

In Absence of Fear

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ISBN: **0-9968243-0-8**

ISBN 13: **978-0-9968243-0-9**

Library of Congress Control Number: **2015917192**

LCCN Imprint Name: **Corner Canyon Press**

For Ted.

Part One

We are born into this world unarmed—our mind is our only weapon.

—Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*

How does a government keep its citizens safe?

Crime prediction. Threat mitigation. There are leading indicators. Behavioral patterns that signal a plan to bomb, the desire to murder. A comment in a forum. A purchase at the hardware store. A detour on the way to work. Together, they tell a story. But they are not enough.

Once the threat is identified, action must be taken.

Chapter One

THE DATA FEED continued to crawl, an overlay against the late-morning sky rendered by windowless walls. Marus sat in his fluorescent-lit workstation, eyes fixed on the massive screens in front of him. Algorithms weighted millions of individual data points, parsing and analyzing to predict patterns and determine possible outcomes. The code did the work, but as senior algorithm architect for the predictive policing program, he guided it. Inhale, input. Exhale, output. He thought in variables and values. Saw sequences in his sleep. Ones and zeroes. Black and white.

When he was a boy, he wanted to be a fireman, as most boys do. Why was that? Why do most boys wish to be firemen? It was noble to put out fires, yes. But, it was nobler to prevent them.

Murderers, bombers, burglars, rapists, and kidnappers were halted before they struck. The program led police right to them. And yet, the Protectors had only scratched the surface. External indicators pointed to plotting criminals, but the system hadn't eliminated all danger. Unplanned crime still ripped families apart and threatened the order of the State.

The Internal Indicator Initiative, coined "I3" by the State, would change that. The Protectors had been able to distinguish various physiological responses that preceded violent

behavior. Hormonal influx, brain activity, and an accelerated heart rate were among the most rudimentary. In time, the State's scientists would identify others. The system would make it easier by flagging patterns they'd initially missed. Statistical significance would ensure inclusion. The program would adjust. Bigger, faster, more secure. Machine learning at its finest.

It was Marus's job to lead the design, analysis, and implementation of I3. It had taken months—years—of testing and refining the code. A lot longer than he and his team would have liked, but he had to make sure the technology was exact. There was too much at stake. Not only the safety of his family, his friends, and citizens across the State, but also their freedom. Misattribution or a faulty diagnosis could put the wrong person behind bars. That ripped families apart, too. He hadn't been willing to take that chance.

Now, I3 was ready. *Finally.* Another month or so and it'd be going gold. He'd be able to take a deep breath. Take his wife and child and father and head south. A beach somewhere. Their first vacation in years. They'd spend a week, maybe two, swimming and sunbathing. Beachcombing. Cade would like that. Collecting shells and other treasures. They'd eat shrimp and sea bass and large plates of crab. He could almost taste the butter, the spongy white flesh breaking apart in his mouth. He and Shey would make love every single day. And then, after a good, long sleep he'd get back to work. Iterations and updates would be necessary. Several hundred Saturdays just like this, but it was in the name of a future free from fear.

The ninth floor was quiet, except for the faint purring of the machine. Its heat radiated from the floor and the walls. Warm-blooded. All around him, slender necks on the ceiling pivoted silently. Dozens of tiny cyclopes twisted to watch as he worked. He didn't mind.

Show the boss I'm here. On a Saturday.

He looked at the clock. Cade's soccer game was about to start, if it hadn't already. Sometimes they'd begin a half hour late. Sometimes five minutes early. It was hard to tell. Seven-

year-olds, he found, were unpredictable. It was best to hurry. His fingers floated across the keyboard, melodious in their tapping.

One more thing. One more line. One more reason I'm the best they've got.

His phone came alive beside the mouse. Shey's face appeared on the screen as it quivered. The game must have already started. He finished the update and logged off. Jacket in one hand, phone in the other, he started for the elevator. The phone displayed his favorite picture of her. The light was just right, illuminating emerald eyes, tinting her brown hair red. He slid the bar green and put the speaker to his ear.

"Hey, I'm just walking out."

"Marus, Cade's not here," she said, her voice a frantic staccato. "I don't know where he is."

"What?"

Entirely unpredictable.

Once Cade had wandered out of the apartment and ridden the elevator up and down, up and down, until an elderly woman heading to the fifteenth floor took his hand and rode down to the lobby, where she deposited him at the front desk.

This isn't a playground, young man, she'd said

I was just making sure it worked, he'd told her.

Marus could hear clapping on Shey's end of the line. A whistle.

"Joey's mom gave him a ride this morning. I just got here, and he isn't here."

"Have you checked ChildSafe?" Marus asked.

"Yes. It says his last tag was here. But I've looked everywhere. The school is locked, and the game's already started. I don't know what to do."

"Sometimes it lags. Maybe he wasn't feeling well, and another parent took him home. ChildSafe probably hasn't registered it yet."

“Marus...” She hesitated for a moment, as if trying to make sense of something. “I found his ball in the parking lot. *He left his ball.*”

He could hear her breath, quick and desperate. She was moving around frantically, he could tell. Her boots made a swishing sound in the grass as she walked the length of the field. The clapping grew distant.

It wasn't like Cade to miss a game. But it had happened before. Strep throat and a fever of 102 degrees had benched him, but his ball was another matter. The ball changed everything. Since his idol, soccer star Luca Valdeti, had given it to him, the ball never left his side. To Cade, sheer proximity to it ensured stardom. He'd even tried to take it into restaurants.

“*Oh,*” Marus said, turning. He hadn't made it past the break room. “Okay. Call the police.” He hurried back to his desk. “Get it into the system. I'll be right there.”

“Okay,” she said.

“Shey—”

“Yeah?”

“Everything is going to be all right.”

She breathed deeply into the phone, an unspoken prayer that he might be right.

“I love you,” he said.

“I love you, too.” She hung up.

He turned on the machine and logged back into the system. At the top of the feed, he saw Shey's call. Her elevated heart rate, a violent line drawn on the screen. His code at work.

He wasn't authorized to pull up specific user profiles, regardless of his relation to the person. Doing so was against protocol, and for good reason. The data wasn't meant for human eyes. ChildSafe was a separate application designed to equip parents with just enough visibility to be effective in their parenting role. It gave them access to a list of their children's geotags—the dates and times. It provided itemized cafeteria receipts so they could monitor what their kids ate

and alerted them if their child had a fever. Unlike the Protector Program, the app didn't display communications or show other data from a user's iD. And, ChildSafe often lagged. Five minutes, maybe ten. Marus had never thought it significant before. But in situations like this, a few ill-informed minutes made all the difference.

Hacking the system to bypass permissions and view Cade's profile was a matter of identifying system exploits. He didn't have to guess where the weaknesses were. Having architected the code, he knew. Accessing the information wasn't a concern. It would take a matter of minutes, at most. And yet, he hesitated. Several seconds passed as he sat frozen in front of the screens.

There would be consequences. By dodging authorization, he'd be written up. He'd have to visit with a State counselor, explain the behavior. His permissions might be restricted temporarily until it was clear he wasn't a threat. No one was excluded from the Protectors' watch, not even a Protector. The algorithms never failed to do their job.

It took him four minutes to gain entry. He scrolled down to the *Tags*, revealing a chronological list of locations where scanners had tagged Cade's iD. The most recent, the athletic field at his school, St. Xavier Preparatory, was at the top of the list. Joey's mom had driven him there. Her car's GPS had appended the route they'd taken to his profile. Marus clicked on the map and traced it with his finger. A left, a right, and another left. Twelve minutes. No stops. The car parked in the lot. Cade was tagged as he ran by the bleachers. There was nothing else.

Point A: Home with Shey.

Point B: The soccer field at school.

As for *Point C?*

Without the data, Marus's guess was as good as any. *A friend's house? A convenience store?*

The restrooms?

There were more than four million State-issued scanners within city limits, and thousands more that had been installed as part of residential security systems. And none of them had picked up Cade's iD in the past twenty minutes.

The drive from work to the soccer field took fifteen minutes. He looked at his watch. A total of thirty-five minutes had ticked away since Cade was last seen. Every last one of them counted. Every second from here out, counted.

She stood at the other end of the field, flanked by several bystanders and a few uniforms. A semicircle of concern. She wasn't looking at any of them. Her head bobbed and turned as she scanned the edge of the field, the bleachers, and the lot. Yellow and blue jerseys darted back and forth. A few parents clapped and shouted at their tiny players, but most were looking at Shey or glancing nervously at those clustered around her. A parent's worst nightmare, realized. Many of them were worried. Many more were relieved. *Not my child.*

Shey saw Marus walk onto the field and lurched forward into a half run, nearly colliding with a police officer.

They met at the curb, folding into each other upon impact. Her hair still smelled of the shower they'd taken before he left for the office. When she finally pulled away to meet his eyes, he saw something he'd never seen there before, a fear so great it pushed everything out. Even the light.

"I thought he was you," Joey's mom said, looking at Marus. "He had a cap on, and a brown windbreaker. I couldn't see his face."

"Where did they go?" The police officer was tapping at the glass in her palm. Pinned flat to her chest was the name *Μυῖνος*.

“They were walking away from the field. Over there.” Joey’s mom pointed to the far side of the parking lot. “The man had his hand on his back. Cade was holding the soccer ball.”

The ball lay lifeless, stark white against the grass in front of them. Joey’s mom eyed it as though it were a body.

“I thought he was Marus,” she said again. Her face was red. Her eyes, glossy with guilt. “Like he was leading Cade away for a pep talk.” She was shaking her head at no one in particular.

“And where were you?” Officer Muñoz glanced in Shey and Marus’s direction.

A shrill whistle sounded from the plastic at the referee’s lips. Shey jerked at the noise. “I had to finish up some work at home,” she said. She, too, was staring at the soccer ball. A look of terror, taut across her face.

Officer Muñoz referred to her tablet. “And you got here twenty minutes ago?”

Shey turned away from the ball. She nodded. “I couldn’t find him, so I checked ChildSafe. It said he was here. I found his soccer ball sitting in an empty parking space.”

“And where were you?” Muñoz turned toward Marus.

“At the Protective Services Center,” he said. “I’d just wrapped up some work when Shey called.”

“You’re a Protector?” The officer asked, though she held that exact information in her hand.

Marus nodded.

“All right. Why don’t you two head over to your district station to fill out a report? Cade’s iD hasn’t been tagged since the school, but we’ve initiated a facial recognition search. If one of the cameras finds a match, we’ll notify you. In the meantime, we’ll issue an Amber Alert and pull back surveillance footage from the area. I’ll come by your house later tonight—”

“Will it take that long?” Marus asked, one arm still firmly around Shey.

“It might.” Officer Muñoz tucked the tablet under her arm. “It depends what we’re dealing with. I’ll call you if we learn anything before then.”

“Okay. Thank you, Officer.” He picked up the ball and guided Shey past the bright jerseys, away from the game and the fixed eyes of spectators, toward the parking lot.

He wanted to ask why she hadn’t told him she couldn’t take Cade to the game, or why she hadn’t gotten there sooner. He wondered what work she’d had to do. Dissatisfied with her job, it’d been months since he’d seen her bring any work home. There were a lot of questions he wanted to ask, but, just then, she dropped to her knee, gagged, and spit up onto the asphalt.

“I’m sorry,” she said, looking up at him.

He helped her stand again. “We’re going to find him.”

A fleshy man with thinning blond hair greeted Marus at the front desk of the satellite station with a disinterested mumble.

“G’day.” He focused on the desktop screen concealed behind the high counter.

Marus nodded an unseen reply. “I need to report a missing person,” he said.

Surprised, the man looked up at Marus and leaned in as though he had misheard. “A missing person?”

Marus nodded. “Officer Muñoz sent me.”

“Uh...uh. Hold on a minute.”

The man waddled hurriedly down the hallway until Marus could no longer see him.

Moments later, he returned, accompanied by a woman. The word *Sergeant* arced across the gold and silver plaque pinned just above her heart.

“Can I help you?” the sergeant asked.

“He can,” Marus said, pointing to the blond man. “I already told him. I need to report a missing person...my son, he’s been kidnapped.”

An audible silence fell over the station. An officer lingered in the doorway. A woman looked up from the lobby, turning her ears. Even the hum of machines and radios seemed muted somehow. The sergeant glanced at the heavy, blond man.

“Get him a tablet, please,” she said.

The blond man looked around, wide eyed, but didn’t move.

“They’re in the cabinet in the hall.”

He stepped around her and shuffled back down the hallway.

“We don’t get many of these here,” she said in apology. Her brown eyes fell to the screen to see what the door scanner had registered. Seeing the seal there, she straightened. The thin black lines of her eyebrows knit together. “You work for *the State*?”

The blond man returned with a tablet and set it on the counter in front of Marus.

The sergeant picked it up, palming the thin glass as though it were an offering. She looked briefly at Shey, who was sitting in one of the rigid, blue lobby chairs with her head in her hands.

“Let me know if there’s anything we can do,” she said.

Your job, Marus thought. Though he took the tablet from her without a word and turned toward his wife.

The woman sitting several chairs over continued to watch. Her head swiveled in their direction. Hungry eyes glanced from Shey to Marus and back again when he looked up at her from the tablet. She started to smile and then thought better of it. Her lips retreated to the dull corners of her mouth as her thumbs ticked across her phone in excitement.

Marus angled his body away from her, turning to protect Shey from her view. Scanning his wrist with the iD reader affixed to the tablet, he pulled up his profile. He clicked *Reports* and selected the missing persons report Officer Muñoz had requested. Empty fields materialized on the screen. *Name. iD. Sex. Address. DOB. Height. Weight. Hair color. Eye color.* Information the

Protectors already had. Information he had to provide as an exercise, a matter of formality. Busy work. Keep the victim's loved ones occupied. Ease their angst. He remembered discussing it in a procedures meeting. *Idleness leads to despondency. Despair creates an opportunity for people to doubt the system. Participation provides purpose. Purpose instills a sense of accountability.*

For everything, a cause and effect.

Last seen?

Marus had gone to work while Cade was still sleeping. The night before, he'd picked him up from soccer practice. In the car, Marus had listened to the news while Cade played a game. Had they talked? Had Cade said anything unusual? He couldn't remember. They'd had dinner as a family. Roasted chicken with mashed potatoes and carrots. Sometimes they'd play a game after the plates were put away, but this time Marus retired to the study early to return to his work.

What was the last thing he'd said to his son? Had he pulled Cade into his chest to say good night? Had he told him that he loved him? He was sure he would have, but couldn't actually remember.

Father: Last night, at home, before bed.

He pulled his collar open to the side and took a breath. Movement caught his attention, and he realized it was his own foot tapping. He held it still, pressing it firmly into the gray, industrial-grade carpet. The woman stared openly from her seat. He tried not to look at her as he typed.

"When did you last see him?"

She lifted her head from her hands. Her face was streaked, pink and pale, though the crying had stopped. "This morning," She said. "After you left. Joey's mom came at nine thirty."

"Why so early?"

She wouldn't face him. "I had to run some errands."

There was a moment of silence. The desire to say something more. Then it passed.

Marus returned to the tablet.

Mother: 9:30 a.m. today, at home.

“I should’ve taken him to the game,” She said. “I should have been there from the start.” She bent over in the tiny chair. Resting her elbows on her knees, she folded her hands and brought them to her forehead. It was a look of pleading. And apology.

He put both arms around her and pressed his lips into her hair. “Everything is going to be okay,” he whispered. “I’m sure a camera or a scanner has picked something up by now. They’re going to find him and bring him home.”

He kissed the side of her head and let her go, returning to the screen in his hand. The Protectors had all of Cade’s information, but accuracy was still important. Each field ought to be reviewed. *Discrepancy created delay. Delay meant death.*

She turned to face him. “Can’t you do it?” she said. “Can’t you look in the system and find him?”

He hadn’t yet had the chance to tell her that he already did. That it was the first thing he’d done, and he’d come away with nothing.

Marus glanced over at the counter, meeting the blond man’s gaze.

Once they were home, he’d lead her into the bathroom and crank on the shower. Through the steam, he’d tell her about his breach. What he’d seen. What he hadn’t. And if Officer Muñoz didn’t come up with something by the time she paid them a visit, he’d hack his way in and do it again.

“You’ve said it yourself: they don’t know what they’re doing. They don’t know what to look for. But you do. It might mean his life, Marus. That could be the difference between life or...” She couldn’t bring herself to say it.

The woman shifted in her chair and let out a little cough. Marus wondered how much she could hear. How much she’d already shared.

“He’s our son. A child. It isn’t like you’re violating his privacy. I’m sure Devlin would understand.”

Marus submitted the report and stood. “Come on. Let’s go home.”

By the time Officer Muñoz arrived, the sun had already begun to sink beneath the vast blue horizon. Marus left the officer standing in the kitchen and went to Cade’s bedroom. She had been resting inside with the door closed for more than two hours. She didn’t want to talk, and he hadn’t known what to say.

He tried to remember the last time he’d heard of a child being kidnapped. What once was a common headline on the nightly news had become increasingly rare since the dawn of the New Era. Crime still clung like an infectious disease at the fringes of any city, but not here. The Isle was different. Scanner and camera placement was triple, maybe quadruple, what it was elsewhere. Same with the patrols. Even the bridges came up after curfew. And yet, Cade had been taken in plain sight, when the sun was at its highest.

She was cocooned in his green comforter, her eyes fixed on the darkening sky outside the window. A pale hand rested atop the soccer ball at her side.

“That police officer is here now.”

She didn’t move.

He lingered a moment in the doorway. In the corner, a small reading chair was piled high with library books Shey and Cade had checked out. The world’s most comprehensive library lived online, but Shey was insistent. She’d wanted Cade to see the weathered spines and smell the yellowing pages. The weight of a book was something to revere, she’d said.

The Luca Valdetti bobblehead stared back from the bedside table. Its plastic mouth was pursed into a dismissive grin that gave Marus an uneasy feeling.

As he made his way down the hall toward the kitchen, he could hear Shey get up.

“I should have known,” he heard her say.

“Do you mind if we sit?” Officer Muñoz asked, gesturing toward the couch.

“The kitchen table,” Shey said, emerging from the hallway.

The three of them sat. Marus pulled his chair closer to his wife. Muñoz set her tablet on the table’s glass surface.

“We were able to track Cade’s iD. He was tagged at Golden Bay Marina at 12:17 p.m. It was his last tag.”

“Golden Bay Marina?” Shey leaned forward. “What do you mean his last tag?”

“By the time we got there, he was gone.” Touching its screen, she brought the tablet to life and angled it toward them. “We were able to pull surveillance footage from both the school and the marina.”

The camera at school was at the south end of the bleachers, but the view was clear. A man in a brown jacket with a blue baseball cap pulled low over his forehead walked onto the north side of the field. He cut a diagonal path toward the goal, exposing no more than a sliver of his bespectacled face to the surveillance camera. A moment later, Cade came over, dribbling the ball.

Marus felt the heat build beneath his collar. Shey’s hand trembled in his own. He thought she was crying, but, when he looked, the only emotion wrung across her face was anger. *Rage.*

The man crouched down and picked up the ball. He said something to Cade and stood. With one hand at Cade’s back and the other pinning the ball under his arm, he led their boy away.

“No one saw that? No one said anything?” Shey said.

I thought he was you, Joey's mom had said. And from a distance, the man looked like he could be Marus. He had the same build. The hair peeking out of the back of his cap was the same dark brown. Even his jacket looked a bit like the one Marus kept in the closet. And Cade didn't put up a fight. He appeared willing, even eager, to follow the man. But why? Hadn't they told him to never talk to strangers? Or did Marus have such faith in the system that he'd forgotten?

They read his mind. "I don't understand," she said. "He doesn't speak to strangers. We had that conversation."

Marus squeezed her hand. She was a good mom. He wanted to tell her so, but Muñoz interrupted.

"The same man was seen at the marina," she said, flipping the screen around to select another video. She turned it back toward them.

There was the sign, *Golden Bay Marina*. And there was the devil, strolling past it in his brown jacket toward the docks. But where was their son? The video ended. Muñoz set the tablet down.

"You said Cade was gone by the time you got there. But he isn't in the video," Marus said.

"Maybe he wasn't there at all," She added, nodding.

Muñoz folded her hands and rested them on the table. "He was tagged by a scanner near the dock."

"We didn't see the car they were in. Maybe there were others."

"Is it possible that the marina was one of several stops and *somehow* they evaded additional scanners?" Marus said.

"It would be unlikely given the sheer volume of scanners and cameras on the Isle," Muñoz replied.

“But it’s possible,” Shey said. “If someone knew where the scanners were and how to avoid them.”

“Have you implemented checkpoints at the bridges?”

Leaning forward, Muñoz pressed her lips together. She looked like she wanted to say something but didn’t know how. The words faltered before she could get them out.

“There’s something else,” she said finally, glancing back at the tablet. “I don’t know how to say this.” She met his eyes and then Shey’s. “We’ve pulled Cade’s Lifewatch feed for monitoring. A couple hours ago his heart rate—”

“No.” Marus felt the air turn to lead in his chest. He pushed his chair back as if to rise. To leave. To pretend it wasn’t real. But then he saw his wife.

“It stopped,” Muñoz said.

Marus grabbed for Shey.

Encircled in his arms, she wailed. The tears fell, fat and hot, against his neck, pooling at his collar.

“*Oh God.* My baby. Our little boy.”

Muñoz’s mouth was open, but she didn’t speak. The room seemed to spin around them. Shey’s cries reverberated off of every surface. They became his own.

“I am so sorry for your loss,” Muñoz said. She retrieved a small pack of tissues from her coat and slid them across the table. “The boats are out there now combing the bay. They retrieved an article of clothing.”

Marus and Shey lifted their heads to look at the screen Muñoz was holding. Cade’s navy blue soccer jersey was drenched, flung across a white table in the picture. The harsh light and ruler placed alongside the bottom edge made it foreign, and yet, it was unmistakable. It was Cade’s.

“Can you confirm this belongs to your son?”

Marus wiped at his eyes. He nodded.

“Forensics found blood on the cloth. The DNA is a positive match. According to Lifewatch, the time of death was two fourteen p.m. We are still working to determine the cause, but as you know, it will be nearly impossible without a—a body.” She cleared her throat. “I know this is an incredibly difficult time.” She set the tablet down. “Please let me know if there’s anything I can do for you.”

“You can find our son and bring him home,” She said.

But she wasn’t looking at Muñoz. She was looking at Marus.

Chapter Two

TIME STOOD STILL. It was normal to feel as though life had stopped after the death of a child. *Normal*. Nothing would ever be normal again. How could it? His wife wouldn't talk to him. When she did speak, it was to herself. Barely audible, rarely coherent. Entire days were spent in bed, but never asleep. Sleep rarely came, and when it did it was punctuated by nightmares. Cold sweats. Even as it happened, he felt like he was watching from a distance. His own alternate reality. They'd miss breakfast, lunch, dinner, sometimes all three, without realizing it. His stomach refused to grumble. The slightest recollection, a sound or a scent, would cause him to tremble. Not tremble, *shake*. Uncontrollably. There was a numbness, a loss of circulation in his legs and arms. As though his heart had forgotten to keep beating. Some days he wished it would.

These things were supposed to be *normal*. He'd read that. Some of it he expected. He wasn't a stranger to grief. He'd been the child that lost a parent. He'd spent entire months out of school, locked in his bedroom. Nightmares and tremors plagued his childhood. As bad as it had been, this was worse. To be the parent that loses a child. The grief and anger and despair dwarfed every other emotion he'd ever experienced. They said that time could heal even the deepest and ugliest of wounds. But could it erase the guilt, the unflinching feelings of failure?

The media wouldn't leave them alone. Everyone wanted to hear from the Protector who couldn't even keep his family safe. Marus had dodged dozens of reporters' emails and calls.

Requests for interviews. Invitations to appear on TV shows. He'd seen the segments, other parents pleading on-air for their child's safe return. They'd cry into the camera and tell their lost little one *we love you* and *we'll find you*. If that script had been available to him, Marus would have gone on-air in a second. But his son wasn't coming home.

The grandfather clock sounded in the corner of the café, ushering in a new wave of customers from the autumn air. Marus watched from his seat by the window as they loosened the scarves coiled around their necks and sped toward a growing line at the counter.

She hadn't said much since ordering. She hadn't looked at him, either. Her eyes were red and puffy, though he'd swear she hadn't cried in days. Her breakfast sandwich lay untouched, cold and soggy, on the plate in front of her. The drink she ordered, a black coffee, had been refilled four times in the past hour. She didn't sip from the mug, but took long, desperate gulps as she looked out the window at the trees.

The park across from the Rose Café was the only true green space on the Isle. Sitting so close, the massive trunks and leafy tops blotted out towering concrete and steel. Sometimes, he could forget he was in the city at all. They'd sat in the same seats eight years earlier on their first date. *Loves the outdoors. Coffee fiend*. He'd read that somewhere on her profile. It was because of those trees, he'd invited her here. And it was because of her the Rose existed for him at all.

Now it was theirs. The place where they'd picked apart the past and considered the future. Where they'd talked about their families and their jobs and their dreams. A confessional of sorts. A place to ponder life and death. He remembered brisk mornings when they'd been the first customers through the door and quiet evenings when they'd shut the place down.

It was here, sitting in the same seats so many years ago, She admitted to loving him moments before he had the chance to do the same. They'd hoped and game-planned, choked back tears and told terrible jokes. One time, in a fit of laughter, She spewed coffee, dousing him

and this very table. He couldn't recall what had been so funny but remembered succumbing himself as, in her hysterics, she'd struggled to sop it up. Countless conversations survived space and time and echoed now, alive and audible as they'd ever been. A gateway to the past. The memory of place.

He never would have imagined a scene like this. The stillness. A gnawing silence between them despite the clanking of cutlery that filled the Rose as Sunday brunch came into full swing. Plates of eggs, smoked salmon, potatoes and toast, came out from the swinging door in a procession to patrons waiting to devour them. Across the café, a gaggle of women broke out into a uniform titter as they smeared butter and crimson jam over slices of toast. A family of four shared pancakes two tables over. The little girl dumped syrup into her lap and started to cry.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd heard Cade cry. A boy with a stiff upper lip. A gleaming trail of snot or tears called attention to the occasional stifling of sobs. He was never very vocal about it. At least, not since birth.

Cade had come on a foggy April morning. Marus remembered with perfect clarity his son's first gasping screams, his swollen face and tiny feet, the dark brown hair plastered, thick and wet, atop the perfect globe of his head. Marus could still see the milky foam running down his chin as he luxuriated, eyes rolled back, in post-meal unconsciousness. Infancy had terrified Marus at first. He never knew quite how to hold him or whether he was being gentle enough. *You won't break him*, She used to say. He wasn't so sure.

Light through the café windows cast strange patterns on people's faces as they ate and drank, consumed wholly by the small screens in their hands or the conversations with those across from them. Marus watched, kicking his gaze from the women, to the family, the man talking too loudly into his cellphone, to an elderly couple silently sawing away at slabs of ham. The lives of the unaffected. The unaware. *The unconscious*. To them, it was just another Sunday. The world still spun on its axis. Life went on.

A couple tables over, a knife clattered to the floor, metallic against the tile. Startled, he turned toward the woman who dropped it, eyes sharp and accusatory. She didn't notice or didn't care. He'd never seen her so expressionless, so vacant. He wondered what his own face looked like. Did it betray the millions of thoughts he was thinking all at once? An amalgamation of notions and emotions woven into one horrific mask? Or had it singled out one, one feeling that dominated them all?

A few diners strayed from their plates to look at Shey, and then at him, and then back to their bacon and eggs. He knew what they were thinking: *liar*, or maybe, *cheater*. With Shey stone-faced as she was, that's likely what it looked like. But they were wrong. He wasn't those things, he was something worse. A father who hadn't been able to protect his child. A developer whose program hadn't done what it was supposed to do. A husband who couldn't comfort his wife. A failure.

A bit of light caught in Marus's eye. He dodged it and looked across the café, seeking its source. An angular man in a tattered overcoat sat hunched in the corner in front of the grandfather clock. He swiveled a spoon on its head, throwing light back at the window. His foot tapped rhythmically beneath the table to the mechanical clicking of the clock's gears. Tufts of straw-like hair stuck out from the hat he wore low above his brow. Lost in thought, the man observed the spoon with large and sunken eyes.

As if feeling Marus's stare, the man pushed the mug aside to dress his hands in a pair of black leather gloves taken from his coat pocket. He pulled them on with the precision of a surgeon, adjusting each fingertip just so. Appearing satisfied, he tidied his space, dropping his napkin into the mug and centering it at the edge of the table beside a half-eaten croissant. He pulled the wool collar of the coat high upon his neck and stood. His shoes made a light tapping sound against the tile as he made his way to the door. He glanced at Marus and then to Shey

before his slender frame moved through the door and across the street toward the park. When Marus looked, he saw Shey was watching the man, too.

“I wish you’d talk to me,” he said, trying to catch her gaze.

She cupped the empty mug in her hands and continued to look out at the trees even after the man had ducked the foliage and vanished into the park.

The park wasn’t really a park. Time had turned it into something else: a reminder or a warning. Maybe both. In the years that filled the space between that first date and this day, those towering trees, once noble in their stature, had taken on a manic, anguished quality. Had they always sprung haphazardly from the crusted earth along the perimeter, like tombstones enshrining the past? Or was it only now, now that the park symbolized so much else, that they appeared that way? Beyond the thicket, enclosed by a steel fence dotted with knots of colorful ribbon, remnants of a playground, several slides, a swing set, and a pavilion, were welded together in a tangled mess of sculpture.

Soon they’d go with their own ribbon, a dark green. Cade’s favorite color.

“Maybe we should start thinking about a ceremony,” he said.

Shey set her mug down. “You mean *a funeral?*”

He didn’t know what he meant. Funerals were supposed to provide closure for the living, a way to move forward. Had that been the case after his own mother’s death? He couldn’t remember.

“Mothers shouldn’t have to bury their children,” she said looking back toward the trees.

“Besides, we don’t have a body to bury.”

He swallowed dryly, angling his mug to examine its silty bottom. “You’re right.”

“Why do you suppose that is?” Shey asked.

“What?”

“Why do you think they haven’t found his body?”

Marus had pondered the same question many times. He'd deferred to the search engines. The bay averaged a depth of 43 feet, but its deepest point, underneath North Bridge was 360 feet. There was the tide to consider, too. And sharks. Not many in the bay itself, but even one would be enough.

"Maybe he's still alive."

"They—" Marus reached for her hand. "You saw what Officer Muñoz showed us. His jersey. The blood."

"People bleed, it doesn't mean they've died."

"Lifewatch showed that his heart stopped."

"Muñoz didn't show us his Lifewatch data," she said.

"I saw it."

She looked at him, disbelieving.

"I did. I saw it with my own eyes."

"Just because the system says it, doesn't mean it's true."

"The data doesn't lie." Immediately, he regretted the words.

"*Data*—" She began.

"I didn't mean it like that."

"So Cade's just a statistic now?"

"I'm sorry, you know I didn't mean it the way it sounded."

She exhaled audibly. Her shoulders went rigid. The wall grew taller.

"It's my fault. If I3 had gone live when it was supposed to, none of this would have happened. If we'd pushed it a year ago, most of the bugs would be resolved by now. I3 would've detected imbalances. It would have warned us. That guy never would've had the chance to so much as step near a child. Devlin was right. I should have listened. I should have just—"

"*Devlin*," She scoffed. "You think Devlin gives a shit about the people?"

“*Shay*.” Marus nodded toward his cellphone on the table. Anyone could be listening. Even Devlin. He picked it up and powered it down.

“How many people would’ve been wrongly prosecuted if I3 went live then? The program isn’t exact. You’ve said that yourself. Even now, after all the hours you’ve spent, *thousands* of hours, and it isn’t. There will always be errors.”

“I can fix them.”

“You can’t fix everything, Marus. The work gives you purpose, I understand that. I know why you do it. But the program won’t stop bad things from happening. You have to see that.”

“I was working too much,” Marus said. “I should’ve spent more time with you and with...Cade.” He found it hard to say his son’s name. As though it had taken on some alternative meaning. Pain. Loss. Failure. He swallowed hard. “It was wrong to put the work first for so long, I know that. But we were so close. Another month or so and it would have been ready. This never would have happened.”

“You don’t know that.”

“*I do*. That’s what I’m saying. The improvements we’ve made, they’re substantial. I3 could end all crime.”

The trees outside bowed in a sudden gust of wind. The leaves had already begun to turn. Reds and oranges. A yellow that seemed too bright for the day. He watched a woman chase her hat all the way to the corner until it scooted to a standstill on the sidewalk. She scooped it up, planted it firmly on her head, and spun on her heels.

“It doesn’t matter. Even if you’ve made improvements, even if it was live, the program wouldn’t have protected Cade.”

“Why do you say that?”

They moved in closer. “The abduction wasn’t random, Marus. Someone targeted us. They planned to take him.”

He shook his head. “If that was the case, the system would have predicted it.”

“What if it didn’t?”

“It would. Don’t you think I would know? When people are plotting to commit a crime, they scope things out. They pick a target and follow them. Every detail is mapped out. If there are multiple perpetrators involved, they have to have a way of communicating the plan. And the Protectors can see all of that. The program looks at everything.”

“Just think about it for a second. The man never showed his face. We never saw which car was his. He knew where the cameras were and how to avoid them. He missed every single scanner, Marus. *How?* He knew we weren’t there watching Cade, and he knew what to say to get Cade to go with him.” Her eyes began to water. She let them pool at the corners and roll. There was no use trying to stop it.

A man glanced up from his hash browns and then quickly away.

Marus leaned in a little closer. “Why would someone target us?”

She didn’t answer.

“Why?”

She hesitated, twirling the band on her left hand as she often did when she was unsure about something. “I’ve spoken with some people. They think it was planned, that he was taken hostage.”

“*People?* What people?”

“They think he could still be alive.”

“Who, Shey?”

“Just people!” her voice rose above the morning chatter, and several diners turned their heads. “*Jesus*,” she said, wiping at her eyes. “Does it really matter *who*? If there was even a chance that your son was still alive wouldn’t that be enough?”

He didn’t say anything.

Now it was Shey who put a hand on his. Her face softened. “I’m sorry,” she said. “If you want to go back to work, you should.”

“What will you do?”

“I’ll go visit Reagan.”

Shey’s older sister, Reagan, had been the voice of reason in many of their disagreements. She’d seen Marus’s side when Shey couldn’t. But more than that, she cared enough to communicate it, to help Shey understand.

“Maybe you could go see my dad, too.”

“You haven’t called him?”

“It’s not really a conversation for the phone.”

“Okay. I’ll visit Reagan and your dad. But if you’re going to go back to work, maybe you could look at Cade’s Lifewatch. Just one more time.”

Each time he looked, he was putting himself at risk. Eventually, someone would see that he was dipping into the data. But after everything they’d been through, how could he deny his wife?

“All right.”

Chapter Three

MORNING CREPT ABOVE rooftops and in through the window like a spirit stirring him from sleep. He lay naked, sideways and tangled in sheets that dripped from the edges of the bed. He turned to face his wife. The soft light made her skin all the more delicate. In sleep, even the anguished looked peaceful and whole.

The first few nights, eyes raw, and exhausted by emotion, they'd plunged violently into a desperate sleep. Last night had been different. Numb and silent, both laid awake in wait of sleep's release. But it didn't come. For hours they writhed there in the dark. Sometimes together and sometimes apart. Then, without a word, Shey rolled over. Lying on his back, Marus could see the gray shape of her body beneath the thin sheet. With fingertips that dug into the flesh at his shoulder, she pulled herself on top of him. Her thighs gripped the edges of his body as she bent his neck toward hers and worked the shirt up and over his head. He met her forceful kiss and slid her underwear off. Her lips held the salt of silent tears.

Gliding up the gradual slope of her frame, his hands stroked its peaks and valleys. Resting at that most perfect ascent from thigh to back, he pulled her hard against him. Her breath, warm and wet and trembling, crept from ear to neck to chest as the shadowed form of their fusion rose and fell, a tide of longing in the silvery hue of moonlight.

But the longing was for more than the body entwined in their own. They yearned for the normalcy that once was. Days filled with work and soccer practice, tummy aches and cartoons, exaggerated eye rolls and messes. Everywhere they'd looked, a breathtaking mess. It was unspoken but felt in each shiver of pleasure. Heard in every moan. And as they were brought into the fullness of the other, they exposed the emptiness growing inside.

At 7:00 a.m. Marus tried to eat breakfast. His daily Lifewatch report waited on the table screen for analysis. It confirmed what he already knew. He'd only achieved twenty percent of his nightly sleep goal. A severe lack in both the quantity and quality of his sleep was negatively affecting his ability to recover, process, and thrive. *Had he tried chamomile tea before bed?* the application asked. *Blackout shades? A lavender bath?* It gave him the opportunity to order all three from the screen. But he didn't like chamomile tea or taking baths. The blackest of blackout shades wouldn't be enough to block out the reality awaiting him each morning.

He took two long gulps from his steaming mug and closed the application. The morning's headlines appeared in its place. Cade's gap-toothed first-grade portrait stared back from the glass. Above it, the headline: POLICE STILL LOOKING FOR SUSPECT IN MURDER OF PROTECTOR'S SON.

Marus read through, scanning the details. A soccer game, the ball left in the parking lot. Surveillance footage, the marina, a jersey. *His* jersey. Marus clicked on a link to the surveillance footage from the school. Watching it for what had to be the hundredth time, he felt the heat beneath his collar build as soon as the man in the brown jacket entered the frame. He scanned the length of the article. Its author stated that police were asking the public to come forward with any information they might have on the boy's abduction. "The Intelligence Annex has been slow to share its progress regarding I3, a Protector Program update that will prevent random crimes like last week's kidnapping and murder of the son of prominent State employee, Marus Winde."

He shot back the remaining coffee in his ceramic mug and rinsed it in the sink. Outside the kitchen window, sanitation service men were already picking up garbage from the alley below. A sweeper truck noisily followed their route.

He went to his wife's side of the bed. Kissing her forehead, he whispered goodbye and closed the bedroom door behind him. He put on his jacket and shoes, retrieved his briefcase, and stepped onto the landing outside of the apartment.

How many people had been killed while he took his time with I3? How many more would have to die before it was ready?

The scanner chirped as the door clunked behind him, locking automatically.

Marus set out to walk the seven blocks from his apartment to the Protective Services Center, as he had every other morning before Cade's abduction, to do his duty. To keep the people safe.

It was colder than normal for the time of year. Commuters bundled in heavy coats ducked the wind as they stepped from the concrete boxes that held their homes. If the meteorologists were right, the harshest winter the city had seen in fifty years would come knocking in another month or so. And then—then it'd almost be Christmas, and everywhere he and She looked, there'd be something to remind them of the boy-shaped hole in their hearts.

Passing a scanner at a lamppost, Marus spotted a screen fixed to the back of a bench that displayed an advertisement for a sleeping aid. *Seize the day, every day.* An image of a man walking with a briefcase in one hand, a coffee in the other, smiled back. He looked like a slightly younger version of Marus, in better shape. The aim of every marketer. To get the consumer to see himself in the ad, using and benefitting from the product. Two capsules hovered in the corner. *Restin Sleeping Aid. The rest you need.*

As if it were that simple.

Though exhaustion weighed like a mask, the chilly morning air felt fresh against his face. He opened his eyes a little wider, watching as his neighbors hurried to meet autonomous sedans and coupes at the curb. He and She could get through this, he thought. *One day at a time.* Isn't

that what people told each other? When Christmas came, they'd deal with it. Together. Maybe they'd finally take a vacation, go somewhere warm.

He remembered their wedding day, a small service at the Gardens. Reagan and her husband were there with their kids. His father, misty eyed and proud, held Cade, just over a year old, as he and Shey exchanged vows in front of a multicolored tapestry of crocus, foxglove, and salvia. With the bees as their witnesses.

I promise to cherish you and trust you, to love you with all of my heart, in good times and bad.

Across the street, he heard a car door slam. A woman wielding a microphone yelled, "Marus Winde!" Flanked by a camera man, she ran to meet him. "Valerie Finch, Channel Two News."

He kept walking.

"It's been nine days since your son was taken." The woman was only a couple steps behind him now. "How are you and your family coping?"

Marus continued on, head bowed. One foot in front of the other.

"Do you have anything you'd like to say to your son's killer?"

Say? No. Actions spoke so much louder than words.

Ms. Finch followed him for another two blocks and then tired.

As Marus crossed Third Street, a scanner read his iD, triggering the display of a targeted ad on the screen at the other side of the intersection. Every day as he walked to and from work, the screen displayed something his iD had identified him as needing. Virtual vacations, financial planning, health supplements, sleep aids, massages. Even the occasional ad for simulated sex or sexual enhancement made its way to the screen. The ads were often fodder for pillow talk, and in the occasion of a sex-related marketing campaign, something more.

Advertisers think it's been too long since we made love, he'd tell Shey, grinning.

I tend to agree with them, she'd respond, unbuttoning his shirt.

He walked toward the screen as he had a thousand times before, glancing at its message out of habit, in simultaneous annoyance and curiosity. What was it that he needed today?

This time, he wasn't ready for the ad it served. Vibrant yellow, red, and blue flowers surrounded a white building. In the right-hand corner, the ad copy. The single sentence that was supposed to convert Marus into a paying customer. A call to action so strong, so relevant, that it stung.

Where your wishes become meaningful memories. Redcliff Funeral Services.

The Protective Services Center was comprised of four annexes, towers that clung to the sides of the colossal Watchtower. An octagonal fortress encased in concrete and steel, the PSC housed all government agencies for the State's West Region.

The glass tower pierced the sky as it twisted upward, refracting and radiating the sun's beams onto the body of stainless steel skyscrapers below. A liquid flame at the heart of the Isle, it illuminated everything.

Struck by the totality of the structure, Marus would often stop after rounding that final corner on his walk to work. It was one of the most beautiful sights he'd ever seen. On sunny days, the glass, more brilliant than the sun itself, was blinding. He wanted to look, but he couldn't for long. The afterimage floated behind his eyelids long after he blinked and turned away.

Marus longed to be a Watchtower resident. Looking out their floor-to-ceiling windows, they could see people, people like him, scurry across the pavement below. High-ranking officials, celebrities, and multibillionaires were the only ones who could afford to live on the tower's residential floors. Here on the street, he'd be nothing more than a speck from their vantage point. But if they truly wanted to watch, they could look to the glass in their palms or the screens

on their walls and see, in high definition, any public part of the city, or the State for that matter. Another perk on a luxe list of many for the elite who dwelled there.

The Watchtower was deemed the safest, most luxurious place to live in the world, but it afforded its residents more than guaranteed safety and awe-inspiring views. The tower also contained the world's tallest shopping mall, a handful of five-star restaurants, a theater, and a world-renowned spa. There was an aquarium and a museum, bowling lanes, and a virtual amusement park. The best of anything anyone could possibly desire was an elevator ride away, and completely secure. Only residents, their guests, and PSC employees, like Marus, were allowed access. Taking Cade on the weekends was one of his favorite perks.

Once Cade even spotted Luca Valdetti, a Watchtower resident. They'd been in the mall, coincidentally close to a sporting goods store. Cade approached Valdetti, wide eyed. He tapped him on the back to tell him he wanted to grow up and be just like him. *Well then*, Valdetti had said, *you'll need a ball. And you'll have to practice a whole lot.*

Marus had worked for the last five years in the Intelligence Annex, or IA, the PSC's north wing, as senior algorithm architect of the predictive policing program, what was known to the public as the Protector Program. It was his responsibility to develop, integrate, and optimize the predictive behavioral algorithm, aiding the region's police force and ensuring the safety of the State and its citizens. Without his work, the countless behaviors, actions, and communications collected by his surveillance-specialized counterparts at the IA would be useless.

Physical access points had been established and concealed decades ago, splitting cable lines and duplicating the data even before the New Era took hold. Back doors provided the State access to every bit of data produced in the years since. Phone calls, emails, browser history, the metadata, and the content. All of it was scraped, analyzed, and tagged to individual user profiles.

The iDs collected offline data, behaviors, actions, and communications, even biometrics. It didn't matter the classification: direct, indirect, overt, or private. It was all observed. It had to be. The slightest oversight or break in the chain would render the entire system useless. Citizens didn't want uncertainty in the system. They needed guarantees, and that's what the State offered. There was no room for doubt.

The Protectors analyzed individuals' social circles, purchases, media consumption, utility usage, employment status, and routine, in real time. Each data point was scored individually and evaluated against additional data points to establish relevance and determine individual intent. The data points were grouped to create datasets, which were then classified, sorted, and paired to predict, without question, a specific and well-defined level of risk, zero to one hundred. A color scale served as a form of shorthand that designated the appropriate response. Threat indicators added up, increasing the individual's total, quantified risk. The higher the level, the greater the threat, the most dangerous of which required immediate, classified action.

Marus had only heard of one Red-Level threat. A crime lord who met justice only after subjecting the State to mass terror in the years leading up to the New Era. Assassinations, political hostages, bombings, shootings. Nothing was out of scope. Maybe now he was conspiring with other detainees in the yard of the detention camp where he was being held. Maybe he was being tortured. Maybe he'd already died there. No one knew. All Marus cared about was that he was no longer a threat.

Marus's work had helped bring peace to the streets, ending more than a decade of increased crime and terrorist activity, bombings, kidnappings, murders, chaos, and a State that succumbed to the rule of organized crime. He had worked with a skilled team of technologists and policymakers to create the infrastructure that enabled the birth of the New Era, providing a future free from fear for the State and its people.

His latest work with I3, the Internal Indicator Initiative, furthered the goal of the New Era. He and his colleagues were programming the future. Working toward a world where no one would have to endure a deprivation of human rights or the senseless loss of a loved one. I3 would change everything. It would be his legacy.

The only one he had left.

Three flights of concrete steps led to the entrance of the PSC's north wing, the IA. Marus ascended with downcast eyes, scanning the names etched beneath his feet. Casualties of the not-so-distant past. Their deaths had paved the way to the New Era just as their names now paved the way to the work that made the New Era so. What was in a name? Could a string of characters carved in stone really harbor the being who borrowed them? Would he see his son's face in the tracing of a *C* or an *A*, a *D*, or an *E*? Deep hazel eyes he'd so loved, a whisper of freckles bridging the familiar button of his nose? Or would they simply be letters, loops, and lines that became more foreign, as most words do, the longer Marus looked?

He scanned his wrist for entry at the main door, and once inside, again for an agent who verified his identity on a screen. Marus didn't know his name. He didn't recall ever looking at the man but glanced now at a wide, purple scar above his right eye. Had it been knife? Or a shard of glass? Had he narrowly escaped becoming another name stamped on a slab outside? Who had he lost? Much easier to contemplate the pain of others than to consider one's own. The man appeared to notice the questions forming on Marus's face and watched with distrust as he retrieved his briefcase from the conveyor.

The north elevator took him to the ninth floor of the IA, matching his voice to his profile so it could clock his time. A screen on the wall thanked him for being early, the fifteenth time that month. He nodded at the camera in receipt of the notification. The report faded, replaced by a message. *I am in charge of how I feel, and today I am choosing happiness.*

If there was one downside to a transparent world, this was it. He missed the days when he could be miserable and angry and no one, not even a computer program, had to know about it.

The doors dinged open and spat him out into a swarm of people headed to the conference room. He zigzagged his way through the crowd, head down, eyes fixed on the screen in his hands, bumping shoulders as he went. He'd almost reached the collaboration area when he ran directly into another person. Their phones clattered to the floor.

He picked his up and then the other. Righting himself, he saw that it was only Anj. She pushed her stringy blonde hair back behind her ear and rubbed at a red mark on her forehead.

“Oh good, it’s you.” He handed her phone over.

“*Marus?* What are you doing here?”

Under normal circumstances she would’ve made some smart remark. Punched him in the arm. Told him to *fuck off*, even. He would have preferred that to her wide eyes. The ill-matched tone of compassion in her voice.

“I work here.”

“Yeah, but, I thought you’d be out for a while.”

He turned to watch the speed-walking stragglers casually cut one another off, vying for the last of the seats in the conference room.

“There’s a lot of work to do.” His head dipped definitively, as if that explained everything. As if his presence—*at a time like this*—was normal. Admirable, not negligent.

He made his way through the café-like collaboration area and game room to the individual cubes along the back wall. His was a corner desk with a tall partition. He’d never done much for decor. Only two items were pinned beside his multiscreen configuration. One was an early rendering of the Protective Services Center, an image that had driven him during his years in college. The other was a photo of Shey and Cade. In it, Shey was laughing, her head thrown

back, and Cade stared in awe at something off to the side. Marus looked at it now, pausing at the silhouette of Cade's nose, his severe eyes, not quite his mother's green, not his own glossy brown.

Each person's iris was as unique as their fingerprint. Never to be reproduced naturally. Never to be seen again in the whole human race. Upon a person's death, the eyes would sink back into the skull. Undertakers glued the eyelids shut for this reason. Marus shuddered at the thought.

"Does this have anything to do with that promotion?" Anj said, poking her head around the partition.

He waved on the screens.

"You know that Devlin would understand if you took a few more days, hell, a couple weeks off. Plus, you're a shoo-in. Everyone knows the promotion is yours. I'm sure Devlin's told you that himself."

Marus didn't want to talk about the promotion or why he was there. If he was honest with himself, it was because he didn't know how *not to be*.

"You know that billboard on Third?" he said instead. "The big one at the corner?"

She nodded.

"Today it targeted me for a funeral services ad."

"Oh shit, Marus." She put her hand on his arm. "I can't even fathom what you and Shey are going through."

"It makes sense though. I was identified as the target audience for that ad given this *life event*, or whatever advertisers call it. It was displayed because I need their service. That's the reality." The corners of his eyes began to water. "That is, if they can recover his body."

Anj looked away, allowing him the small courtesy.

“That’s the beauty of the system,” he said, wiping his eyes. “It works. It tells us where to live and what to eat and who to date, and it makes life more efficient. It predicts crime, prevents accidents, protects people. So why didn’t it work this time? Why didn’t it protect *my son*?”

Anj didn’t say anything. She looked at the data overlay, the code active on the wall screens behind them. The answer was there, somewhere.

“It’s because I3 isn’t live. Because the system, as is, isn’t good enough,” he said. “It’s my fault. My failure. As his father and as a Protector. That’s why I’m here. I owe it to my son and to every parent out there to make sure nothing like this happens again.”

The first step to solving a problem was identifying what the problem was.

He needed more than Cade’s Lifewatch data. He needed all of it. It didn’t take him long to write the script. Pulling back the geotags and other data was a matter of stringing together several database queries, nothing more. The trick of it, though, was masking the request. *Misattribution*. With the right adjustments, the script would appear automatic; the origin, unknown. He wondered how soon the algorithms would notice the pull, against protocol and unlike the rest. If he was as good as he thought he was, they never would.

The lengthy report waited in queue with hundreds of other legitimate ones. Algorithm engineering was more than design and implementation. It dealt in analysis and optimization. Experimental evaluation. A never-ending process of testing that involved scraping data to systematically analyze what was being collected, how it was sorted, and whether improvements could be made. *There was always room for improvement*.

Under normal circumstances, the work was daunting at best. Before the launch of a new initiative, when a major system update was in beta, it bordered impossible. Cade’s data formed one report among hundreds Marus would have to sift through, but it was the only one that mattered. It was all he could think about.

He stood to stretch and peer above the partition. The floor hummed with the sound of the machine and pockets of muffled conversation. As long as Anj and Gene weren't around, he wouldn't be bothered. No one else had the gall to venture to his corner. He returned to his seat and clicked on the report. There was Cade's name. Their address. His son's State-issued photo. Though rudimentary and available to the public, the information in this context was decreed private. In the dozens of other reports, it was obscured by the system to prevent State employees from personally identifying individual datasets. A comical concession to put the public at ease. *We know you, everything about you, but don't worry, we can't see your name.*

This, of course, was not an ill-intentioned breach of citizen privacy. This was his son. This was his right. That flat line across the screen, sharp and straight as a scalpel, had cut his own heart in two. *Time heals all things.* He'd heard his father whisper the words to himself after his mother's death. What was closure if not a clock? Not an end as everyone imagined, but a beginning. *A reset.* He had seen it for himself, had pinpointed the exact moment his son's heart stopped. Now he needed to show it to Shey. Only then would she understand. Only then could time begin again for both of them.

The only thing left of Cade's life, the bit of code that represented his final interactions, illuminated the screen in front of him. The report showed the information Muñoz delivered the day Cade had gone missing. He saw the tag at St. Xavier Prep and, later, at the marina. That line, the ultimate symbol of life itself, a boundless plain from 2:14 p.m. on. Marus took a screenshot, then deleted it. Shey would have to take him at his word.

The lunch hour came and went, and still Marus remained in front of the screens. He wasn't hungry, anyway. It wasn't that he was averse to food; he'd simply forget to eat. Forget to shower. Forget to sleep. Grief did that.

Sometimes, he'd forget to breathe.

He hadn't accomplished much. Ten reports. That's all he'd been able to get through. Not even a fraction of what he was supposed to do to keep I3 on track. But he was here, wasn't he? Wasn't that enough for today, *given the circumstances*?

His colleagues were emboldened. Previously, no one but Gene or Anj would step near his cubicle, but several made their way over now, one after the other, to offer their own commentary on *what happened to Cade*. Had they known his name or age before? Marus doubted it. Tragedy was a window, a way to look in on other people's lives. To be present, but unaffected. After all, you didn't have to walk through the door.

Marus kept his head down, trying to appear as busy and focused as possible to deter his colleagues and their assortment of obligatory condolences. Often it's more challenging to appear to be something than to actually *be* it. *Authenticity* had been a buzzword during his coming of age at Newbold. Now he understood it had nothing to do with virtue; it was a matter of efficiency. It was too exhausting otherwise.

In addition to the others, Anj had already checked in on him three times. In his peripheral vision, he'd see her forehead, her eyes, then mouth, appear slowly from behind the wall. *Did he want to go for a walk? Had he had lunch? Could he join her for lunch? Had Gene stopped by?*

No, thanks. No. Sorry, no. Nope.

He kept returning to that thin, black line on the screen. Here one day. Gone the next.

Maybe he should've stayed home with Shey after all. He wondered what she was doing. If she'd eaten. How much she'd cried. If she'd gotten any rest. He picked up the phone to call, but a notification flashed across his screen. It was from Commissioner Jack Devlin by way of his admin.

Devlin wanted to see him, *immediately*, it read.

Commissioner Devlin waited in one of the small meeting rooms on the second floor. Marus had always thought of them as closets, but they were a necessity of the open-concept office. A place to gather your thoughts or have a “private” conversation. The setting for performance reviews, promotions, and warnings. And firings.

“Please, take a seat,” Devlin said.

Marus closed the door, activating the privacy glass. He walked toward the empty chair opposite Devlin and sat.

Sit straight. Maintain eye contact. Nod and appear engaged.

He didn’t have to feign interest. Marus’s heart throbbed with it.

“Thank you for meeting with me. I know you’re busy up there,” the commissioner said, smiling.

Marus shifted in the chair. Impromptu meetings meant an increased likelihood of one of two things. Promotion or demotion. Plain and simple.

The last time he’d spoken to the commissioner had been some months prior. Devlin had come unannounced. He’d actually sought Marus out to cite several improvements Marus had made to the Protector algorithm and discuss his efforts with I3. Devlin had complemented Marus’s work and dangled a carrot.

There’s a new initiative on the tenth floor, he’d said. I’m recommending you for it. We need a mind like yours up there.

Another rung in the right direction.

Marus crossed and then uncrossed his legs. This meeting was either about the promotion, or the unauthorized data pulls. Either way, it was a move up or a step down. *You’re a shoo-in*, Anj had said. He wasn’t sure.

“I wanted to offer you my condolences,” Devlin said.

“Thank you, sir.”

“I also wanted to see how you’re doing.” The commissioner’s brown eyes blinked with sincerity, and yet Marus could tell Devlin was studying him. Weighing him, even now. A test of some sort.

“It’s a difficult time.”

“How is your wife holding up?”

“She’s trying to keep busy. We both are. She was very supportive of me coming in today.”

“What a patriot.” There was something about the way he said it that set Marus on edge. “I don’t think my own wife would be that supportive,” Devlin said and smiled. “But she wouldn’t be wrong to want me home. It’s important to be with family during times like these. The Protectors understand if you need more time off.”

“I appreciate that, sir. But I3 is almost ready, and I’d like to see that through.”

Devlin leaned forward. The wax run through his salt-and-pepper hair gleamed, a halo in the cylindrical glow of the recessed lights above. “Your dedication is commendable, Marus. Still, it’s a matter of quality control. Of efficiency. The Internal Indicator Initiative should have gone live over a year ago. We keep pushing deadlines—”

“It wasn’t ready!” Marus said, surprised by his own interruption and the volume of his voice.

Devlin raised an eyebrow.

“It wasn’t ready then,” Marus continued carefully, “but we’re almost finished. Just a few weeks out now.”

“We can’t miss this deadline. Too many lives hang in the balance. There are plenty of capable people who can lead the launch if you feel you can’t focus on the work. Your *position*, well, it’s understandable.”

“I assure you, sir, it won’t be an issue. If anything, I appreciate now more than ever how delicate the system is. I’m committed to I3, and committed to resolving the program’s deficiencies, for my son and for the State.”

The commissioner tilted his round, clean-shaven chin toward the light. “Well, I’m pleased to hear that. No one knows the program like you.” He smiled, blinking at Marus in approximation. “Handpicked from Newbold itself. Employee number three, weren’t you?”

“That’s right, sir.”

“And you were responsible for calibrating and implementing the individual risk algorithm in its earliest forms?”

“I worked with a team.”

He recalled the first day on the job, the breathtaking tour of the Protective Services Center with a handful of other Newbold Corp. recruits, Anj and his old friend Gene among them.

“There’s no need to be modest, Marus. It’s an impressive legacy you’ve built.”

“Thank you, sir.”

A little over a week ago, Marus had wanted the promotion more than anything else. From the moment Devlin mentioned it, his first waking thoughts and last conscious moments before sleep had been filled with notions of its possibility. Numerous perks would present themselves. An entire world of opportunity would open its doors the moment he stepped foot on the tenth floor. The salary and personal pride that would come with it were part of its appeal, but there was a greater pull. The promotion would afford them a larger, more secure apartment in one of the best complexes outside of the Watchtower, itself. He’d already found a floor plan they would love.

“I understand you’ve dodged all of the media’s requests for comment on your son’s death.”

Death. Marus tried not to fixate on the word.

“We felt we needed some privacy.”

“Understandable, of course. I do hope you’ll reconsider, though. It’d be good for you. And good for the public to hear from the boy’s father. People are feeling very unsettled right now, especially given the recent fearist threats against the PSC. I assume you heard about Li Syun?”

Marus remembered the video that was made. The slash, a deep-red smile carved across Li Syun’s throat.

“Yes,” he said. “I saw it on the news.”

“If we can’t protect our own, how are we expected to keep the public safe? That’s what those bastards want people thinking.”

“But as an isolated incident—”

“Don’t underestimate them, Marus. A little doubt can go a long way. People begin to mistrust the system, mistrust the government. Their uncertainty blinds them. It makes them vulnerable. As Protectors, we must ensure the security of the State and citizen safety, at all costs. The only way to do that is to safeguard the system. If we waiver, if the deficiencies aren’t resolved, we risk everything. Everything you’ve built. It’s all the fearists need to sabotage the Protector Program and throw us back into a frenzy of chaos and fear. Some good news regarding I3 will ease their doubt. And the quarterly crime report ought to help. It’s due out later this week. The decline should be significant, don’t you think?”

Marus nodded.

Devlin was right. All indications pointed to a declining crime rate, the lowest it had been in his lifetime. Maybe in all of history. And yet, to Marus, the world felt more dangerous than ever before.

“Of course, stats only go so far,” Devlin went on. “There’s nothing like a story to rally the people. That’s what they need. That’s why I’d like you to make a statement. The public should hear from you. Your impressive background and commitment to the program should be celebrated. Cade should be celebrated. The people need to know how we’re progressing. When I3 goes live, it will be dedicated to him.”

Marus found himself nodding.

“Good. I’ll have our PR team prep you.” Devlin smiled triumphantly.

A politician’s smile, Shey once commented.

Chapter Four

CLOTHES WERE STREWN across the apartment. Several books and sheets of paper had been stacked atop the kitchen table. Marus closed the door and set his briefcase down. He plucked a book from the top of the stack. Creased and worn, it was a collection of essays and poems. A faded yellow note stuck out from the middle. He went to the marked spot, an essay, “Self-Reliance” by Ralph Waldo Emerson, and saw the words underlined there.

Speak your latent conviction and it shall be the universal sense; for always the inmost becomes the outmost...

He followed the pencil marks and dog-ears. Yellow strokes that bled from one page to another.

Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine Providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events.

He closed the book and returned it to its perch, scanning the crumpled papers stacked to the side. Shey’s small, slanted handwriting crammed the lines.

“Hon?” he called, walking into the living room.

No one answered.

He reached into his pocket and turned off his phone. Shrugging out of his coat, he tossed it over the back of the couch. He walked down the hallway and into the master bedroom. The closet door was open. Several naked hangers littered the floor, but the room was empty.

Walking back toward the living room, Marus paused outside of Cade's closed door. He knocked and turned the knob. She was standing by the dresser, looking at the soccer ball sitting atop a mess of blankets draped across the bed. Neither of them had touched the ball since the night Muñoz had come to tell them their lives would never be the same.

“Hey,” he said.

She turned to look at him. Her face was white. Her eyes, tired and heavy. *Empty*. A small duffel bag hung limp in her right hand.

“What are you doing?”

“I'm leaving.”

“What do you mean?”

She ducked under his arm and went out into the living room. She set the duffel bag in front of his coat on the couch. “There are people who can help me,” she said, reaching for a pair of pants on the coffee table. She folded them in thirds and set them inside the bag.

“Don't start on the *people* again.”

She ignored him.

“Help you how, Shey?”

“Help me find him.”

“Hon,” he said, following her to the next piece of clothing, a sweater on the arm of the chair. He hesitated. “I looked at Lifewatch and the rest of it. He—he's gone.”

If she heard him, she didn't acknowledge it. She moved back toward the bag and tucked the sweater inside.

“We need to face this, Shey. *Together*. We can't run away from it.”

At this, she turned. Her voice was sharp. "I'm not running away." She stuffed several more sweaters and pairs of pants inside the bag and went to the kitchen table.

"Well, what are you doing?" Marus said, one step behind her.

"I'm doing *something*. I have questions I need answered. If I'm running, I'm running toward it. Toward the truth."

"There's a right way to do this."

"What? *The program?*" She folded the papers and slid them inside. "You know what Cade is to the program? Eight characters, bolded red text: DECEASED."

"They'll find who did it, Shey. They always do."

"They'll find *somebody*. I know how the legal system works, Marus. It's about numbers. Maintaining their goddamned solve rate."

"Shey!" He brought his voice to a whisper. "You can't say things like that."

She ignored him. One by one, she placed each of the books into the bag. "They'll look to the WatchList and find a man who meets the criteria and pin it on him. Someone who was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Some poor guy who rubbed them the wrong way. I've seen it before. I don't want that. That won't bring us peace. You're lying to yourself if you think it will."

"You can't just leave."

"Why should I stay? I won't make a difference here. There's nothing for me to do." She slung the bag around her shoulder and zippered it shut. "Besides, I don't feel safe here anymore."

He tried not to flinch at her words. She'd known this last comment would cut him.

"Let me ask Devlin for a security detail then. I'm sure he'd give us one. He wants to help."

"I'm sure he would," Shey said, her voice thick with sarcasm. She shook her head. "You don't get it."

“Then help me *get it*.”

“Nothing can be done here. These people I’m going with, they can fix this. You don’t have to worry. They’ll keep me safe.”

“These people! These people! Do you even know them? Do you know what their motivations are? Maybe they’re manipulating you! Maybe they’re…” he lowered his voice, “*fearists*. You don’t know, Shey. Think about it. You aren’t being rational.”

“Why should I be *rational* after what’s happened!” She began to cry.

He moved toward her slowly and took her in his arms. A truce.

“And we let it happen,” she said. The words were muffled and warm at his collar.

“We’ll get through this. We will,” he said. He held her tighter, but she broke away.

“That’s just it,” she said, studying him. “This *isn’t* something to get through.”

“Leaving won’t do any good. People will make their own conclusions about why you’ve gone. And the media will think—”

“What, that I was responsible? That I was negligent? Well, I was negligent. I am responsible. That’s why I have to go. I have to do something about it.”

“It’s too dangerous, Shey.”

She was quiet a moment. He could see the calculation in her eyes. Her lip quivered with the question she was asking herself. Then, the faintest exhalation. He’d learned to look for that.

Resolution.

“I’m going, Marus,” she said. “I’ve made up my mind.”

So that was it, then. There would be no dissuading her.

Her face registered his disappointment, the hurt. But it wouldn’t change anything.

“I know you don’t understand, but—I just have this feeling.”

“What feeling?”

“That Cade’s out there. That he’s waiting to be found.”

“Jesus, Shey. I saw the line.” Regretting his tone, he reached out for the back of her arms, to reel her in. To hold her. To help her understand. “I saw Cade’s Lifewatch data. I saw his pulse. It was there and then it wasn’t. Just like Muñoz said. He’s dead.”

It struck him then, this knowledge that somehow seemed new. As though he’d just learned it himself. *My son is dead.* The sharp certainty of it.

“Cade is dead,” he said again.

His voice wavered, his lips trembled, and now it was Shey who inched closer to comfort him. Not in an embrace, but a nearness. She held his gaze for a moment. Her eyes were the same green but looked hollow now. *Dead*, he thought. She dropped her head, and he knew then that this was goodbye. On lifted toes she moved forward, craning her neck halfheartedly to kiss his cheek. Her lips were cracked and cold.

“I love you,” she said.

She didn’t wait for him to say it back; she didn’t need to. The body of the duffel bag banged against the frame as she stepped through. The door clunked shut, and the locks reengaged. A mechanical whirring sound.

The incredible weight of silence.

He went to the window, searching for the shape of her along the sidewalk. Long, brown strands of hair flew sideways as the wind whipped into her. She clutched the strap at her shoulder and quickened her pace. She was almost to the corner and out of sight when she turned and tipped her head up at their building. She couldn’t see him through the privacy glass, but she knew he was there just as he’d known she’d look back.

A gray sedan crept to a stop near the curb behind her. Shey lingered a moment. Her eyes scanned the shiny, black windows that were their home, seeking his.

Then she turned, stepped into the car, and was gone.

The apartment, once warm, even small for the voices and life that had filled it, became cold and cavernous the moment Shey stepped outside. Not knowing where she was headed or when she'd return made the accompanying quiet unbearable. Who was inside the gray sedan?

Marus went to the study and closed the door. A hundred items waited, arranged on the desktop screen. A to-do list that trickled far below what was visible.

Thirty minutes passed and then sixty, his fingers barely brushing the keyboard. A guttural snarl of stomach snapped him out of his trance. It was almost 9:00 p.m., and he hadn't eaten all day. He went into the kitchen, avoiding the empty table.

Dinnertime was his favorite part of the day. A time to be with family, to nourish the body and recharge. He enjoyed cooking, the methodical combination of elements to produce a desired result. Around the table, he'd ask Shey and Cade if they could list the ingredients. Cade would analyze the colors and give his guess. Shey would purse her lips and smack her tongue in an exaggerated display of detection that always made Cade giggle. There were very few ingredients she had trouble identifying.

He pulled a Ready-Made meal from the freezer—hearty chili and cornbread—and, once it was ready, hovered over the counter to choke down the slurry. The cornbread was hard and tasted of cardboard. He threw it out.

He glanced at his watch. It had been a birthday present, the first gift Shey had ever given him. He preferred its leather strap, the gold buckle, and its broad but understated white face to the Watch everyone at work wore.

The Watch was sleek, square faced, and embedded in thermoplastic rubber. Like Shey's gift, the Watch told the time, but it also displayed physiological signs. As with the Lifewatch app, it provided the information collected from the iD chip in its user's wrist, reading back heart rate, blood pressure, hydration levels, and chemical signs of stress. An exchangeable band would flash the wearer's "hue of wellbeing" with a two-finger squeeze.

The Watch and its maker, his previous employer, Newbold Corp., were certainly capitalizing on the New Era and the ubiquity of iD technology, but they were also empowering people in real time with the data their bodies produced. His old boss, Newbold's founder and CEO, theorized that regular wear and adherence to the recommendations and warnings it displayed would extend its owner's life by five to ten years. It was a bold claim but was marketed brilliantly and endorsed by dozens of doctors. Newbold sent him one before it was available to the public. He wore it for five months. The constant chirping for his lack of sleep and general ~~///~~wellness almost drove him mad.

It was 9:45 p.m., more than two hours since Shey had gone. How far could one get in that time? What distance would she have to travel to feel safe?

He would find out. He had to.

Marus returned to the study and waved on the screens.

He awoke six hours later, covered in sweat and cramped in the reading chair beside his desk. He didn't remember lying down. The screens, in sleep mode, emanated a green glow. Three blurry, white digits glared at him from the screens' center. It was 4:17 a.m.

Scenes from a dream floated to the forefront of his consciousness. In it, his bedroom door creaked open and Cade's small, shadowy figure moved to his side of the bed. He was crying.

"They're gonna get me, Daddy."

It was too dark. Marus couldn't see his face.

"No one's going to get you. It was just a bad dream."

"They're gonna get me."

"You're safe. I promise." Marus tried to reach out to touch him, but his hand couldn't find his son's edges.

There was a pause. Cade's shadowed profile turned and began to walk away, stopping just inside the bedroom's open door.

"You're lying."

Had the dream ended then? Or had he simply forgotten the rest? He forced himself from the chair, making his way down the hall to the master bathroom, where he drank his fill directly from the faucet before splashing his face. His eyes burned bloodshot in the mirror in front of him.

Sheets of rain drove down on the quiet world outside the bedroom window. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed something floating. The tiny orange object seemed to glow in contrast to the bleak sky behind it, swaying back and forth as it climbed higher. At eye level it became discernible. A large spider struggling up an invisible strand to shelter itself from the night's storm. How simple life was for such a creature. Survival was success, and death, the only failure that counted. Marus had survived, but what did it matter if he failed to keep his family safe?

He pressed his forehead to the cold glass, applying the weight of his entire body. With his back arched, he pushed down harder, fantasizing the metamorphosis of a hairline fracture, the sound of cracking glass, the impetus of his own body moving through the jagged vertical plane. Shrouded in crystal as he tumbled toward nothingness.

How long would he live? It was a question he hadn't considered since childhood, during those uncertain years that followed his mother's death. It seemed more relevant now than it had then. Would he spend the next forty years with this hollow feeling of loss pressing upon his chest? Or would it be fifty? He tried to picture himself as an old man. Would he be alone like his father, in a home under the care of strangers? Lifewatch served to ensure that his death wouldn't be untimely. Genetic decoding and self-quantification would tell the doctors when he was ready.

He wondered if Shey would be there as he slipped into a comfortable bedchamber to close his eyes for the last time.