you report that?”

“*I didn’t know*,” Alex said, glaring at Amy.

She blushed. “Okay, I left out that part.”

“We need to report it now,” Robinson said. He pulled his phone from his pocket. “Oh, damn.”

“What?” the others asked at once.

“No signal.”

Amy noted that Alex was genuinely surprised as they checked their own phones and found the same thing.

Alex was on the land line before the dozen others in the coffee shop discovered their cell phones had no service. Amy could tell from his body language that it was dead too.

“No luck,” he said to Robinson when he returned to their table.

Barb stared at her, wide-eyed with fear, and mouthed, “Is this it?” By *it*, Amy assumed she meant *part of the attack*, and nodded.

Robinson noticed their exchange. “Let’s keep calm, everybody.” The music which had masked their previous conversation stopped playing just as he said it. A couple four tables away turned to look at him.

The middle-aged barista behind the counter repeated Alex’s attempt with the land line and clearly had the same result. She purposefully walked over to their table and asked him loudly, “Is there something we should know about?”

Amy watched him stare into space for a few seconds, what he would later self-consciously refer to as using his work brain. To the barista he said, “We’re trying to figure it out. Do you have a TV in the back room?”

“Yes, an old one, but it stopped working a couple of hours ago.” She paused, her expression matching Barb’s. “Do you think it’s related?”

Amy felt her adrenaline start to surge, just as it had during the fire. *Of course it's related!* she wanted to shout.

"I don't know," Alex said instead. "Is it the TV, or is it the cable that's out?"

The barista shrugged. "What's the difference?"

"I can go check," Amy suggested, anxious to do something.

Alex gripped her arm and looked to his partner for guidance. "It's probably just your TV, ma'am," Robinson said, smiling at the barista.

Barb turned to the barista. "If the electricity's on, then why did the music go off?"

"We get that off the radio."

"The radio," Barb said to Amy.

Something caught Amy's attention through the window beside Barb. People in the parking lot and on the sidewalk next to the street were frantically checking their phones. She pulled her arm loose from Alex's grasp. "Looks like we're not alone," she told him, and pointed at the view.

"Don't worry," Alex said reassuringly. "I've been in situations like this before."

Amy sensed that he really meant to say "worse than" instead of "like." She relaxed slightly and then saw a flash of terror cross Robinson's face.

Alex apparently saw the same thing. "Mark, maybe we can get some information over the car radio."

"Good thought," Robinson said. "I'll go check it out and be right back."

"What exactly is *this* situation?" the barista asked Alex when Robinson left.

"Communications go down," he said easily. "Cell towers..."

"Tell her!" Barb interrupted. Amy could tell that she was ready to say it herself, blowing Alex's credibility if he didn't do it first.

"I AM," he said forcefully, glaring at Barb. Dead quiet punctuated his statement, which bothered Amy like a sudden itch. "This may be intentional."

Barb's disgust was palpable, but Amy was focused on her own discomfort. She found the source outside, where a dozen people watched Robinson as he approached the detectives' unmarked car.

“What do you mean, *intentional*?” the barista asked Alex.

“He means it could be part of an attack on the country,” Barb interjected. “*That’s* what his partner is trying to find out.”

Several people spoke up at once, seizing on the word “attack,” while Amy saw Robinson get in the car.

“Hold on!” Alex commanded after standing up. “We *do* need to get more information. All we have right now is a guess.” Outside, Robinson started the car and started speaking.

“She doesn’t seem to think so,” the barista challenged, nodding toward Barb.

“They were told that we’re under attack,” Barb said. “Right, Amy?”

Amy ignored her, mesmerized by the scene outside.

“AMY MARRENA!” Barb shouted, using the middle name that was sure to get her attention.

It worked, but not the way Barb expected. “I think we have a problem,” Amy said. The number of onlookers had doubled in size and they were moving to encircle the car. Robinson talked rapidly, looking scared.

Alex followed her gaze along with the others. “Oh, come on, Mark,” he said, clearly irritated. Then the car began inching forward. He headed for the door and announced over his shoulder, “I’ll be right back.”

By the time Alex got outside it was too late. Robinson had sped off onto the street.

His face turned as red as his hair, in the first of the handful of times Amy would ever see him angry.

He looked up at Amy, closed his eyes, and peace spread over his face. He then turned and addressed the crowd in the parking lot. She couldn’t hear what he was saying, but whatever it was caused the people there to visibly relax.

“Wow,” Barb said softly, expressing Amy’s own reaction as they began walking randomly off as though nothing had happened.

“What did he say?” the barista asked, equally impressed.

“We’re about to find out,” Amy said, watching him head back to the door, and stood up to greet him.

The room was silent when Alex entered. “Well,” he said directly to her but loud enough for everyone to hear, “we know the

police radios work.”

“Apparently,” she replied.

He continued, “That means the situation is being assessed by the people who can help the most.”

“Why did your partner leave you behind?” the barista asked.

“I don’t know, but he was apparently told to, so there must be a good reason.”

“He looked scared to me,” the barista said.

“That was probably his ‘I’m in a hurry’ look.”

“So what now?” Amy asked.

“I recommend going home and waiting for authorities to notify you about what’s going on.”

“Could you stick around while I close?” the barista asked.

“Sure,” he said.

“I can drop you off at the station,” Amy offered as they went back to their table.

“Actually, I’d like to make another stop first, if that’s okay with you and Barb.”

CHAPTER 3



Alex didn't reveal where they were going until they were half-way there. He sat in the back seat of the car, with Barb in front as Amy drove. "You know the rest of the way to David's house," he said.

"Your cousin?" she asked, surprised.

"Yes. He might have some ideas about what's happening."

Barb turned to look at him. "Are you serious? The whole government's probably got it figured out by now."

Amy saw him smile in the rear view mirror. "Have you noticed that there aren't any patrol cars on the road?"

"Yeah!" Barb said. "They're probably getting their orders, like you should."

"Maybe, or maybe not."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"A big part of my job is to find my own answers," he said

patiently.

“But what about your partner?”

“It’s a partnership of convenience, obviously.”

“Why do you think there aren’t any patrol cars?” Amy asked him, wondering what his original point was.

“The attackers might be setting a trap.”

“*What?*” Amy and Barb asked simultaneously.

“In the military, the most important thing I learned in order to stay alive was to anticipate and be prepared for worst case situations.”

Amy thought about that in light of her own recent experience. “You didn’t expect Mark to leave,” she said. “That’s very unusual, isn’t it?”

“Yes. He was also scared. That’s unusual too.”

Barb said, “So you lied before.”

“No. I’m talking about the first time, at the table, when I mentioned my experience. I think it changed how Mark thought about the situation. Leaving me behind could have been his choice, for tactical reasons.”

Amy recalled his advice in the coffee shop. “It would be easier to contact people if they headed downtown. You told them to go home because that might not be safe.”

He smiled approvingly at her through the mirror. “They would be an easier target there, that’s right.”

“Oh, my God,” she gasped. “Derek!”

“I wouldn’t worry about your brother,” Alex said. “He’s probably hanging out with David.”

They were quiet for the rest of the way, with Barb staring ahead, rigid with fear. Amy wanted to comfort her, but couldn’t imagine how to do it.

Amy was relieved to see Derek’s car in David’s driveway as Alex had predicted. She parked on the street and rushed to the front door ahead of the others, wishing she still had her windbreaker as the mountain winds whipped up.

David opened the door after her first knock. “Hi, Amy!” he said, smiling.

“Hi, David.” She smiled back, noting from his tee shirt and jeans that he must not have left the house. “Alex wants to see you.”

"I know," he said, and looked beyond her. "Hey, Alex!"

"What do you mean?" Amy asked him.

"I called David before I heard from you," Alex explained, joining her. To David, he said, "I got a little delayed."

"Where's your partner?" David asked him.

"He's more than delayed."

"What's going on?" Barb asked from behind Amy.

Amy stepped aside so they could see each other. "Barb, this is David Nichols. David, this is my friend Barb Johansson. I don't know if you've met before."

"I've heard about you," Barb told David. "I don't keep up with Derek's friends, but you definitely made an impression with Amy by introducing her to Alex."

"Come on inside," David suggested.

"Hi there, Sis!" Derek called out to Amy from a couch in the center of a large living room.

Two laptops were open on a translucent coffee table in front of him. Behind him, near a large wall with an imbedded flat screen, was a standalone console whose contents to Amy's eye resembled the innards of a small church organ with a small monitor on top.

"Hey, little brother!" she happily greeted her twin. "Whatchya doin'?"

He grinned mischievously. "Looking for the bad guys."

"Have a seat," David said to her and the others.

Amy sat next to Derek on the couch and basked in a feeling that had comforted her in stressful times: that they had each other's backs, no matter what. Watching Alex lean forward in a nearby easy chair and check his phone, she realized that she now felt the same way about him.

Alex looked at David, who had chosen to remain standing while Barb sat in another easy chair facing the couch. "Commercial communications are down. Tell me what you know."

David folded his arms. "That matches what we see, except as far as we can tell it's not just commercial, at least in the last fifteen minutes." Amy gasped. He continued, "It seems to be the result of a sophisticated cyberattack, affecting only Colorado."

"How do you know that?" Barb asked skeptically.

"Satellites," he said. "So far, satellite communications are still

operational. The outages are strictly ground-based.”

Amy imagined what that meant. “It’s like someone’s saying: Look what I can do.”

Alex looked at her strangely. “What?” she challenged him.

“That’s an interesting point,” he said sincerely.

“Any idea who’s responsible?” Alex asked David.

Derek answered, “We’re just in the early stages of tracking that down, and so is everyone else.” He pressed a key on one of the laptops and the wall screen behind him lit up, showing a set from one of the major cable news channels with four pundits discussing what was happening.

Amy turned to watch, even though the same scene was playing on the laptop. At the bottom of the screen, a banner displayed the headline *COLORADO SILENT: TERRORIST ATTACK?* followed by a clock showing elapsed time.

“That can’t be right,” she observed.

“No,” Derek said, still looking at the laptop, “that matches what we know.”

Amy faced Alex, whose intent expression told her that he saw the same thing. “How much did you tell David about what happened?” she asked him.

“Nothing,” Alex answered, “I just asked him to be on the lookout for any sign that someone might be trying to sabotage communications and electronic infrastructure.”

Derek turned off the cable feed’s sound and stared at his sister. “What happened?”

Amy recounted the main events, beginning with the drone attack, with guesses about their timing. Alex nodded occasionally when she described what they had been through together.

“That’s impressive,” David said.

“That’s Amy,” Derek said, with a crack in his voice that made her shiver, “a mind like a calendar.” He turned to Alex. “What did the Air Force tell you?”

“They asked a lot of questions,” Alex replied, “and basically told me what they told Amy, that we’re under attack. No specifics about what to expect, probably because they didn’t know.”

David asked Alex, “Did you notice anything odd after you called me, when you got to work?”

Amy looked sharply at Alex. She had assumed that he called later than that.

"They knew something was up. There were reports of random power outages, malfunctioning traffic lights, and dropped 911 calls. But when I told them about the drone attack and what we were told, they were oddly dismissive."

Amy turned to Barb. "You said 911 wasn't working when they called in the fire."

Barb nodded. "It wasn't, but someone must have gotten through."

Alex looked pensive. "Mark and I were specifically told to follow up on a tip about an emergency in that area. We assumed it came through 911."

Derek began tapping furiously on one of the laptops and said, "I'm surprised we didn't see any of those power outage reports."

"How would you find out about them?" Barb asked him.

"They're posted on the Web," he said. "I archived outage info along with a bunch of other stuff before the comms went down. Oh, there it is." He tapped a few more keys and a map appeared on the wall screen, with no outages appearing. Eight more versions followed, in ten minute increments, with no change.

"How did they find out about the outages?" David asked Alex.

"They would have gotten calls from people who were worried about the impact on the security of their houses and businesses," Alex said, staring at the map.

Amy turned to Derek. "It's more of the same. 'Look what I can do.'"

He rolled his eyes. "That sounds like some people I know."

"I'm a little confused," Barb announced. "Aren't there a lot of people with satellite TV, radio, and internet? Why can't they just share the news until somebody fixes everything? Isn't that what you guys are using?"

David smiled at her. "Those are commercial. Companies are providing them, and we think those companies and their equipment have been hacked to cut off specific customers."

"What we're using here isn't sold anywhere," Derek added.

"Yet," David said, still smiling.

Amy was following along, and had one question for Alex.

“How did you know to come here?”

“It was an educated guess,” Alex said.

Barb picked up on what she was implying. “That’s a pretty good guess! You said ‘commercial’ before we knew what it meant. You just happened to be called to the fire at the restaurant, and you were conveniently left behind by your partner so you could come here with us. That’s a lot of luck.”

“Hang on!” Derek said. “That’s borderline conspiracy talk.”

“And that’s coming from someone who’s prone to suspect conspiracies,” David said earnestly.

“Yeah, that’s *my* thing,” Derek added. “Look, everything that happens is connected to a chain of events that made it a hundred percent likely.”

Barb looked at him as though he was crazy. “So?”

“They’re not the only events, and not the only chains, that could have been connected to it. They just happened to be the ones that were.”

She looked even more convinced he was crazy. “That sounds like a whole lot of B.S. to me.”

Amy turned to David. “You said before that it’s not just commercial communications that aren’t working now.”

“Right,” he said, “since about fifteen minutes before you got here.”

“That was when we left the coffee shop,” she said, looking at her watch to confirm her first impression. “What else were you talking about?”

Amy noticed Derek shift nervously. David answered, “We’ve got access to some government assets, let’s say, and they experienced a major dropout.”

“What does that mean?” she asked.

“That’s all we can tell you,” Derek said, turning to her. “What are you thinking, Sis?”

“Can we see the news channel again?” Amy asked Derek. She looked at the call log on her phone to confirm her suspicion.

“That clock started *right after I called Alex from the coffee shop*. Not before, when we lost signal at the campground, or when 911 stopped working while we were in the fire at the restaurant. It didn’t happen after, when everyone’s phones stopped working, and

when the police radio conveniently stayed working just long enough to force Alex to have me drive him here. And when we left the coffee shop, not before and not after, government communications began to fail.”

She took a deep breath, thankful that Derek was following along without obvious judgment. “Everyone except you has been hacked, with the purpose of getting us all together here.”

Amy expected her brother to challenge her, or for Barb to accuse Alex of arranging it all, or for David or Alex to offer some more logical explanation. But instead, the lights went out.

“How did you do that?” Barb asked Alex. Before he could answer, the lights turned on.

“Backup generator,” David explained. “Any surges?” he asked Derek.

Derek shook his head, tapping the laptop in front of him. “Everything here’s still up, but we lost our link.” An error message appeared on the other laptop, while the screen behind them glowed light blue.

“I’d say that proves we’re not very special,” David said to Amy.

Derek added, “And besides, no technology exists that can control you and everything else like that.”

“There’s only one explanation left, then,” Amy said. “It must be God.”

“What do you think, Alex?” Barb asked, still focused on him.

He had leaned back in the chair, appearing as if he was just taking in everything that was happening. “I wouldn’t rule out anything at this point.”

“Spoken like a detective,” Derek said. Amy couldn’t tell if it was out of respect or derision.

“I still think you know more than you’re saying,” Barb insisted.

Alex sat up and stared at her icily. “That will *always* be the case.”

Amy watched him, impressed and a little excited as Barb meekly said, “Okay.” He turned to David and asked, “What else can you do?”

“We can crank up Big Boy.”

“Do you think there’s enough power?” Derek asked David.

“Enough for a basic sweep before it gets dark.” David walked to

the standalone console and pressed a switch hidden from Amy's view, causing the color of the wall screen to turn white.

Amy and the others got up and stood facing the screen. "Say hello to Big Boy," Derek announced, standing beside Barb to the right of the console. On its left side, Amy watched transfixed as the screen displayed an array of antennas at the top of a mountain, and felt a tingle as Alex reached around her back and rested his hand on her waist.

"What does it do?" Barb asked.

David said, "It automatically controls and gets data from a network of specially designed drones nesting near strategic sites around the city. Typically we need to get special permission to use them, but that's not possible now."

"How did you..." Barb began.

"We tend to bring a lot of work home," Derek interjected.

"Where is it you work, again?" Barb asked him.

"A little company you may have heard of: ServoBiome."

The view of the antennas shifted on the wall screen, occasionally zooming in on the nearby buildings. "Nothing unusual there," David said.

"Do you have a view of downtown?" Alex asked him.

"Already on it." Another window appeared on the screen, showing what Amy instantly recognized as the city government buildings viewed from above some clouds. "We're taking photos that can be reviewed later at a total of thirty locations."

Amy felt herself tense up as Barb asked, "Can you get below the clouds?"

"Those aren't clouds," Alex said. "That's smoke."

It was clear while the drone dived through toward the street that smoke was coming from several buildings, including police headquarters.

"You were right," Amy told him as the hand on her waist balled into a fist. "It was a trap." She saw that the parking areas were full, recognizing his car in one of them.

"You knew that was going to happen?" Derek challenged Alex angrily.

"It was a possibility," he said. "I need to get over there." His tone reflected a mix of anger and sadness rather than

determination.

“You might want to wait,” David said, opening a new window on the screen.

Amy gasped as a close-up of a helicopter appeared. It looked just like the one that had been blown out of the sky at the campground. Beside her, Alex stood rigid, arms now at his sides, and she imagined him experiencing the same sense of dread.

“Where is that?” Alex asked David, his voice emotionless.

David glanced at one of three small monitors that newly occupied the operating space in front of him. “Three miles north of the city offices, closing fast on that position.” He opened a fourth window on the screen, which showed a map of the city and several slowly moving multicolored dots. “The blue dot is the helicopter and the red dots are the observer drones.”

The window showing the fire panned toward the direction of the helicopter, and showed in detail that the streets around the fire were totally filled with motionless cars. Lights flashed several blocks away, which Amy suspected were coming from fire trucks stuck in the gridlock.

“Do you think the people in the helicopter spotted the drone?” she asked Alex.

“And if they know it’s friendly,” he said, anticipating her concern. “We’ll find out soon enough.”

Barb asked David, “Can you at least try calling them?”

“We’re kind of doing that already,” David replied. “There’s an identifier signal being sent by all the drones, which they should be able to recognize if their onboard recognition software hasn’t been hacked.”

“‘Should’ is the operative word,” Derek said.

“Am I right that one of your drones is at the power station?”

Alex asked David, gazing at the map on the screen.

“Yes,” he said a few seconds later. “There’s one taking photos as we speak. Why? What are you thinking?”

“Just how someone might set a fire remotely. Natural gas, a power overload, something like that.”

“Let me pull up the feed,” David said. Another window opened on the screen and the others changed size to make room for it.

Amy’s attention was focused on the view near the fire. The

helicopter had arrived and appeared to be circling the area, oblivious to the presence of David's drone. Recalling what happened at the campground, she imagined that the helicopter was on the lookout for the enemy drone that shot the other one out of the sky. Of all the places that must be in trouble, she wondered, why was it there?

Barb interrupted her thoughts. "Isn't the power out all over the city?"

"We don't know if that's true," Derek said.

"You'll be able to tell when it gets dark, if people's lights don't go on. That's like in an hour."

"She's got a point," David said.

"The drones will have to be back in their nests by then," Derek countered. "They need solar power to keep going, and daylight to take the photos we want."

"Geeks!" Barb spat, prompting Amy to giggle. "Just go outside and look around!"

Amy's memory flashed forward to her experience at the store, and suddenly she knew what was going to happen next. "They're going to put out the fire!" she exclaimed.

"What?" David asked.

"I'll bet another helicopter is on its way," she added, "once they make sure the enemy drone isn't around."

"I think you're right." Alex locked eyes with Amy, and a flash of a smile told her that he already had a plan.

"Why..." Derek began.

Alex interrupted, "If they're expecting friendly company, then they can communicate and so can we." He turned to David. "Tell me you've got more than transponders and command and control."

"Sorry," David said, "Any modification to their communications would take hours in a lab and direct access to the drones."

"How far are you on your sweep?" Alex asked.

"Pretty much done."

"So you can spare all the drones?"

"Spare them? For what?"

The smile returned. "Some good old-fashioned visual communication."

While Alex conferred with David and Derek, Amy watched with relief as cars were finally moving out of the way of the now advancing fire trucks. There would normally be plenty of space, but it seemed most of the city's population had converged on the downtown area when the communications stopped. She hoped that at least the people Alex warned at the coffee shop were somewhere else.

"Hey," Barb said, joining her.

"Hey," Amy said back, noting that the helicopter was now gone from view.

"Looks like your boyfriend's plan worked."

That got Alex's attention. He stared at the screen, a surprised look on his face. "We didn't do anything."

"Nothing?" Amy asked, assuming he was being modest. "How do you explain that?"

He walked up to the window showing the buildings. The smoke was already starting to dissipate, even though the fire department was just arriving.

"No, not that." She pointed at the map. "That."

The dots representing the drones had formed a perfect circle with a giant "B" inside.

"That's not what I had in mind," he said hoarsely.

CHAPTER 4



Amy flipped the switch as she stepped into the apartment, and felt a surge of relief when the overhead light turned on and she felt the cool breeze coming from the air conditioner.

Barb slipped past her and dropped a pair full grocery bags on their dining room table. She then ceremoniously held her nose and opened the refrigerator door.

The smell wasn't as bad as they anticipated, but it was obvious that replacing their food was the right move. Amy retrieved a couple of more bags from the car while Barb filled a large trash bag with what Amy could only think of as a waste of their precious money.

They silently stowed the groceries and then took the trash out together, more aware now than ever of the danger that might be lurking in the dark outside. "Hello, you two!" they were greeted as Amy opened the large trash bin. Their elderly neighbor Alice emerged from a nearby door, dragging a large bag behind her.

“Let me help you with that,” Barb offered, and took the bag from her.

“Thank you, dear,” Alice said gratefully. “It’s so nice to have the power back on, isn’t it?”

“Yes it is,” Barb said, and tossed the bag into the open bin.

“Have you been out?” Alice asked her.

“Yes, we have,” she said, exchanging glances with Amy. “How did you deal with the heat?”

“I have lots of water and a battery-powered fan,” Alice said, grinning. “The lap of luxury compared to what I grew up with.”

“I’m sure,” Amy said. “When did the power come back on?”

“It’s been a little over an hour.”

“How are you doing with food? Would you like to join us for dinner?”

Alice smiled gratefully. “Oh, no, sweetie, I’m fine, but thanks!”

“Didn’t your food spoil?” Barb asked her.

“No. I kept the refrigerator door closed the whole time, and I’ve got lots of dry goods.”

“That was the problem,” Barb mumbled.

“Have a nice evening,” Amy said, ashamed that she wouldn’t have known better.

Amy and Barb were catching up on cable news and had finished dinner when the happy-go-lucky whistling that was Derek’s ringtone erupted from Amy’s phone.

“Hi, Derek!” Amy greeted him, having anxiously awaiting his call.

“Hi, Sis. I just got home after dropping off Alex.”

She grabbed the TV remote and muted the volume. “I’m putting you on speaker.”

“Hey, Derek,” Barb said. “What’s going on?”

“It’s mayhem downtown,” he said. Amy knew he was exaggerating, but not by much. “The fires are out, and a couple of people died.”

“We heard,” Amy said. “The news reported that they were cops, but didn’t release the names. Anyone we know?”

“Yeah. Alex’s partner Mark was one of them.”

She suddenly felt lightheaded. “No,” she breathed.

“A patrol officer too. Tom Jenkins. Alex said he was one of the

best.”

“How is Alex?” she asked.

“He’s pretty shaken up, but he’s also determined.”

“Determined?”

“Determined to find out what happened and why. He also gave me some marching orders.”

“I’ll bet that went well.”

“I’m willing to cut him some slack, this time.”

“What did he want?” Barb asked.

There was a pause which Amy read as discomfort. “He wants me to make sure you’re both okay.”

“He meant Amy,” Barb said.

“Alex said ‘both’. It’s going to be a long night, as you can imagine. He also wants me to dig deeper into what happened with the drones, since he doesn’t buy David’s explanation.” Before they left the house, David had suggested that it was either an optical illusion or an unknown default configuration.

“What do you think happened?” Amy asked him.

“The system’s still in development. My bet is that somebody left a joke in the code.”

“Geeks,” Barb said.

“What are they saying on the news?” Derek asked.

“No one has a clue what happened,” Amy said, “but they have plenty of ideas.”

While eating breakfast the next day, Amy and Barb watched more news. “It’s not news if you don’t learn anything new,” Barb complained more than once.

Government sources were calling it an “event” instead of an “attack,” since no one had claimed responsibility for what happened, there was no discernible pattern that could point to a goal, and there was no trace of a problem after it stopped. All they could say for sure was how long it lasted, which Amy knew was wrong, that it involved mostly communications technology, and that it was limited to the state of Colorado. Luckily no planes had crashed even though they couldn’t communicate with ground controllers.

What Amy found most interesting was a lack of video footage taken during the blackout, on TV and on the Internet, though

afterwards people described what happened to them from memory. She suspected that David's drones had the only recorded photos, which she assumed he was sharing with authorities.

Alex called just as Amy and Barb were getting into her car to go to work.

"Hi!" Amy said, thrilled to hear his voice. "I'm so sorry about Mark." She switched seats with Barb, who had silently offered to drive.

"Me, too," he said with effort. "It was strange the way it happened. Almost as if he and Jenkins were targeted."

"Targeted? How?" she asked, and Barb glanced at her questioningly.

"They were the only people in the break room when it blew. Everyone else was far enough away to get out safely."

Amy paused, processing what he said. "What do the others think?"

"They believe it was just bad luck. By the way, you're the only one I've said that to, because you wouldn't think it's crazy."

"What's that mean?" she blurted, although she instinctively knew the answer.

"You don't think it's crazy, do you?" he asked plaintively.

"No," she said, trying in one word to ease his pain. "Where are you, Alex?"

"Still at work. I've got to go back soon."

"We're on our way to work. Will you be free when I'm off?"

"I think so. It's all hands on deck today."

"I love you, Alex," she said, wishing she could be with him.

"I love you too, Amy. More than anyone or anything." The ache in his voice made her want to cry.

"What was that about?" Barb asked Amy when she ended the call.

"Alex thinks Mark may have been intentionally killed in the fire," she said.

Barb drove silently for a minute before responding. "Does that mean he believes your theory about God being behind everything that happened?"

Amy had nearly dismissed the idea until Alex's suggestion. She recalled something she learned about in a philosophy class before

dropping out of college because of the cost. “I think for Alex it’s like the ‘god of the gaps’ with an explanation to be found later.”

“So you still believe it?”

Amy knew that Barb’s faith didn’t include God being a micromanager. She decided to duck the question. “Remember, Derek said the technology doesn’t exist yet.”

“Technology that he knows about,” Barb countered. “But if you’re right, why kill Mark? We were already at David’s house. And don’t give me that copout about mysterious ways.”

She didn’t have an answer, which maybe *was* the answer. Both the methods and the motivation were still unknown.

Amy was relieved when everything appeared normal at the outdoor supply store where she and Barb worked. It meant they would get a full paycheck, which they needed more than ever after replacing the food in their refrigerator.

She braced herself for comments about the restaurant fire, but thankfully no one brought it up, not even the Harmans. Instead there was rampant speculation among employees and customers alike about the cause of what everyone was now calling “the Event,” which some were giddy to be at the center of. The atmosphere reminded her a little of the terrorist attacks that occurred when she was in high school, with TVs displaying breaking news and people on edge, half expecting that something worse was coming soon.

One of the three TVs in the store was tuned to a local news channel, which was having almost non-stop interviews with people around the state. It was in the department Amy was assigned, and she just finished serving a long line of customers when a familiar face appeared on the screen.

She turned up the sound as Harvey Howard started answering a question next to his camper in a mall parking lot. “An Air Force sergeant told us that the country is under attack, and not to tell anyone. Don’t believe them if they tell you otherwise!”

The reporter, a woman Amy didn’t recognize, moved the microphone closer to his face. “Why have you waited this long to tell anyone?” she asked.

“He told us to keep it quiet, but my wife and I,” he said,

pointing to Toni who was partly visible behind the camper, “we decided it was our public duty after we saw the helicopter fly over, just like the one that almost killed us.”

The camera panned briefly to the reporter’s shocked face. “You were almost killed?”

“That’s right. We were stopped at a little campground I can show you on a map, and this missile flew into the trees and exploded. The helicopter flew over and then it was hit by a missile and exploded. We high-tailed it to a store nearby and that’s where we got the word, after calling the fire department.”

“So the helicopter didn’t actually try to kill you,” the reporter clarified.

Harvey nodded. “But it was too close for comfort when it blew up.”

“Did anyone tell you why?”

“Nope, just what the sergeant said.”

“Was anyone else there?” she asked. Amy held her breath and noticed that several customers had stopped to watch.

Harvey paused. “A police detective and his really nice lady friend were there, and there was this crazy old vet and his daughter who ran the store.”

“Can you tell us any more about them?”

“That’s pretty much all I remember.”

Amy exhaled, thankful that Harvey had respected their privacy.

Business was heavier than usual for the first Monday in November, with a run on hiking and camping survival gear that by mid-day already needed to be restocked.

“Unbelievable,” Amy’s manager Evan Diego said as she followed him into the large storage room underneath the main sales floor where he wanted her to do a spot inventory. In his early thirties like her, but with a family to support, the prematurely balding Diego was a recent immigrant who, as he put it, had “seen much worse than a couple of hours without phones and power.” He handed her a tablet with the expected inventory showing on its small display. “I used to see helicopters and fires every day when I was growing up, except the helicopters were *causing* the fires.”

“You saw helicopters and fire?” she asked him, noting his use

of the plural. "What do you think happened?"

"Someone was messing with us," he said bluntly as she studied the display, "getting ready to do something worse. Like with the election tomorrow."

Hearing Diego say it so definitively sparked a sudden feeling of embarrassment. Amy realized that her own speculation was deeply self-centered, a fact that her brother and friends had politely avoided, perhaps in the hope that she would discover it herself.

For the first time, Amy wondered if she had accidentally biased Alex's views, and in the process jeopardized his ability to do his much more important job. When Diego was gone, she called him to apologize and hopefully correct her mistake.

"Hi, Alex," she said tentatively when the call connected.

"Are you okay?" he asked immediately, the worry in his voice feeding her guilt.

"I'm fine. Do you have a minute?"

She heard muffled voices, and then he said, "Yes, sure."

"I'm sorry," she said urgently, aware she might be compounding her mistake by distracting him from helping someone. "I was selfish before, about why I thought things were happening. Please ignore that, and follow your own instincts."

He paused for an excruciating couple of seconds, and then gently said, "You've got nothing to apologize for."

"You're sweet for saying that. But really, you're the detective. I'm just..."

He interrupted, "The most insightful person I know."

She found herself fighting back tears again. "Thanks," she croaked.

"I mean it," he said forcefully.

She took a deep breath. "Have you heard anything about what's really going on?"

"Everyone's still sorting it out." His voice became a whisper. "Our friends are in trouble, though."

"Oh, no," she said, thinking of Derek and then David. "Can you help them?"

"Don't worry," he said in a normal voice. "I have to go now. Can I pick you up at your place around six?"

"Yes," she said earnestly, "I can hardly wait."

By the time Amy finished her inventory, Harvey's interview was the main story on all the news. "They *know*," Barb whispered loudly as soon as she saw her.

Amy looked around furtively, hoping her worst fear wasn't confirmed. "About what?" she asked innocently.

"The attack. At the campground."

"What attack?"

From what Barb told her, there was no other information available, but it was only a matter of time before Alex was exposed as the detective. "I wonder when they'll find out who those other people are," Barb finished.

"Anybody's guess," Amy said, reading from Barb's body language that she was willing to keep their secret. She learned later during one of the newscasts that so was the Air Force, who was denying the whole story.

"Hey, I know you!" a woman called out to them from across the floor. Amy turned and recognized her as one of the other patrons at the coffee shop.

"Oh, hi," Amy said with a friendly smile. Beside her, Barb put on her customer greeting face.

"Please thank your husband for his helpful advice," the woman said when she got closer.

"He's not my husband," Amy corrected her automatically.

"Really?" the woman asked with a surprised look. "You sure act married."

"We're dating. I'll be sure to pass along your message, Miss..."

"Ainsley. Gloria Ainsley. And please, I'm not a miss." She laughed. "I've got three grandchildren."

"I'm Amy Pacer, and this is my friend Barb Johannson."

"Nice to formally meet you both."

"Do you mind if I ask," Barb asked Ainsley, "how was Alex helpful?"

"Oh, Alex is his name?"

"Alex Rideout," Amy said.

"I went home, just like he said, and avoided all the nastiness they're talking about on the news."

Barb smiled. "All of it?"

"Yes. The phones didn't work, but I had lights, and I watched

one of my videotapes. I have to admit, though, that I cheated and get groceries near my house. It was the only store that had power.”

Amy and Barb exchanged glances. “Where?” Barb asked.

When she told them, Amy immediately recognized the store they had visited on their way home.

Alex was waiting for Amy when she and Barb arrived at their apartment a half hour early. It was already dark, but Amy could tell he had changed into the spare clothes he carried in his trunk.

“Hi!” he greeted them when they got out of the car.

Barb studied him. “You’re pretty awake for someone who’s been up since yesterday morning.”

He grinned at her, surprising Amy. “Adrenaline. It’ll wear off soon enough.”

“Amy told me you’re taking her out. Are you up for that?”

“I thought we’d go to my house and have a home-cooked meal I saved for last night.”

“Sounds great,” Amy told him, grinning. “In the worst case, as you like to say, I could drive your car back here afterwards and pick you up in the morning.” Then she had a thought and suddenly felt guilty. “How are Derek and David?”

Alex’s grin disappeared. He looked around, which Amy assumed was to make sure no one else could hear them. In a lowered voice, he said, “The Air Force filed a formal complaint against their company for what they, we, did yesterday, and they were both reprimanded. Mostly David, since Derek works for him.”

“Is there anything you can do for them?” Amy asked, matching his volume, while Barb moved closer to listen.

“I already did it,” he said. “I took responsibility for asking them to help find out what was going on. It didn’t help much, although I am getting a new partner out of it.”

“That was fast,” Amy said.

“‘Someone to help keep me in line’ is the way my commander put it, though technically I’ll be the lead.”

“When is Mark’s funeral?” Amy asked in a normal voice. “I’d like to be there.”

“His family is working that out. Wednesday at the earliest.”

“We should go,” she said, handing Barb the keys to her car, and

whispered, “Don’t wait up.”

Alex didn’t argue when Amy offered to drive. Fifteen minutes later they were deep in a residential neighborhood, at the house Alex inherited when his parents died in a plane crash. Built for a family of four even though he was an only child, it was spacious compared to the one-bedroom apartment that Amy shared with Barb.

Even though they had been dating for just three weeks, Amy already felt like this was her second home, and that Alex was someone she could easily and willingly share everything in her life with. They had spent many hours talking, about their past, their beliefs, and their hopes, and had explored and played together when Alex didn’t have to work.

In only aspect they held back: they were very affectionate, but not physically intimate. It was driving Amy crazy, though she took responsibility for part of it. She knew it was a cost of taking her religion seriously, even as her faith became seriously eroded with experience and the indulgence of her ability to see connections within that experience. But she had also come to believe that the intent of a rule was as important as the rule itself, because not all applications of it could not be anticipated; and that the intent of chastity outside of marriage was to enable children growing up in safe, stable families.

Whether or not they were married, she knew now more than ever that she and Alex practically fit the definition of a family. His declaration of love for her in the morning was the strongest indication yet that he felt the same way, and tonight she hoped to test it.

“Whoa,” he said, pausing after he unlocked the door.

“You okay?” she asked, concerned.

“Fine. I think the adrenaline’s wearing off.” He stepped inside and headed for the kitchen. “You’ll like this dish, I think.” She followed him to the refrigerator, where he pulled out a large crockpot.

“One of your family recipes?”

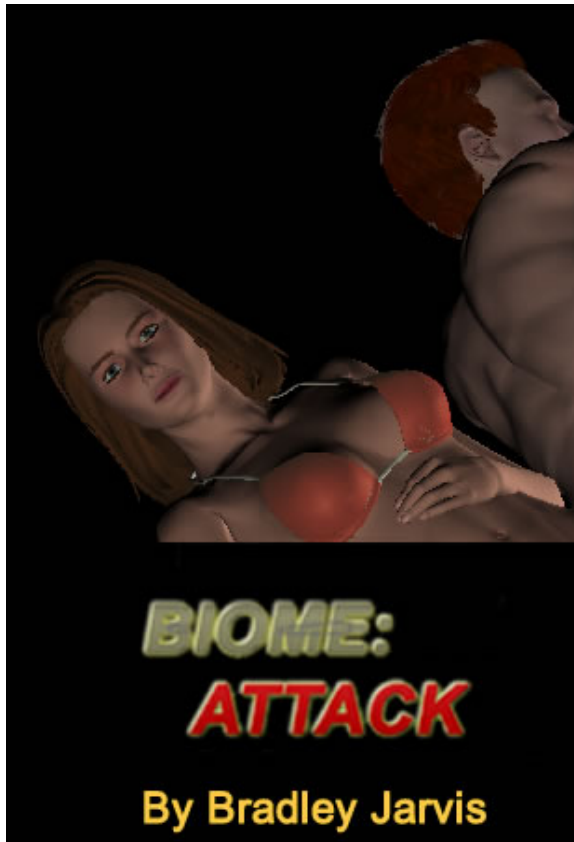
“A new one, actually. It’ll take about a half hour to warm up, but it’s worth it.” He set it on a counter next to the sink and plugged it in. “Whew!” he suddenly exclaimed, raised his arm and

sniffed. "Oh, that's me."

Amy suppressed a laugh as he looked at her, embarrassed. "I need a shower," he said. "Do you mind watching that? I won't be long."

"I'd rather watch you." She turned and unplugged the crockpot. "You know what? I need a shower too."

CHAPTER 5



Amy woke twice in darkness.

The first time was to the sound of Alex's soft snoring beside her, and considered whether to wake him. He had given in to exhaustion before they could do more than cuddle after showering and eating, with a promise to go further when they were rested, but he clearly wasn't rested yet. Disappointed, she gradually drifted off to sleep.

The second time followed a very loud whistle. "What is that?" she mumbled, and felt the bed shake beside her.

"That's my doorbell," she heard Alex say.

"Not a bell," she grumbled. Opening her eyes, she saw his half-naked form move toward a nightstand.

“Cover your eyes,” he warned, and a blinding light flashed through her closed eyelids. She squinted and sat up, unsure whether to comment on the time or how irritated she felt.

The doorbell whistled again. “Let me get that,” he said, and moved quickly to the walk-in closet that faced the bed. He then put on a large bathrobe and left the room.

Amy debated with herself whether to get out of bed or just wait for him, but the decision was made for her when she heard him shout, “You!”

“Hello, Detective Rideout,” a woman’s voice said just loud enough to be heard through the wall. “I’m your new partner, and we have a situation.”

“Show me your badge,” he said, and then, “So it’s *detective* now?”

“Just promoted,” the woman said.

“Wait here, and let me get dressed,” Alex told her, and seconds later was back in the bedroom with the door closed.

“I’m sorry, Amy,” he said honestly, “it’s work.” He threw the bathrobe on the bed, and headed for his dresser.

She slid out of bed and found her clothes. “Your partner is a *woman*?” she asked.

“Apparently,” he said. She felt a little relief that he wasn’t happy about it.

They both finished dressing at the same time, and Amy stepped out behind him.

The woman was about Amy’s age and half-way in height between her and Alex, with short-cropped brown hair and wearing a white windbreaker just like the one she had given away at the restaurant. “Hello, Miss Pacer,” the woman said, and removed the windbreaker. “I believe this is yours.”

“Who are you, and how did you get that?” Amy snapped, and grabbed the windbreaker out of her hand, adding, “And how did you know I was here?”

“I’m Detective Ambrose, and it’s part of my job. The young lady you saved asked me to thank you again.”

“What’s the situation?” Alex asked her, pulling a jacket off a wall hook.

“We can’t discuss it here,” she answered bluntly, and turned to

open the front door.

“Can I go with you? Amy doesn’t have a car.”

“Of course. I’d be happy to drop her off on the way instead of her taking yours.”

“Or him taking his,” Amy said.

“Right.” Ambrose made an attempt at a grin. “You’ll need your gun,” she said to Alex.

“Already have it,” he said, not revealing where.

“How do you two know each other?” Amy asked from the rear seat of Ambrose’s large black sedan when they were half-way to her apartment.

“We met once at a crime scene,” Ambrose said, driving. “I’m afraid I didn’t leave a very good impression on Detective Rideout.”

“That’s surprising,” Amy said, not surprised at all.

“You can call me Alex,” he told Ambrose.

She paused. “You can call me Cathy. It’ll be easier, since my husband is also a detective. I think you know him: Gary Ambrose.”

“El Paso deputy. Yeah, I’ve worked with Gary a couple of times.”

Amy said, “Looks like the birth of friendship, as my friend would say. By the way, *Cathy*, what’s your night job?”

“What?”

“You said this is your day job. What’s your night job?”

Ambrose paused. “I just got off a reserve assignment. That’s all I can say.”

“Gotcha. More like a part-time job. I guess that means we’re not at war.”

“Don’t believe everything you hear, Miss Pacer,” Ambrose said after a pause.

“I don’t,” Amy said, not sure whether to trust her.

The sleeper couch that Amy used as a bed was ready and waiting for her when she got home. She thought about trying for more sleep, but decided against it.

“It’s almost five-thirty,” Barb observed, stumbling groggily out of the bedroom.

“I know,” Amy said, making a beeline for the coffee pot in their kitchenette. “Do you want me to make some for you?”

“Sure.” Barb sat at their small dining table. “Were you up all night?”

“No, I got some sleep.”

Barb perked up. “Really! Say more!”

Amy thought about how much to share. Her personal desire for privacy extended to those around her, and Barb knew it. She decided to keep it simple. “He was very sweet. Everything I imagined. But too tired to do more than fool around a little.”

“What about this morning?” Barb asked.

“He had to go to work. I think it’s something big, because his new partner picked him up instead of calling him.”

“New partner? That didn’t take long.” She picked up her phone. “I’ll see if I can find out what it’s all about. A few minutes later, she exclaimed, “None of my favorite news sites is loading!” She then grabbed the TV remote and began scanning the channels.

None of the local stations mentioned anything that matched what Amy expected, but one of the cable news stations caught their attention. “We now have reports of violence at over half of the first polls to open,” an earnest female anchor announced to a table of five pundits facing a wall-sized map.

“Polls?” Amy blurted. “Voting polls?”

“That’s right,” Barb said with disappointment, “we’ve got to vote today.”

The TV screen split and an anxious male reporter in his twenties interrupted the anchor as she was listing some of the locations. “Just like the first ones, the voting machines here are refusing to register the selections people are making. Many people are complaining that they barely have time to vote before going to work, and that the parties they want to vote against must be responsible.”

“Is there any indication that it’s just one party that people are blaming?” the anchor asked the reporter.

“It’s unclear,” he replied. His eyes widened. “Oh, crap!”

“What is it?” she asked just as the camera tilted at a crazy angle, followed by a sharp bang and static.

Amy and Barb traded looks of shock while the studio on the screen erupted into chaos.

Three long commercials later, the news anchor stared out of the

screen, her face wet with tears. “We’re sad to report,” she said, her voice cracking, “that our colleague Mike Anderson is the first known casualty of...” She stopped and swallowed, and anger suddenly took over her face. “Screw it. Our FRIEND is dead, shot by a MONSTER!”

The face of a male anchor appeared, standing in another studio with another group of pundits at a table behind him. Amy barely paid attention to the steady stream of speculation and updates that followed, wondering whether Alex’s “situation” involved preparation for this happening locally.

Amy flipped through the other channels during a commercial and discovered that local TV stations were now covering the story of voting violence, which was spreading like a virus with the opening of polls and the simultaneous malfunction of electronic voting equipment regardless of location or type. Even the polls using paper ballots were affected by violence, which some reports suggested was due to growing distrust of those managing the overall counting.

Some reports of decreasing turnout due to fear were starting to be received by the national news services. This sparked a round of speculation that the violence would decrease over the course of the day.

She and Barb were among those who now considered not voting at all, especially since it was most convenient to vote in the two hours before they started work, and there was no assurance that they would be able to vote afterwards.

“You should call Alex,” Barb suggested at one point during their discussion. “See what he thinks.”

Amy had already anticipated the idea and dismissed it. “I don’t want to get in the way of him solving the problem.”

“You think this is what he’s working on?” Barb asked predictably.

Amy’s suspicion had quickly grown into a working explanation, but she wasn’t ready to share it yet. “Maybe,” she said instead.

“What aren’t you telling me?” Barb demanded.

Amy shrugged, and chose to run with the obvious facts. “Look at the timing. He had to go in right around the time that the violence started.”

“Yeah,” Barb conceded. “That is quite a coincidence.”

“He’s probably helping to secure everything as we speak.”

“Which means he’ll know better than anyone whether it’s safe to vote.” Barb leaned toward her. “Do you think he loves you enough to make sure *you’re* safe?”

Amy knew he did. But she also was confident that he wouldn’t be able to share what he knew with her while he was with Cathy Ambrose, much less give her any privileged advice. “He loves me,” she answered Barb. “If there’s something I need to know, then he’ll tell me, and I’ll tell you.”



Amy and Barb had to be at work by nine o’clock. Still unable to

access news sites from their phones, they watched the local news to help them decide whether to vote before work or after. By seven forty-five there was no indication of local violence or voting machine malfunctions, so they chose to try voting on their way to work.

Alex called Amy just as she finished parking her car at the store. "Have you and Barb voted yet?" he asked before she said anything.

"Yes," she answered, "we voted and we just got to work. Are you okay? You sound out of breath."

"Thank God," he said.

"Why? What happened?" she asked, turning off the car and ignoring Barb's anxious look.

"A small riot just broke out near your polling place. Are you sure you're safe?"

"Yes." She began feeling breathless herself. Barb gripped her arm and mouthed, *What?* "Hang on," she told Alex and put him on speakerphone. "Barb can hear you too. Did you say there was a small riot?"

"They're happening all over the city now. Look, I've got to go. You two be careful, and let me know when you're on your way home. Promise me, Amy."

"I promise," she said. "You be careful too, okay? We need to finish what we started last night."

He chuckled. "That we do. I love you, Amy." The call ended before she could respond.

Barb released her arm. "Riots, huh? That explains why the parking lot is almost empty."

Amy hoped she was wrong. Inside the store, she got her answer.

During the first two hours only a dozen customers had entered the store. Amy stood in the main checkout area, watching a local newscaster on one of the TVs reporting a variation of what was being said on the others. "All over the state, many people are choosing to stay home rather than risk being hurt, or worse. Still, at least a dozen polling places have seen violence, most of them on the Front Range." Cutting away to a national network, pundits continued what had become rampant speculation that the voting machine malfunctions and the Event might be related, although no

one could explain why the incidence of failure was the lowest in the state where the Event occurred.

Diego called a meeting at the front of the store shortly before noon and announced that the store would be closing for the day. “I’m sorry, my friends,” he said to the six employees who had shown up for work. “Go home and be safe. I hope tomorrow this will all be over.”

“‘Be safe,’ Where is safe?” Barb muttered later as Amy drove them home with the radio on to catch any news updates.

“Good question,” Amy said, worried that Alex hadn’t answered his phone before they left, and hoping he would appreciate the short message she left on his voicemail.



Alex sat anxiously waiting for the briefing to end. He glanced at

Cathy beside him, who was calmly listening as if she had heard it all before. They were in a room that smelled of smoke and the sweat of the crowd of detectives and patrol officers, many of whom had worked through the night.

Commander of detectives Max Henderson stood below a large screen showing a street map of the city that until an hour ago had been covered with red blotches indicating sources of 911 calls. Now dots were popping up sporadically and few, close to matching what a typical day would look like. “We’ve still got seven hours before the polls close,” he said, apparently winding down his presentation, “so we can’t let our guard down, but I am provisionally pulling some of the detectives we’ve had on patrol duty so they can start catching up on the backlog of work since Sunday. Any questions?”

One of the younger officers who was sitting in front of Alex got to ask the first of what were thankfully only three questions. “Sir, have you heard anything about what caused this, that the news hasn’t reported? Like is it related to the Event?”

Cathy straightened up and watched intently as Henderson answered. “The investigation has only just started, and it’s being run by the feds and the military, who aren’t sharing anything at this point.”

“Are any of our people going to be involved in an investigation of our own?” one of the older detectives asked. “Maybe they can piggyback off of what I heard Rideout was doing during the Event.”

A collective gasp spread through the room and Alex became uncomfortably aware that he was now the center of attention.

“We’ve been explicitly told to stand down,” Henderson answered, which Alex noted was not an explicit “no.”

The third question was from a patrol officer. “I was going to ask about whether we’ll get time to attend tomorrow’s funerals, but I’m more interested in what Detective Rideout was really doing while my partner was burning to death, and if he knew it was going to happen!”

A respectful murmur grew in intensity until Henderson answered. “I would let him speak for himself,” he began, staring not at Alex but at Cathy, “but I’ve just been told that it’s

classified.”

“What?” several people shouted simultaneously.

Alex was suddenly more concerned with that admission than the mood of the room, and what it might mean for everyone who was part of what happened. He gritted his teeth, suddenly very worried about Amy.

“Suffice it to say,” Henderson shouted, “he was **DOING HIS JOB**.” He waited for quiet and continued in a normal voice. “*His* partner left him behind to follow up on a lead, which may end up saving lives.” Technically it was unknown whether the drone photos had useful information, but Alex was grateful for the defense of both him and Mark’s reputation.

After Henderson dismissed the meeting, several people shook Alex’s hand, saying some version of “Good work.” He thought about calling Amy, but decided to get more information first.

“What do you know about the classification?” he asked Cathy as he led her to a secure conference room.

“Nothing,” she said.

“Well, what does it mean?” he pressed, entering the empty room.

“It depends on the threat level, but you already know that.”

“I’d say the threat level is about as high as it can get, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes,” she said. The look on her face said that she was impressed. “I take it you’re worried about Miss Pacer.”

“Amy,” he corrected reflexively. “You can call her Amy. She distrusts people who are formal.”

“Good to know. Anyway, I doubt she’s in any trouble, though I expect she’s under surveillance. At least for a while.”

“I expect she and I have both been under surveillance for more than a while.”

“It wouldn’t be surprising,” she agreed. “What makes *you* think so?”

“An enemy drone shoots down a military helicopter, and the Air Force sets up a roadblock to keep people away. Except a few civilians accidentally witnessed it. You can’t control them, so you tell them that national security depends on them keeping quiet and then you watch them to be sure they do.”

“But *you* didn’t keep quiet,” she said.

“I’m a cop. You didn’t expect me to. But you had to keep up appearances.”

“This is beginning to sound like an interrogation, Alex.”

“I just want to make sure we’re on the same page, and if you’re serious about working with me then you do too.”

She sat down at the table. “I do. We need to be honest with each other.”

“Okay,” he said, taking a seat across from her. “First question: Is this a safe place to talk?”

“I think so,” she said.

“That’ll have to be good enough. Are you spying on me?”

She hesitated, flustered. “Yes, no. They think I am, but I’m not.”

“*They* being the leaders of your team?”

“My former team. I’m a civilian again.”

“Do they expect you to report on me?”

“Not unless you present a threat, but I’ve assured them that you won’t be. That’s not an issue, though, *because I’m not working for them.*”

He felt an old anger begin to boil inside and instantly identified its source. Cathy was acting as a decoy, whether she was telling the truth or not, because someone else was still watching Amy. “What constitutes a threat?”

“Endangering the mission,” she said, and surprised him with a smile. “You’ve been through this before, haven’t you?”

“A couple of times,” he said, being as honest as he could.

“What’s the mission?”

“Winning that war I mentioned at the roadblock.”

“Tell me about the war.”

“I can’t. It’s classified.”

“How can I avoid being a threat, if I don’t know what I’m threatening?”

“I’ll help you,” she said earnestly.

“Will you help Amy and the others too?”

“Of course.”

He stared into her eyes, letting her know he was serious, and testing if she would honestly answer his most important question.

“Why?”

“I’m not okay with the costs,” Cathy said bluntly, holding his gaze, “in lives or in principles.”

In that moment, Alex saw a glimpse of himself at the time he reached the identical conclusion under similar circumstances. The pain, the conviction, and the joy of finding that core truth were all there in her expression, which he knew could not be faked.

He also saw the solution to the problem that had occupied his mind for more than a day.

“You can’t compromise at all,” Alex said with sympathy.

“I know,” Cathy said meekly.

“Have you talked to Gary about any of this?” he asked.

“I plan to do it tonight.”

“You should tell him as much as you can, including your role in the Event.”

“What?” she gasped.

“That cost in lives was the two cops that died, isn’t it?”

She recoiled with what he recognized as a mix of surprise and guilt.

“You were in that helicopter over downtown, or you were giving them orders, trying to keep civilian lives from being lost by accident.” Her expression confirmed his guess.

“How did you know?” she whispered.

“I saw both helicopters, remember? The one that was shot down and an identical one over the city.”

“From the test drone,” she said.

He nodded. “That loss hit you the hardest, because you felt responsible for people dying you were dedicated to protecting, both on that job and this one.”

“Yes. If they’re willing to go that far, I can’t be a part of it.”

“Can you tell me why they did it?” he asked carefully.

“Not legally.”

“How about if I guess, and you let me know if I’m right?”

“Okay.”

“You, I mean they, were improving their chances of finding the enemy drone wherever they thought it might be.” She nodded.

“That meant hunting in the air while tracking potential means of communications and use of power by control relays on the

ground. They discovered the enemy might be using cell signals, so they killed or blocked them from towers in the target zone.” She nodded again.

“The drone was lost after the hunter was shot down, and the search area grew to include the whole state. Meanwhile, they started testing to scale how they would kill communications and power in the populated areas so the drone and its relays would stand out.” She nodded.

“They got desperate, and started knocking out everything they could, some of it by accident, except of course for the satellites, whose communications were being tracked as the last option for the enemy to use.” She nodded and began to grin.

“David got his drones up shortly after that, and they let him do his sweep figuring they could commandeer the photos and data for their own use by pressuring the company.” She was smiling now.

“The fires were accidental, caused by the all-out controls sabotage. Meanwhile, someone decided that either the drone was grounded, maybe because of loss of sun for solar power backup, or that the risk to the population was too high, even for them. Maybe both.”

“That’s quite a story,” she said, effectively confirming it.

“What I don’t get is the timing and how they arranged for both me and Amy to be together at David’s house.”

“What do you mean?”

“Getting me to the restaurant after it burned, and Mark to leave me behind at the coffee shop so Amy could conveniently drive me to the house at the exact same time that the networks logged the start of the Event, which was later than we saw it on the ground.”

She looked genuinely confused. “If they *could* control all those variables, which they *can’t*, they would have kept you as far from that house as possible.”

Alex suddenly had a sinking feeling. “What if they tried and failed to do just that?” He imagined the people who followed him and Amy collaborating after intercepting his call to David arranging the visit. They would have started the restaurant fire to keep him busy in the aftermath, and arranged for Mark to be called back to the station with orders to leave him behind at the coffee shop to deal with the crowd.

"That is more plausible," she admitted, and then frowned and reached below the table.

Without thinking, Alex lifted his right leg and unbuttoned the holster above his ankle.

Cathy's cell phone was above the table just as Alex raised his gun to firing position below it. He held her gaze the whole time without changing his expression, and became suddenly aware of what he was doing. "Who are you calling?" he asked evenly.

"A former colleague," she said with a questioning look. "Wait. Do you think *I* was involved in something like that?"

"Watching me is your job."

"Was my job," she corrected, and realized her mistake when Alex raised the gun above the table. "Not *then*, and not *now*!"

"I'd like to believe you," he said. "I'll ask again. Who are you calling?"

"His name is Roger Gilpin. He's a special agent in the Office of Special Investigations. Just like I was. If anyone can sort this out, he can."

"Why would he?"

"He shares my values and would find a way."

"You're asking for a whole lot of trust here, especially since my future wife's life may be in danger."

She raised an eyebrow. "Your future wife? Does Amy know that?" He let his expression reveal that he hadn't told anyone until now. "I don't want anyone harmed, which is why I'm here," she said with compassion and no fear.

"Okay," he said as his instincts aligned with his judgment. "Make your call, but I need to see for myself, and you're coming with me."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," she said, and put her phone on speaker.

Twenty minutes later, Alex got off the phone with Amy while riding in Cathy's car. "She's fine," he told Cathy. "Her job let her off early and she's at her apartment watching TV with Barb, along with Derek and David."

"They're all there?"

"Yes. Will you be able to tell if they're still being monitored?"

“Possibly, but when their tails see me they’ll likely leave, figuring I’ve got it covered.”

“Makes sense,” he said, “unless Gilpin gets to them first.”

Gilpin had been totally unaware of the Air Force’s responsibility for the Event, and promised to do a full investigation beginning with the end of any ongoing surveillance. Cathy had promised to be fully debriefed as soon as the safety of the civilians could be guaranteed.

“It’s a good thing the commander gave us the rest of the day off, huh?” Cathy said.

“It’s provisional,” he reminded her.

“Are you going to pop the question when we get there?”

“I haven’t decided yet. I don’t even have a ring.”

“Not a big deal. Gary didn’t get me one until two weeks later, but they were a *glorious* two weeks, and I got to pick it!”

When they arrived at the apartment complex, Cathy drove through every place a car could be. There was no sign of anyone waiting or watching in the area. Cathy received a call from Gilpin just as she was about to park near Amy’s apartment.

Alex used his own phone to take a movie of the scene outside the car while listening to Cathy’s side of the conversation, which wasn’t meaningful until the end. “Thank you, Roger, I’ll pass it along,” she said. “WTF!” she shouted after ending the call, followed by a string of explicit epithets he hadn’t heard since boot camp.

She accidentally hit the car horn, which drew attention from inside the apartment. Amy was the first one out, looking questioningly at them through the windshield.

“What did he say?” Alex asked calmly and waved at Amy.

“The whole operation’s already been shut down, with the highest classification slapped on everything internal and some super high quality cover stories for everything else. We can’t tell anyone else about it outside of a controlled setting, ever, or we’ll each be stuck alone in a cell until we die there, and so will whoever we tell.”

He felt his body go numb. “What about the drone strike? Amy and the hiker were witnesses.”

“The Harvey family already broke that news. What they know,

or have shared, is *all* we can talk about.”

“Damn,” he said, just as Amy got close to the car.

“I need you to promise *me* that you won’t say anything to anyone about this. Even to Amy.”

He saw it as a commitment of trust that they would both need. “You have my word.”

“Hi, Alex!” Amy shouted through the window, concern in her voice. “Are you okay?”

“You go ahead,” Cathy said. “There’s something I need to do first. Just in case.”

“I’m fine,” he told Amy as he walked with her toward the apartment.

“Where’s Cathy going?” she asked.

“She just had a bad day at work and needs to vent.” He turned to see Cathy open and close her left fist as she held it briefly over her head. He assumed it was a signal to anyone watching that they could leave.

“Sorry to hear that,” Amy said almost insincerely. “Really, how are you? You look stressed.”

“It’s been a rough day for everyone,” he said, forcing a smile.

“Maybe this will help,” she said and hugged him tightly. “Does it?”

He closed his eyes and let her warmth overwhelm him. “Yes it does.”

“Hi, Cathy,” he heard Amy say and opened his eyes as she let him go.

“Hi, Amy,” Cathy said. “Sorry if I made you uncomfortable this morning.”

“No problem,” she said and opened the door. “Look who’s here!” She pointed to the couch. “There’s my brother Derek, and Alex’s cousin David.” They both waved in turn. “We don’t usually have this much company. Oh, and back there,” she pointed to the kitchenette, “is my best friend and roommate Barb.”

“Nice to meet you,” Barb said. “Can I get you two anything to drink?”

“Water’s fine,” they both said in unison, getting a surprised reaction from Amy.

“Anything new happening?” Cathy asked Amy. The TV was

tuned to one of the major cable networks, showing what looked like a presidential press conference just ending.

“The president said he came really close to declaring a national state of emergency, but everything started working again as if nothing ever happened. They decided to postpone the election for a week so they can make sure, but it looks like everything’s okay now.”

“Really?” Alex said. He had half-expected martial law by now.

“That’s what they say, whoever the hell ‘they’ are,” Derek answered loudly, “but I don’t believe it for a second. Problems like that don’t just fix themselves.”

David turned to him. “The Event fixed itself, Derek. The lights and phones are working just fine.”

“For now,” Derek spat.

“Here’s your water,” Barb said, handing glasses to Alex and Cathy.

“Thanks,” Cathy said sincerely.

“Thanks, Barb,” Alex added. “How are you doing?”

“Just great,” she answered. “I just hope we get paid for the rest of the day.”

“Me too,” he agreed.

She whispered, “David told me what we saw at his place is now classified, and we can’t tell anyone about it. Is that true?”

“I’m afraid so,” he whispered back. “I can’t say I’m surprised.”

“That sucks. It’s a great story.”

“Sure is,” he agreed.

He took Amy’s hand as she walked by, and asked, “Can we talk for a minute?”

“Sure,” she said. “How about Barb’s bedroom?”

“Don’t do any funny business in there,” Derek shouted. “Barb wouldn’t like it.”

“What has he been drinking?” Alex asked when the door was closed.

“I’ve got a little alcohol, for company,” she said.

“So I’ve heard,” He set his glass on the dresser. “Hey, I’ve got an important question for you, but I didn’t come prepared.”

She squinted at him. “Prepared for a question?” Then her eyes lit up. “YES!” she screamed.

“What?”

“What?” she mimicked him. “Okay, go ahead.”

“Will you marry me?”

“*Absolutely* yes!” she exclaimed happily and kissed him deeper than he ever thought possible.

EPILOGUE



Amy was exhausted after an hour of intermittent lovemaking. Alex had luckily not been called back to work, so they were able to celebrate their engagement without interruption at his house.

“That’ll keep us in shape,” Alex said as she rested her head on his chest.

She propped herself up. “I hope so. I don’t think I could do a workout too.”

“You might surprise yourself,” he said. “I heard you can run pretty fast.”

“Different muscles,” she said. The comment reminded her of the fire at the restaurant. “Speaking of which, how did you like my message?”

“You mean ‘heading home, it’s all connected to how we feel about each other’?”

“That’s the one. You haven’t asked what it meant.”

“Some other things came up,” he said, grinning.

"They sure did," she agreed, and slid her chest against his for emphasis. Proof of what he meant greeted her immediately.

"Are you interested now?" she asked.

"In what?"

"I'm serious," she said, moving to his side, "though I take full responsibility for *that*."

"Fair enough." He turned and looked into her eyes. "It's hard, I mean *tough*, changing gears. Tell me what you meant."

She forced herself to focus. "I believe... the closer we've felt to each other, the more we've been guided to get closer. Bad things happened when we were distant, and they corrected themselves when we felt closer to each other."

He held the same expression for several seconds. She imagined his mind churning through all the possibilities, testing what she said against what he knew. "There are some match-ups," he conceded finally, "though there's one I don't see. The election attack started before Cathy woke us up this morning."

She had anticipated that. "I woke up a while before the doorbell and went back to sleep. I was pretty sure we weren't going to finish what we started."

"Interesting," he said. She couldn't tell how sincere he was. "If you're right, then that puts a lot of pressure on us."

She kissed him. "I'm good with that."

He smiled at her. "Yeah, me too."

One year later...

Amy woke up disoriented, and suddenly felt like she was flying. Ahead of her was a large dark blue river of stars, which she was approaching without any control over her direction or speed. The stars grew to the size of small bubbles, and the river had dimension to it that made it resemble a large tube.

She felt curiosity and no fear as she realized that this was a dream rather than reality. Looking around her, she saw that the tube of stars was actually bent slightly, and curved into a snake-like form on either side of her. Above, a shimmering string of light grew bright as it dangled closer to the snake of stars.

Abruptly, the string wrapped itself around the snake right in

front of her, and she saw that they were very similar to each other. A feeling of ecstasy grew within her as she was drawn within its sea of bright bubbles.

She flew toward one bubble in particular, which resolved into fluffy white cloud. As she entered, she saw a younger woman suspended at its center, eyes closed as if in a trance, with flowing dark hair and more than a passing resemblance to Amy herself.

Amy slowed and then stopped when they were close enough to touch. Happiness spiked within her as if every cell in her body was dancing with joy. She reached out to embrace the woman, knowing it was the right thing to do and the only thing she wanted to do.

And then the woman's eyes opened. In her bed, beside the man she loved more than anyone until then, Amy's eyes opened too.



BRADLEY JARVIS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The contents of this book were first published in parts on the official BIOME Web site at

http://bradswriting.com/BIOME/BIOME_Attack.html.

Artwork was created using Poser Debut, Adobe Fireworks CS5, and an original photo.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bradley Jarvis has been writing creatively for more than four decades, and professionally as a technical writer for nearly half that time. He has a science background which he applied as a test engineer in several industries, as an educational consultant, and as a non-profit advocate of space science and exploration.

He finished his first novel [*Lights Out*](#) in 2009 based on another application of his background: independent research into the relationship of people's actions and values on the long-term survivability of our species. His second book [*Death Stoppers Anthology*](#) is a sampling of writing up to 2014, including short fiction, poetry, essays from his large collection of blog posts, and a memoir that chronicles the evolution of his interest in the future.

As a fan of orchestral soundtracks, he taught himself how to create his own, and published his first album based on scenes in *Lights Out*. Personal experience with the death of loved ones inspired another album, *Final Solace*, and a related short story that was included in *Death Stoppers Anthology* (which also led to a music album).

Most of his efforts are now focused on dealing intellectually and creatively with results from the latest iteration of the research, made urgent by growing confirmation of their most dire aspects by recent events.

For a full list of his writing and music, see

<http://bradswriting.com>.