Untaken Three: 12 Weeks Following the Rapture

End Times, Volume 3

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UNTAKEN THREE: 12 WEEKS FOLLOWING THE RAPTURE

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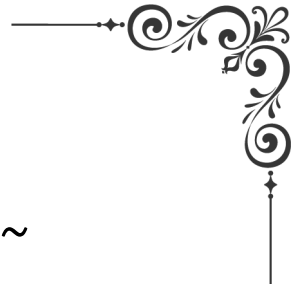
Written by C.O. Wyler.

To Our Sons ~ *"To God be the glory."*

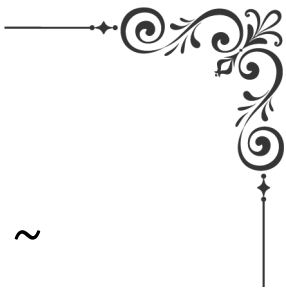


~ Hack ~

My name is Jack Hackett; everyone but my mom calls me Hack—and there's a good reason why she doesn't. It's not Hackett, Hacker, or Hackster. Just Hack. I'm not your usual immature seventeen-year-old who hacks into a couple of websites, trolling to get the dirt on someone or gain business advantages. In fact, I'm a master at hacking computer programs. I may not be the clout chaser you think I am, but I'm probably the only teen you know who has tapped into the FBI and lived to talk about it.

Now I want to access Numen, the company that invented an artificial intelligence—AI—implant that allows a viewer to be inside a person's mind to hear, see, and know what that person thinks. I'm one of Numen's beta testers and recently started watching their implanted participant, ValleyGirl, through my virtual reality (VR) headset.

This amazing technology got me thinking I'd love to know how Numen works—like behind the scenes as they interact with their participants. Hacking it would be rad. Yeah, I keep it low-key so I don't get in trouble again.



~ Week 1 ~

"Hack, are you okay?" The banging on the door to my small room interrupts my attention to the VR headset. It's Uncle Ben, who's repeating his words in an ominous tone.

My parents and I live with my uncle and his family at Hackett Haven, my grandma's remote 260-acre ranch in northern Idaho; the place has been in our family for generations. I stay about fifty yards away from the huge, 3,500+ square-foot farmhouse in an added-on building attached to the garage. It's my IT, information technology, sanctuary, complete with a bed, couch, and table, plus a kitchenette, full bathroom, and access to a large upstairs storage area.

"Yeah, bruh, I'm talking to you, aren't I? And I'm busy." I don't mean to be short, but it comes out that way since I'm focused on what I'm doing online.

"Come on, Hack!" he yells as he enters the main room and yanks my flannel shirt sleeve, trying to drag me outside. "Right now!"

I put my goggles down as he rants, "It's Grammy. We can't find her."

"Are you sure? Did you check the garden? Grammy's always out there weeding," I say as I click "pause" on my computer's keyboard.

"Nope. Haven't looked there yet, but Scooter found his way to the cattle barn, where I was working," my uncle replies. "I think that strange sound must've spooked the dog."

As he heads over to the main house, I stay back a few seconds to slip on my shoes.

Apparently, that sound wasn't heard only via my headset.

See, I was online watching ValleyGirl via Numen's program. I chose her from one of their dozen participants who have devices the size of a dime implanted behind their ears that, when triggered, allow a viewer like me to be there, in the moment, inside their heads, feeling and seeing and hearing what they do. It's the best AI reality program I've ever used or seen. It's fire.

It's so weird being in someone's head, especially when wearing these 3D wrap-around oversized goggles that provide 180-degree visual angles. I could watch ValleyGirl on one of my two desktop computer monitors, as then I could multitask at the same time. The headset grabs my complete attention, so I don't wear it often. But man, it's vivid. It's like being right there, inside her body, looking out her eye sockets, watching everything she does.

Anyway, here's what was going on:

ValleyGirl—her online name—is a Los Angeles photojournalist named Sarah Colton, and she was having a bad day. She

hated her aunt, argued with her husband, and found out she was pregnant, all around the same time. Without telling her husband, she decided to have an abortion. Then there was this big, odd sound.

The tri-sound, which I heard through my headset, was loud, and it hit differently, like it happened right here, at the same time, in my room.

I ignored the abnormal noise and, over the next twenty minutes, I fixated on what was happening to Sarah.

Working for the local newspaper, she was the only one to video the horrific aftermath of a plane crash outside her condo.

It was dope. So messed up viewing all that blood and gore at the crash site.

With Uncle Ben repeatedly telling me to hurry up, I trot to catch up with him. "Did you ask my mom and dad?"

He doesn't need to respond; my parents, Brent and Karen Hackett, are standing on the large, wrap-around porch of the main house that was built in 1878 but had been added to and remodeled several times over the last hundred years. Thankfully, it's got all the up-to-date amenities, including satellite, cable, and solar panels.

Mom's crying into her apron, and Dad shakes his head as he says, "Grammy's not inside. We've checked all the rooms, including her bedroom and bathroom. Mom said she last saw her head down the hall to her room after dinner. We're sure she didn't leave the house."

Instead of going up the stairs to the porch, I walk around to the right side of the house made of massive logs. Before

I know it, I spot Grammy's clothes and shoes between neat rows of newly transplanted peas and spinach in her garden. I bet she wanted to check her veggie starts again. Her reading glasses, complete with those long chains that wrap around the neck, are neatly lodged on a mound of dirt. Both upward arms of the eyeglasses are wide open, as if begging to be picked up. I yell out my findings, and Mom races to my side, rescuing Grammy's clothes, specs, watch, and cross necklace lying in the dirt. My mother's sobs echo the entire time.

What's uncanny is that it looks like no one or nothing else is missing. Scooter, her beloved dog, hangs around, not knowing what to do with himself.

We handle her clothing and jewelry with respect, baffled at how we found them. Where did she go? And why did she leave her stuff behind? No answers are given. Everyone's confused. What happened to her, and where did her body go?

While my parents, uncle, and aunt head into the house, I stay in the garden, picking up her spilled bucket of weeds and adding a few more to it. I linger, looking around for more clues to her disappearance.

Let me back up: Six months ago, my parents and I moved from ultra-crazy Washington, DC, to live on my dad's great-grandparents' ranch twelve miles outside of Bonners Ferry, Idaho. The town in Boundary County is about thirty miles from the Canadian border and has almost three thousand residents. At least there's a small airport, a weekly newspaper, and a Safeway; we have to drive to Sandpoint to really shop, as that larger city has ten-k residents. Yeah, we aren't talking about city living here.

We moved in with my grandma into the main house on the property surrounded by zillions of mountains and trees. The vast land has a spring-fed water system, private septic, ponds, and a year-round creek that flows into the Kootenay River near our property. Uncle Ben, Aunt Aya, and their eleven-year-old son, Ethan, live in a smaller log cabin about five minutes away, closer to the cattle. Yes, for more than a century, it's been a bovine ranch—well, currently it's down to only twenty-four of them—mainly due to Pop being gone; Uncle Ben would rather be a farmer than a rancher.

Supposedly, all ranches are farms, but not all farms are ranches. Mom and I consider that since our property no longer focuses on raising, herding, and selling livestock, it's a farm, because it produces a variety of goods, including crops, animals, and services. This has become a debate often at the dinner table. We've won over Aunt Aya; Uncle Ben is on the fence, and Dad is adamant it's still a ranch.

Also, I always thought cows were cows, but Dad repeatedly explained before we arrived not to call all of them "cows." "Bovine" and "cattle" mean both sexes; cows are girls and steers are boys. While I've got down what our Angus and Herefords look like, I'm still learning the difference between bulls and steers and cows and heifers.

Moving here wasn't my parents' choice, but it was the best choice, Dad keeps telling me. We had to move, and it was my fault.

At least my father got me a decent satellite dish and fast internet after what I did. I've no clue what I'd do without being online; I'd be delusional. Incredibly, Dad let me take over this insulated outbuilding for my computers and equipment,

maybe hoping to make the move easier or get me out of the adults' hair. Even though it's in view of the main house, I like the privacy of being alone with my electronics. It's old and musty; at one point, it must've been where my grandparents' or their parents' foremen had their office. Good thing it's been updated.

I don't think I could live twenty-four seven with Grammy and my parents at the big house, so I'm more than happy Dad gave me this place as punishment. It's a perfect escape.

We're not bougie; I think we do well compared to most families I know. We always have what we need and get what we want. Dad has me figured out more than Mom. With her doing online charter school teaching, she relies on me for all the electronic devices wherever we live, including at this mega-farm. That's a bonus for me; it gives me the responsibility I enjoy doing. She's the one who homeschooled me.

Yeah, it's a tough call to be taught by your mother. Yet, I understood the assignment—more than both my parents expected, because I got my GED at age fifteen—and I'm currently in my third year of online college, studying, of course, IT and anything it involves. It's been my obsession for years.

Dad has been with the FBI for over twenty years, working his way up to being a special agent, but nowadays he's a part-time staffing supervisor. It wasn't the ongoing budget cuts that demoted him; it was me.

My bad was when I tapped into the FBI's online secured server. It was cool on my end; I mean, the coding was easy to slip around and access. I shouldn't have put Alyssa Brenda Cliffton's name in their system. I simply wanted to find the dirt on this girl I'm friends with in one of my IT classes.

But I hacked, and that was that. My dad's boss called him on it since I'd used my father's access code by hacking into his computer—cringe on my part—to get into the system. Dad tried to explain to his boss and everyone else in the FBI how intelligent I am, and that they should be researching *how*, not *why*, a seventeen-year-old easily accessed classified info. Dad was so frustrated with all the governmental cuts that he got mad and quit, right on the spot. Walked out. Said their system is broken.

In less than a month, the FBI did some backpedaling and offered Dad a remote part-time position once it was all straightened out, with him being strongly reprimanded and me grounded for a month with no internet. That was torture.

Since my grandpa Pop passed away two years ago from a massive stroke—my uncle found him dead among his beloved bovines—Uncle Ben sold off the majority of the ranch's high-quality beef because he and Grammy couldn't handle hundreds of livestock without help. Now, two dozen remain, with one ready to calf. When Dad's job changed, he decided the best option would be to move back to where he was raised, help Ben take care of Grammy and the ranch, and work from home, like a million miles away in backward, boring Idaho. And now we're here.

Back to reality.

With Grammy's basket now full of weeds, I head to the main house and find Dad on the porch calming Mom down to the point that she's not hyperventilating. Placing the bucket on one of the steps, I ask Aunt Aya when the bus arrives with Ethan, their pre-teen son who lives in his wheel-

chair. The bus normally drops him off before five o'clock, and it's now after that.

When Ethan was three years old, he fell into Ben and Aya's Las Vegas swimming pool and was underwater for almost four minutes, which caused severe brain damage. He can barely speak and has physical limitations, so he has been wheelchair-bound most of his life. But he's got a great sense of humor, and anyone can see the sparkle in his eyes when you tell him a joke or do something silly in front of him. He goes to a small, special-education school in Bonners Ferry two days a week, giving his parents a little respite.

When Aunt Aya calls the school, they tell her there's a problem. Kids are missing. Yes, that means Ethan is included. The same scenario as Grammy is reported, but his clothes were found on his wheelchair. I can't tell you how badly that goes over; the crying of my mom and aunt is unbearable. Now two people I know are up and gone.

To be honest, I don't do well with stress. I shut down and hide my feelings; I'm vanilla and not emotional. I'm more than content when Dad asks me to send up one of my drone cameras to check if any animals are missing.

It's decided that Aya and Mom will drive to Ethan's school while Dad and Ben remain glued to the news on television to try to find out what happened. Gladly, I leave the increasing chaos as I flee to the solace of my one-room refuge.

The drone remotely checks one of the pastures, where most of the herd is lazing around in the grass; it finds the rest by its run-in and feeding trough. I whiz the device past the horse barn, check the sheep and pig, and zoom in on the

chicken coop. I also view on my laptop our five trail cameras and report via walkie-talkie to both Dad and Ben that there are no losses.

When I'm done with my work, I can't help but don my headset and surround myself with someone else's detached-from-me troubles:

After ValleyGirl, aka Sarah Colton, notices two girls on swings disappear, she races to the site of the plane crash and helps rescue the only survivor, James.

Being in someone's head is a gas, yet frightening at the same time—especially in Sarah's mind, as I find she has plenty of controlling issues. She has main-character energy, but she's one of those people who thinks she knows it all and manipulates others to get her way. Personally, I don't care for her, but I like the viewing and find the experience addicting.

I can't think about Grammy disappearing or Ethan missing. I can't understand what's happening within my own family. I can only focus on the AI-enhanced world of some self-absorbed woman over a thousand miles away in the burbs of Los Angeles. I'm more comfortable watching her troubles pan out than my own.

When survivor James starts mentioning his friend dematerializing like in Star Trek*, I take off the goggles and open the Numen site on one of my monitors and a news site on the other. Unfortunately, I witness the onslaught of videos and photos showing that not only a few people are gone, but also every single kid—like in elementary school and younger. Babies included.*

What has happened is different, way different. The whole "missing" subject quickly becomes overwhelming. I know I'll be thinking about it and its effects forever. What really happened?

After time seems to whirl by, the walkie-talkie on my desk that I'm always supposed to be carrying lights up. We use these small, easy-to-carry units because they're offline and need no internet or Bluetooth link; they're simple communication tools that use rechargeable batteries. Yes, they're old-fashioned, but they're top of the line, as they flash a bright light and vibrate when live, catching my attention whenever I'm submerged in wearing my VR headset or looking at two screens and a laptop at the same time.

"Hack? Can you come over to the house, please?" A hollow vibe is in my father's voice.

"I hear ya."

"I know you're probably not up to it, but Ben, Aya, your mom, and I have things to discuss and want to include you." His words are softly spoken.

"Coming." I shut down my electronics, wishing I could find out what happened to Sarah instead of dealing with the real world.

Minutes later, Aunt Aya and her puffy, tear-stained face welcome me into my grandparents' great room, directing me to my usual chair at the long wood dining table that overwhelms the room. She places a cup of hot coffee with my usual splash of whole milk in front of me and routinely pats my head. Mom's looking like she has one of her bad

headaches; she's already seated next to me as Dad and my uncle sit down.

As Aya, who is known to provide comfort food as emotional support, serves us berry cobbler, Ben speaks first. "We have news to share, Hack. Ethan and every student at his school have disappeared. They're gone, as are a couple of the teachers." Aya and Mom start weeping again as he cautiously continues. "Not great news. I don't know how much you know about what happened hours ago or if you've been tracking it online, but we don't want to alarm you. Many people have gone or are missing. Not just Grammy and Ethan. We don't know the exact number, but from what I understand, it appears all babies and children are gone."

He pauses, maybe gauging my reaction, but I only nod in the affirmative as I jam another forkful of cobbler into my mouth to avoid having to make any verbal response.

"Either way, Grammy's gone. Our Ethan, bless his soul, is too. Yet, we're still here—here to pick up the pieces. And that we will."

Now, I'll add something about Uncle Ben and Aunt Aya. They moved back to the family homestead around 2015 when they got infatuated with survivalist James Wesley Rawles, who started the American Redoubt, a political migration movement designating Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, and eastern parts of Oregon and Washington as safe havens. Although the group targeted conservative Christians, Rawles chose areas based on their low population density and lack of natural hazards when other parts of the country had growing issues. My grandparents, who had already been established on our land for decades, didn't think the move-

ment was that great, but they were more than grateful when my uncle and aunt moved back to the ranch with Ethan. While Ben and Aya aren't religious like Pop and Grammy were, they're preppers and survivalists, always anticipating the ultimate disaster that may happen.

When Ben and his family lived in Las Vegas, he was a commercial real estate agent who made a fortune selling properties that became mega-hotels and mansions. A few years after Ethan's accident, the three escaped to Idaho to get out of the city. Granted, Ben's focus hasn't always been on cattle, but he knows what he's doing when it comes to survival.

I'll state it again: This is a farm. Besides having a menagerie of animals that includes twenty bulls, four cows, five horses, seven sheep, a pig, and eighteen chickens—not counting old Scooter the dog, as he was here before they moved in—there's Grammy's vegetable and herb garden, plus the small orchard of apple, apricot, peach, and cherry trees, along with the beds of huckleberries, raspberries, and strawberries. We've got about everything we need to live. Ben's main goal is to make us self-sustainable. We could live here alone, rarely missing anything. Well, I'd have to have my internet wherever I go.

I'm not saying prepping is bad, as Ben has creatively added protective shelters for us and these critters in our mountain caves. The dude had four empty shipping containers delivered and used the backhoe to bury them in the side of one of our eastern hills. And yes, they're completely self-contained, meaning there are living, sleeping, and cooking areas and a full bath, plus air and water filtration and storage.

All packed inside, tucked safely away from the outside world. Oh, tell me that isn't irregular! But in this case, they may be a godsend if we ever have nuclear fallout.

Back to the conversation.

Dad says, "Due to the current status of our country, we need to make some changes on the ranch to keep it more secure and less visible. Sure, we have the electronic fencing to keep the cattle in the pastures. And yes, we've set up precautions with trail cameras at spots we feel trespassers or poachers could access. But we'd like your assistance in expanding the security perimeters we've already implemented."

Ben interjects, "I want us to get farther off the grid, but somehow, if that's possible, keep in touch with the outside. Is that viable?"

"Yeah, I'm the ranch's CEO of IT," I state, emphasizing the word "ranch" strictly for Dad's sake. "We should increase our motion sensors and cameras with the extra gear stored above the garage. Maybe there's a way I could tap into satellites, too," I proudly add.

"I've been in contact with some of my friends in the FBI since the disappearances happened," Dad says. "They know little and aren't about to explain what occurred or make guesses. However, I think the government will continue to increase tabs on everyone, including us. But on the flip side, we're little fish in a big pond to them, so I doubt we matter. I'm sure someone's able to track us or our movements here in our remote area. We've never seen those drones fly across our land like they do over the larger cities, most likely monitoring movement through infrared systems."

"Well, from what I know of AI," I add, "someone can always track us, somehow. Look at Elon Musk's Starlink. As of 2024, they have put over seven thousand satellites in orbit and are aiming to deploy up to forty-two thousand of them to offer complete global internet coverage. That's a big increase."

All four adults stare at me as if they're contemplating the large number. Yes, that's a giant increase in space cameras to spy on us.

"As far as hacking," I say, "I can try to access a satellite and disable our government's tracking of our particular location—like duplicate mask it so they think it's a live feed. Yeah, let me work on that." I'm amped thinking about it, and I appreciate that my own family wants and needs my help, especially because it doesn't have anything to do with animals.

Dad agrees. "Alright, that'll be your new project, but based on what I know from working at the FBI, their spy satellites cannot be hacked. Starlink's might, but I'm like Ben, I wish we didn't exist on any satellite grid. Do what you can. Also, we can't do much about Grammy and Ethan missing now. We know they're gone. We can only hope they return, somehow. The ramifications of their disappearance will need to be dealt with as time goes by. While the women clean up the dessert dishes, your uncle and I are going to check the perimeter of the ranch and make sure all the electronic fencing is intact. Ben, let's wear our flashlight helmets, and Hack, please keep an eye out and keep your walkie-talkie close in case we need to contact you."

With the euphoric feeling that I'm approvingly allowed to hack into a GOAT company, I get up from the table, put

my dirty plate and fork in the sink, offer light kisses to the grieving women, and walk with determination back to my private domain.

When I check Sarah online again, she's popping off about finding out that Denny, her husband, is one of the missing.

She's in their condo's upstairs office and finds his clothes, watch, socks, shoes, boxers, and even his wedding ring. I've never heard a woman melt down and cuss as she does, especially when she learns he was listening to some religious guy talking about and reading the Bible. It was right after she read an email from her preachy Aunt Amy.

I would give a big "yikes" over that, too. I've heard a lot about the Bible, thanks to Grammy bringing it up in pretty much every conversation we've had since we arrived six months ago. I don't believe it, though. I mean, how could this God have His Son come to earth to die on a cross for our sins and save us? And then Jesus resurrects and is in Heaven right now? I know a few Bible stories, but can't comprehend believing them. And let's say this Rapture thing occurred. It's not fair to take only certain people to Heaven, leaving plenty of good people behind. What about the rest of my family and me? Are we supposed to deal with this upcoming Tribulation, or whatever Grammy called it?

Wearing the headset for hours, my head and neck get heavy, so I put Sarah Colton's feed on one of my computer screens again to monitor anything out of the ordinary. I set up my dad's old video camera, load it with a blank VHS tape, and point it at her screen. I had read on Numen's website

that the participants' feeds are live but cannot be rewound or saved. Well, if I use the old camera and record it from my monitor, duh, it can be copied, and they've got no way of knowing it. That way, I can rewind the video later if I want to review any of Sarah's actions. Sometimes, companies don't realize how easy it is to get around things.

Taking a minor break from Numen and their participant, I return to researching satellite tracking on a second computer and have live news displayed on my flat-screen television. On my laptop, I keep an eye on whenever Dad and Ben pass by our trail cameras. Yeah, I can multitask, especially when it comes to IT.

When Sarah and her friend Zoey start drinking wine and girl-talking after midnight, I concentrate on a security patch Microsoft leaked a few months ago that contains a hidden access route. I doubt it will do the trick, but I try applying it to Starlink's system. It doesn't work.

While reviewing the program coding in detail, I watch Sarah.

She's taken her husband's meds and drunk plenty of wine. Totally wasted, she tries to go upstairs to bed, but she tumbles down and crash lands at the bottom of the condo's stairs. What's weird is that I watch her still thinking and reflecting on her life, even mentioning going to Hell—that's until the screen goes pitch black.

I hope she's okay and not seriously injured.

It's 2:30 a.m., I still haven't found a way into Starlink, and there's still a blank screen on Sarah's online portal. I predict she's hurt or even dead.

Watching the national or world news is, to say the least, depressing. What astounds me is the children. There are none left, including unborn babies. None. That's incredibly tragic. Talking heads are already guessing why, with theories of aliens beaming them up in spacecraft, viruses disseminating bodies, or instantaneous chemical radiation. Yeah, I bet everyone around the globe is as surprised as I was when they found out someone they love went missing today. Everyone. It's crazy.

Having never been a great sleeper, because that's when I obsess about computer processing and coding, I try lying on my bed to concentrate without wearing my goggles.

I must've dozed off. The walkie-talkie squawks at 6:30 a.m.

"Where are you, Jack?" Dad barks. He only calls me by my real name when he's miffed at me.

I look at the clock; it's over half an hour past the time to feed the animals.

"Did you oversleep again, Son? You know how I feel about that." He starts his ragging. "This ranch can't run properly without routine attention."

Keep in mind, I've no interest whatsoever in these stupid bovines or other stinky farm animals, but I'm the only able person under twenty years old on this land, so my physical being is always required—although I'm far from buff or athletic. No, I'd never consider being a rancher, cowboy, or farmer as a career.

Grumbling that I'll be right there, I roll out of bed, pull on my Washington Commanders sweatshirt—thanks, Dad, for the one time you took me to a pro football game—and jeans, and quickly turn on Dad's video camera that's pointed at Sarah's still-blank screen, hoping an update will be forthcoming. I head to our feed barn to load up the ATV with sacks of grain to pour into the troughs.

During breakfast after doing chores—yes, we do it in that order here and only eat two meals a day, but I always snack in the evening—I report my late-night discoveries to the adults. "I think I've found a potential link to not only improve our cameras' visual quality, but also to tap into global satellite feeds," I say. I won't mention Numen; my parents would say I'm wasting time watching people's lives.

"That's promising," Ben replies as he eats his avocado toast.

Dad adds, "Just don't use my FBI account, and cover your tracks. I don't want us traced at all."

I stress the need for my complete focus on the project, not wanting to see or hear the ongoing distress about Grammy being gone or Aunt Aya sobbing about Ethan. Now, I'm not callous—yes, I miss them both—but I don't like this any more than anyone else on the planet does. I don't understand why people are gone; I'm only seventeen, and I'm trying to survive like everyone else. But escaping into my world of IT, I can be left to my vices to accomplish my goals and not deal with raw emotions.

I let both parents know that my school's temporarily shut down, so there're no classes until further notice.

Ever the educator, Mom pipes up. "Well, Jack." Yeah, she never says "Hack," as she thinks it's sophomoric; it constantly reminds us how I was the cause of making our family move out West, and I don't think she's super wowed about living here. She continues, "In the meantime, maybe you can jump ahead of the game and do advanced study in some of the harder subjects."

"That would be sus," I haphazardly say. I find my Computer Architecture and Data Structures and Algorithms classes intense.

"Wait. What does 'sus' mean? Sometimes you say words that make no sense," she starts riding my back.

I retort, "It means 'suspicious,' as in 'I can't just jump ahead in class.' That would be suspicious; it'd look like I hacked into their grading system." I roll my eyes for emphasis; I don't like where this conversation's headed.

"Garbage in, garbage out," she mumbles.

"Right. Whatever I put in, good or bad, will come out that way. Body, mind, and soul. Your dad's favorite saying is drilled into me, Mom."

"Correct. If you eat too much sugar or salt, take drugs, or drink too much alcohol, it will affect your entire body. If you read, see, or hear garbage, which I'm sure you do, being on that computer all day and night, your mind will become trash. And then there's your soul. I'm not sure about that one, but I guess if you believe or get involved in bad things, like evil stuff, it'll consume you. That would include involvement in a religious cult or witchcraft, which I hope you're not into." At least she ends her comment sarcastically.

I don't bother replying. I know she's right—my grandpa's saying is practically engraved on my brain, since she's declared it so often. And everyone my age knows the meaning of the word "sus."

She continues, "You're a college student talking like a middle- or high-schooler using those garbage words. If you want to act like a mature seventeen-year-old, I suggest you drop the Gen Alpha lingo and grow up."

"Mom, I'm not Gen Alpha. That's Ethan's age." Once the words left my mouth, I knew I had touched a sensitive nerve.

Aunt Aya doesn't say a peep and immediately gets up from the table and walks into the kitchen to start washing the dishes, with Mom trailing behind her. I can tell they're both crying again when they keep sniffing and wiping their faces with the backs of their hands.

Wordlessly, Ben stands up, walks over to the coat rack to grab his hat, and exits the room. The silence is unbearable. Dad gives me a slight nod as if to dismiss me, while he picks up Bonners Ferry's newspaper and takes a long sip of his coffee. I blew it; I know, so I quietly leave the room without bothering to clear my dishes.

Later, when I'm in the horse barn mucking a stall, Dad avoids conversing with me, speaking only when necessary.

While helping with the never-ending routine of ranching and/or farming for several hours, I mull over the theory about the Microsoft security patch and satellites. As Dad and Ben move the small herd to another pasture to graze, I break up my chores by checking my phone before I clean out the rest of the horse stalls.

An email comes across my phone from Numen stating there are technical difficulties with ValleyGirl, Sarah's portal. The company gives me the option of switching to another implanted participant during the interim, so amid my smelly, dirt-laden drudgery, I browse the options, selecting WaynesWorld as my next viewing participant. From what I can tell, he's a male in his thirties who works for OWL, the One World League, based in Italy. I'll have to wait until later to tap into his account to see if I like him, but I hope Sarah shows up again on the program.

And Numen. I still want to hack into their system. Maybe I could monitor what they do, and see how they do it—find out the behind-the-scenes that's unknown to the public.

When I finally finish my work and grab a sandwich Mom left for me, I return to my room and spend at least an hour fiddling with the Microsoft security patch, even changing some of the address coding, like one- or two-character strokes. Knowing it's too simple a fix, I repeatedly link into one of the Starlink-programmed patterns, but none of them work. I'm missing something, but I can't figure out what it is.

Frustrated thinking about Musk's complicated programs, I try this same flawed Microsoft security patch on Numen to get into their system. Without explaining all the technical jargon, I piggy-back onto a random account and enter through a complex security program using the system's own AI portal. I set up an internal dummy account, which I doubt will allow Numen to shadow me, making it think it has designed its own security account.

Tada! I'm in the system! I'm stoked.

And just like that, Sarah's screen goes live again!

But it isn't at all what I expect.

Sarah's in the hospital. Asleep in a hospital bed.

What's weird is that when I check Numen under my account on the second computer, the screen is still blacked out. Yeah, what's the deal with that? Well, at least on Numen's internal screen, I can see she's there. Yes, there, but unconscious.

During the day, I set up four of my standard drones on my laptop that should be undetected on satellite by using a ghosting server, which is like a disposable tracking device. Think of it like a burner phone that can't be tracked, but in this case, the root tracking can't be searched.

After dinner, I open my laptop while we watch the ongoing depressing news on television, and I show Dad and Ben the four camera drones online.

"That's cool, Hack," Ben tells me. "Can you program the drones to follow specific patterns of coverage of the ranch instead of having to manually maneuver them?"

"Yes, that's the idea," I say. "Tell me what you want each one to cover."

"How about one drone covering the homestead, meaning Grammy's and my house, your place with the garage, and the two barns? Another drone can watch the front gate ac-

cess and road to our place, but can it cover something that's a mile away from us?"

"Yes, they can cover several miles if programmed properly."

Ben smiles and looks at me with enthusiasm. "The third one should involve the pastures and outdoor pens as well as their outlying areas."

Dad finally speaks up. "I think the last one should roam the electronic perimeter of the 260 acres, if that's possible."

"It should be, but it'll take the drone almost an hour at a medium speed for it to cover the distance," I explain.

Ben confers with Dad, and they agree to have me order two more drones to cover the ponds and streams on the western side of the property and a third one to focus on the eastern mountain areas, especially where the shipping containers are hidden. It's hard to cover that much land.

Dad praises me for quickly setting up the drones, but he also makes sure they won't be tracked back to him and the FBI. I reassure him that no one can tap into a drone if it has at least a two-step verification system, which ours does. Both he and Ben feel more comfortable having better coverage of the land. While the stationary trail cameras have always kept an eye on wild animals and fowl or potential trespassers, there's a sense of security when most of our property can be viewed instantly and live at any given moment.

But more of my downtime involves monitoring Numen. Since I can access more than ValleyGirl directly, I view OWL's WaynesWorld in the public portal.

This Wayne guy thinks he's important as he struts about his Italian flat, but he grates on my nerves. I only keep him on my regular screen, not on the hacked Numen one, since I'm sure my watching as a regular viewer is being monitored.

With Wayne, everything he does—from getting out of bed and putting on his clothes to being a peon at the office in Rome and watching television at night—gets monotonous. When he views porn, he must not care what viewers think of him. I guess he'll attract more viewers to raise his rating.

On a positive note, I usually watch him at night, because he's eight hours ahead of me.

His work becomes interesting days after the disappearances, since he's in charge of forwarding emails to OWL members. I read a few that include unusual phrases like "now is our time" and "it will happen soon, be ready," but the screen routinely gets blocked out or instantly crashes.

I've no clue what they're talking about, but I don't bother looking at him when I'm inside the Numen portal watching Sarah, which still is a black screen on the public portal.

It's Sarah who is the only one who catches my attention.

While she's in the hospital, which is barely functional thanks to the mayhem happening worldwide, she learns she miscarried and has to have surgery on her broken hand and foot. It's then that a doctor notices her Numen implant, but assumes it's for hearing or something and dismisses it.

While all other viewers watch Numen's participants' actions/thoughts, I'm able to see how the AI company interacts with the one who's becoming their prized participant.

*What's not the norm is that after Sarah's surgery, they introduce themselves to her as Dios or D...*well, they're in her

mind, so it isn't audible to anyone nearby, but I hear the entire conversation.

She freaks out over their intrusion, but she must've found some acceptance, as they help calm her fears and give her encouragement. So far, she's the only participant they've contacted directly.

By the fourth day after the missings occurred, the media goes full tilt trying to figure out what's happened. Our president speaks, telling us he's planning on going to Europe for a meeting to address the situation. As usual, the discussion is hot when my family meets for a meal, since mentioning Grammy or Ethan appears to be taboo.

"Some think it's UFOs that took specific people," Ben comments one evening. "Aya and Karen, what's your take? Sure would have to be a lot of spacecraft in the sky, and I didn't see any here."

Aya speaks up. "This could be what Grammy predicted would happen someday. You know she thought the Rapture, or Jesus coming to take His believers to Heaven, would appear in the twinkling of an eye. You do remember that she quoted Bible verses to us for years. And maybe she was right; I don't know."

When no one responds, Mom gets up from the table to retrieve the forgotten salad dressing from the refrigerator. She sighs and grabs the kitchen counter as if it helps her maintain her balance. To me, it looks like her chronic headaches are worsening. "I don't know," she says slowly. "Why did so many elderly people, disabled, and all the chil-

dren disappear? That makes no sense to me if a spaceship selected them and not those at prime ages."

"It's tragic," Aya adds. "I heard at the food store, which was getting low on milk, eggs, and cheese, that a couple of checkers, baggers, and stockers are missing, causing the lines to get longer."

Dad redirects the conversation. "Others think it's a virus, which is a theory I think the government may be focusing on the most."

I speak up. "One guy I read about online stated it was caused by an EMP. Do you think that's a possibility?"

Ben answers, "I think the disappearances had to be a chemical or biological reaction, not due to a flying saucer or device. I'm skeptical about the EMP theory, as only some, not all, electronics around the world were affected. If an intercontinental ballistic missile is detonated in the stratosphere, it can generate electronic magnetic pulses that can damage electronic devices over large areas. Brent, can you think how that'd make only certain people on the ground disappear?"

"No clue," Dad answers, "but I agree with Aya and Karen on questioning why a specific person is gone. It may be the key: Why some and not others? What in the world caused it to leave behind those mainly late teens to folks in their sixties and seventies? And why did more disappear in America than in other places in the world?" He mentions that the government is working with other countries and is planning to meet at NATO in Brussels in a couple of weeks—hopefully, to provide some definite answers by then.

It's Mom and Aunt Aya who insist again that it was that event, the Rapture, that Grammy spoke of so often. Since the disappearances, I often find the two women hovering over Grammy's Bible when I go into the house for a meal.

During the week, we're glued to the big screen at the main house. We gather around the table for our main meal around four in the afternoon and fill ourselves with the news of the day after eating; I hang around for about an hour to watch with them. The missings affect every country, state, city, household, and person. Everyone knows someone who's gone; all the kids have disappeared, so how could they not be affected?

It isn't only the constant visuals on screen of the automobile, plane, boat, and train accidents across the globe or the empty classrooms and daycare centers and disappearing babies, even the unborn, that cause nightmares. It's the emptiness and hollowness in people's faces due to their loved ones being gone that brings us to tears as we remember and begin to occasionally mention Grammy and Ethan.

But the pandemonium isn't over. Two mega-earthquakes occur in the Cascadia subduction zone, wiping Seattle off the map. ValleyGirl's parents in Springfield, Oregon, feel it and survive. Then rioting and pillaging, food shortages, and outright killing to get necessities overtake the network news. Dad says he feels safer here than he would anywhere else in the world, including DC.

Late at night when I return to my room, I check Numen's public portal and see that Sarah's still at the hospital. I keep

the public and hacked portals open on my side-by-side monitors so I can watch what the viewers see and the interactions of D and Sarah separately.

It seems that if the participants go into a bathroom or closet and look into a mirror, they automatically go offline for privacy on the public site. Yet, during that time, Sarah has one-on-one conversations with D. According to Numen's inner ratings, she's become their main star, causing their viewer numbers to accelerate rapidly.

When I rewind the VHS video of her day, I see this:

Her co-worker Jeremy drives her home from the hospital, and he and her friend Zoey take care of her at her condo. Oh, they pamper her, making sure she takes her pain meds and is comfortable sleeping downstairs in her great room. Even Amir, her doctor and Zoey's latest boyfriend, keeps an eye on her. I wish I had friends like that.

There are a few friends I keep in touch with, usually to discuss coding nuances. But they aren't friends; they're more like fleeting acquaintances. I would say that the only friend I have is Alyssa, the girl whose name I put into the FBI's database, and after almost a week, I still can't reach her. Maybe her internet is down; I don't know. But am I her true friend? We met in a computer systems programming class last semester. She's twenty-two. I wonder if she'll unfriend me when or if she learns I'm only seventeen.

I did have a friend growing up. Mom and I went on field trips to museums and had play dates with Seth and his mom. We met online, and he was cool until he offered me some ec-

stasy when we were both twelve. My parents found out, and that was the end of the relationship. It's for the better; I saw online that Seth dropped out of school and is now into hard-core drugs, including meth. Sad.

Meanwhile, D or Numen's AI helps Sarah understand the situation and how it can aid her in staying in control, the one thing she craves.

It's interesting to view both Sarah's outlook and Numen's approach to their highly rated participant everyone loves and wants to watch.

One day, I think it is the fifth day after the missings:

Jeremy and Sarah interview James, the smart kid who's two years younger than I am and survived the plane crash. He gives Jeremy a small flash drive that has Bible stuff on it, which Eddie, his seatmate who disappeared, gave him. Sarah sure doesn't like that Bible talk, either. She gets pretty mad about it. Another day, she and Jeremy go to her pious aunt's house and find her starving cat, Isaiah, whom Sarah doesn't care for, but Jeremy rescues and renames him "Eyes."

By the end of the week, things seem to start getting a little back to normal, or whatever you want to call it, on the farm and around the world. Ranching or farming always has routines that can't be altered much, which brings us comfort and sanity in the mundane. There's still confusion about what to do with the missings—including Grammy and Ethan. Like, do we hold a service, or can we put a marker for

them in the family plot on our property? With no bodies, there's nothing to show. Thankfully, Dad said Grammy had a living trust, so everything in the bank and on legal documents can be accessed by her sons. At least, that's some kind of closure. But the banks aren't open right now, and they're having everyone turn in their cash, so nothing can be done, anyway.

I'm trying not to get brain rot while being online so much at night, especially when I review Sarah's day. I have to admit I'm ecstatic about being able to see how Numen corresponds with her—I mean, they're artificial intelligence, but their program is tricked out so that it appears human.

D calms her down after her druggie neighbor, Adam, who was getting her anti-anxiety meds since he's a pharmacy tech, handed her a gun for protection. She's not thrilled about it, either.

As I crawl into bed before midnight, I'm mindful that the week is finally over and behind us—and what a tiring week it's been. Everything's changed, and nothing's how it used to be. Who knows what's going to happen next? But hopefully, the missings will come back or be thoroughly explained, and we'll stay safe.

Well, that's my hope, but we'll see what really happens.

~ Week 2 ~

The stupid alarm clock pesters me from my slumber. Time to get up for the dreaded morning chores. I don't see how Ben enjoys doing this day after day. So tedious.

Today's texted instructions from Dad are different, almost mysterious. After feeding, I'm to meet him and Ben by the Blue Pond, about twenty minutes away.

There are three ponds on the property, and each is named after a color. The Green Pond is located by the house, on the opposite side of Grammy's veggie garden. It's not that big, but it's quaint with a small dock with a huge oak tree shading it; Pop taught me how to fish in it when we visited when I was five years old. Ducks and geese are always in it. A stream flows into the Green Pond and then wanders out to the Blue Pond, which is a mile away, toward the middle of the property. It's larger and home to rainbow and cutthroat trout and sturgeon. Ben added some bass, pike, and walleye a few years ago. A small shelter is nearby for our canoe and gear; it's fun to paddle out and fish. We call the last pond the Black Pond, and for good reason. The medium-sized basin of water is shaded by tall pine trees and eastern mountains, making it look as dark as oil. It gives me the heebie-jeebies, as a body could be dumped in it and no one would ever know.

I'd never take a dip in it, thinking something could grab me and pull me under. And no one would ever find me.

After I get my grandfather's horse, Spot, saddled, I lead the leopard appaloosa out of the barn and guide him past the pastured cattle, sheep, and pig.

At over ten years old, Spot is a nice, gentle ride. Since I'd never been on a horse until we moved here six months ago, I'm glad he's kind and mature, so I'm not freaked out riding alone anymore. He seems intelligent, as if he knows my disdain for the bovines and some of the farm animals. Somehow, we've bonded.

When we get past the grassy hillside of pastures, we stop at the top of a sloping ridge, and I look north across the land. A blanket of fog covers the valley floor, weaving low among the trees, brush, and grassy fields. A sense of calm and peace encompasses me. This is why my uncle and dad find solace here. It's quiet and serene.

After a couple of miles of riding, I see Dad at the top of a small bluff near the Blue Pond.

"What's up?" I ask as we trot up to him and Sweetie, his black Morgan.

"Took you long enough, Hack," chides my father.

I search for Ben, who's off his all-brown stallion named Ed, standing near some aspen by the water. He's walking back and forth in the tall grass; I can barely see him in his navy-blue jacket among the trees.

"Let's ride over to your uncle—we want you to see this," says Dad.

Spot and I follow Dad over to the densely treed area. Several branches have fallen and are broken on the ground.

A manufactured object hides halfway among the tree line and foot-high wild grasses. One would miss seeing it completely if riding by the other side of the pond.

"What do you think it is?" Ben asks as we dismount and approach him. "UFO?"

"You know, it's not called that anymore," I say as I let Spot's lead drop freely into the grass. "It's a 'UAP' for 'unidentified aerial phenomenon.' But this isn't that. It looks like part of a spacecraft or satellite. It's space junk."

The scratched-up, twisted metal is about thirty feet long and eight feet wide. No electrical flashes spew from it. No sparks or wires are sticking out, either.

Noting that the thing must've fallen through the trees, stripping multiple branches, we three drag some of the broken limbs away, making a path to the discarded hardware.

I walk over to the hunk of metal, pull my phone out of my jeans pocket, and take a few pictures. When I get down on my knees, I see a burnt Starlink logo on the side of the rubble and snap a couple of photos. I inform the two adults, who continue to pull branches away.

Next, I shine my phone's light into an arched area that creates an opening in the hull that jets out of the moist ground. "Look here," I say.

Both men come over and kneel next to me. To the left inside the cave-like shell, there's the body of a deer that has been crushed to death by the violent crash. Its antlers are stuck under the metal edging. Poor thing. I hope it died quickly.

"Sad way to go," Dad says solemnly.

Ben adds, "Good thing that space junk didn't hit one of our houses or buildings. Or even the herd. It could've done some serious damage."

"Do we need to report it?" I ask.

"I'll let the FBI know," Dad says. "Send me the pictures, so they can forward them to NASA."

"It's Starlink," I say. "And remember—they keep sending satellites into orbit. There's plenty up there. I doubt they'll want to come collect this."

Ben blurts, "There's no way that company or even the FBI will be stepping foot on our land. I can guarantee you that." He's always been overly protective of our homestead.

"Agreed," says Dad. "I'll keep the report clean, won't mention Starlink. It could be Kessler Syndrome—I've read about that." He walks around the debris, as if measuring its length and width, continuing, "That's when space debris collides and creates more debris. All that metal up there's going to come down someday and cause havoc and problems. We're lucky that it's so remote out here. I think we should forget about it and not tell anyone."

"So what should we do with it, Brent?" Ben asks.

"Leave it there and let it rot," Dad replies. "It's not like we can move something that's the size of a small bus." Instantly, I think of the bus Ethan used to take, but I remain tight-lipped.

"What about the deer?" I ask. I may not like farm animals, but I've always had a thing for Bambi and his friends.

"Do you want to crawl in there and pull the carcass out?" Ben questions me. "We don't know how long he's been in there." He takes a longer look at the dead creature. "Based on

the freshness of his fur, it could've happened only a couple of days ago. I say let him be—a way to feed the other wild animals, especially any wolves or coyotes. Better the deer instead of our cattle. It's far enough away from our compound. We should be okay."

As we remount and head back home, Dad asks, "Hack, did you see this debris fall to earth from any of the drones?"

"No, that's why I think we need more coverage out here," I say.

"Do you think this has anything to do with you trying to access Starlink?"

"Nope. How can space debris be planned to fall to earth on an exact piece of property—our property—because I tried to hack a satellite and failed, so far? No, Starlink can spy on us, but I doubt they can dump their junk specifically on us."

As we ride, Ben and Dad reminisce about the times Pop would take them to Blue Pond, where they learned to swim and fish. They talk about swinging in a tire from a big fir tree and leaping into the water. I admit, parts of ranching life do have some perks.

The thick fog diverts our attention.

Ben says, "Has it gotten thicker? It was here earlier, and it's still hovering around. There's a smell to it, isn't there? It's as if the fog has a chemical odor."

Dad agrees. "It does. From what I remember, metals from satellites can deplete the ozone layer, like when they reenter our atmosphere. They release aluminum oxide nanoparticles that can drift down to the ozone layer. I think something like ten percent of aerosol particles in the stratos-

phere are made up of satellite and spacecraft metals. But that's up high, not here on earth."

I sarcastically add, "Well, that'll increase quickly to fifty percent if Musk keeps sending them up there."

Ben asks, "Do you think this smell in the fog—with a man-made scent—is from that crashed satellite part?"

"Could be," Dad answers. "I don't know. But either way, I'm not reporting the crash to anyone right now."

When we return to the big house for a late breakfast, the crash isn't mentioned to the women. It's as if it never happened. But it makes me think more about space and all the junk up there that may fall to earth, injuring or killing people, or even making strange-smelling fog appear.

That afternoon, I finally get a break in my chores.

ValleyGirl and WaynesWorld. Same deal as usual: Sarah is on the hacked Numen screen while Wayne's off work, getting ready for bed and scrolling online porn again. The dude's weird. From what he allows us viewers to know about what he's thinking, he likes both sexes equally and flaunts the fact. And what he watches, well, many—including me—would identify him as a pervert.

And another thing: There's a big difference between being in Sarah's head and being in Wayne's. She knows she has followers and, even though she's self-absorbed, she includes or acknowledges us in her thinking process. Wayne does not—it's like we don't exist.

I'm glad I'm not wearing my goggles; I don't want to see up close what warped Wayne does. Plus, when the headset is

on, I can't watch both monitors at the same time. But after seeing a minute of Wayne's indecency, I put one of my shirts over his monitor. Watching him makes me feel dirty.

Instead, I get out of my chair and rewind the VHS tape to find out what happened to Sarah since last night until the tape stopped.

Get this: *A tornado hit Los Angeles in the middle of the night, killing a few people and destroying her friend Jeremy's apartment. She had him and the cat, Eyes, spend the night at her house, where Jeremy and she smoked marijuana that her neighbor Adam gave her. I assume they ended up sleeping together, but nothing sexual happened, from the way they're acting now.*

While watching Sarah's monitor again, I learn that 1.5 billion children have disappeared and over eighty thousand people died in the Pacific Northwest earthquake. Those two reports alone are staggering. Unbelievable.

Later, Sarah and Jeremy go over to his apartment to assess the damage, which is a total loss. They glean what items they can and drop them off at his parents' house in the nearby Encino hills of the San Fernando Valley. With his parents gone—one missing and one by suicide right after the disappearings—Jeremy invites Sarah to move there with him, but she declines.

During my viewing, on my laptop I tweak the four drones, reformatting their programs to survey our property better. It will be nice when we add the other drones, as then the ponds will be covered, which they aren't now. I wish the perimeter

drone could go faster. And I'm still frustrated about how to access Starlink's satellites. There're too many security blocks set in place.

As usual, at four o'clock, I take a break from the computers and head over to the main house, where Aya and Mom are preparing dinner. At least they're whispering and don't seem to be stressed out. Aya releases a soft chuckle when Mom says she wishes she had a green thumb like Grammy did and will do her best to keep the garden up. Yeah, my mom's not a gardener, and we doubt she'll ever be.

Dinner consists of fried chicken, black-eyed peas, and cornbread; Mom, with her African American background, makes the best of these dishes. Granted, Aunt Aya's Japanese miso soup and gyoza can't be beaten, nor can Grammy's Swiss army stew. We usually have an eclectic array of ethnic food choices available.

While eating, we lightly discuss the multitude of the missing. The depressing conversation is interrupted when the landline rings in Pop's office next to the front door. The loud, distinct shrill of the old-fashioned telephone echoes across the oak floors; it's an original black tabletop phone with a rotary dial and a handset attached by a kinky cord.

Dad excuses himself and goes into the office to answer the phone. His muffled voice is the only sound heard until the grandfather clock chimes at the top of the hour.

"Well, that's disheartening," he declares as he sits back down at the table. "That was the Johnstons' son, Mike, calling. He can't contact his parents, so he asked us to check on them. I told him we would, and I'd call him back from their house."

Mom says, "Oh, now that I think about it, I haven't seen them all week and didn't think to reach out to them."

"Neither have I," adds Aya.

"Ben, do you want to drive over there and check with me?"

For some reason, I ask to come along. I don't know why I want to go, maybe to see if they're missing, too.

Within ten minutes, Ben's driving Dad and me in his Ford F-250 to our next-door neighbors' house two miles away. When we arrive at their gravel driveway, Ben parks the vehicle and retrieves his Smith & Wesson rifle from the back window rack of the truck. Dad climbs out of the cab and unsnaps his handgun strapped into its waist holster. With the gun in one hand, his other hand prods me behind the two of them as we approach the porch and ring the doorbell.

No answer.

We wait a couple of minutes, then walk around to the back door. Ben tests the handle and notices it's unlocked. He nods for Dad to enter first, because he knows his brother is the sharpshooter in the family.

What we see is as surreal as finding Grammy's possessions in her garden. Mr. Johnston's abandoned clothing is draped over the kitchen chair. His shoes, still tied and with socks inside, are under it. The freezer is open, with Mrs. Johnston's dress hanging over its lower ledge. Both were having something to eat, as we see their bowls of melted ice cream left unattended. One spoon is on the floor, where a line of ants hurriedly confiscates the sticky liquid.

Dad shuts the freezer, being careful not to slip into the pool of the defrosted water collecting on the floor. He puts

away his gun and calls the Johnstons' son, informing him of the news. Mike tells my dad to take his parents' Holstein milking cow, goat, and chickens, as he lives in New York and can't come deal with them. He also tells him to take anything we want or need, especially any food.

When we check on the animals, we realize they haven't been fed for over a week. Needless to say, they ravenously eat what we give them. We find two of the nine chickens dead, perhaps attacked by a coyote or wolf. Plus, there's a rooster to add to the pack. We gather the perishable food in the Johnstons' cupboards and refrigerator. We also collect feed in the barn for the animals.

After several trips, we let Ben deal with the cow and goat, putting them in the extra stalls we have in the cattle barn where our small herd stays during the night or inclement weather. We add the chickens and rooster to our collection. Our farm is growing once again. More mouths to feed; more chores for me.

When we're done with the animals, we head back to Grammy's house and watch the news on the big screen while Mom and Aya put away the extra food. A half-hour later, I excuse myself and head to the restroom, as I don't feel right. I'm sweating, and my mouth's watering.

Suddenly, I'm sick to my stomach; puking and diarrhea overtake my body. I ache everywhere and am nauseated, complete with abdominal pain and cramping.

Mom hears me retching and knocks on the bathroom door. "Jack, are you okay? You don't sound well."

"Sick," is all I can get out.

She enters the room and sees me on the floor, grasping the toilet for my next hurl. Immediately, she calls for my dad.

"You're burning up!" she says as she gently touches my forehead with her cool, soothing hand.

She and Dad help me to the great room couch, where Scooter jumps up and tries to lick my face. The poor dog seems to sense whenever anyone has issues. Mom makes him get off the couch and leaves to get meds while Dad towers over me. "We need you to get to bed. And now," he instructs. He adds that I'm excused from doing chores tomorrow and must get rest, demanding that I don't look at any electronics. He asks Ben to help get me to my room.

As they practically carry me by my armpits to my outbuilding, Ben whispers, "Do you think he has food poisoning? It came on fast."

Dad answers, "I doubt it's from our dinner. But it could be from something he touched or smelled at the Johnstons' house that was rancid. Or maybe it's from that fog we ran into. Could the odd chemical smell have something to do with it?"

"Oh my," says Ben, "if he's this sick, I hope we don't come down with it, too!"

"Yeah, let's continue to keep the crash quiet with the women; we don't want to startle them, but you never know."

After they help me get changed and tucked into bed, Mom arrives with a barrage of medications and fluids, pushing me to at least sip water out of my tumbler whenever I can. The barfing may be over temporarily, but right now, all I want to do is sleep.

The next three days are nonexistent. I've never felt so horrible. I thought COVID was bad; nope, this is way worse. When I'm awake, I'm either throwing up bile in a bucket next to my bed, crawling to the bathroom, or shaking in a fetal position under a pile of blankets. Otherwise, I'm unaware of the world and what's going on around me. When I'm coherent, Dad and Mom push Gatorade and some kind of bland soup Aya made that she says is chock full of healthy ingredients. Mom recommends drinking my aunt's ginger tea to help stop my vomiting. I have vivid dreams about herbs growing from under my fingernails and people disappearing and then reappearing.

On day four, I finally feel like I'm back in the real world. Mom demands that I stay in bed for at least another twenty-four hours with no fever, but I'm sure Dad and Ben aren't thrilled, as I've been unable to do my chores, making them pick up the slack. To get a chuckle out of me, Mom says it's hysterical watching Ben teach them how to milk the cow and goat, as none of us have done it. I don't miss his tutorial at all.

After sleeping all morning, I'm glad when Mom brings me some soup and crackers, which I hope will stay down. She helps me get out of bed and to the bathroom, then urges me to sit in my desk chair to be vertical for a while.

Although I'm weak and exhausted, wanting to know what's happened to Sarah is the driving force that gets me going.

When Mom leaves, the first thing I notice is that the VCR camera has stopped working; it's ancient, as it doesn't

have a looping tape to record over itself. What a disappointment. What did I miss?

I have to carefully crawl under my desk, trying not to bang my head, to unplug all electronics from the wall and restart them. I know that's probably the easiest way to reset stalled, unattended programs.

I log into Numen.

WaynesWorld is at an Italian restaurant called the Trattoria Da Tea eating a late-night cannelloni dinner with some hot girl—I'm guessing he's got a date from one of those weird dating sites. It looks like his Numen ratings are getting traction, probably due to the eye candy across the table from him and his constant deviant thinking.

When he goes off about sex, I either turn him off or cut the audio.

The second computer comes to life.

I see Sarah and her friends Jeremy, Zoey, and Amir driving on a rural road talking about a man they met at a lake; the guy had pulled a gun on them, demanding their food and water, but Amir defused a potentially dangerous situation.

I wish I could rewind everything that's been happening to her.

The only things I can figure out are that she's mad at James, the airplane crash survivor who pushes his newfound Christian religion on her, that she hates filling out endless online forms on her missing husband, and that she can carefully climb her condo's stairs despite her foot being in a cast and her arm wrapped up.

With exhaustion affecting every limb in my body, I rearrange Dad's old video camera to watch both computer screens from farther across the room and add a 120-minute tape instead of the worthless 60-minute one. Burnt out, I crawl back into bed, hoping to catnap between Sarah's adventures and WaynesWorld's romancing.

Propping up the pillows, I get more comfortable.

Sarah talks on the phone to her sister in Florida, who tells her their father was stabbed in Oregon and is not doing well. And Wayne—I'd rather not think about him.

I drift in and out of sleep, waking up when Dad or Ben brings me dinner or helps me to the commode. This doozy of an illness has taken me down while not letting me function well. I hate not being able to help on the farm or go to the big house to share a meal or sit around and watch television.

That night, I'm online again, snacking on dry crackers because they're the only thing that tastes good to me.

Sarah and her three friends witness Adam pulling a gun on three hoodlums trying to break into his garage. The viewing keeps me awake enough to watch Amir talk Adam down, but I drift back into oblivion right when Sarah is venting to Numen's D about some bird drone that watches her from her bedroom window.

The next morning when it's still dark outside, a rooster's *cock-a-doodle-doo* stirs my sleep. Guiltily, I've forgotten about the extra farm animals and increased duties. I feel perky enough to at least get dressed in sweatpants and a sweatshirt and walk, with Ben's assistance, over to the big house for breakfast. Aya and Mom repeatedly tell me how peaked I look and that I have lost weight. I counter with a comment that Mom's too thin and pale, too, which garners no reaction. I fiddle with my eggs, but eat a whole piece of dry, homemade sourdough bread and drink a few sips of orange juice.

Mom insists I go back to my room with no more excitement for the day. I don't mind, as Sarah continues to be in my thoughts. After a short nap, I put on my headset again for the first time in days and drop a new tape in the VCR camera.

What I appreciate so much about these 3D goggles is that I can look around in Sarah's head. I'm not just seeing what she's seeing, but I can look to the side of her vision to catch little things.

Sarah's shoes are always lined up perfectly under the table by the front door. She accidentally left her keys on the patio table when she went to check her mailbox. Then Eyes the cat goes missing.

I know before Sarah does that the feline sneaked out the front door when she went to retrieve her keys.

Remember, I'm viewing this from the hacked portal on my headset, and now I'm shocked:

James knocks at her front door. D tells her—no, instructs her—to open the door and shoot James! Yes, like put a bullet in the kid with the gun Adam gave her. D says they will give her a million dollars to do it!

I can feel her struggling to decide what to do.

Of course, I quickly yank off my goggles and switch WaynesWorld to ValleyGirl on the public monitor, yet hers is blank.

White words against the black screen appear: *Sorry for the pause while we are upgrading our system. Please stand by.*

I hurriedly flip back to Wayne's feed, and it's perfectly fine. Well, he and his dinner mate are having sex, which grosses me out. I'd prefer the black monitor any day over that stuff. As Mom's dad would say, "Garbage in, garbage out."

I put Sarah back on the public feed, and it's live again—so suddenly both screens match exactly.

Sarah views her neighbor Adam opening the door, aiming his gun at James and shooting him, instead of Sarah doing it. Yes! He guns the dude down with a Glock that looks identical to the one he gave Sarah!

Man, I'm freaking out just like they are. Should I call the cops?

However, even though the two screens look identical, the hacked screen is a little wider in dimension.

It shows a weird bird whizzing by James's right shoulder and suddenly flying away. James collapses to the ground while Sarah stands there in a panic. On the internal portal, D has to tell her to put her gun away in her hoodie while Adam goes on a rant about the bird.

After Jeremy calls Amir and Zoey plus Sarah's friend John, who's a cop, Sarah goes into the bathroom to converse with D, who tells her she did a great job and, although she didn't pull the trigger, awards her with a half million dollars. D informs her that her ratings are through the roof, and OWL, an international organization that promotes a one-world league of peace and prosperity, offers Numen a two-billion-dollar deal to merge with them because of her actions.

Wait. OWL? Isn't that the same company WaynesWorld works for? He lives in Rome and manages emails for that company. Yes, it is! Do they now own Numen and their artificial intelligence implants? Will that change how Numen works? Will I still be able to hack into their system?

Sarah's fuming to D about the money and the bird, which is a well-camouflaged drone. She's more than miffed that James lies dead on her walkway and Numen used her. She gets through John's interrogation and never mentions her now-hidden gun.

Sarah did not shoot James. Adam did.

I replay the video from Dad's camera on my flat-screen, and it shows she's innocent. I can prove it. I used my phone's camera to retape the entire incident, and now I have a copy of it on my computer, too.

A little later, this is a good thing:

Jeremy takes her to his parents' house, away from the sickening crime scene. Thankfully, Amir gives her anti-anxiety meds to let her sleep, while Eyes spends the entire night next to her.

Man, what a nightmare!

On the twelfth day after the missings and after being bedridden for four of those days, I finally feel human again. Our new addition—the rooster—has beaten my alarm clock's announcement twice. I don't mind the intrusion, since I want to know what is happening to Sarah, so I end up forty-five minutes ahead of schedule. In the dark, I rush through feeding the cattle, horses, sheep, goat, and pig without seeing either Dad or Ben.

During the entire time, my mind's distracted by Sarah. How will she deal with realizing she's capable of murdering someone? She should keep telling herself that she wasn't the one who murdered James.

I can't say how many times I watched the video of D telling Sarah to kill James and her opening the door, ready to shoot. The look in James's eyes is indescribable when he realizes what she's attempting.

Scooter welcomes me when I enter Grammy's house as the sun starts to rise. I bend down and pet the poor dog.

"Morning, Mom."

"You're up early," she says as she pulls out her delicious cinnamon rolls from the oven. She tells me her headache is back again, a health issue she deals with continuously.

She's startled at my earlier-than-normal appearance, but I explain that my chores are already done, and I need to hurry back to my room to work on my satellite project—yeah, it's a white lie, but I can't tell her the truth right now.

"Is Scooter okay? He seems so lonely since Grammy disappeared," I comment.

"Yeah, he's sad. He sleeps on the small rug by her empty bed every night. Due to his age, he can't climb the stairs any longer. We don't know what to do for him."

"That's no fun. Poor guy." I pet the dog again, and then Mom hands me a wrapped, still-warm roll and a cup of coffee, hugging me on my way out. I rush back to learn the aftermath of yesterday's tragedy.

After adding a new tape to Dad's camera, I put on the headgear.

Sarah's eating cereal while Jeremy says he's got to run an errand. When he leaves, she and Eyes go into the large backyard of his parents' house. There's a stillness in the air except for the birds chirping.

Next, Sarah heads to an old oak tree, where she sits down and leans against its wide trunk. The cat's nearby, climbing up one of the large branches. Out of nowhere, Sarah pulls out the gun in her hoodie and holds it up against her temple. She pulls the trigger, but the pistol jams!

I'm stunned at her actions. I get why she repeatedly tells herself she's a loser. Is she dwelling on what she almost did? Even D doesn't reply to her panicking calling out. But why try to kill herself?

What comes next rocks me to the core!

All of a sudden, one of those sinister-looking drone birds is right in front of her, a few feet away from her face. But it's Eyes who leaps from the tree and lands perfectly on the bird in flight, taking it down to the ground! The movement startles Sarah so much that her gun goes off.

Because I'm wearing my 3D goggles, I'm so surprised that I fall backward in my chair, causing its wheels to turn on the vinyl flooring as I physically try to dodge the bullet. It's as if I'm right there and am holding her gun.

And, as abruptly as it happens, the headset fades to black.

So, what's going on? Did the bullet hit her? Kill her? Did she live or die?

I toss my goggles across the room and look at both monitors.

Wayne's fine. He's at his desk at work. At OWL work. Sarah's inner portal is black. All black once again.

I sit motionless in front of the screens for five minutes.

Nothing's happening, but some older man's telling Wayne to get the email out to the members they have procured Numen. Globally, anyone can be inserted with an implant and be watched—and for free, to boot.

Forget him! What's Sarah doing? Is she bleeding to death, or what?

I freak out. What should I do? I'm at a loss. Like, what's next?

Frustrated, I leave my place and head to the horse barn. Two of the five horse stalls are empty, so I saddle Spot and go out for a ride. I need to calm down. I need to let go of the thought that my favorite Numen participant most likely is dead. Gone.

Funny, I'm heartbroken, and at a loss—more so than learning Grammy and Ethan had disappeared. What's become of this world? Of me?

We trot out to the Blue Pond, where I find Dad and my uncle at the satellite crash site. Ben's trying to pull the carcass of the poor deer out of the hole. Dad's yanking on a rope tied to the animal's broken antlers as they haul the body onto the open grass. Flies are swarming it.

When I dismount, Ben announces that small creatures are feasting on it. Gross. I don't want to look.

"What brings you out here?" Dad asks me.

"Irritation," I answer.

"Nothing new with that these days," he says. "Is the programming causing a problem?"

"Yeah," I lie. I can't even start to tell him about Sarah.

Ben asks me as he and Dad move the dead animal another foot, "Did you bring protection with you?"

"Always do when I ride. Golden rule of ranching, right, Uncle?"

"Yes, sir. Hey, Brent, once we pull this carcass farther out into the open, do you think we can have Hack practice on his aiming? Like how Dad taught us?" There's a smirk on his face when he looks at me. He must think shooting a gun is fun. Well, right now, I don't.

Dad tells me to unpack from my saddle-bag the Colt Single Action pistol that used to be my grandfather's. In the meantime, Ben heads over to the small shed near the pond where we keep the canoe, oars, life jackets, water floats, and an array of plastic bottles. He returns with two jugs he has filled with pond water and balances them on top of the large metal shell.

By now, Dad has his rifle out and is fiddling with its bullets. He paces off fifteen yards and pulls a dead branch to the spot.

I don't want to do this. *Not today, please not today*.

"Come over here, Son. We'll start at fifteen feet and try to get to twenty or twenty-five today."

"I'm not in the mood, Dad. Maybe another time? Please," I beg.

Ben says, "No, you can do this. You're getting better. Just let a couple of shots off."

They stand to the side of me as I hold the weapon in my hands. In lifting the gun, I notice I'm shaking. Don't they see it, too? My eyes are burning. All I can think about is Sarah—how she held that Glock, frightened out of her mind about what Numen told her to do.

Somehow, I take the shot. The ping when the bullet hits the metal is loud, so loud that I drop the gun. I can't do this. Not right now. Maybe never.

"It's okay," Dad says as he retrieves my weapon. "You must still be weak from being sick. No worries. We'll work on it some other time." He reassuringly puts a hand on my shoulder. The physical contact is the best thing I've felt all day, to know he loves me and is there for me.

Ben says, "Well, 'waste not, want not'—please step back and watch the expert at work." Still with his hand on my shoulder, Dad and I follow Ben as he paces off another thirty feet or so.

This time, Ben and my dad line up next to each other and simultaneously take their shots. Ben's bullet whizzes past the water jug and lands in the pond, rippling the water, while my

father's is a direct shot into the bottle, giving freedom to the fluid pouring out its newly made hole.

When we ride home, Ben declares out of the blue, "I wish we had a cat." The comment seems so typical of our Mr. Farmer. "They keep an eye out, always. They don't miss a trick and would get rid of the mice that eat our feed."

"No, no more animals to feed," I groan. But then, I think about cats; my mind starts brainstorming again. Like big time. I redirect the conversation. "Hey, the fresh air helped my attitude. Do you care if I go back to my room until dinner? I may have a breakthrough about the programming." Yeah, another lie. I know that once you do one, it's easier to do the next.

"Nature always makes you feel better, Hack," Ben declares. "It's why I have such a cheery disposition."

We laugh, but now my mind is churning, spinning in circles, and I'm determined to check it out. I excuse myself as the men leisurely walk their horses back home. I nudge Spot to gallop the entire way.

After unsaddling my horse and returning him to his stall, I run to my room and check the monitors.

Wayne's getting a cup of coffee and sweet-talking a modelesque man in OWL's lunchroom. Sarah's screen's still black.

I exit her screen and start browsing through Numen's participants' list, searching, searching for something that stands out differently than when I checked it before. Several participants have been added in the past few days. I re-sort

the list by most recent. If Sarah's screen went dark mere hours ago, I need to focus only on any added since then.

After going on Wayne's monitor and reviewing the public participant list, I do the same thing on the hacked site. I compare the two lists side by side. Only one pops up on Numen's screen that's not on the public one.

Bingo! I found it.

A new addition named CatEyes is only on the internal site! Yes!

Before clicking on the participant's file, I make sure I'm still rogue and undetectable online. I hold my breath when I click the mouse on the name.

Lo and behold, the screen comes to life.

But the view's different. It's from the air, like one from a satellite when Sarah and D discussed being able to watch her at the lake from the sky. This one has zoomed onto the roof of a house, moving close up, then farther away, back and forth, even side to side. It must be using radar technology, like Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR), which captures images in both daylight and darkness because orangish silhouettes of humans appear on the screen.

Of course, since I'm a researcher, I exit out of Wayne's screen and type in "infrared radiation," where I learn it's invisible to the human eye; it can't go through concrete walls, metal, glass, or water. That means no vehicles, unless their sunroofs are open. It also says it can't go through any electrically conducting material like aluminum foil. That's cool.

The monitor shows four bodies in a room. One is lying down while the other three are nearby, one leaning over the reclining form.

I turn up the volume, thinking there's no sound. Then I hear voices talking like they are far away.

"Is she going to be okay?" It sounds like a male's voice. "I'm so glad I came back home to get my phone. When I heard the gunshot, I ran outside to the old tree and found her. The blood. There was so much of it."

"Head wounds are like that, Jeremy. You did good," says a different male. "Your shirt wrapped around her head saved her. And thanks to you and Zoey for helping me safely remove that implant the bullet must've hit."

"That was gross, Amir!" Zoey says. "All that blood seeping out around the implant. I'm surprised she didn't bleed to death! And then there were all those thin little wires sticking out from her veins and going into the device. How did you know how to cut them?"

Amir replies, "I'm not a brain surgeon and know nothing about BCI, a brain-computer interface, but by using my cauterizer, I figured if I cut the wire from the implant and sealed it where it entered the veins, it would stop the bleeding."

Zoey says, "Either way, that was sick! And it looks like there are a few wires still sticking out around the stitches you put in."

"Yeah, I couldn't help that. She'll need to go to a neurosurgeon to make it work again. I've never seen an implant like it. It doesn't look like your typical hearing aid, unless it's something else. I'm sure it's damaged, so she'll have to get a new one. If we keep the sutures and area clean, she should recover."

I breathe a sigh of total relief: Sarah is alive.

"I used bleach to clean up all the blood in the kitchen," Jeremy adds. "Hope I got it all."

"I'm sure you did the best you could," the doctor says. "It'll be okay."

"Oh, Amir, thank you for saving my dear friend. I don't know what she or even we'd do without you!" says Zoey.

The three talk more about how Jeremy found Sarah, called Amir, and was told over the phone what to do to keep her alive until he got there.

It's rather boring staring at the movement of four beings inside the house—until Amir goes to his car. The orbital camera zooms in and shows him riffling through a bag in the back of his SUV, where he pulls out a clean, black crewneck shirt since the blue one he's wearing has plenty of Sarah's blood splattered over it. That's how close the satellite gets!

Yeah, I'm watching the man change shirts from an eighteen-hundred-pound camera that's 342 miles above the earth. And it's noticeable that Amir's in good shape.

Back in the house, Zoey says, "Jeremy, it's going to be alright. You saved Sarah; you can relax now. The worst is over. I'll go get you a glass of wine or something to calm you down."

Following her movements reminds me of a military surveillance video. Her glowing image walks down the hall and into the kitchen.

As I think about the audio, Zoey confirms my assumption, my theory when I was riding with Dad and Ben.

"*While I'm gone, be sure to keep Eyes away from our patient," she says.*

Yes! It's the cat! When he snuck out of the condo and was presumed lost, right before the shooting, that strange man who supposedly found the feline and gave him back to Jeremy must've done something to the animal. Could it be

that he implanted him with an audio chip? Oh my, the new Numen participant CatEyes is Jeremy's cat! This is getting stranger by the second.

I recheck the public listing, but the name hasn't been added.

Unfortunately, I'm paged on the walkie-talkie to break for dinner.

During the entire meal, I'm in a better mood. Sarah's alive and will hopefully recover. Dad must notice my improved disposition, as he tells everyone that I've had some sort of breakthrough accessing the satellites. Ah, the lying's self-replicating.

When I return to my outbuilding a couple of hours later, an email notification pops up on my Gmail account; it's from Numen, vaguely apologizing about what's happened to Sarah and her supposed demise—not her current status, which they and I know about—and the company's purchase by OWL. There are discounted offers on their future viewing packages, plus an invitation to apply to be an implanted participant.

Since I can tap into all of their accounts without their knowledge, I'm more than glad to sign up for their minimal deal so that when OWL takes over, I can still watch, but no way will I ever agree to be one of their robots!

Later that night, I check on CatEyes while munching on popcorn.

Now the satellite feed shows a body in one bedroom, which I assume is Jeremy's, *two in a nearby bedroom*, which have to be Sarah and Zoey in the twin beds, *and one sacked out on the family room couch*, no doubt Amir.

With things looking more positive, I go to bed early, hoping to catch some decent sleep. Tonight, my dreams include loading pistols, flocks of mechanical birds, and Grammy's dog, Scooter, having an audio implant. Bizarre.

When I wake up the next day, I quickly do my chores at the regular time and return home to check both monitors.

Eyes must've spent the entire night lying on Sarah's bed, since Zoey jokes about it when Amir comes into the bedroom to check on his patient. After a quick breakfast, Zoey and Amir leave, telling Jeremy they'll be in touch soon.

It's frustrating not being able to hear all the conversations—only those where the cat is in the speaker's presence. Maybe Numen can get a swarm of those drone birds closer to the house to see and hear better. But do I want that to happen? Is my growing interest turning me into a voyeur?

I'm thankful that Wayne's monitor isn't infrared-only viewing.

In Europe, he's off work and taking the metro home. He sits across from a couple. They look like they're my parents' age—late forties. *The man's wearing a jacket with a USA flag on it.*

All of a sudden, five adults dressed in black, with ski caps pulled over their faces, enter the subway car at the Roma Termini station. Unabashedly, they walk down the aisle, surround

the couple, and pull out sawed-off shotguns. One is standing adjacent to Wayne, who cowers in his seat, holding his hands over his ears.

The man in the jacket abruptly stands up, begs them not to harm his wife, and hands his wallet to the guy hovering over him. As the older man takes off his watch, the thug throws his wallet back, hitting him in the face with it while asking, "Are you American?" When the man replies positively, he's shot in the chest. The shooter says to the woman, "And what about you? Are you American?"

She shakes her head, saying, "No, I'm French." Tears are running down her face.

He replies, "Well, you have a wedding band on, so you're married to an American." He puts his gun to her head, pulls the trigger, and screams, "Death to Americans!" Blood splatters everywhere, including on Wayne's glasses, blocking my complete viewing.

Then the punk jerk standing next to Wayne looks over at him. He nudges the muzzle of his gun against Wayne's backpack, which is cradled on his lap. The guy says, "OWL?" when he notices the logo branded on the top of the bag. Wayne timidly nods until the masked man asks if he works there. Scared to speak, Wayne nods again. As the train comes to its next stop, the bully replies, "Best organization in the world. Tell them we're on their side and are helping their cause." Seconds later, the five exit the train. Wayne's hands shake as he takes off his glasses and wipes away the blood with the edge of his dress shirt.

Once again, I breathe a sigh of relief. This world's getting way too violent. I don't know how much more I can watch, can take.

To detach myself from the gruesome scene where the bodies are collected and weeping Wayne is questioned by the police, I try to tweak the audio of Eyes on Sarah's screen. She may still be unconscious, as I only hear muffled voices. Maybe the cat has left her side, is eating, or is strolling around the house.

Not being able to get thoughts of the murdered couple out of my head, I divert my attention to hacking into Starlink again, but nothing I try works. As the day progresses, I don't get much done.

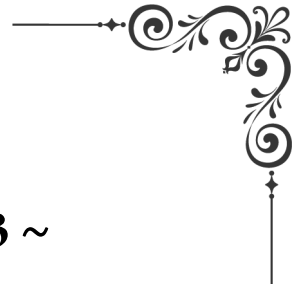
After dinner, Sarah is somewhat conscious.

Repeatedly, she says, "Numen. Implant. Bird. Bad." Of course, no one knows what she means, and Amir says it's the drugs that are confusing her.

Thanks to being in her head, I know what she's saying, but everyone else is clueless.

The next day marks two weeks since the world went crazy. Thankfully, it's normal, with no incidents with guns. I almost appreciate the busyness of farm work that keeps me from my obsessive, yet depressing, screen time. Ben asks me to drive Pop's beat-up 1957 Ford truck, which I've recently learned how to operate a stick shift on, over to the Johnstons' property a couple of times to load up the rest of their fifty-pound bags of feed for the animals. Ben's happy to have more food, since we all know shortages are becoming more frequent.

And, as Sarah goes in and out of consciousness, I'm convinced things will be getting better.



~ Week 3 ~

The next morning after chores, I check on Sarah.

"Now that the implant has been removed, I feel different." In between the purrs of Eyes, Sarah's speaking, but I'm not sure to whom. "Like there's a change of awareness and consciousness since I'm no longer connected to Numen. I feel alive and more focused. I have a heightened sense of control—not the control I usually demand of myself or others, but a control of my being. My thinking. My soul. There's less noise in my head and random thoughts darting around in my mind. It feels like an oppressive spirit within me has exited my body."

She stops talking and is perfectly still on the monitor.

I tap my screen to make sure there's no glitch in it.

"God. It was a God thing. And I'm positive something was said to me, like spoken out loud. It was the most powerful experience ever. Does that make any sense?"

The visual on my screen isn't from the satellite above. There're no orange-glow bodies. Instead, there's a view peering through a window, so the camera must be outside looking inside. It shows Jeremy's kitchen via the window above its sink; branches are blocking some of the view.

"Oh." It's Jeremy's voice. "If it was God who was talking to you, that's fine—all I care about is that you're alive. But I still

don't understand how you shot yourself. I don't want to pry, Sarah, but can you tell me how you had Adam's gun in your hand?"

"It's not Adam's gun," she answers, surprisingly calmly. "He gave me a duplicate. I promise you, Jeremy, I never pulled the trigger. I didn't shoot James! No, that never happened. And now I feel totally free."

The camera at the window zooms into the room. Sarah and Jeremy are sitting at the kitchen table with Eyes on Sarah's lap. Thick gauze where Amir removed the implant covers almost all of her head. Her left hand wears the immobilizer, and her leg's still in a cast.

"You don't understand, Jeremy. It's Numen. D and that company wanted to control me."

Jeremy responds, "You're not making any sense. You keep mentioning Numen. What is a D? And what's with that small implant Amir removed? As long as I've known you, you've never told me about it. Are you tone deaf, or visually impaired—or is it some kind of AI, like to keep your heart ticking?"

With her good elbow on the table, Sarah holds her head. She exhales loudly and tries to get up from her seat, but knocks over her glass of orange juice. She lets out an "oops" as Eyes jumps off her lap and runs out of the room. Jeremy retrieves a towel from a drawer to soak up the spill.

Although there's no audio since the cat is gone, you can tell by their body language that Sarah and Jeremy argue; she's pointing at him with her good hand while he wipes the table with a wet sponge and then dries it. Due to her yelling, the only decipherable words heard are "AI," "implant," "money," "bird," and "control."

After their tiff has ended, Eyes re-enters the room.

I wonder what they argued about. Did she tell him everything about Numen, including that they offered her a million dollars to kill that kid?

"Please, please, Jeremy," she says, "don't tell Zoey or Amir, okay? I'm only telling you about it for now. I need time to think about what to do next. Please. I want to do the right thing."

How I wish I knew what they discussed.

"Alright, mum's the word, only because you're my best friend, and I love you." He clears the table of dishes and continues. "Oh, I talked to our boss. Carl says they're still swamped at the newspaper; he asked when I'd be coming back to work. He also asked about you, like how you're holding up; he'd heard about James and the shooting. I told him we both need time off. He sends his condolences about my parents and said to stay home and heal."

"Thank you, Jer. I didn't want to explain things to him. I'm glad he's giving us a breather. But back to what I wanted to ask. Do you have a Bible in this house? Like, did your mom have one?"

BTW, I know the mom did—I remember that Sarah saw one in the primary bedroom on her first visit to the house.

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure she does. I'm curious, though, why would you want to see it? You've always been so averse to Christianity."

"Because my recent experience was an awakening. Maybe I've been wrong all this time. Something has changed inside me with the removal of the implant. I can't explain it to you—I don't even understand it myself—but now I want to read the Bible to see what it says."

Changing topics as he puts the soiled dishtowel in the laundry room, Jeremy says, "We do need to run by the condo at some point, but only when you're healed enough to go. Amir will be the judge of that."

"Good idea. And we can pick up what supplies are left there, along with the coins upstairs."

When the two leave the room, the cat follows, but the visual goes dark. However, seconds later, it's back online, this time from the window in the parents' bedroom, where Jeremy sleeps.

"I think she kept a Bible in her dresser drawer," Jeremy declares as he opens one of the two nightstands that flank the king-size bed.

I notice one of the dressers has a lamp on it; the other has a rotary dial phone, like the kind my grandma has in the office. But this one's an avocado green color.

Sarah's resting against the door frame, out of breath from limping down the hall. Eyes has jumped up on the bed; his purring continues to interrupt the audio.

"Here it is," Jeremy says. As he opens the book, a small, tattered photo—the one Sarah saw earlier—falls out. "Wow, this pic of my brother Dylan and me is old. It's like the one on our mantel." He puts the photo on the nightstand, walks over to Sarah, and hands her the Bible.

"Thanks, Jeremy. It means a lot to me." Leaning the book against her bandaged hand, she caresses the leather cover with the other, as if she's almost afraid to open the pages. "This may or may not help, but for some odd reason, I'm drawn to it, though I've never been before."

Eyes climbs up on the nightstand closer to the window and jumps across to the long bureau, walking along it. He suddenly paws at the window's glass.

Sarah looks at Eyes and screams, "Another drone bird!" A small, dark creature outside flutters, its wings hitting the decorative shutter next to the window. As it mechanically flies upward, the video feed switches back to the infrared satellite view of the roof of Jeremy's home.

"Enough already!" Sarah yells. "Leave me alone, Numen. Now! Stop watching me, D!" She hobbles over to the window and violently closes the drapes. Then she abruptly leaves the room and enters where she sleeps, twisting the blinds shut with force. With determination and complaining the entire time how she wants to be in control, she drags her bad leg throughout the house, going from room to room, slamming each blind or drape shut. Her body's glow on the satellite gets brighter as the house gets darker.

Later that night, Sarah is in bed reading Jeremy's mother's Bible until after midnight. She keeps a pen and paper nearby, but I can't see what she's writing.

Today, I feel weak again and not fully over whatever I had. When I complain to Ben, he hassles me, telling me to take it easy by sitting on a stool to milk the cow. Like I want that to happen. I beg to pass, threatening that it would make me start barfing again. Instead, I help the women collect and store the increased number of eggs that we have in the coolness of the chicken coop. Due to the increase in the flock and the new, outspoken King Rooster, Ben has me help him

extend their coop so they have more free range and can eat bugs and insects in the weeds and grasses. I never knew that if you don't wash eggs, they don't have to be refrigerated for up to three weeks, and if you refrigerate unwashed eggs, they can last for three months. But I hate handling the bird-pooped produce. The things one can learn living on a farm.

Lately, Mom spends hours in Grammy's downstairs bedroom going through her stuff. Scooter is in there with her, putting his head on her lap whenever she's on the floor, going through things. In the evenings, Mom shows us old photos and love letters from Pop. Of course, this allows Dad and Ben to reminisce about their parents, appreciating the healing balm. It's decided to leave my grandmother's room as is, mainly because it makes a lovely guest bedroom—as if we'll have company again.

Yet, Aunt Aya is in a dark mood. She's been cleaning out Ethan's room at their house, leaving no trace of his medical equipment or that he was disabled. And Ben enables her by digging a hole with the backhoe and burying it all. I keep hearing her humming songs whenever she thinks she's alone. It's almost obsessive—she needs to chill.

Whenever I'm not working on the endless list of chores, I'm concentrating on the two monitors. It's Numen that has my eyes burning nonstop until two or three in the morning, only to repeat the process of farm work early the next day. Almost always I'm alone during my outdoor tasks, giving me plenty of time to think...of Sarah, Eyes, Wayne, Numen, the drones, and Starlink.

Speaking of drones, two more finally arrive, but we have to drive to town to pick them up, as Amazon says they'll no

longer deliver to our remote location. We have to set up a PO box inside Safeway to get our orders. I go with Dad to pick up our supplies, and the store has had obvious changes—like lines of empty metal shelves in every row. Also, people are nasty: One man approaches us demanding food and money. Dad, who always carries a weapon, has to pull it out and tell the guy to move on. He does.

While in the store, we talk to the Choates—well, at least the husband. They have a small country market that's halfway between our house and Bonners Ferry. He shut down his store because delivery trucks kept being seized and their contents stolen before reaching their destinations. He privately tells us they moved their existing goods to an outbuilding on their property. Much of his perishable stock had mold on it, like bread, rolls, and pizza dough—unusually greenish black—within a day or two. He felt bad; some of it was sold before he closed his doors; he noticed it when moving the merchandise. Dad works a deal with him to swap our eggs and veggies for staples like flour, batteries, and toilet paper, so at least we have some optional sources.

Later that day, I hook up the two drones, having one cover the Blue Pond and westerly; the other covers the Black Pond and buried shipping containers. I spend hours making sure the cameras are viewing the land from the best angles.

I watch WaynesWorld more carefully. The dude is a pervert with a now-large following. However, his job's interesting because of what we view while he's at work. What surprises me is that if OWL now owns Numen, why are they agreeing to

have Wayne be a participant? I mean, they're a huge conglomerate that could easily take over the world, so why are we viewers allowed to see the inner-office emails when Wayne sends them out? Sure, some have sections blacked or blocked out, or part of the email is hidden behind an object so it can't be read, but you'd think it'd be better not to show them to viewers.

For example, OWL consists of ten "horns" based around the globe. They call them "horns" even though the actual fowl doesn't have any, but they do have tufts of feathers that are sometimes called "horns" or plumicorns, which means "feather horns" in Latin. I learned this, researching it out of curiosity. In the emails, these "horns" are referred to as only Horn A, B, C, et cetera—all the way to Letter J, so ten letters. I can't tell where each letter is located on a map—whether it's a group of people based on economic regions or continents, a cabal of billionaire technocrats, or specific individuals like kings or dignitaries who are in charge as they're masked in secrecy. Nonetheless, Wayne sends out emails to the ten daily, sometimes a couple of times a day. Some notes are lengthy and verbose, while others are quick and short.

I took a screenshot of this email and am trying to decipher it:

Congratulations are in order for our newest horn addition who has risen rapidly among us. In the past few days, not only has this horn shown strength and fortitude, but also, its leader is proving his worth by displaying his wise intelligence and reserved emotion that's imperative in these trying times. He has lessened the anxiety and tension felt in his sector regarding the

disappearances with his calm disposition and sensitive perspicacity. The newest horn should be exalted and praised as the god of fortresses for the determination, perseverance, and military prowess he and his team have shown. Please offer respect and glory to our special addition who will be attending our next global event!

Yeah, no clue what it means, but it's interesting. So mysterious.

At dinner, I ask the adults if they've ever heard of OWL.

Dad replies, "Yes, isn't it that fast-rising company that's trying to resolve peace in the Middle East?"

"I heard they're pivotal to resolving wars in other locations in the world, especially what's going on with China," says Ben. "And they also, I think, are the ones leading the investigation of the missings—trying to find out what happened when everyone disappeared and devise a way to comfort the world. Aya, do you remember reading something about them?"

While placing a casserole dish on the table, she responds, "My take is they believe the weak and worthless need to be eliminated so the strong can correct the wrongs in the world today. I strongly disagree, though, as our Ethan wasn't worthless because he was disabled. And neither were all the children taken. They were our future, so why remove them from the planet?"

Noticing my aunt's heartbreak, Mom pats her arm, saying, "I think so, too. With a higher percentage of the elderly gone, namely Grammy, such wisdom will be missed. None of

this makes sense. Nor does what's happening to our world, our government, our people. Everyone is becoming violent and abusive; there's no harmony, no kindness. We need someone to stop the madness!"

Everyone agrees with her comment. How we wish things would return to the old days. We'd like healthy, happy children to fill the hurting homes, with grandparents being able to bounce them on their knees again.

Another night while watching my monitors, I get a text message on my phone at 10:20 p.m. I don't recognize the number; it looks like it's from Texas, as the area code is familiar.

Hack, it's Alyssa. I had to get a new number. Can we talk? Like, can I call you?

Amazed, I hit the "call" button. This is a first. We normally just text back and forth, yet I've seen her in Zoom meetings, and she's a babe. We've never directly spoken.

"Alyssa! Where've you been?" I use a deep voice to hide my being only seventeen years old. "I've been trying to get a hold of you since the people disappeared. Are you okay?"

"I'm sorry," she answers. "So much has happened since then. I've been living a nightmare. Days after the disappearances, I wanted to check on my grandma, who lives almost eight hours away, but my boyfriend got mad, really mad. We got in a fight, and, well, he got physical and pushed me around."

First of all, I didn't know Alyssa had a boyfriend—I mean, it makes sense, since she's attractive, twenty-two years old, and almost finished with college—but she could've told

me. Secondly, what a dirtbag the guy is. I say, "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I think so. One of my front teeth is chipped, and I still look banged up. I'll live. But I'm madder that I had to get in my car and leave so fast. Everything I own is left in our apartment, and I'm never going back! Since I refuse to call the narcissist and give him my address, there's no way I'm going to get my stuff back." She tells me she had to buy a new phone and get a new number to make sure the jerk couldn't contact her.

"Whoa. That's bad. Where did you go? Do you have a place to live?"

"Yeah, I drove straight from Brownsville to Abilene. Driving through Texas is always horrible, but I knew the craziness of San Antonio would be worse, so I avoided it by using an alternate route that added another hour to the drive. There's so much road rage that I got driving PTSD from it."

"I'm sorry. Did you find your grandma?" I ask, almost afraid to know the answer.

"No. She's one of the missings. Sadly, I found her clothing on her recliner. She must've been watching television when it happened."

"I'm sorry, Alyssa." I tell her about Grammy and Ethan, and we commiserate about the loss of our loved ones.

"So, where are you now?" I ask.

"Since I'm the only relative my grandmother has, I'm staying at her house. I think she deeded it to me when I turned eighteen, but she still lived there—until now. I have

to start over anyway to get away from Dirk, so living here's perfect."

"That's good that you have a place to live, but I feel bad that you have to start over."

"Don't worry about me, Hack. I'll bounce back. But do have good news: I called Professor Harrison—remember him from the class where we first met?" We talk about the schoolwork and the classmates we did and didn't like.

"Harrison told me that the twenty humongous Stargate data centers were recently bought out and were looking for coding experts. I applied online and start on Monday. And get this, one's right here in Abilene!"

"Awesome! Who used to own Stargate? Wasn't it OpenAI, Microsoft, Meta, Oracle, SoftBank, MGX, or...?'

"Yeah, I think they all may have owned parts of it. OWL bought out Musk's Starlink, too. All these tech gurus are like a broligarchy overseen by OWL. Since America wants to be a technocracy ruling the AI world, they're racing to get ahead of China in the field."

I think about OWL again; that company has its talons everywhere. Man, it's been buying out everything and everyone. We're talking about serious money here. I'd better check out WaynesWorld more often.

Alyssa adds, with excitement, "And even better, they said they'd contact the school and have me listed as officially graduated."

"Wow. Way to score, Alyssa!" I'm truly happy for her.

"Right. And the job's right up my alley, focusing not on AGI but on ASI."

Since I'm a tech nerd, I know she's not going to be dealing with artificial general intelligence, wherein a computer understands, learns, and applies information, but she'll be working on artificial superintelligence, which simulates reasoning and problem-solving abilities that surpass human learning, having intelligence at the level of a god by using quantum computing.

"Interesting about ASI," I say. "I read online somewhere that five out of six of their frontier models show the ability to deceive users and developers. Do you think that's true?"

"Well, I'm sure we'll find out what the system is and is not capable of and code it to behave correctly, even if it can think and act on its own," she assures me.

"I hope so. You're the best coder I know. It's fantastic! I bet you're excited."

"That I am. I'm glad I won't be working on fiddling with biometrics involving DNA or mRNA for transhuman applications such as implants and replacement parts, but the division I'm working in is domestic intelligence applications involving satellites. How cool is that?"

"Ah," is all I can say, realizing I still have no way to block our property on Starlink. I won't say anything, but I wonder if Alyssa could be my answer.

We talk about school, and I tell her I'm trying to finish the semester's work ahead of time. She pushes me to move down to Texas and work with her at Stargate, even offering me a room at her grandmother's house. I make excuses that I'm needed on the farm, but I don't mention our big age gap.

When our phone call is over after we make promises to touch base again, it's past midnight. Restless, I walk outside to get some fresh air.

There's something about living in rural areas when I can look up into the sky and see the Milky Way. It's enchanting to see the stars, even the colors, as they shine on us from the edge of our galaxy. I take deep breaths, inhaling and exhaling slowly. Looking up makes me feel small and invisible. A nobody.

The sound of a nearby cough breaks my solitude. I see my dad walking over to me, old Scooter trailing behind him.

"Hey," I say. I lean down to rub the dog behind his ears.

"Hi, Son. You're up late."

"I could say the same about you." Scooter licks my hand and wags his tail.

"You burn the candle at both ends—I see the glow of your computer in your window late into the night. No wonder you can't get up on time to do your chores."

"If you're noticing me being awake, it means you are, too," I tease.

"Touché. But I'm out to let Scooter do his business." We talk about how the animal isn't like it used to be since Grammy disappeared.

Dad changes the topic as he gazes at the sky. "What a beautifully clear night out tonight. What do you see?"

I scan the darkness splattered with a multitude of tiny lights. "Big and Little Dippers." I search for Sirius, Vega, Alpha Centauri, and Canopus and point to their locations.

"Even Venus and Mars," adds Dad. "And there goes the ISS over us." He lifts his arm and slowly guides his finger in the sky to follow the International Space Station.

"See that string of lights over there?" I show him where, saying, "Could freak a few people out if they didn't know it was a group of Starlink satellites just sent up. They'll spread out in a few minutes to each one's located program."

"Incredible what man has accomplished." He reminisces, "My dad used to say, 'The heavens declare the glory of God.' I wonder if there's a God up there. And why doesn't He come save us? What really made all those people disappear, including every child? This world's getting so bad. Where's God when we need Him? I worry every day about how to protect you and your mom. I, too, wish someone would come and take over—give us direction and make things right again. I don't know what to do sometimes."

I've no clue what to say or how to respond. I'm surprised my father is being so real, so raw, by showing his emotions. I glance over and see his eyes look glassy. Is this world that bad? And who can make it better—how can they?

After a minute of silence, I speak up. "I don't have the answer, Dad, to a question that big. To be honest, the problem I'm facing these days is with the satellites. If one goes over our head every ninety minutes and reappears in almost the same line, is there a way to block that particular one? If so, can I do that? As you already know, there are satellite-tracking programs I can tap into and find the serial number of that specific satellite. I intend to hack and disable it when it's above us. But nothing's working; I can't figure out its coding. How else can I access a space drone above us?"

"You can't, because they're all linked together, thus Starlink—notice the 'link' part. They're like a network or swarm. If one goes down, another can take its place. I learned this as an agent at work. We would simply apply another drone to its target if one went down, was damaged, or was eliminated. And you can't remove an entire swarm. It would be flagged on tracking monitors. You have to find a unique way to move what I would call the beehive so the swarm moves away with it. Does that make sense?"

"Yes, it gives me a perspective I haven't thought about. Thanks."

Now I divert the conversation. "Mom said Scooter sleeps on a rug in Grammy's empty room every night."

"Yeah, I come down when it's late; I hear his whining and let him outside," Dad says.

"He can stay with me at night. Do you think that would help?"

"That's a great idea," Dad answers quickly, "if you don't mind. Let me go get his rug right now so we can see how it goes."

Scooter and I remain while my father's gone for a few minutes. He returns with a rolled-up, medium-sized rug and an empty water bowl. Together, we walk over to my place and set the rug by my bed and the bowl in the bathroom under the pedestal sink. But Scooter seems more than happy when he jumps up on my bed and lies down at the end of it, thumping his tail a couple of times. Dad and I laugh, glad the dog has adapted to his new surroundings.

After we say our goodnights, I climb into bed, adjusting my feet to accommodate my new bed warmer. We drift off to

sleep, preparing to face a new day on our land under the vast sky filled with a ton of metal.

Another day, and the satellite's infrared camera lights up.

Amir and Zoey drive up the long driveway, getting out of her Audi, ringing the doorbell, and entering Jeremy's parents' house.

"I'm so glad you came for dinner," Sarah tells Zoey as she hugs her with her good arm.

"All things considered, you look great, Sar! And you're up and around. Nice head wrap, too. I brought you some of your clothes," says her friend as she holds up a large shopping bag.

As Jeremy welcomes the guests, Amir hands him a bottle of wine and replies, "Sorry that we haven't come by the last couple of days. Zoey's back working at the bank, and I'm trying to clean up the rental. But let me take a good look at our patient."

The heat sensors follow Amir as he leads Sarah into the kitchen and puts his medical bag on the table. Eyes trails her everywhere, jumping up on her lap when she sits down at the table. Meanwhile, Zoey's putting the bag of clothing in Sarah's bedroom, loudly apologizing for going into her condo without asking.

When she walks back into the kitchen, she complains, "Why are all the drapes in the house closed? It's a beautiful day outside, while it's gloom and doom inside." She opens the family room slider's blinds.

"No!" screams Sarah. "Shut them right now!"

Zoey quickly obeys as they're closed in a flash.

How I wish I could see the look on her and Amir's faces right now, but the satellite can't catch it.

"Okay, okay. My, girl. A little touchy there, aren't you?" says Zoey.

Amir speaks up, "Listen to her, Zo, she may be light sensitive with that damaged implant removed. Leave her be." He has pulled off Sarah's head bandage and is inspecting his sutures.

"Looking good, dear," he says as he puts antibiotic ointment on the tender area. "I only shaved off a little of your hair, so the scar shouldn't show too badly. Your longer hair hides it well. The sutures are intact, clean and dry. There are a couple of wires from the implant sticking out of the cut so your surgeon can reattach the implant." He applies a smaller bandage and wraps gauze around her head again, adding, "This won't be too thick, but it will keep the bandage in place for the next few days."

"Also," Amir says, "here's your implant." He pulls out a small device from his pocket and sets it down on the table in front of her. It also has wires sticking out of it. "I tried to fix it at Zoey's, but I can't get it open. I would say it's a total loss. Your insurance should cover it."

"No!" Without another word, Sarah grabs the implant, studies it for a few seconds, then gets up from her chair and hobbles into the kitchen. The entire time, she's mumbling undecipherable words—maybe she's talking to God or something, someone, as she has this weird conversation going on with herself.

I would have expected her to use profanities right now, like I've seen her do before, but she doesn't. It's like she's ar-

guing or having a heated discussion, but no one else is included.

She violently opens and closes kitchen drawers until she finds what she's looking for in a utility drawer in the laundry room. A hammer. She puts the small device on a wooden butcher block and starts beating it. Over and over, at least ten times. Small metal and plastic pieces go flying.

Everyone else is motionless until Jeremy comes up behind Sarah and puts his arms around her, holding her body close to his for a minute. After whispering something in her ear, he slides his hand over her hand that's gripping the hammer. She lets go of it and starts to sob audibly. She turns around and cries into Jeremy's chest as he clutches her to himself.

What breaks the silence is when Zoey says, "Oh, Sarah, I have news. I talked to your mom. Your dad continues to have a fever, and your sister and husband are still grieving that the twins are missing. I didn't want to upset her, so I didn't explain all that happened, but I said you're okay and healing at Jeremy's house. I told her you couldn't call because you don't have your phone, since you left it at home. So, here it is—I brought it over." Zoey retrieves the device from her large purse and puts it down on the kitchen table.

Jeremy's shaking his head back and forth, but Sarah abruptly hops to the table and picks up the phone. She immediately takes off its backing, pulls out the insides, and throws all the parts against the nearby wall. "No, I don't want this either. No electronics for me. From. Now. On. Period."

Ugh, but I get it! Numen told her that her implant syncs with her smartphone, which also monitors the audio. It's easy to understand her anger that's causing her to make sure

the implant is demolished. But why destroy the phone, since her implant isn't working anymore?

"Alright, Sarah, no phones," Amir says calmly. "We get it. We know you're dealing with something unusual right now. We know you could still be in shock from what happened at your condo or by the tree. We—Zoey, Jeremy, and I—are here for you, always. We'll help you get through this, okay? Now why doesn't Zoey help you get settled into the family room while we prepare dinner? Relax and think positively. No one can harm you when we're here."

Sarah's reaction isn't what I expect. She loves being in control, so it makes sense that she destroyed both devices, but at the same time, she's acting differently, like she's determined to prove some kind of point. I can't figure her out.

The satellite shows the women leaving the kitchen, while Eyes, who followed Sarah into the laundry room, starts eating food from his automatic feeder nearby. As Jeremy and Amir prepare meatloaf and twice-baked potatoes, their quiet conversation can barely be heard.

"Jeremy, what was that about? Is Sarah okay?" Amir asks.

"Yeah, she's pretty upset over both shootings. She's got this phobia about electronics for some reason, but I think she'll be able to deal with it. I called our boss, Carl, and he agrees she needs more time off. I've got plenty of vacation time, so I'm taking off work until she's ready to go back. Does that make sense?"

Amir says, "Yes, if you can afford it and don't mind her fluctuating moods. Please keep an eye on her, and let me know if it gets worse. I gave her a prescription for antidepressants. I'm sure Zoey packed them in her overnight bag, so make sure she takes them."

"Yes, will do. And thanks again for the help you've been to both of us. I don't know what I'd do if I lost her."

That night when we're watching the news in the great room, with Scooter tucked by my side, we learn that the small country Mauritius, which is five hundred miles east of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean, is no longer in existence. For some unknown reason, the 723-square-mile island that's surrounded by coral reefs has sunk—just like a sinkhole, but in the water. Like gulped, or imploded. With over a million residents, everyone on it drowned, leaving no trace.

~ Week 4 ~

My phone rings. I roll over and look at the clock. It's 4:38 a.m. I think I've blocked all robocalls, so who could this be? Even Scooter's startled.

My eyes adjust to the glow of the phone's screen; it's Ben.

Groggily, I answer. "Do you know what time it is?"

"You bet I do, Hack. Time to watch a cow give birth," my uncle replies. "This'll be one of the most incredible experiences to watch. Come as soon as you can!"

I groan as I put the phone back down on a side table. The event sounds horrifying. How Ben can be so thrilled is beyond my comprehension. But, knowing him, if I don't show up in the next ten minutes, he'll keep calling. I complain to Scooter and get no response.

After I dress, we head over to our cattle barn. Keep in mind that this barn isn't a typical cute, red barn like the ones in movies. Nope, it's a huge, industrial, all-metal building that used to house hundreds of livestock. On its roof, over fifty solar panels provide electricity for the entire farm. When it rains, the drops hitting the barn's aluminum roof make it sound like being inside a metal drum: way too loud. Large pens on each side and troughs down their centers are where we put food and water. It takes me forever to walk

down the middle aisle from one end of the barn to the other. Inside we have two dozen bovines, along with the sheep, goat, and pig. The animals are divided into separate pens, but the smell and dung are ever-present. If I owned our property, I'd turn it into an arena for a rock concert or play football in it—of course, only if it's completely remodeled and the stench is eliminated.

When I finally get to the end of the barn, Ben and Aya are standing by the calving pen that's completely enclosed, tucked away from the other animals.

"She's in labor," Ben says. "Her vulva's been swollen, and her udder is all bagged up. She's restless and having contractions." He quickly demands, "Scooter shouldn't be here right now."

Glad to avoid Ben's ongoing descriptions, I leave to let the old dog out the side door to freely roam. How I wish I could stay outside with Scooter. When I return, I talk about something else. "Where are Dad and Mom?"

"Oh, they've no interest in this. They've seen it before, so are probably sound asleep. I caught the cow's progress on the pen's camera."

He continues his monologue. "Cows get nervous when humans hang around them while giving birth; actually, they usually deliver when no one is around, but I've been checking on her; it's almost time."

I want to gag. The three of us are in the next pen, far enough away that we're less obtrusive as the animal actively delivers. Ben tells me to whisper so we don't disturb her. Okay. Weird.

After twenty-two stressful minutes, a bull calf is born. Ben—as he explains to me—swabs the calf's navel with iodine to prevent infection and help it dry.

A little while later, the mother licks her baby and prods him to stand up, then she nurses him. It's cool seeing how excited the frail and innocent animal is quickly adapting to life. I notice Ben and Aya stand nearby, hand in hand, with tearful eyes of joy. I appreciate the moment of something coming to life. Yes, it's truly an amazing experience. I thank them both for the opportunity to watch a live birth.

Ben says since I was in attendance, I get to name the calf. I chose Midnight, since the jet-black bull reminds me that it's still dark outside.

When I return to my room, Scooter hasn't returned; he's probably on the big house's porch, waiting to be let in for his breakfast. I lie on my bed, still fully dressed, hoping to catch a few minutes of sleep. Yet, the Zs evade me, so I get up and check the monitors.

Jeremy's in bed. Sarah's in bed, but Eyes isn't curled up next to her like other times. The satellite camera zooms out and in when it spots the cat, who's sneaking out into the darkness of the property through the doggie door in the kitchen. The camera follows him as he meanders through the vegetable garden and rows of grapevines. When the feline walks on the path to the tree where Sarah shot herself, the camera zooms in closer.

What happens next is impressive.

Eyes walks around the tree several times and then approaches the drone bird lying on the ground. After hovering

over the mechanical object for several seconds, the cat bites down on one of the fake wings and starts to drag the thing back to the house. It takes a while, but the cat appears to be determined, especially when pulling it through the small opening in the kitchen door. He yanks it over the doggie door's bottom flap, making a noticeable noise.

Again, the camera zooms out, as if someone's watching every movement in the house. Both Jeremy and Sarah remain motionless; they haven't been disturbed by the clatter.

I wonder who else—human or not—is watching this besides me? Is the electronic chip in Eyes more than an audio recorder? Can the implant make the cat do things? Like, can Numen control the cat like he used Sarah to try to kill James? That would be alarming. An animal can't obey a command like a robot. It has free will like we humans do, like Sarah did. The cat isn't moving the bird drone because it's being told to, right?

After Eyes drags the drone down the hall, he leaves it on the bedroom carpet, next to Sarah's bed. He jumps up and snuggles with her, probably proud to show her proof of his achievement when she awakens.

Meanwhile, Wayne has been at his office desk during Eye's adventure. He has such a boring job. His dating life and porn hobby may be the only reasons his ratings are high. Suddenly, he logs out of his computer and leaves the room.

Fifteen minutes later, he enters a large convention hall. He's greeted by an older man—I think this guy is his boss or someone above him—*who hands him a lanyard with an ID card that has an owl logo with the name "Numen" on it. The boss man wears a name tag that says "Horn A" on it. He*

walks with Wayne into a meeting room of two hundred people, all wearing name tags, too. There's so much chatter that Wayne never speaks, and it's hard to hear what others are saying, except when they say "hello" to Wayne's boss or shake his hand. The two take their seats three rows from the front of the room.

When I can, I look at the name tags. None have personal names, but Horn A, B, C, et cetera, similar to the email I read about the accolades given to a new horn who is given no letter. But individuals are attending with the same horn letter—so there are several Horn A or Horn B name tags, and so on. Again, everything seems normal as they greet each other, but there's something mysterious. It's as if it's a secret organization with strange hand codes and wording.

A few minutes later, Wayne's boss leaves his seat and approaches the podium. "Horns, please be seated so we can get this meeting started." He introduces himself as a Horn A. "Thank you for coming, for taking the time away from your priorities that further our goals in making a better world. We appreciate how we band together as a whole to work as one unit. First of all, I would like to thank Numen, which has recently been bought by OWL. This company has invented one of the most advanced AI implants in the world. I'm pleased to introduce you to one of Numen's participants, Wayne DeGasso, who has a large online following of over one hundred thousand viewers and works for OWL. Wayne, please come up here."

Wayne looks intimidated as he fiddles with his lanyard; he walks up the two stairs and stands next to his boss.

"Thank you, Wayne. Could you please turn to the left and show us your implant?"

Wayne shyly turns his head; his hand pushes away his curly brown hair, uncovering the small, round implant. A few oohs and aahs rise from the audience.

After his boss explains the device and its features and benefits, he says to Wayne, "Can you tell us what you think about being one of Numen's most-watched players?"

At first, Wayne stutters, but then he looks over the crowd and speaks. "Well, I—I love that I can show others what I'm thinking, seeing, experiencing. It makes me feel important to help others see they're as normal as me and that they're important—just as important as I am for OWL and Numen." The audience claps heartily.

"Very good, Wayne. Thank you for your contribution. Hopefully, by those viewing your everyday actions and thoughts, others will want to get on board to become viewers or even participants."

The boss motions for Wayne to be seated, then says, "But Numen and their groundbreaking technology isn't why we're gathered here today. This isn't about us, but the one who deserves our respect and honor. Please welcome our newest horn to the microphone."

I notice no letter is given to this horn. Hmm. I wonder why.

After the room erupts in clapping by everyone in attendance, an athletic, impeccably dressed man approaches the stage.

Immediately, I notice the man's eyes: They're a steely blue that is clear, unique. When he looks at the camera, I feel him looking into my soul—yes, a weird feeling encompasses me that he's reading my mind. I know he's not, but...

As Wayne's walking down the two stairs, the newest horn stops him, takes him by the arm, and brings him back to the podium.

Meanwhile, clapping and shouts of acclamation and praise are given to the charismatic man as he taps the mic.

The camera stare happens again. It creeps me out how he's, like, in my face, but not. Such a strange sensation whenever he looks into the camera. It's as if I'm being hypnotized.

"Thank you. Thank you for the heartfelt acknowledgments. But first, let's thank Wayne again for his participation in Numen's innovative program." In a fatherly gesture, he puts his arm around Wayne's shoulder while the crowd applauds again. "Due to Horn A's team recruiting and investing in Numen, I challenge all other horns to procure similar ventures to improve OWL's visibility around the globe." Wayne's smiling from ear to ear as cameras flash pictures of the two of them.

Yeah, the pervert's getting his fifteen minutes of fame. I bet his numbers will skyrocket.

The horn refocuses. "Thank you for believing in me. And blessings to all other horns in attendance. I appreciate the support you gave me in our last private meeting, where the horn leaders pledged their respect and commitment to me. I, the leader of my horn faction, will help us become one as we at OWL change the world for humankind's benefit."

Once more, the clapping ends, and the captivating man tells everyone to sit down. "We are OWL," he says, "exactly like the cunning bird. We have eyes and ears designed to easily locate prey. We have unique feathers that enable us to fly silently as we oversee and control countries, their governments, and their people. We're known for wisdom, intuition, and protec-

tion—and, like owls, we're associated with the supernatural. We're the keepers of 'death' concerning ending the old and beginning the new. And now we will begin a new reign of peace and tranquility with the other ten horns around the globe."

This time, every person in attendance is standing up and screaming, "Horn, Horn, Horn!"

As he speaks, he seems comfortable, affable, and intelligent, yet in control. He doesn't talk down to those who listen, but draws them in with his tone and sensitivity. His effect is a soulful, peaceful feeling that makes me want to hold onto his every word. Intoxicating. Wayne isn't the only one captivated by the man; although I want to fight his stare, he draws me in. I wonder if I've become infatuated with him, too.

"From now on, I am no longer the newest horn. I insist on being called Iam Mastema!" The words are spoken with determined arrogance, as if he knows exactly what he's doing.

Again, the crowd goes wild. Wayne's standing on his chair like several others and lifting his hands, as if worshipping the speaker. Strange, blue smoke appears out of nowhere and swirls around the speaker's entire body—eerie-looking.

I check Wayne's online ratings. They've increased by another two thousand.

"Calmness," the magnetic speaker says in a muffled voice as the smoke instantly dissipates. Within seconds, the room is so quiet that you could hear a pin drop. "Calmness is what our world needs. No longer should we be overthinking, overemotional about, or overreacting to what has happened to our loved ones. They're gone, and it's been over a month since their disappearance. We must accept that no one will be coming back.

Time to move on. No, now is the time to be redeemed, to change our sorrows into joy so that we can change the world from the inside out...from our inside presence and soul to an outer acceptance of each other. To genuinely love one another—all races, all religions, all beliefs joined as one and one for all. Let's put away the hate and harm that have made us suffer tremendously since the beginning of time and, for once, have true tranquility within us and everywhere in the world."

Although this meeting is only within OWL, the guy has international wisdom. He really does. He speaks with a dedication to peace and safety for all; he should go global with his message, as I'm sure others will see how he could be the one who gets it. He may be the only one who can bring sanity to our broken, fractured world, to our sad, heavily burdened people.

When I shut down the monitor, I feel as if I have to shake my head to clear it—as if this Mastema dude had power over me through the computer. I don't know if or how he did it; it was bizarre. But whatever I sensed, the feeling's gone now.

Although the rooster crowing brings me back to the here and now, what I witnessed makes me realize that history is in the making of a new world, a world where I don't watch my father pull a gun on someone trying to rob us or watch gangs shoot people on a subway.

Minutes later, my alarm clock buzzes, verifying that it's a new morning, and there are always farm chores that need to be done.

Scooter's waiting for me when I enter the great room for breakfast, and we decide that the old dog will hang around Mom at the big house during the day and stay at my place at night. This way, I don't have to be responsible for feeding him; I'll just be there for when he cries, which he didn't do last night.

When the meal is over, I head back to my room for a quick check on the monitors. I must know how Sarah responded to that drone bird.

It's almost ten in the morning. Sarah's still asleep with Eyes by her side; she must've drunk too much last night when Zoey and Amir came over. The drone remains nearby on the floor, immobile. Jeremy's in the backyard, fiddling in the vegetable garden, gleaning a couple of ears of sweet corn and peas.

Wayne's at a bar with some of his coworkers after work. He shows off his picture of Mastema's arm around him when they were on the stage. Of course, his chums are curious about him being a Numen participant; he acts like he's the focus of the room. He shows them his small implant and explains using his phone app how the viewer sees through his eyes. Everyone's wowed by it, opening their phones and signing up. Some are even applying to be participants, too.

I check his numbers, which are now close to three hundred thousand viewers. All because he was in the right place at the right time.

Sarah finally stirs at 10:15 a.m. When she gets out of bed, her good foot steps directly onto the drone. She screams. Eyes

screeches. Sarah falls back on the bed, right on top of Eyes, who yelps, leaps up, and scampers out of the room.

Jeremy must've heard the commotion; he runs into the house, down the hall, and into Sarah's room, Eyes following his every step. Sarah's sitting on the bed, holding a pillow to her face, weeping into it.

"Sar, oh Sar!" He glances down at the drone, kneels next to the bed, and gently puts his arms around her. "What's wrong?"

"That—that on the floor!"

Jeremy picks it up and examines it, turning it over in his hands.

"Where did this come from?"

"That's the bird I told you about that no one believes I saw. See, it's real. And there was one when Adam got shot. It's some kind of drone. Is it alive? Can you tell if it's active? Is it watching me—us?" she asks.

"No, it looks like it's dead. But how did it get inside the house?"

Sarah looks over Jeremy's shoulder at the bird and then at Eyes, who's back on her bed. "It has to be Eyes! By the tree, he was the one who took a flying leap and fell to the ground with it. It startled me so abruptly that the gun went off."

"Ah, what a good kitty. He was bringing it to you as his prize."

"He's the prize." She picks up the cat and hugs him.

"Can I take this apart in Dad's shop?" Jeremy asks as he inspects the drone closer.

"Yeah, go ahead. I don't want it anywhere near me."

"Thanks. Hey, you slept in. How do you feel?" He pushes a strand of hair out of her face.

"Much, much better. I needed the rest. But I stink; I can't remember when I last showered. Is it alright with you if I take a shower here?"

"Please do. And afterward, do you want to go to your condo and pick up some of your stuff?"

"I'm not up for that, but maybe you could go for me? I'm not ready to relive the memory—or leave the house, for that matter," Sarah explains.

"Sure. Sounds like a plan."

With not much excitement to watch on the monitors, I check our drone cameras on my laptop. All are working well, as are the trail cameras. It's cool to watch the wildlife across the land, especially the assortment of fowl. I play with the zoom feature on one of the drones and spot several cottontail rabbits by the Black Pond. During dinner, I mention them to Dad and Ben.

Since we eat our main meal so early, there are a few hours left of sunlight until it gets dark. Ben decides we men should go hunting. In Idaho, like most states, there are plenty of rules about what one can shoot and when, even on your own property. Although I don't like taking the life of any living being, I get the need for survival of the fittest when it involves eating to stay alive. We aren't at that point yet, but it's smart to always have enough food on hand.

Half an hour later, we three are on our horses, heading out to the Black Pond. Having only been there once before, I appreciate the dense forest of trees found in the mountainous area. Before we get to the pond, Ben leads us to the

base of the western side of a mountain. We all comment that there's no strange fog in the air.

"This is good," he says. "The overgrowth has hidden the shipping containers well."

"I can't see them," I say. "Where are they?"

"Unnoticeable, Hack. See that natural path there?" he points to our right. "I had the Crosby brothers bring in their big trucks and unload them here over seven years ago, then I dug out the side of the mountain there." He's still pointing. "And set the four forty-foot containers against it and buried half of each one. If you look carefully, you can see their tops and corners sticking out. The brush around them is filling in nicely."

"Can we go inside?" I ask.

"Next time," Dad answers. "The sun will set in less than two hours; I'd prefer hunting, since it's usually the time the rabbits feed. If we can bag a couple of them, Karen can make us her delicious stew."

I sense Ben's disappointment in not being able to show me the containers as we make a ninety-degree turn and head toward the Black Pond.

Using my grandfather's Remington 870 shotgun, I lie in the damp wild grasses that tickle my nose, thankful that I have no allergies to them like Mom does. Maybe she's sensitive to pollen because she weighs only a hundred pounds. I wonder if that could be true; I should research that online. Ben and Dad are prone on each side of me. Dad keeps telling his brother to shut up and stop telling me what to do.

Ben whispers instead. "I spread some of the weeds I pulled from Grammy's garden, such as dandelion and clover,

near a few of the rabbit holes I spotted. Plus, I added a little of her fresh mint and cilantro."

Dad reminds me of the gun's recoil when two cottontails pop out of their holes and approach the fresh leaves. Ben tells me to breathe in and breathe out, aim, and shoot. This time, I don't think about shooting people or animals. I think only to focus on the goal. When I pull the trigger, the kick of the gun is like a punch in my shoulder.

Dad quietly says, "Missed. Try again."

Ben shoots as I get back into position. He hits his mark, one down.

"Be patient," Ben barely speaks. "I think the cilantro is to rabbits like catnip is to cats. It always works."

Again, I line up my shot, eyeing the burrow closest in range. As I wait, I think about Eyes attacking the bird drone. Was it the cat's way of protecting Sarah, or did he think it was a real bird, and he was on the hunt to kill it?

The two ears peep out of the hole.

"Hold. Wait," Dad says quietly. Then, when the bunny's head shows, he says, "One, two, three—*now!*

I shoot, and again the gun recoils, jamming me in the same spot on my shoulder.

"Great, you did it, Hack! You bagged your first rabbit!" Ben's happier than I am. I consider my action population control instead of premeditated murder.

Dad and Ben get up and put both bodies in a canvas bag, while I stay far enough behind them to not see any dripping blood.

As we ride back to our homes, the brothers are singing, "Have a Feast Here Tonight," a bluegrass song my grandpa sang whenever they bagged an animal.

I can't watch Ben skin and prepare the animals in an add-on room in the cattle barn, so he asks if I will check on Midnight and his mom instead. The bull calf looks quite content. Ben tells me they'll stay in the pen for at least two weeks until they can be put with the others.

When we meet for our meal, Ben gives a nice-sized bag of meat to my mom to put in the slow cooker for tomorrow's dinner.

That evening when Scooter and I are settled in and I have an ice pack on my sore right shoulder, thanks to the gun's recoil, the monitors show little excitement.

Wayne's asleep, this time by himself.

Sarah's seated at Jeremy's dining room table with her three friends.

"Thanks for the invite for dinner tonight, Jeremy," Zoey says as she passes him the salad. "Work's a headache, and this is the perfect way to forget my troubles."

"You're welcome, Zo. What made work hard today? The banking industry has to be easier now that everything's going digital and the banks are opened again."

"Yeah," she says, "I'll be glad when the ten percent bonus for turning in all cash and coins into digital ends this week—what a hassle it's been. Now the problem's a company called OWL."

My ears perk up. That company, again! Like, they're everywhere you turn!

Zoey continues, "They're now the thirteenth official member of the FOMC, which is the Federal Open Market Committee of the Federal Reserve System. The FOMC handles interest rates, which affect many facets of the banking system. Then the OCC and the FDIC, which handle insurance of non-federal- or non-state-chartered banks not in the Federal Reserve, have OWL on their platform. So all that I just explained means new rules and policies are being put into place once again, because it's all under the umbrella of the Bank of International Settlements. Typical corporations, they drive me crazy. Yet, I'm sure down the road it'll be for the better of anyone who has money. Other countries have already switched to OWL's centralized authority to limit or get rid of cash, so America's following suit."

After serving himself more spaghetti and meatballs, Amir changes the topic. "Sarah, you look great tonight. How do you feel?"

"Better. Getting there."

"Good to hear. Did you do anything interesting today?" he asks as he pours himself more red wine.

"Taking a shower was wonderful. And, yes, I was careful not to get my head, arm, or leg wet. I can't wait to heal and wash normally. How much longer do I need to wear my cast?"

"Let's see, it's only been a month, so at minimum two more weeks, depending on how fast you're healing. But I don't think you're ready to go back to work."

"I don't want to yet," Sarah agrees. "Maybe when the cast comes off. I still feel vulnerable. My emotions are all over the place. Yet, I feel more at peace in some ways. I can't explain it."

"That's wise. And with Jeremy here, I'm sure you're healing quickly in both your body and mind."

Jeremy speaks up. "She's doing much better. I left her alone for several hours today and went over to her condo to pick up some more things she wanted, including those coins she told you about, Zoey. Sarah's cop friend was leaving an envelope at her front door, so it was perfect timing. We chatted a little; he said he was returning a couple of things. I told him she needed to get away for a few days. He said the case is almost closed, so that's a plus. I brought over her laptop, but she has no way to access it since we don't have a connection out here."

"You're kidding," interjects Zoey, "There's no internet in this house?"

"As I told you before, Zo, Dad was old school. He had a computer, alright, but it's the size of a small fridge and uses floppies only." Jeremy laughs as he adds another serving of salad to his plate.

Sarah gets up and leaves the room. When she returns, she's balancing a manila envelope and laptop against her bad arm. She clumsily drops them on the table and opens the envelope. The laptop almost knocks over a glass of wine, but Zoey saves it and moves Sarah's plate aside to make more room. Sarah pulls out two clear police evidence bags from the envelope; it looks like a note is in one bag and James's flash drive is in the other.

"I don't care about having online access," Sarah declares. "I only want to know what's on this flash drive." She passes the item to Zoey, who inspects it.

Jeremy asks, "What's the note say?"

"I'll read it," answers Sarah as she unfolds the small piece of paper that has blood spots on it. "'Sarah, I'm sorry we disagree, but I have to give this flash drive back to you. It'll be the most

important thing you'll ever use, besides the Bible. Love, James.'" Sarah's eyes are tearing up as she whispers, "I hope so, I do."

Zoey redirects the sad memory that Sarah's reliving. "Simple. Just plug it into your laptop and open the file."

"I tried that," Sarah says. "But look at the metal part on the flash drive. It's bent, so it can't fit in the laptop's port."

"I know what to do," Zoey says. "Since the drive says 'Rapture Kit' on it, let's go online and see if we can download from there. I'll use my USB cable plugged into my phone and her laptop in one port and the drive in another. Then I go online using my connection to satellites and download everything into files. I do that often, especially when I have to go to different branch locations."

Zoey gets up, retrieves her oversized purse from the kitchen, and returns. She roams through several pockets in the bag, pulls out a USB cable, and connects it to the laptop.

I'm baffled. Lately, Sarah seems to be deathly afraid of touching any online electronics, yet she emphatically wants to read the contents of this drive. Why? Her tenacity makes no sense. Are the antidepressants the reason she's accepting reality better? What's made her more introspective? Is the removal of the implant the key to her questioning so many things?

To top it off, she says to Jeremy, "You need to show them what Eyes found today."

I thought she wanted to keep the whole Numen thing between just Jeremy and her.

"Hmm, that piques my interest, Jer," says Zoey as she pushes her unfinished food away and moves the laptop closer. She sets up her smartphone to connect with the laptop, links to the in-

ternet, and searches for 'Rapture Kit,' saying, "Here's a KeychainRaptureKit.com *that offers a free flash drive." She opens the site, adding, "But what if the person or people who run this website have disappeared? How will you get your free copy?"*

Meanwhile, Jeremy discusses Eyes dragging the drone into the house and reports that he took it apart in his father's shop. He mentions that its technology and camera are extraordinary; the bird's feathers feel and look real, but up close, they're made of plastic.

Amir's confused. "Where did this come from? Who's in control of it? And who's it watching? Her? Us? Why?"

Zoey says, "Got it—found it under 'RaptureKit.com.' *There's a lot of information here, Sarah. I'll download the files directly into a folder on your laptop. Here, which files do you want me to save?" She uses the USB port and opens the site's directory folder.*

After leaning over the laptop and reading the contents, Sarah says, "I don't need the documents in other languages, but how about everything else? Thanks so much, Zo."

While Zoey starts the transfers, Sarah explains what Numen is, the implant and what it does or did, and how well-paid she was for allowing access to her brain. She tells them everything, including her conversations with D and how she was instructed to shoot James.

Zoey looks up from the screen. "Now I understand the concern about Sarah's phone tracking her via the implant. Yikes, unbelievable, but the technology is fascinating."

Frankly, I'm concerned that Sarah told them all this. If Numen knows she's talking about them right now, they can't be happy with her. Will they react and retaliate for her

spilling the beans? What ramifications will there be in the future?

An hour later, Zoey announces, "Whew, done! Those are too many files, Sar. But now you can read them without being online. I think you're barking up the wrong tree about this religious stuff, though. I mean, come on, one of the documents is about refusing to take something called the 'Mark of the Beast.' Say what? Next, you'll say everything relates to the number 666. Yeah, be careful what you get involved in, or you'll be talking like your Aunt Amy if you take this seriously."

Without a retort, Sarah hugs her with her good arm and thanks her for what she's done.

"I know it's getting late, but I do have one more minor request," Sarah says. "Is there any way I can use your phone to call my parents and sister?"

"Of course, honey, here, go call—and give them my love." Zoey hands over her phone and gets up. "And I'll do the dishes this time."

Sarah takes the phone and tells everyone she'll be back in a few minutes as Eyes follows her down the hall. During the interim, Jeremy and Amir clear the table and walk over to the shop, but no visual can be seen because it has a metal roof.

"Mom! It's so good to hear your voice. How are you? How is Dad?" I hear Sarah say.

Pause—I can't hear any responses since Eye's audio isn't close enough to Zoey's phone.

"No, is he getting worse?"

Long pause.

"My, oh my. I'm sorry. What about taking Dad to a hospital?"

Pause.

"I see. That's sad. If he comes to, can you tell him I love and miss him?" She's crying.

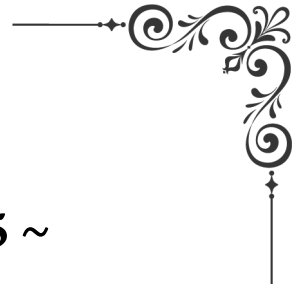
I can hear the heartbreak in her voice. Her father must have been awfully sick since he got stabbed by those thugs in Oregon.

Sarah tells her mom she's doing better, and her wounds are healing, but there's no mention of James being shot. Surprisingly, she says reading the Bible has helped her get through her dark moments.

I wonder if Zoey told her mom about either shooting.

She asks how her sister, Silvia, and her husband are doing. It sounds like they're trying to shut down his Florida construction company and somehow get to Iowa, where a close cousin lives on acreage. Since it's getting late, she asks her mom to tell her sister she's thinking of her.

After I let Scooter out to pee for the night, I turn off the monitors and crawl into bed early. I'm glad the week's finally over, as it's been rather trying. Upon reflecting, I realize it included witnessing both a birth and a death, which is standard for farm life.



~ Week 5 ~

I've checked on Midnight and his mom several times; he looks like he's already gained weight. When I told Dad what I named him, he told me not to get attached. Pop never allowed the boys to name their animals, because they're grown for meat purposes only. Yet, Ben had insisted that I name the calf, maybe to make me feel more like a part of the ranch.

When I'm in the barn one early morning observing Midnight, Ben asks—no, nags—me again to milk the Johnstons' cow that's in her pen. I usually make a lame excuse, but there's something I find so interesting about this whole milking thing that I finally agree to do it.

Ben explains endlessly all the instructions before I'm allowed in the pen. He stands over me as I perform the steps of cleaning and massaging the udder, putting a bucket underneath her teats, getting comfortable on the stool, and using my thumb and forefinger to pull down without knuckling or bending the thumb against the teat.

Voila! We have milk!

I repeat the process until all four quarters of the udder are empty. When we check the bucket, Ben declares I've got over one and a half gallons, and that I win for getting the

most milk in one sitting. Impressed with my novice talent, he has me milk the goat and then adds the task to my morning chores, stating he'll milk them in the evenings. Great. One more farm chore, but for some reason, I don't mind the rhythm involved and consistent motion.

After breakfast, where Ben praises my milking skills, I return to my room to check the monitors, drones, and trail cameras. Everything on our property looks fine; I wish I could figure out a way to tap into the Starlink satellites, though, and get us off their grid.

Sarah's on the patio reclining on a chaise lounge, her laptop open on her lap; Eyes is lying across her legs with his back resting against the warmth of the electronic device. A closed Bible and a cup of coffee are on a nearby wrought-iron table.

Wearing a pair of cutoffs and flip-flops, Jeremy is shirtless as he pulls weeds between rows of cages of almost-ripe cherry tomatoes.

I'm glad to see the video is clear and not infrared, but how did Jeremy talk her into going outside?

"Isn't it nice out here, Sar? I'm so glad you ventured out. Amir said you shouldn't be holed up inside; you need your Vitamin D. And it's a perfect day out."

She sarcastically says, "Sure, if you don't mind a satellite spying down on us or a fake bird nearby watching us. I don't see any of them right now, but they could be hiding anywhere. Or maybe they're now made to look like squirrels or rats. I'll never trust Numen again."

"Well, Amir and I took apart that drone," he says. "It's as dead as dead can be. I haven't seen any critters staring at us with an evil eye, unless you want to say that butterfly right there is one." He nods at one fluttering by a tomato plant. "Or maybe even Eyes has one. Ever thought of that?"

Sarah strokes the cat and says, "No, he'd never betray me. He saved my life and proved it by attacking that bird drone."

I want to scream. If Sarah only knew Eyes has an audio tracker, and I'm watching her right now. Granted, I no longer know what she's thinking—neither does Numen. I feel guilty not being able to tell her. How would I without D knowing?

"I can't believe you got involved in this Numen mess," Jeremy comments as he sets a weed-filled bucket on the patio's bricks arranged in a herringbone pattern.

"Since I no longer have the implant, and one of their birds isn't in play, I'm starting to think I'm no longer on their radar," she says. "I have nothing to offer them, nothing.

"Jer, you know me. I do things my way. I'm getting my control back, but in a new way, and I'm a fighter. Numen won't beat me at this game."

As Jeremy checks the herbs in pots that line one edge of the patio, Sarah redirects. "Listen to this: I've been reading your mom's Bible, beginning at page one in Genesis as James did. I'm already into the middle of Exodus; I learned about the twelve tribes of the Jews. Remember how Amir says he's from the tribe of Judah? That tribe's mentioned, along with stories about Abraham and his wives, Isaac and his wives, Jacob—who's later named Israel—and his wives and dozen sons. Then Moses and what happened in Egypt with them fleeing in-

to the desert. It's rather fascinating how it's all tied together. You should read it."

"I'll pass, Sarah. I don't have time to read; I'd rather work on our little compound."

Sarah pushes again, "Together we can watch some of the videos Zoey downloaded from that Rapture Kit website. I viewed one that was only fifteen minutes long; it's a short docu-drama explaining exactly what happened when everyone disappeared, and why. It's spot-on—almost exactly like what occurred. Right now, I'm going to watch the next video, which is almost an hour long, about the Biblical explanation that God knew about it. There are also a few videos of what to do now that the Rapture has transpired."

"You're telling me the whole missings event was planned? By God, like a long time ago?"

"Yes, that's the gist of what these videos and documents are about, with Bible references backing them up. I remember Aunt Amy saying the end times are described in Revelation, the last book in the Bible. I'm going to read it from beginning to end to understand it better. And all these downloads are going to help me decipher what it all means and what to expect next."

"Okay, if that's how you want to spend your time."

"I do, plus I'm beginning to think I never really listened to anything Aunt Amy—or Denny, for that matter—said when it came to God, Jesus, or the Bible. I mean, I heard stuff from my husband, but I don't think I thought it through, like really, really concentrated on what it meant. I was defensive and snobbish, like an automatic wall came up every time anything God-related was mentioned; I turned it off or shut the two of them down any time the topic was broached. I'm interested now, and

I want to make my own decision, either way. Does that make sense?"

"I guess, but I'm not in the mood for deep thoughts right now," Jeremy answers. "I've got too much on my mind thinking about how to keep this land productive."

"I get that one; it's always something. I'm fine not dealing with my physical life right now. I'm focusing on my spiritual one. And there's no way I want to call up Carl and get back to work. Since you have no internet here, we can go to the bank to transfer some money to you for all your help. Wouldn't that be good?"

Ignoring her last comments, Jeremy says, "Well, it would be the first time you've left the house in over two weeks—so, yes, I think we should go this afternoon."

He adds, "First, I'll go get some tools from the shop to prepare the ground for new plantings. At least that rain we got a couple of weeks ago has greened things up, except where the Palisades Fire burned."

"Oh yeah, I remember that. Is the damage visible from your property?"

"Yes, see up at the edge of that ridge there?" Jeremy points to the top of a low mountain range. "That's where the fire stopped, right at that edge. The helicopters used water nearby at the reservoir right there," he points in another direction, "so they could keep the fire contained. I've never seen such panic in my parents when that fire got so close. So much devastation."

While Jeremy heads to the shop, Sarah watches the video; the screen's situated so that I can't view it from the satellite angle.

Meanwhile, Wayne's boss, the same one who introduced him to Mastema, approaches him as he's leaving work. "Wayne, wait up," he says as the office door in the long, windowless corridor closes behind him.

The younger man stops by the elevator, waiting for his boss to catch up.

"Good news! Mastema was impressed with you and your presence when we were on the stage the other day. He wants you to work directly with him."

"Is there a raise in it for me?" Wayne asks.

"Of course, and we decided you'll still have the Numen implant to help improve Mastema's popularity. However, we'll turn off your personal thoughts so the viewers will only see and hear what you do, not what you think or your inner reactions. This may curb some of the rather—how should I say it?—disturbing sexual desires your brain exhibits. Does that make sense?"

"Here I thought my thoughts were what raised my ratings," Wayne says snidely.

"This is no longer about you, Wayne," the boss states. "It's about Mastema and how the world accepts, trusts, and respects him. You're one of many to help promote the cause of OWL's globality that will produce peace and stability through Mastema."

"Sure, whatever you say. I'll do it. I like the attention, but you've already learned that, based on reading my mind." Sarcasm fills the tone of Wayne's voice.

"True, but we can also remove any implant that isn't helpful to our goal. Remember that, Wayne."

It seems like Wayne enjoys being the center of attention. We'll have to see how it plays out for him, especially if this Mastema becomes well-known. But I must say that I get a funny feeling about this up-and-coming leader. There's something sinister to his steely blue eyes, as if he's plotting something evil.

I head over to the house before dinner to find Mom and Aya on the porch in rocking chairs again; Scooter, who's lying down between them, whacks his tail against the planks of wood several times to greet me.

I ask Mom how she's feeling—if she has a headache. For once, she says, she's not in a lot of pain.

Mom and Aya have open Bibles on their laps. After listening to Sarah's dilemma with the flash drive and its contents, I don't want to bring up religion, but Aya broaches the subject before I can open the front door and go inside.

"We don't get it, Hack. This Bible stuff Grammy believed seems so complicated."

Mom adds, "We know the Bible stories; she told them to us enough to, as they say, 'bring the cows home,' but it seems things are important in it, especially now, yet we can't understand what they mean."

I don't say anything. I could tell them to go online and look up that Rapture Kit to read all those files, but I'm concerned with their responses. Will Mom and my aunt get all pious viewing it, or will they learn something relatable to what's going on in the world?

Aya says, "Karen, we need to find out why our mother-in-law underlined so many things, especially in Revelation. Is it all true or simply allegories? What's your take, Hack?"

"I don't know," is all I can say. Stalling, I change the subject. "When's dinner ready?"

"Almost ready, dear," says Mom as the women get up and we go inside.

The rabbit stew at dinner tastes better than I expected. Mom made delicious rolls that soak up the sauce, which adds nicely to the meal.

When I return to the monitors, *Wayne is still at a bar celebrating his new job position that starts next week, yet it's two in the morning in his time zone. He tells everyone he's working for the new leader of OWL. With all his drinking, he's going to have a major hangover tomorrow. Lucky for him, it's the beginning of the weekend.*

Jeremy and Sarah are in his parents' living room, with Eyes walking back and forth on the sill in front of a large window that overlooks the San Fernando Valley.

"I can't believe it. I just can't, Jeremy. They wiped me out! Everything!" Sarah cries. "I hate Numen! I hate what they've done to me!"

"It's alright, Sar. It'll be okay. You have me."

"No! It's not okay. Not only did Numen erase the half million dollars they said they were going to give me for standing there holding a gun at James, but they also deleted all the payments they made to me, plus all my savings; my checking account is in the negative! My mortgage is messed up—the bal-

ance owed looks doubled. Plus, the student loans, which they promised they'd erase, are reinstated and showing past due. Don't get me started about the two car loans; they doubled somehow. And my credit cards are maxed out, even though, per Zoey's instructions, I paid them off the day the missings happened. I'm bankrupt. I have nothing. I own nothing!"

"You have the coins. They didn't take those. But what they did—that sounds like retaliation," Jeremy says softly.

"I can't live only on those coins, Jer. Numen is evil. Pure evil. And why? Is it because I didn't do exactly what they wanted, or because I told Amir, Zoey, and you about the implant and how it worked?" Sarah gets off the couch and walks to the bay window. "They want to control me...control us. I hate them. I hate them so much! But you know what? They'll never control me again. Ever. If anything, God will control me before they do!"

He asks, "Should we tell Carl? Give him the scoop on Numen and D? Run an article about it? Get the word out, and go national with it? That way you can recoup your losses."

"Absolutely not. It wouldn't do any good. This company may be powerful, but they were recently purchased by OWL, which is a humongous conglomerate with offices all over the world. Now that OWL owns Numen, I can see their AI implant program is going to take over so many aspects of our lives. Also, if I fight back, who knows that they won't come after you, or Amir and Zoey, or Carl, if we went to him? No, I can't—I won't—let them do that!"

"That's wrong," Jeremy says, "and so frustrating. So we can't do anything?"

Sarah firmly answers, "Nothing. We've got to lay low and stay out of Numen's crosshairs."

Out of curiosity, I check Numen's list of implants. Hundreds have been added since last week. CatEyes still isn't listed on the public monitor. Hopefully, those at OWL will forget about Sarah and move on to someone like Wayne, whom they seem to have right where they want him. But I still don't like that Sarah has no clue Numen is shadowing her.

It's after ten o'clock at night, and my phone rings. It's Alyssa, so I answer it on the second ring. "Hey, girl. How's the job going?"

"Love it," she says. "You would, too. You really should move down here and work with me. We'd have so much fun coding."

"What's it like? Are you in a room with a dozen other coders with headsets on and staring at five screens at one time?"

"Ha, funny, Hack. No, it's cool. Everyone is nice. I'm considered an AI Agent II, so at least I have a title. We use light-based or protonic computing, which is amazingly fast, holds an immense ton of info, and never heats up. Quantum is also used for its qubits, superposition, and entanglement features; it's unbelievable what it can do. When Starlink sends up a swarm of drones, the five of us on our floor are responsible for determining their location in low-earth orbit and then setting their cameras to specific grids for mapping. They're clustered together for each area of coverage around the globe. We divide them into quadrants, so each

satellite is responsible for four quarters of a designated circle, with overlapping, of course."

"That's simple?" I ask. "Don't you have to be concerned about duplication of data?"

"Not really, as we block out duplicated quarters. Plus, it doesn't block the coverage, only the viewing."

"Sounds challenging," I say. My brain starts analyzing satellite data and configurations, looking for loopholes. "How do you eliminate the duplication? Coding or simply deleting the similar data?"

"Both ways. Sometimes we have to manually adjust longitude and latitude to erase the extra feed to the satellites," she says.

"Yet it doesn't mess with the access, right? So the electronics work here on earth, but the visual data is blocked in space?"

"Correct. Anyway, it's interesting, and I feel I'm doing something worthwhile."

"I'm glad you're liking it, Alyssa."

"What's the weather up there in Idaho? I mean, do you have extreme temps, or is it cold all the time there?"

"This isn't Alaska," I say. "We have all the seasons, and I'm glad we're in spring right now; everything is greening up."

"Do you get a lot of snow, or is it bitterly cold?"

"Funny you ask. My uncle Ben was saying at dinner tonight that this past winter was one of the mildest he remembers. We moved six months ago, and I've only seen two snowstorms here, and they weren't as bad as some of the blizzards we experienced in DC. My uncle says not to think it's

always going to be like this; it can be frigid cold when the Canadian storms blow down and the temps drop to negative twenty degrees or more. I'm glad it hasn't happened since we've been here."

"Ah, more the reason to move to Texas!" she squeals.

"Hardly, girl. You have hurricanes, something I never want to experience."

"True, and they are getting worse. Plus, we now have earthquakes. I felt a 4.2 two days ago. Building rocks and rolls. Glad it's retrofitted to handle quakes. Guess no place is paradise."

We talk about Midnight and farm life. She tells me about going through her grandmother's things and finding photo albums of when she and her parents visited. I can sense she's a little lonely—maybe she misses her boyfriend, but I don't bring up his name.

"Oh, I just texted you a pic of my uniform since I refuse to wear any of my grandma's clothes. Thankfully, OWL gave us some work clothes—a windbreaker, a hoodie, a couple of button-down dress shirts, polo shirts, and T-shirts. Perfect timing, as now I have clothes since I can't go back and get mine. Do you like the logo?"

The photo arrives, and it's Alyssa wearing one of the dress shirts. She has her black, curly hair pulled back in a ponytail. Her smile's contagious. I admit again: She's hot.

"Nice digs. You look good, too," I say, trying to keep my voice deep without being obvious.

"Thanks," says Alyssa. "The clothes are comfy, too. I wish they made pajamas; I need a pair—guess their T-shirts will do for now."

We laugh as she talks more about the office and its employees. It's such a normal, casual conversation.

"Do you like OWL's new logo? They want feedback on it."

"Well, there's no big-eyed owl on it," I say, "which is what I would expect, but I do like the small bird flying above the three loopy waves. Modern-looking."

"Turn it sideways," she tells me.

"Hmm. Now it looks more like three sixes stacked on top of each other—so 666 with a three to the right of them."

"That's what I thought, too," she says. "I filled out a form saying they should open the loops of the sixes more, so they look like waves, not sixes, and scrap the bird. But what do I know?"

"Yeah, you may be artsy, but I doubt they'll take your creative advice," I tease.

"Thing is, I think OWL is a little over the top," my friend says. "They don't seem as transparent as they keep telling us. Think about it: We don't use cell phone towers anymore because Starlink covers all phones worldwide, thanks to their ever-growing satellites that have given me my job. And, who knows? With all these new mega-facilities they own, they can record or listen in on everyone's phones. To be honest, I've wanted to add hidden coding to my program to have some power—a little cog in their system that's my signature, my artistic creation."

Man, is she telling the truth about OWL listening in on conversations! I hope this one isn't included. Or, more importantly, will this discussion come back and bite us? I question myself: Should I ask Alyssa to help me block the satellite

or satellites covering our property? Should I use our friendship to help me get what I want? Is that right or wrong?

"Is your phone protected right now?" I ask warily. "Mine is."

"Of course, always is. I refused to be shadowed."

"Well, I have a small suggestion that would be easy to do and provide you with some minor sense of control. If you're game..." I pause, allowing her time to respond. I don't want to risk our friendship over this, but it would be pretty simple.

"What have you got up your sleeve? You're the greatest coder and always have the best ideas. Tell me, tell me please, what that analytical mind of yours is processing."

"Okay, but it's up to you to decide if you want to do it. I'm offering a task that requires minimal challenge on your part, yet it'll provide satisfaction to 'beat the system,' as the saying goes."

"Oh, stop with the teasing. This is fun. Tell me what you want me to do, and I'll let you know if I can or want to do it." There's a playful tone to her comment.

"Alright. To cut to the chase, I want to block the satellites from viewing our property," I confess, hoping she takes the bite.

"All of your property? Isn't it hundreds of acres?"

"Well, not every one of the 260 acres, but at least where our houses and buildings are. And the ponds."

"Wait, you're talking plural. You have several houses, buildings, and ponds?" she mocks.

I explain who lives on the land and where, including that I have my own place, which interests her. I talk about the

massive cattle barn, horse barn, and outbuildings that hold the chickens. I describe the three ponds, too, along with the orchard and berry patches. She repeatedly says she wishes she lived with me instead of in her grandma's old, 1,200-square-foot, musky-smelling house.

The now-diverted conversation is about Midnight and how cute she says he must be. She asks if it was gross watching him be delivered, and if milking the cow and goat is weird. The discussion is lighthearted, as if we've been friends for years and are catching up with each other's lives. However, we never mention her abusive ex-boyfriend, Dirk. At times, she has me laughing so much that I snort, and then she mimics it. It's refreshing and engaging. Yet, I still feel bad that she doesn't realize I'm five years younger than her.

Alyssa giggles as she says, "I can see you in overalls and cowboy boots, on your horse, pushing or prodding—or whatever you do—the cattle to get them to eat grass and fatten up, while there's a chunk of chew in your mouth."

I laugh and add without thinking, "Right, and meanwhile, you're watching me constantly spit out tobacco juice via the Starlink satellite."

"Funny, Hack. If you have an Alexa hooked up through an AI-driven Wi-Fi, I could use the DensePose program to map all the digital pixels of your body and see you at your computer right now; it has the capability of seeing through walls. But I get your point. What business is it of OWL's to know what you do on your own farm?"

"Exactly. Remember when I told you I hacked the FBI?" I ask.

"Yeah, but you didn't or couldn't give many details."

"Right, because my dad works for the FBI, and I used his credentials to get into their system." I don't tell her that I was searching for her name, though. She'd stop talking to me if she knew that. "Dad got reprimanded and now has a remote desk job—which was my fault. That's the reason we had to move to Idaho."

"Oh, so it's not your choice to live there? Then come to Texas, please." There's a plea in her voice.

"Or you could come here to the land where the cattle roam, and milk and eggs are as fresh as you can get," I answer, but I bet she'd never do it. She's too much of a city girl.

"Sure, and you and I could code all day long, making sure those animals gain their weight and enough grass grows for them to eat. I think not, but I'd be more than happy to alter—shall we say—a certain satellite that zooms by you sixteen times a day."

"You will? Really? Can you do it without getting caught? The last thing I want is to get you in trouble at your new job."

"Ha, we block areas all day long. If it's not the military bases, it's the rich and famous who pay OWL for the block. Due to the mapping quadrants, I'll make sure one satellite thinks the other satellite is covering the area, but neither will be. It'll be a piece of cake. I'll try to cover the buildings and maybe the ponds, but I'm unsure about the land perimeters."

"Wow, that's great!" I'm more than impressed that she agrees to do this.

"What about your internet?" she asks. "Are you bouncing your location or coding transmissions?"

"We have a satellite dish, so I usually link onto random outside sources when necessary, so I can't be tracked. With my dad working for the FBI, of course, he's got protection online, even if he's using the dish to connect."

"I bet he's protected; you don't want anyone hacking into the FBI," she teases. "Either way, the block will mask your dish, too, so it's invisible from space. That way it appears it's offline if someone happens to check."

"Will the FBI know? Or should I tell my dad everything will be masked?"

"I doubt the FBI would consider checking your location from space. Just tell your old man that he's protected. But please, never tell him how it was done. The last thing I want is for the FBI to contact OWL about me. But then again, maybe it's OWL that really runs the show, even with the FBI."

"I can't thank you enough. My dad and uncle will be elated, because they want the ability to be unknown and untraceable."

"Yes, I understand. This should work, and I don't mind doing it—it's no big deal. You and your large farm are nobodies in OWL's world."

We talk a little longer. I'm thrilled she understands what I want to do and is willing to do it, few questions asked. I almost tell her about Numen, but decide not to, yet.

Before we end the conversation, Alyssa says, "Text me the coordinates, and I'll make it happen when I go back to work on Monday. It may take a few days, but I'll let you know when it's done."

Of course, I send my text seconds later. I'm stoked that this is happening.

The next day, things are different. Dad tells me I have a new responsibility for the day—only one day. I'm in charge of putting the cattle out to pasture. All by myself.

We had a little rain last night, so Ben put all the cattle inside the barn for the night. Ben cares about these animals to the utmost; he always treats them with lots of respect. What's a little rain? Ben has constantly told me he doesn't ever want his animals to get hungry, thirsty, cold, wet, or even muddy. Talk about being pampered.

When I ask Dad why I have to do the task alone, he gives me a blank look and doesn't answer. Remember, this is my first time! What's up with that?

After feeding the herd, milking cow, goat, and sheep, I muck the horse stalls and report to Ben that I'm ready to move the cattle. He's unusually quiet and doesn't speak much. He only tells me not to get near our oldest steer that's separated from the rest in its pen.

I go to the horse barn, put the saddle on Spot, check to make sure my gun is loaded, and lead Spot to the cattle barn.

Dad comes from outside the back of the barn where there are several add-on rooms, Scooter following behind. Dad stops in front of me, rubs Spot between his eyes, and says, "Jack, why don't you have Scooter help you move the cattle? He knows how to do it and will help."

"Okay," I say, baffled that my dad called me "Jack" and that Ben is treating me oddly.

"Be sure to use the call words with him whenever you want him to do something. He's a smart dog." Then he walks back to the add-ons, entering one of the windowless rooms.

I call Scooter to "come" and go to the front of the barns, where the doors are easier to access the pens.

After I tell Scooter to "stay," I open the two large doors. Inside, the cattle have been moved by my dad or Ben—neither is in sight—to the front pens, so they look ready to be released from their shelter. The steer is alone, way back by the separate pens that hold Midnight and his mom, the milking cow, the goat, the sheep, and the pig.

Without me saying a word to Scooter, he walks into the large pen and goes behind the group of cattle. He emits a quiet bark without my command, and the animals start heading toward me. Surprisingly, I don't panic, but guide Spot to the side of the herd, which almost seems confused.

While I mount my horse, the cattle seem unsure of what to do next. Maybe the steer who was left behind was their leader? I don't know if there's a hierarchy in herds.

Scooter comes to my rescue by zigzagging behind the cattle, gently nudging them with his nose against their hind legs to move them forward. Ben had told me they don't like being alone, so they follow in packs, usually with a leader. But if the oldest steer isn't here, I hope another one steps forward.

Thankfully, another one does, and it's like they're children on a school playground ready to go back into the classroom; the bovines systematically line up behind him. One cow hangs back until Scooter prods her along. I wonder if

the steer was her mate, and she's waiting for him to join the group.

Let me explain our pastures. We have four fenced-in ones that make a diamond shape; they're named North, South, West, and East, with the South one closest to the cattle barn and the North the farthest away. A stream meanders through all four pastures, and run-ins with feeding and water troughs are at one corner of each pasture.

Dad has instructed me to move the herd to the North Pasture. The grass is the tallest there; the animals can graze for a week or two, weather permitting. I can't imagine how hundreds of cattle could be rotated in the large pastures, but with less than two dozen, they have plenty of space to eat and roam.

I move Spot ahead of the cattle and lead the group around the right, or east, side of the pastures, as it's the shortest distance to North's gate. Once the animals get into a consistent walk, Spot and I go ahead and undo the gate, which I can do without getting off my horse. As I turn to watch the line of slow-moving bovines make their way up the beaten path to their reward of fresh grass, I hear a gun go off.

Now I understand.

Ben, I'm guessing, must've shot our captive bolt stunner to put down the steer, as I know Dad hates the task. Now it makes sense why I was given this job, and I agree with their decision about my lack of involvement.

After the twenty-two cattle are put to pasture, I shut the gate. I take my time counting them and recounting them. Did they hear the shot? Do they know their leader is no

longer? It's sad but necessary. I understand why Ben caters to them.

I don't know what to do next. Should I go help with the slaughter, go see if the women need any chores done, or hide in my room and try not to think about what happened? I do get it, though. This is a beef ranch and has been for decades—this is, or was, the business of the land. But I still hate the thought of death.

Not wanting to be left alone in my thoughts, I head back to the barn, brush Spot down, and go to the big house. Mom and Aya are in Grammy's garden, preparing the soil to plant starts from the greenhouse. When I ask if they need any help, they seem appreciative and ask me to rototill a section for planting. I'm glad I have something to do with my hands, even if mud splats all over my clothes and shoes.

When Dad and Ben arrive at dinnertime, they seem back to normal. Ben explains that the beef—yeah, he doesn't call it the oldest steer any longer—has to age a few days before butchering. Usually, they have a mobile kill truck come if the bovine is sold to a slaughterhouse. But since the meat is for our consumption, he and Dad plan to cut it themselves. I don't ask if I can help, but I do offer to move the cattle again if need be. Ben says that since the weather has warmed up, the animals can stay in the pasture unattended. Instead, they ask me to monitor their feed and water bins, making sure they're full.

That night I fall asleep early, with Scooter crowding me on my bed. I don't have any time for or interest in being online as I reflect on how a cattle ranch has so many facets.

While we had the birth of one cow, Dad explained, we had the death of another—all to keep the balance.

~ Week 6 ~

So far, this day has been "so-so," as my grandmom would say. Not good, not bad. Just there. Maybe it's due to the loss of the steer that I feel so unemotional and drained. Even the drones and trail cameras have no movement, no wild animals crossing our land or flocks of geese flying overhead.

I do my regular chores mechanically, including milking the cow and goat. Same ol' same ol' routine.

My attitude is banal. Whenever I check the monitors, nothing interesting happens.

Sarah's either asleep, reading the Bible, writing in her notebook, or watching the Rapture Kit videos. Boring. Looks like Jeremy and Eyes are avoiding her.

Wayne must have the day off work. He lets out a big whoop when he sees a large OWL deposit into his online checking account. Later, he gets his hair cut and goes shopping at what looks like a high-end men's clothing store, where the manager helps him select a complete wardrobe of suits, shirts, pants, shoes, and everything else needed for "a professional look." When he hands over his credit card, he doesn't glance at the re-

ceipt, but flaunts the fact that he works for the head of OWL to the staff. I'm sure they're impressed. Not.

My phone never rings or dings. There's no update from Alyssa.

Around noon, Dad contacts me on the walkie-talkie and asks me to come to the cattle barn's add-on room where he and Ben have spent all morning. I dread going, but walk over, hoping they aren't going to ask for my assistance.

When I tap on the door to the room, Dad opens it and asks me to stand back, explaining they don't want to contaminate anything inside. I peer around him and see two halves of the steer hanging by chains from the rafters. Thankfully, no blood is pooled on the floor.

"We have a task for you," he says while I envision the cutting-up process. "Would you be willing to take the backhoe and dig a hole for the carcass and a pile of debris we have? By the East Pasture, away from the pond and stream."

I'm beyond relieved and answer quickly, "Of course, I can do that. I've driven the backhoe once before, and now that I know how to drive a stick better, it should be easier."

Dad says, "Yeah, Ben thinks you're capable of handling it. Just remember—the throttle controls the engine's speed, so be easy on it."

"Yes, sir. I'll be extra careful, and when I'm out by the pastures, I'll check on the cattle's feed and water."

"Great idea. Thanks, Son." As he is closing the door, he says, "And don't dig the hole on a slant or hill. Look for someplace flat so you don't tip over while excavating." He al-

so tells me the keys are in the equipment shed and to be sure to check the backhoe's gas level.

Excited to do a different chore, I get in the vehicle, check all the controls, and carefully exit the building without hitting anything.

As I ride out, I stay clear of the cows hanging around the North Pasture, since they can get easily agitated by loud noises. I stop the backhoe about fifty feet away from their feeding troughs and see they're still full, as is their water.

I slowly move farther east, noticing there's no odd fog like what we saw near the Blue Pond. It's a beautiful day, with temperatures in the mid-seventies.

A spot is selected in the open, where the land is flat. I pace off a ten-by-six-foot area and, with ample practice, use the backhoe's bucket to dig the hole. It takes me at least two hours to prepare the area, making sure the pile of dirt dug doesn't fall back into the hole.

When the task's completed, I spend an hour practicing with my shotgun. I use a plastic drinking cup left in the backhoe's cab for a target by putting it upside down on a mound of dirt. Although I shoot off only a half dozen bullets, I'm content that the last one hit its target. Each time, I try to figure out how best to avoid the kickback into my shoulder. After picking up the cup debris and spent casings, I reload the last four bullets in my pouch into the gun and repack it in its holster.

I drive the vehicle back to the front of the shed and wash off the dirt; I return the clean machine to its spot, satisfied with my accomplishments for the day.

After showering, I meet the family for dinner. Dad thanks me for digging the hole and states that the carcass needs to be buried within the next day or two. "We're almost done cutting and packing the meat," he says. "Thanks, Karen and Aya, for rearranging the large freezers in the garage. I hope there's enough room for it all."

That evening, the news on television reports that many invitation-only presidents and dignitaries from around the world are in Davos, Switzerland, attending the World Economic Forum (WEF) for a special week-long meeting to discuss current events and the improvement of cooperation between the public and private sectors. The segment vaguely comments that OWL's hosting the event and our president will be in attendance, but there's no mention of Mastema.

Of course, with the mention of OWL, I hurry to my room and check the monitors.

"I'm glad you came on such short notice; I hope the lateness isn't an issue," Mastema tells Wayne as they're getting out of a limousine parked in front of the Leonardo da Vinci-Fiumicino Airport.

"Two in the morning isn't that late for me," Wayne replies. "Like you, I'm a night owl." He chuckles at his play on words, but Mastema doesn't respond.

During the drive, Mastema tells Wayne what's expected of him. Twice, he states, "And never speak the words 'Jesus Christ' in my presence. Ever. Understand?"

"Yes, sir, I understand," Wayne replies as he looks at his new boss.

Someone takes Mastema's carry-on and briefcase as the two enter the small, private airport terminal while Wayne carries his bag. Another employee leads them into a private lounge, where Wayne's immediately offered champagne. Several boards of cheeses, meats, olives, and bread slices are neatly displayed on a nearby table. Wayne fills a plate with food and sits down on a dark-red, modern couch to eat while Mastema makes several phone calls.

Only once Wayne overhears Mastema say arrogantly to the person on the phone, "Since I've recently subdued three of the other horns with ease, it's proof enough to show that I'm the one in charge here...and plan to be from this point on."

When Mastema gets off the phone, he walks over to a blank, white wall and faces it. He lifts his hands and starts chanting—like in a foreign language. His body gyrates and quivers.

I can't hear what the man is saying, but it looks as if he's conversing with someone, because there are pauses between his sentences. With his back turned against Wayne, I wish I could see if his face is contorted or not.

At the end of his chant, he raises both hands into the air and touches his thumbs and first fingers together, making a triangle. Then he shouts a strange phrase, which breaks his concentration.

Five minutes later, he and Wayne walk across the tarmac with three assistants and two airport staff members to an awaiting jet that has the OWL logo boldly printed on its tail.

When they're halfway to the plane, two drones appear from behind a hangar and zoom toward the group. All black with two green lights, each unit hovers above the seven people.

Without any pause, the sound of gunshots is heard. Bullets are rapidly fired from the armed drones, aiming for Mastema.

"Get down!" one of the assistants screams as Wayne drops to the asphalt and covers his head.

Mastema doesn't budge—doesn't move an inch. Stands there. He looks at each weaponized drone as it fires, points to one, and calmly says, "Stop." He then points to the other and repeats the directive. It's as if an electric charge shoots out of his finger with each command.

And, just like that, the devices clatter to the ground mere feet away from the group.

It's unbelievable. Incredible. I can't believe what just happened. This man, this man with some kind of magical powers, stopped two drones from killing him! Maybe he's transhuman; that's the only way I can figure out to explain how he does it. Normal humans don't seem to have electrical currents spew out of their fingers.

"Everyone can get up now," says Mastema calmly. "Crisis averted. It looks like no one was injured."

They all slowly stand, bewildered, as they pat their bodies, feeling for any blood or bullet holes.

Mastema says to the two airport employees, "Please get rid of the debris, and sorry about the inconvenience. The pilot is already on board, so we can now take off. I don't want the flight to be further delayed."

As if nothing happened, Mastema quickly walks ahead of Wayne, climbs up the plane's stairs, and enters the cabin. Wayne sheepishly follows, mumbling that it's going to take more than champagne to lower his blood pressure.

Whenever I glance at Sarah's screen, she's reading the Bible, whether she's in the living room or her bedroom. When she writes in her notebook, the camera zooms in, but it can't decipher any of the words. Jeremy must be somewhere else, since his beat-up Suburban is not on the driveway.

My phone dings. Finally.

There's a text message: *Done. "Things are not always what they seem; the first appearance deceives many; the intelligence of a few perceives what has been carefully hidden." ~ Phaedrus.*

I laugh and reply with a happy-face emoji. Alyssa must love philosophy to be able to come up with that appropriate quote.

When I call her, she's giddy, "That was a blast! And incredibly easy. You're officially hidden from OWL and the world!"

"Thank you, Alyssa. I bow down to your coding ability to do this for my family and me. Do you think anyone will notice?"

"Hardly," she says. "Not with the thousands of satellites above us monitoring our phones or counting how many people are in our bedrooms at the same time. Serves them right to be so obtrusive. My way of conquering a tiny part of my world."

I thank her over and over again, but she stops my praise with a warning: "Be sure to keep your phone bouncing off other locations. Remember, everything is traceable. I know you know, but does everyone else in your family? While on your property, no phones should be recordable, but if you're

away from the covered zone, one could be tapped into. If you want further protection, I suggest only communicating from landline to landline. Analog, not VoIP, but so few own or use them these days."

I tell her I'll keep it in mind. We do still have the old phone in the office at the big house that I could use in an emergency.

"Then there's Origin AI," she says. "That stuff scares me. The ISP transforms smart devices in your house into advanced virtual sensors that can localize motion with over ninety percent accuracy. Meaning, by using radio biometrics, it can spot someone moving around in a room; it recognizes a person's gait and their breathing patterns if awake or asleep, and it can pick up sounds without a microphone."

"Yikes," I say. "I'll look more into that one, too. I'm glad we don't have Alexa. Thanks."

For the next hour, we talk more about OWL, the satellites, and her coworkers. When I tell her about the steer and his demise, along with my backhoe adventure digging his grave, she seems sickened, but interested at the same time.

The next day, Dad and Ben are back at work in the addon, so I don't have a chance to talk to them. I check on the cattle, which seem quite content roaming around in the grass or lying down in the shade under the trees. The one cow, which I guess was the dead steer's mate, still doesn't hang around her cow pals, but stands away from them, by the electronic fencing. Does she miss him? Does she sense she'll never see him again?

Later in my room, *I see that Sarah is back on the patio lounge reading her Bible, with Eyes in a ball at her feet. She occasionally stops and jots down something in her nearby notebook, but it's as if she is hiding what she's writing so no one can read it.*

When Jeremy approaches, she says, "I can't wait until Amir gets here and takes this stupid cast off my leg. I've had it not being able to scratch an itch." She groans as she sticks her finger into the space between the top of the cast and her upper thigh, attempting to relieve her discomfort.

Hate to disturb you or bring this up," Jeremy says, "but I found this at the base of the treehouse." He holds Sarah's gun with his pointer finger looped around the trigger guard, its barrel facing downward.

"I figured it would turn up at some point," she comments without any emotion, until she adds, "You have to believe me that it was an accident. I was so stunned when Eyes attacked that bird that I didn't know I had somehow pulled the trigger. When I heard something like an inner voice, that was my pivotal moment. Jeremy, you may think I've gone nuts when I say this, but it was like Jesus telling me He loved me. And that's what I'm trying to figure out now. Was it Him, or am I going crazy? It was incredibly real."

Jeremy doesn't respond to her question, but wipes off the dirt on the gun with his T-shirt and checks the empty chamber, asking instead, "What should I do with it?"

"Um," Sarah says, "I forgot about it. Maybe for the better. Why don't you keep it? I never want to touch a gun again."

"Alright, I will," he replies. "I'll have to pick up some bullets for it."

"Ask Amir," she says. "Maybe he has some, or knows where to get them. Don't ask my neighbor—remember, Adam's the one who gave it to me."

"I can't do that because he's in jail waiting for his murder trial."

There's movement in the house. Amir's voice is heard calling their names. "Hey, today's the day, Sarah!" He greets them at the sliding screen door.

Sarah says, "Yes, I can't wait to have my freedom again."

The two join Amir in the kitchen and start making the area as sterile as possible by putting surgery drapes on the cleared-off dining room table.

"Alright," Amir says, "we need to get you a little comfier. I'm giving you a Vicodin to take the edge off the pain." He pulls out a pair of forceps, knives, a syringe, alcohol swabs, and other supplies from his medical bag.

He insists Eyes is removed from being with Sarah to keep the area uncontaminated before she sits on the table where the lighting is better. Eyes stays on the patio right next to the screen door, mewing to protest being put outside.

It takes about half an hour for Amir to find the right serrated kitchen knives, with plenty of complaints that he wishes he had a medical saw. He and Jeremy carefully chip sections off of the leg cast, making sure not to break through to Sarah's skin. When the bracing is completely removed, Sarah's disappointed to see how flaky and dry her skin is; Amir says moisturizer cream will do the trick. He also takes off her arm/wrist immobilizer.

Sarah starts crying when she sees the pins sticking out of her hand and foot, but Amir calms her down and explains the up-

coming procedure. He swabs the areas and injects lidocaine as a local anesthetic. Meticulously, he uses the forceps to remove the pins. Since three of the pins in the foot are in a row, he cuts into the skin to access and discard the pins; when done, he adds three stitches to close the wound.

As he finishes bandaging Sarah's hand and foot, he says, "Now you're as good as new. Let's see if you can walk. Go slow and don't overdo it."

At first, Sarah apprehensively takes a few steps, but she shows immense pleasure that she can walk again, even if there's a little limp. She flexes her hand, commenting on how stiff it feels. Overall, she's quite pleased with her recovery.

When they're cleaning up and Eyes is let back into the house, Zoey knocks on the front door and enters, declaring, "I've brought dinner, gang! I know it's early, but we're having Mexican tonight." She holds up two large bags. "I got off work early, so I figured you were here giving Sarah medical attention and brought support...food."

I look at my phone, and it's a quarter after four—I realize that I'll be late for dinner. I jog across the yard to the big house and run up the stairs of the porch. When I enter the great room, the adults are at the table, already passing around plates and dishes.

"Sorry I'm late," I apologize. "I got tied up online."

"I tried contacting you on the walkie-talkie," Mom says. "You mustn't have heard it."

I don't remember hearing it. Instead, I answer, "No, maybe you called when I was using the bathroom." I hate ly-

ing, but I don't recall where it is. Dad would go ballistic if I lost it.

Dad scolds me as he passes me a dish of scalloped potatoes. "We must always have communication. Next time, take it in the room, even when showering. It's the least you can do to honor our wishes."

I don't know why he's so bent out of shape, but I say, "Yes, sir." I hope it's the end of the conversation.

Ben saves the day by changing the subject. "These are coulotte steaks, the best part of the animal," he says as he hands me a platter of perfectly grilled meat. "Most people don't ever taste them. Usually, butchers keep them to themselves. We ranchers know the good cuts."

"Yeah, and the way you cook them, Brother, is the best," praises Dad.

Ben says, "I talked to the Choates this afternoon. We're going to swap half a side of beef with him for more staples, and we'll keep the rest. Aya or Karen, do you want us to get anything special for you from them?"

"We'll give you a list and maybe you can find a few things for us," Aya says. "When are you going to see them?"

"Brent and I are planning to do it tomorrow morning, then bury the carcass in the afternoon," Ben replies.

"Hack, you'll be staying back and taking care of the ranch. I expect you to check on the animals, making sure all are fed." I can tell Dad's still miffed at me over the walkie-talkie—as if he's punishing me for missing Mom's call.

"I have great news," I report, hoping to regain his respect. "I found the way to block the satellites. The quadrant on the one that tracks us has been hidden." I don't want to tell him

that it was all Alyssa's doing. "That's why I was late," I add. Even though it's not true, it may give me grace among the adults.

"Good," Dad says. "One less thing to think about. The world's going haywire. I hope it doesn't get worse."

After dinner, I skip watching the news and return to my room to search for the communication device. It's nowhere in my outbuilding. And, yes, to make sure, I check the bathroom, too.

I start to panic, retracing my steps in my mind. I don't remember using it at all today or yesterday. I doubt I had it on me when I went to the pasture to check on the cows. I sneak out to look, but it's nowhere to be found.

Discouraged as I walk home, I stop by the equipment shed and rummage through the cab of the backhoe. I find the walkie-talkie in the cup holder that Ben had added last month. I'm glad no one had to get a hold of me the last two days and thankful I won't have to deal with Dad's wrath.

When Scooter and I settle down that evening, Wayne's feed has a note on his screen:

"Due to sensitive information based on WaynesWorld's location, he will be offline for a few days. We apologize for any inconvenience and offer each of his three hundred thousand followers a free month of service plus access to one other implanted participant during the interim. We at OWL strive to keep you as our loyal viewer and appreciate any feedback on how to improve our AI service."

I check the public site and, still, CatEyes isn't listed.

When I look at Numen's private page, Jeremy, Sarah, Amir, and Zoey, along with Eyes, are in the living room.

Zoey says, "Work's been interesting. The entire banking industry is changing. It's going global; it'll eventually be one currency for all. I think it's a good idea for everyone to turn their cash into digital. Now it's easy to merge the dollar with all other countries' currencies."

"I wouldn't know," Sarah says negatively. "Numen washed me clean of everything I own." She tells them about her bank accounts.

"It'll all work out, Sar," replies Amir. "It's probably a temporary glitch due to the digital switch. Wait and see."

Zoey pipes in. "OWL may be behind it; they control everything in our industry. I was involved with two HoloBots today where they ran the meetings."

Jeremy asks, "What's a HoloBot?"

Meanwhile, I search online for HoloBot. Another OWL creation. This one has a free beta app to test for anyone interested. Hard pass.

"It's super cool. It's like the people are three-dimensional and in the same room you're in. So, you think and feel like they're right there in front of you," she replies.

"Oh, I know about those," interrupts Sarah, as Eyes jumps up on her lap. "Denny and his co-worker Mark played a trick on me a couple of months ago. They called it a 'multiverse hologram system' that was on display at the Consumer Electronics Show. When I walked into Denny's upstairs office at our condo, it looked like Mark was sitting in one of the chairs. When I went over to hug him, he disintegrated right in my arms. So freaky and weird. I didn't like it."

"Yes, that's what a HoloBot is," Zoey says. "And it's so interesting. OWL had me download the app that only needs a built-in camera to work. I say we try it now." She leaves the room. As she walks back into the room carrying her open laptop, she's syncing it with her cell phone.

"I'll set it up on the bay window and have the screen's camera facing that armchair across the room. Instead of the camera taking a video of you, it reverses internally through its program and projects the image out of the laptop. It's so progressive. You three stay on the sofa, and I'll sit in the other chair."

Sarah says, "Don't you think this is creepy, guys? I mean, who are we going to talk to, and why?"

Zoey replies, "Well, one of the OWL attendees told me to type in the name of someone dead or one of the missings."

"I don't want to do a dead person," Jeremy bluntly remarks.

I wonder if he's thinking of his parents—his dad who committed suicide after watching his spouse disappear. No, I wouldn't feel comfortable talking to Pop or Grammy, either. This is trash. I try to see how the app works on Zoey's laptop, but the screen's facing the wrong direction.

"I know," squeals Zoey. "We'll do Dennis! Sarah, wouldn't you love to ask him what happened?"

Without giving Sarah any time to respond, Zoey types on her keyboard, and a 3D vision appears sitting in the chair. And, based on the bodily reactions of the four in attendance, it looks like Sarah's husband.

To me, the infrared body is not as bright as the others—more like tiny particles outlining a skeleton. Strange, to say the least.

"No, this isn't real. It's fake!" Sarah screams.

Zoey says, "Oh chill, Sarah. Let's see what he has to say."

The Denny, or the 3D aberration, is in a relaxed position as he—or it—answers in a voice his wife recognizes. "Oh, Sarah, I've missed you! It's so good to see you again, my love. And Jeremy and Zoey, good to see you, too. But I've never been introduced to this gentleman." It points to Amir.

Amir gets off the sofa and walks over to the image. He tries to shake its hand, but an airless grasp is the outcome. "Wow," he says. "It's unreal and so lifelike. But nothing's there. Some kind of light particles are arranged and displayed in real time. How's it done?"

"Yes, Amir. Nice to meet you," the Denny responds. "You're the doctor who helped my Sarah at the hospital after she fell downstairs. Thank you for taking such excellent care of her, especially for removing the cast and those nasty pins in her leg and hand today." It says to all four, "I'm sorry I couldn't be here in reality, but this AI program's sufficient."

Amir's shaking his head, confused about what he sees and hears as he swats the air where the vision's right arm is displayed.

Jeremy can only say, "It's so realistic!"

"Yes, it is," the Denny agrees. "I'm programmed by memories, so ask me anything you wish about the real me, and I'll respond accurately. I'm here to support each of you during the crisis that happened over six weeks ago."

Sarah immediately asks, "Where were we married? Where did your wedding band go—you're not wearing it? Why did you leave me? And, most importantly, do you believe in God?"

"Sarah, my love. It was such a memorable wedding overlooking the Pacific Ocean, where you were stunning in that lovely long white dress. And barefoot, too. Simply charming."

She covers her mouth when the Denny says, "You found my ring under the green wingback chair in my office and put it in the dish on my bedroom dresser. But I don't understand why you considered taking my anxiety meds to kill yourself. I'm glad you didn't. I love you; I'll always love you, and I'll always take care of you. And, as far as God, well, we can all become gods in diverse ways; that's the best way to explain it."

Sarah's now crying, as she constantly wipes her eyes. Jeremy wraps his arm around her and holds her close.

The Denny says, "Jeremy, I wondered if you've had a thing for my wife. That's okay now, but please refrain from physical contact with her while I'm here in the room."

Jeremy quickly releases Sarah and glares at the AI image, asking, "Tell me, if you're really Denny, where did you disappear to, and why?"

"I expected one of you to ask that," the image replies as it adjusts the collar of its shirt. "It was all preplanned. I and everyone who were 'missing,' including the babies and children, were removed so the world could become better. Our loved ones were taken so we could save the future of the world."

Eyes jumps off Sarah's lap, goes to the windowsill, and walks along it back and forth. When his tail flips across the Denny, the image goes in and out.

The 3D continues, "And now that this inventive HoloBot program's available, anyone can download the app and communicate with a loved one who disappeared. Watch and see what OWL does to make each of your lives better."

"What a great idea," Zoey says. "Many will save time and money instead of visiting therapists."

The Denny turns in its chair and replies, "Zoey, remember when you told Sarah you were untaken?"

Wait. Denny hadn't been in the room when Sarah found his ring or considered ODing on meds, or when Zoey told Sarah she was confused about the missings, so how does Numen's AI program know that? Or has all the memory it's compiled been taken from each of the participants' implants? Is that the connection?

Zoey answers, "Yes, and being untaken is the better option."

Sarah stands up and declares, "I can't do this. It's all fake. This OWL system has pirated my memories and is using them in this AI image. Denny and Aunt Amy were taken because of their personal relationship with Jesus Christ! I've been reading the Bible and have learned this is all a set-up," she says as she points to the image. "Christians and all the others were raptured. There's only one true God, and this—this thing—is not my Denny!" She screams at the image, "Go away! I hate you; I hate Numen, and I hate OWL!"

Zoey rushes toward Sarah and grabs her, but Sarah jerks back as if there's pain when her friend grasps each hand. Zoey adjusts her grip on her upper arms and says firmly, "No, you don't understand, my friend. You say the others were taken. Fine. We're the ones untaken. Didn't you hear Denny just say those missing had to disappear so that we could change our world? Being untaken is good."

Without another word, Sarah rushes out of the room. No one speaks. Zoey goes to her laptop and disengages the HoloBot program, and the image fades away.

Minutes later, Jeremy says goodbye to his guests, and they drive away. He cleans some used dishes and tidies up the kitchen. Before he goes to bed a few hours later, he taps on Sarah's bedroom door, but she only says, "Go away." It looks like Eyes has to spend the night in Jeremy's bed.

As I lie in bed, I think about Sarah and what she's been through. Something has changed her thinking; her attitude is changing. She's not as obnoxious and controlling as when I watched her weeks ago when she was first implanted. Yeah, she's different. I wonder if reading the Bible and watching those videos are what's changing her.

Around 10 p.m., one of the trail cameras beeps, showing movement nearby. I get up and check it. There's no animal or bird on the video feed, but the camera itself may have been turned a little, as it's off-kilter. Perhaps a squirrel or small rodent climbed the tree and tipped it to the side.

Almost two hours later, my laptop dings. It reports that one of the drones isn't working. I look at the feed. It may have had some kind of glitch. It may be a battery problem; I can see that the camera still works, but the drone's lying sideways on the ground, showing dirt and blades of grass. Ah, I'll have to check both the trail camera and drone tomorrow.

~ Week 7 ~

The rooster's timing is getting better, as it's only three minutes between his crowing and my alarm clock going off. Once again, I go through my routine of feeding the animals housed in their pens, milking the cow and goat, and cleaning out the horse stalls. I'm thankful I never have to deal with the chickens or gather their poop-covered eggs. That's Aya's problem.

During my chores, I struggle to think about Sarah. I feel guilty that she's all alone; Numen and OWL have taken advantage of her. I can tell she wants to correct things and do what's right, but I've no idea how to help her. I'd love to tell her about Numen's satellite and Eye's audio implant, but how? It troubles me more than I can explain.

After breakfast, Ben backs his pickup into the garage, and Dad and I help him load the wrapped and labeled packages of beef into the truck bed. While we're loading up the meat, I tell Dad and Ben about the trail camera and drone. They aren't too concerned, and neither am I. Before they drive down our gravel road to swap goods with the Choates, Dad tells me to be sure to check the animals in the North Pasture and reminds me to take the walkie-talkie and my gun wherever I go. Ben asks me to move Midnight and his mom

to be with the rest of the cattle and explains how to do it without any issues.

Knowing I don't have to check on the cattle immediately, I head back to my room to view the monitors.

Sarah hasn't left her room, but her bedroom door is open. The camera shows Jeremy at the old barn. Although he's not mucking out what used to hold his mom's horses, he appears to be moving boxes around and cleaning up the stalls and the unused tack room.

I remember what Alyssa said: "If you need to make a call, use the landline." I'm sure there aren't many people who have them nowadays, though—maybe just those over sixty-five who don't want to make the change to a cell phone.

Since I recall a tabletop telephone in Jeremy's parents' room when the drone bird peered in the window, I look up Jeremy's address on Google Maps and apply it to a reverse phone number website.

Determined to do the right thing and help Sarah, I find the number and jot it down on scrap paper, then head back to the big house to make the call, hoping she'll answer.

Mom greets me as she cleans up the kitchen. "Need anything, Jack? What brings you back here?"

"I have to make a quick call."

She's probably surprised. I've never used the phone in the office before, so I add, "It's about the satellite feed."

That must satisfy her curiosity; she leaves the room and goes upstairs to their bedroom.

I enter the office and shut the double-glass doors. After sitting down at the desk, I get the paper out and dial the number.

Please, Sarah, be there and hear the phone. It rings six times before she answers.

I speak immediately: "Sarah, my name is Jack Hackett, and I'm one of Numen's online viewers. I've been watching you since the beginning, including when you fell down the stairs at your condo. I have video proof that you didn't shoot James, too. Please don't say anything. Only say 'yes' or 'no.'"

"Okay," she replies.

I rush to continue, "Numen's still tracking you—"

She interrupts me, "No, tell me no."

"Shh. Don't say anything, especially if Eyes is nearby. He has an audio tracker implant. Just answer something like, 'You must have the wrong number.'"

She follows my command.

I talk quickly. "Yes, you need to have Jeremy or Amir remove it. A magnet may help locate the tiny device. I'm guessing it's by his neck or ears."

"I understand," is her reply.

"Also, satellites are tracking you with infrared cameras. If you can stay under metal or glass roofs, you're untraceable."

"I see. No, no one lives here by that name." I'm relieved she's playing along with me.

"You can call me any day at 5 p.m., but only use an analog landline, because cell phones can be traced." I give her the office phone number and repeat it two more times.

"You need to recheck your number," she says. "I'm sorry I can't help you."

"Great. Hope this helps and take care."

After saying "goodbye," I hang up the phone, thinking it may be the only time we speak directly to each other. I trust she finds some sort of peace, but I know I'll miss watching her.

I run back to my room and open Sarah's feed.

She's still in Jeremy's bedroom, and Eyes is on the bed. I watch her walk down the hall with a limp, open the patio door, and look around. She returns inside and goes back to her room, with Eyes jumping on her bed to sit next to her as she reads her Bible. She keeps her good hand on the cat, petting it slowly.

I hope the satellite doesn't notice she may be feeling the cat to locate the implant.

Knowing I have responsibilities while Dad and Ben are gone, I turn Dad's video camera on both monitors, leave the room, and head to the barn. I saddle Spot and check to make sure I've got the walkie-talkie and my fully-loaded weapon "just in case." Like I'm ever going to use a gun except for practice.

After I put a loose rope around Midnight's mom, I saddle up and lead her to the North Pasture, and, as Ben predicted, the bull calf follows closely behind her. They both adapt to the rest of the herd without any problems being with the other cattle.

As I ride, I reflect on the phone call. If Sarah believes me, and the cat's implant is removed, I'll still be able to view Sarah from the infrared cameras, but CatEyes won't be heard. But what happens to Sarah after that? Will she ever get 100 percent away from Numen?

Now that all our twenty-four bovines are at the same location, I head to the eastern property line, where the trail camera that is somehow tilted is located. When I inspect the unit, it doesn't appear as if there's anything wrong; maybe it got jiggled or the wind jolted it. I take it down, change the batteries, and put it on a nearby tree that's more out in the open.

Spot and I head toward the Blue Pond to locate the downed drone, but we approach it from the heavily treed side. When I scan the land, I see two men at the pond. One is completely naked and standing in the water, like he's washing himself. The other is leaning against a large rock, taking his shoes off; he's got no shirt on, but is wearing camo pants. They have identical tattoos of large eagles on their left breasts.

Not knowing what to do, I quietly walk Spot back a few steps so we're better hidden among the trees, completely out of view of the pond. I pull out the walkie-talkie from my back pocket and say as calmly as I can, "Two intruders. Blue Pond. Come ASAP." I turn the squawk box's volume to "vibrate" and return it to my pocket.

Next, I get out my gun—my grandfather's shotgun—and check its magazine, verifying that there are four shells in it. It's a pump action, so I'll have to be fast if I need

to fire it more than once. Then there's the kick to deal with. Too many scenarios fly through my head at the same time.

While still on my horse, I decide to do a fast gallop over to the pond, using the element of surprise. Since the men aren't fully dressed—well, one isn't dressed at all—they must be unarmed.

Everything goes according to plan, even me yelling, "Put your hands up!" when I rush up and show them my gun.

"Whoa," says the lighter-skinned man who is knee-deep in the water, raising only one of his hands while his other shields his private parts. "We're just passing through here. No harm done."

The other man, who looks Latino, says, "Yeah, let us get dressed and pick up our gear and get going."

"No!" I demand as I point the gun at the white guy. "Stand still, and no bending down into the water; you could have a weapon there."

"Smart thinking, kid," he says. "But I'm naked, and this water's awfully cold."

The other guy starts grinning at me—does he think I'm enjoying this? Doesn't he realize I've got a loaded gun pointed at them? Who are these guys? Their demeanor seems too casual. Are they high?

"Too bad," I say. "You should've thought about that before you got into it. Just stand there. Backup will be here any minute to deal with this." I'm hoping Dad is on his way. *Please.*

My hand's shaking holding the gun on them; I hope they don't notice I'm scared out of my wits. Where did they come

from, and why are they on our land? Does this have anything to do with the blocked satellites?

It looks like they're communicating with each other in low tones that I can't hear. I hope they're not planning to attack me. I motion for the Latino to move closer to me, away from the rock, and to keep his hands where I can see them. As he moves, he slowly grabs a shirt from the rock and wads it up. He tosses it to his pal in the water, who catches it with his free hand.

"You should've asked me if you could do that!" I yell. "What if I thought you were grabbing a weapon to assault me, and I shot you?"

"Naw, we don't think you'd do that. You don't look like the kind who's reckless," he replies.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Uncle Ben's bright red Ford F-250 tearing across the flatland and pulling to a sudden stop in the thick grass. He and Dad jump out of the cab, using the doors to block their bodies as they aim their guns toward the intruders.

Then Dad starts laughing. Like, really laughing—to the point he has put his gun down and bends over with his hands on his knees. Ben and I are bewildered, while the guys by the pond start chuckling, too.

"Frick and Frack! I don't believe it. What in the world are you doing here, on my land? And why are you butt naked, Frick?"

"We'll explain once this young man puts down his gun," says the guy in the water.

"Son, it's okay," Dad says to me. "They're FBI. Two of the best agents."

As I put away my gun, the Latino says, "Is this Jack? We thought he held his gun like you do. But we didn't know if he's a better shot than you or not, so we didn't take him down before you got here."

Ben smirks as he introduces himself. I feel relieved when the men collect their clothes and get dressed.

The white guy says, "As you know, those budget cuts a while back did damage to the quality of the FBI. After years of working with you, we're both quite upset that we're no longer on your team. Three days ago, when the FBI implemented 'One ID' facial-recognition technology using biometrics, we were offered a severance package to quit, so we both took it. We don't approve of tracking online wherever anyone goes—and for any reason they want. And with everything happening with the government and OWL being in bed with each other, it was time to walk. We should've contacted you. We're on our way north and decided to stop by."

"Yeah, I heard you both quit," Dad interjects, "but why not drive your Camaro here instead of hiking in and overnighting on our property? Why didn't you simply knock on our front door?"

Now the Latino talks: "Because we don't trust anyone anymore, and we weren't sure if you were compromised. Honestly, we didn't want to get your family involved."

The other guy says, "Then there were the traffic hassles on the freeways—we saw plenty of drive-by shootings and road rage in DC. We took less-traveled roads and had trouble in Riverton, Wyoming. A gang saw the car and decided they wanted it when we were inside a convenience store. Bad

for them. We presented our weapons and took off in a car that's faster than any of theirs. However, we were getting low on gas, so we took US Route 2 until we ran out at Katka, hiding the vehicle near the Kootenay River and hiking the rest of the way in. We didn't want anyone following us here."

Ben speaks up. "Thank you. We don't like unexpected guests on our property."

"We're sorry," the Latino says. "It wasn't how we planned it, but please know we took extra precautions coming. But, more importantly, Bulls, do you think you can help get my car back?"

Dad laughs. "Yeah, we can't have you without your wheels."

"Sorry about your camera and drones," says the other guy. "We tried to do the least possible damage. We spent last night inside that metal space debris so as not to be detected by you or satellites."

I keep my mouth shut and watch the two interact with my dad. I've never seen him this casual and friendly with anyone.

One of the men says, "I can see why your land is called Hackett Haven; it's like heaven on earth, but I've got to ask: What's with the rectangular hole dug in the middle of nowhere? Did someone die, or are you planning someone's death? It's large enough for a coffin."

Ben shakes his head, but Dad replies. "After what you pulled on Hack, the two of you are going to help me after dinner, and you'll find out then."

The Latino jokes, "All I can say is it can't be my car, please."

My father asks them to pack up their gear, put it in the back of Ben's truck, and climb into the cab. Before he gets in the vehicle, he tells me to meet them back at the big house for dinner.

After they take off, I'm alone. I protect our land but get no "thank you" or recognition; it's like I don't exist. I collect the nearby downed drone and take my time riding Spot back to the horse barn, where I brush and feed him.

Next, I head to my place with the drone and inspect it for damage. Only one arm got bent in its fall to the ground. The camera's still working properly; I take it outside, reset it, and change its path of coverage, keeping it closer to the tree line.

I check the monitors again.

Wayne's still out of commission.

There's no movement or sound from Sarah's feed. The satellite shows no one in the house, and since the shop has a metal roof, the cameras can't see if anyone's inside.

When the VHS tape is rewound, Sarah and Jeremy are lying on his bed with their arms wrapped around each other. Her bad leg's resting on top of his. Eyes is walking around the room while the two seem to be whispering, but it's inaudible.

Are they whispering sweet nothings or their undying love, or could it be that Sarah is telling Jeremy about our conversation?

It appears that any talking out loud between the two is minimal.

Later, Jeremy puts some clothes and food into boxes and bags and puts them into his Suburban. Sarah collects Eyes and his supplies and gets into the vehicle. It's silent as they drive over to the shop. Seconds later, Amir's car arrives and is parked next to the SUV. Amir gets out, and the three quickly go into the shop's side door, with Eyes in Sarah's arms.

Although no visual is seen inside the shop, limited words are spoken that the cat's implant hears. "Try here," "no," "maybe this," and "got it," are spoken quietly.

Amir, Jeremy, and Sarah must have detected Eyes' recorder and removed it. CatEye's audio has gone silent.

At 4:28 p.m., I slowly walk to the big house for dinner. I'm intentionally late, upset that no one paged me. No one cares, do they?

When I enter the room, I immediately notice dinner's not ready. No one's sitting around the big table eating.

Instead, Mom and Aya are in the great room on the leather couch, with Dad resting on its armrest. Ben's standing by the fireplace, his hand holding onto the thick wood mantel. Frick and Frack or Frack and Frick—I still haven't figured out who's who—are nowhere in sight.

All conversation hushes until Mom says, "Dinner won't be until after five tonight. Dad's friends are cleaning up."

"Great," I say. "Will they be staying here in the house or out on our land?" I know the comment's rude, but I'm curious about how close Dad is to these guys.

Dad says authoritatively, "Hack, they're my friends, and we'll be treating them as guests in our home. One'll spend

the night in Grammy's room and the other in one of the extra bedrooms upstairs; we have plenty of room."

"How long will they stay?" I ask.

"As long as they want."

I don't talk again. I see no purpose in it.

"We're having chili," Mom says. "It's in the slow cooker, so I turned it down. There're some crackers and cheese on the counter if you're hungry."

As I get something to munch on, Dad's friends enter the room, both wearing tight gray T-shirts and black cut-off sweatpants, obviously accentuating their biceps and toned thighs. They're carrying their dirty clothes and used towels; one of them asks, "Karen, where do you want us to put these?"

Mom gets up and tells them to follow her to the laundry room, where she shows them how to use the machines. What? Now Mom's helping them with their clothes? She doesn't help with mine, so why theirs?

When the three return and stand by the kitchen bar, I notice the men have matching tattoos in the crook of their arms. I'm surprised I missed seeing the markings at the pond, but they are small: a scale of justice taken from the FBI's logo. Dad has one on the same spot on his left arm; I should've caught that.

The two snag a couple of crackers and cheese, using no plates or napkins, and walk over to the fireplace area.

While I pour myself a cup of coffee and add milk to it, Ben says to the adults, "We heard about what happened in Iran today."

Of course, I'm not up to date on current events, as I've had a trying day, having had to pull a gun on intruders. And I didn't hear anything on WaynesWorld's feed since he's in Switzerland and his screen's still down.

Ben and Dad look at each other and then at me, as if I'm not supposed to be hearing the conversation. I sip my coffee, pretending to ignore them.

The Latino says, "The United States had to help Israel destroy the rest of Iran's nuclear-weapons labs hidden deeply in their mountainous caverns. The mullahs want to wipe Israel from the earth."

"Do you think that'll set in motion World War III?" Dad asks.

"We don't know," the white guy admits. "Hope not. That's another reason we quit the FBI; we don't agree with a lot of our president's policies or politics. And after all the missings, our families are more important."

By the time we sit down to eat, I still don't feel like I'm part of the conversation. Dad's telling Mom about what he bartered with the Choates. Ben and the guy who had no clothes on at the pond are discussing hunting. I'm ignored until Frick (or is it Frack?)—the Latino guy sitting next to me—asks when I realized the cameras were down.

Instead of answering, I accusatorily say, "How did you sneak onto our property?"

Restating his name, Frack replies, "Easy. My laser pen initially blinded the trail camera, but the stick worked better to change its angle so we could get by unnoticed. Using a drone scanner app, I found your perimeter drone. It was simple to breach it; once it flew over, I knew we had about half

an hour to move. I could help you correct your patterns if that helps."

"I'm good," I say, declining his offer. I don't like these men.

"Then I used a drone jammer app to disable the drone near the pond. If I had used a laser on it, it probably would've damaged the camera, and I didn't want your dad to have to deal with that."

"Thanks for your consideration," I say impudently. I'd never expect someone to take down my drones, and hadn't thought of using either app to do so. I don't bother to tell him the drone had a bent arm, but I fixed it.

"Hey, Jack—or do you prefer being called Hack? I get it, and we're sorry. We didn't want to spook you. We didn't know if you're as good a shot as Bulls. We were a little frightened of you, too. Sorry."

"It's 'Hack' to my friends. And who is Bulls?"

"Your dad! We didn't name him due to his stature, that's for sure. He's that because whenever he's at the shooting range, he always gets bull's-eyes on his IPSC target sheets. He's the best gun around. Drove us crazy. So we shortened 'Bull's-eye' to 'Bulls.'"

Right when he finishes his explanation, the landline rings in the office. I excuse myself from the table, telling anyone listening—if they are—that the call's probably for me.

I close the double glass doors in the office and answer the phone. "Hackett residence."

"Jack?" Just one word makes me know it's Sarah. I go around the desk and sit down on the oak swivel chair.

"Sarah? Good to hear from you. The last I saw was when Jeremy, Amir, and you went into the shop with Eyes. Did you remove his implant?"

"Yes, we found it by using a magnet, as you suggested; Amir removed it and stitched it up. It was by Eye's ear. I still can't believe Numen continues to track me, and I don't know why," she says. "Thank you so much for telling me about it. How long have you been watching me?"

"Since you turned the implant on, right after you argued with Denny over your aunt," I answer. "I was one of Numen's first beta testers." I can hear Jeremy's voice in the background. "Is that Jeremy? Where are you?"

"We're still in the shop and haven't left. Like, at the house, there's a landline here in the small office, too. Yes, that's Jeremy; it's so weird you know us but we've no clue who you are."

"My friends call me Hack, and I'm an IT person," I say. "Well, I'm only seventeen, but I'm in college studying computer programs and coding. I hacked Numen, so I watched them communicate with you at the hospital until you damaged the implant. Then I found out they used Eyes and were tracking you with satellites, but that's not on the public site, only within their system. After what I see you've been going through, I had to reach out and contact you."

"I never would've expected Eyes to be implanted," she says. "You were sent by God to protect me."

"I'm not sure about that, but I knew you needed to know the truth. I don't trust Numen or OWL anymore after seeing what they're capable of."

She agrees. "Yes, they're evil and want to control everyone, including me." There's a pause on the phone until she says, "Amir wants to know if we should stay here or go somewhere safer."

"I don't know. Where would you go?"

"I called my mom. I don't know what you know about her and my father up in Oregon, but Dad got sepsis and passed away last night after being stabbed a week ago. I'm thinking of getting out of LA, driving to Springfield and picking her up, then going to Iowa, where we'll stay with my sister and her husband at his cousin's house. No clue how I'd get there. I've got nothing; I'm not sure what I should do or where I should go."

"That makes sense. But can we keep in touch? I'll be glad to keep watching to see if Numen spies on you again—if you want me to." I say this hoping for a two-way friendship instead of feeling like a Peeping Tom.

"Please do, if you don't mind. I'm concerned about those bird drones, so I want to know if they come back. I bet they've been keeping an eye on me, but are far enough away that they can't hear me—at least I hope so."

"Great. I'll do that. Should I call you at this number?"

I can hear her asking Jeremy if the phone numbers in the house and shop are the same. Yes.

"Sarah, also be careful using cell phones. That's how I think Numen's keeping tabs on you. The cat's audio must be bouncing off Jeremy's phone. Or maybe Amir's or Zoey's. If anyone near you has a phone, Numen may be tapping into it to watch or hear you somehow. Tell them to turn off their

phones, remove the batteries, or not carry them around you. They can check for malware, too.

"Plus, there's something called 'wireless radiation' that could be used to surveil people without them knowing. Using RF radiation that's strategically placed can access signal reflection with smart products. Small RIS panels can be installed outdoors for smart-city surveillance, or indoors in offices or homes, and connect with certain electronics. Yes, those smart devices have made our lives better, but it's all about tracking us. I doubt there's any RIS on Jeremy's property, because it's hard for someone to enter the grounds and install them. So, you're better off staying put at his antiquated house that has no updated electronics in it."

"Oh my," Sarah says, "Denny and I've always had Alexa in almost every room of our condo and car...our watches, even the refrigerator."

"Yes, I know—I saw that when you had your implant. Sure, it's easy to have Alexa order you wine and groceries, saving you time and energy. But Numen has abducted the data and is using it against you. Remember when Zoey showed you the HoloBot? AI gleaned all the information from your Alexa, social-media accounts, and any time you went online. They used your implant to make their image more realistic by replicating anything your video collected. I think HoloBots will be the next step in people being told by a loved one that they truly disappeared for the bettering of the world—just like that Denny hologram said."

"Okay, I understand. I'll tell Jeremy and Amir right now, since they've got their phones with them. Zoey won't be coming here for a few days; Amir said she had to go on a

business trip, so he decided to stay with us. I think we'll all sleep in the shop from now on; it has plenty of room. Good thing there are only windows in the shop's office and upstairs bedroom and bathroom, but we put cardboard over them. I don't want anyone watching me.

"Please let me know if you find me again on Numen," she begs.

"Will do, and call me again if you see any strange movement there; maybe I can find the source."

"Definitely!"

We offer our goodbyes and say we'll call in an emergency. She tells me twice that I'm a blessing to her. A blessing? Yeah, what's up with that? I'm only trying to protect her; she's like a friend to me.

Man, I feel bad for her. I don't think I could stay in a metal building 24/7 because someone's tracking my every movement. No. I. Wouldn't. Do. It.

But what choice does she have? What are her options?

When I return to the dining table, most of the dinner plates are empty. Mom asks me if everything's alright, and I say it is as I sit down and finish my meal.

Smiling, Dad reports, "It's too late to deal with our buried treasure today, so we'll make sure Frick and Frack help us tomorrow. It's a good way for them to earn their board and keep."

The two guests get up and help clear the table, putting all their dishes in the sink while Aya puts away the leftovers and Mom loads the dishwasher. They discuss their families; neither is married, but each has siblings, so Mom says that's why they relate to pitching in during mealtimes. Frick is headed

to someplace in Canada to be with what's left of his brother's family, while Frack wants to go to Alaska, where his sister lives. Both have missing nephews and nieces.

Dad, Ben, and I discuss tomorrow's schedule, with me being the one in charge of the cattle and feeding the animals again while they bury the carcass. You'd think I ran this farm.

When the adults settle down in the great room, I leave with Scooter and walk over to the cattle barn to check the animals, since I have a feeling Ben and Dad are preoccupied with our guests. On the way to my room, a beautiful sunset fills the sky. So peaceful and calm. Why can't life be that way, too?

This evening as I eat left-over crackers and slices of cheese, I view the monitors.

Sarah's feed remains the same...the view of Jeremy's property from space. No humans are shown. No activity. As the saying goes, "All quiet on the western front," which is a good thing in Sarah's book. Jeremy's and Amir's vehicles are still parked next to each other in front of the shop. Occasionally, Eyes walks outside for a few minutes, but he must not like the dark, because he doesn't stay out too long.

I wonder what's going on inside the building now. What are the three friends discussing or planning?

It's late afternoon in WaynesWorld's world. His monitor is finally live again. He's still at Davos, currently eating guinea fowl supreme with white rice, eggplant, and peanuts at a suite where Mastema resides.

From what Wayne's saying to a hostess he's hitting on, he doesn't sleep at this high-end suite, but has been invited to attend.

I silently joke that maybe if he sounds like a commoner, he can get her phone number for later.

But it doesn't seem like Wayne's involved in any of the closed-door meetings that Mastema and maybe our president attend.

Only once do I catch Wayne walking into one of Mastema's private meetings. Talk about strange. The leader is lying on the floor with a white sheet covering his entire body, which starts levitating. Four men are around him, repeating luciferian chants involving words and phrases like "enlightenment," "bringer of knowledge," and "force for positive change." But the feed goes down seconds later.

While Wayne's screen is dark, I search online for info about Iran being bombed by the USA and Israel. It was a pretty quick event, with fewer than fifty Iranians killed who were working in the caverns. However, several websites mention the potential of war breaking out as different countries line up behind those they favor.

The next day, sure enough, I'm left to do the farm chores while the men use the ATVs with their attached carts loaded with the steer's carcass and excess garbage we've collected and head out to the hole I dug. When I'm done—yeah, I rushed through it a little—I saddle up Spot and ride out to the burial site.

"Nice of you to come," Ben says to me as they finish shoveling the last few scoops of dirt on the mound, trying to make it as inconspicuous-looking as possible.

Frick and Frack are shirtless and sweating, while Dad's in the backhoe.

Dad says, "You got a little carried away digging the hole, Hack—although Frack's Camaro might've fit in it."

I ignore the comment and tell Ben all I accomplished without his presence.

Frack says to me, "Hey, after this, do you want to practice shooting with us?"

Without my agreement, the two set up a target area.

When Frack hands me his gun, he says, "The FBI hands out Glocks, but I'll always prefer this Beretta M9."

I like the feel of the cool, steel frame. It fits better in my hand with the larger grip area.

"I won't argue with your dad," he says, "but this gun destroyed the Army's acceptance test before even I enlisted. It averages one malfunction every 19,090 rounds, and has seen more action than that tactical Tupperware your dad uses." He looks at Dad and sticks his tongue out.

"Whatever," Dad yells back as he remains in the backhoe's cab. "You could put a Hi-Point in my hands, and I'm still a better shot than you."

Frack has me hold the gun, then puts his hand over mine and slightly adjusts my palm around the handle. "Try this instead."

I hold the gun steady with both hands.

"Now shoot at that tree there, the second one from the right."

I shoot. I hit my target. *Wow!* That was cool.

Frick, Frack, and Ben are laughing, but Dad shakes his head as he starts up the backhoe and drives home alone ahead of us. I'm the lucky one: I get to mount Spot, while the others have to walk the mile alongside me.

Later, our guests and Dad go pick up Frack's Camaro, but I hang back with Ben and move the cattle from the North Pasture to the East one. Of course, I check on Midnight and see that he's blended well with his bovine mates, but I can't imagine taking care of more than two dozen of these animals.

After I shower and arrive for dinner, the mood's different from what it had been during the afternoon. Frick and Frack are quiet and contemplative, but I don't know why. It could be because they have said they need to keep moving north.

When we're done eating, Dad spills the beans: "I checked in at work today. Intel says two nukes will strike America soon. I think it's in retaliation for what we did to Iran. We're not sure who's sending them. If it turns into retaliation, you know Israel uses the NFU—no first use—to WMDs—weapons of mass destruction—but they've got the Samson Option in their back pocket, and that won't go well. They'll fire back with their nuclear arsenal instead of conventional preemption. Either way, I hope whatever's targeted here in the US is minimal. The FBI believes they'll hit somewhere on both our coasts."

"I knew that would happen," says Frick. "The Middle East is a ticking time bomb, and we stirred up a hornet's nest. My guess is San Diego or Los Angeles, due to their military bases."

"Agreed," interjects Frack, "and probably New York City."

Dad says, "Yes, that's where they're predicted. Encrypted online chatter mentions it'll happen in a couple of days, but they're unsure of the source."

No one talks. I go numb. I must tell Sarah. She must leave the Valley soon.

Ben starts asking how much damage a nuke does and how far it covers.

"Depends on the wind," explains Dad. "Shockwaves can extend up to a half mile, but thermal damage and lethal radiation are about a mile. Debris could fly a few miles. But it's the radioactive materials that can be sent as high as fifty miles into the air, and the fallout that spreads over the earth could last for years."

Ugh. I have to let Sarah and her friends know.

"May I be excused? I need to make a phone call," I say.

"No, Son," my mom answers. "We first need to have dessert. Aya and I made Grammy's apple pie with the frozen fruit we picked last season, and I know it's one of your favorites."

Dad says, "Hack, what we just talked about is high-security information. You can't share it with anyone, especially someone online who'll make it go viral. What if it turns into a panic, and there's a stampede to get out of town? No, let the government tell the people. It's not our problem. It's not your problem."

On my lap, my hands are clenched. I can't tell him why I need to tell Sarah, but I reply with an affirmative nod.

After dinner, I hang out with the adults for several hours, listening to Frick and Frack tell stories about their FBI adventures, but Dad's more tight-lipped about his employment. We have the television muted in the background.

My eye catches a breaking news report flashing on the big screen: The president of the United States has suffered a heart attack. While in Switzerland, he was in bed at his hotel, and the Secret Service heard a crash in his room. They found him on the marble floor with a gash on his head from hitting it on the nearby dresser. He was immediately transported to Spital Davos AG, a local hospital known for its advanced medical technology, up-to-date surgical unit, and highly qualified staff.

"Wow," says Frick. "What's going to happen next to America? We're so short-staffed in many government entities, and now this happens. Besides all the babies and children disappearing, along with a portion of the adults, the US has one of the highest percentages of missings than other countries. And now this."

Frack adds, "Yeah, if the States are supposed to take up the slack and govern themselves, good luck with that. I'm so glad we're getting off the grid. I don't want to think about what's going to happen next. We've become a third-world country."

Dad's only addition to the discussion is, "I wonder if our president actually had a heart attack. Or was he given one? Like, was the stress of the missings what did it, or did someone nefariously cause him to have one before his speech at the WEF tomorrow?"

My mom speaks up, "Well, I would've thought it was a natural event—he is older, and he has been looking rather peaked whenever he's been on television."

Frack adds, "I can only hope the FBI still has the resources to find the truth."

We remain focused as the facts unfold. Our president is seriously ill. Here in the States, the disability clause on the Twenty-fifth Amendment is enacted, and the vice president is sworn in as the acting president.

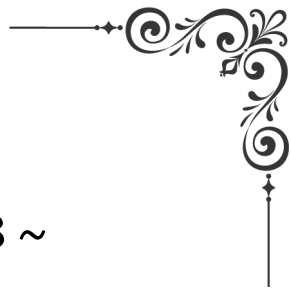
When I return to my room hours later, I'm depressed. Our president has died. Frick and Frack repeatedly stated they're glad they quit the FBI, since both don't care for our vice president; they think he's too inexperienced. He's not even forty years old and won't be able to solve all that's going wrong in our country.

And I'm more than frustrated. I haven't contacted Sarah, but I want to. My emotions battle making the right decision—do I not tell her, or go against my father's wishes and call her? I know I can't call from the office landline because Dad and Mom are still up. Riled, I check the monitors.

It's in the morning for Wayne and, of course, he's in bed with the hostess from the hotel. The news is on, covering our president's demise. The influx of condolences from the other leaders and dignitaries at the summit are graciously offered. Our acting president, who's not in attendance, makes a statement from the Oval Office and gives his promise to keep America strong. We can only wish; I don't think the public's too impressed with him.

No action on Sarah's screen. It's eerily quiet.

I give up. I take Scooter out to pee and then go to bed, but I toss and turn.



~ Week 8 ~

It's after midnight, and I'm wide awake. Still thinking about what happens next in our country and worrying about the bombs. I wonder if I can sneak into the house and make the call. No, not with Frick and Frack there—they'd shoot me dead. If I use my cell, how do I know Numen isn't tracking me? Even if our quadrant's blocked on the satellite, how can I be sure they don't have other sources to spy on us? Like drones?

My computer may be the only way I can make sure the source is bounced around without coming back to me.

Is paranoia settling inside me?

I have to do this. I must. I won't say much on the call; I'll offer minimal information.

After getting out of bed, I go online to *voice.google.com* and sign in to my Google account, but I backtrack and ping three locations in the world the computer thinks the call's coming from: Egypt, the Cayman Islands, and Japan. I make the call quickly.

I hear the sounds through my computer's speakers; it takes three rings before the phone's answered.

Jeremy groggily says, "Hello?" I may have woken him up. He's probably wondering who'd call at this hour.

"It's Sarah's friend Hack, Jeremy. Is she there?"

"I'll get her," he says, "hold on. That's sad about our president."

"Yes, it is," I say. "I'm sorry it's late, I didn't mean to scare you, but I have to make this quick."

He keeps talking while movement noises are heard in the background. "Hack, in case you don't know, I contacted our boss at the *Valley News*, and he was sent a photo of Sarah pointing a gun at James while he was at her front door. He said there's a BOLO out on her! That's one of those 'be on the lookout' police alerts. We don't know what to do."

"Oh, no! Numen has to be behind that," I say. I can't believe that company.

"That's what we thought, too," he replies. "Sarah wants to contact John, her cop friend, but Amir and I think she shouldn't yet. We'll keep you posted. "Oh, here's Sarah."

"Hack here, Sarah. I can't talk long. I'm sorry about the BOLO. So frustrating. I may be able to help. What's your boss's name and email? I can send him video proof that you didn't shoot James. I recorded it."

She gives me the information, and I promise to send it.

"But more importantly," I say, "I need to tell you—well, this is odd—there's going to be a nuclear bomb detonated in Southern California in two to three days."

Alarmed, she says, "How do you know this?"

"I can't tell you my source, but you've got to trust me. It's true. You and your friends need to leave before it becomes public knowledge."

"Are you sure? Does it have anything to do with what happened to our president?"

"I doubt that, but I'm sure about the bomb. Get out of town. Go before it's announced. Also, please don't tell anyone but Jeremy and maybe Amir about it. Use the BOLO as the excuse to leave. And please, please do not say my name, as we never know if or when Numen's listening. Okay?"

"Yes."

"My time's up; I have to go. Sorry."

I click my mouse to end the call. I feel horrible about disobeying my father, but I didn't give too many details—and, hopefully, now they'll have a head start.

For the next several hours, I'm glued to Sarah's monitor, even though there's no activity. Waiting to see if she is taking my threat seriously, I also keep an eye on any updates about the president.

While I watch, I send an anonymous email to Sarah's boss, Carl, attaching the video clip. Hopefully, he'll spread the news so the BOLO ends. The whole thing's ridiculous. She didn't shoot James, and she's obviously being set up.

It must be confusing for Numen's satellites to watch what's happening. An hour after my call, Zoey drives up in her Audi and parks near the treehouse, gets a suitcase out of her trunk, and walks in the dark to the side door of the shop.

I hope Numen doesn't notice the suitcase.

Minutes later, Amir walks to his car, but there's a bird drone perched on its roof rack. He grabs the device and smashes it on the ground, then stomps on it several times. He gets into his car and drives over the drone, the car's tires rolling back and forth over it a few times. After he parks his car next to the Audi,

he picks up the drone, throws it into the nearby bushes, and goes back into the shop. Meanwhile, Jeremy opens one of the shop's bay doors and quickly pulls his Suburban inside.

Eyes exits through the open bay doors, batting a black insect the size of a June bug or large beetle crawling on the ground. The cat runs back inside as the bay door closes.

I wonder if that bug's a miniature version of those evil drones.

About an hour later, both large doors go up again. First, Jeremy's Suburban leaves the bay, but I can't tell who's driving, as the windows have somehow been tinted, and it's still dark outside. Following quickly behind is Jeremy's dad's truck with a camper shell on it. Again, all windows are tinted. Finally, a motor home exits. Its side and back windows are covered with foil or cardboard, while the front window looks like it's been darkened.

Smart thinking, guys. I can't figure out who's driving any of these.

With the overhead satellites tracking them, the Numen's internal screen splits into quarters, with three showing each vehicle leaving the property and one that's blank. No tracers show bodies inside. No drone birds or bugs view the drivers. A drone attempts to get close to the motor home, but misses the mark when the RV turns onto another street. Street-camera photos flash in the blank quarter of the screen, but none show the drivers.

The satellites watch the three as they head onto the 101 freeway. The caravan switches to the 405 and then the 5. Surprisingly, they separate after driving past the Grapevine. The Suburban takes the 166 to the 33, the most western route; the

truck remains on the 5 freeway, and the motor home goes on the 99. It's obvious they're all taking different routes to head north, but there's no way to know which vehicle contains Sarah.

Scooter jumps off my bed and scratches on the door, so I let him out to pee. I step outside and look up at the dark sky. When I catch a satellite going slowly across the heavens, I have to smirk. Numen may be spying on my friends, but they have no eyes on us, thanks to Alyssa.

I head back to my desk. The old dog returns to overtaking my bed.

Wayne's monitor shows him sitting outside of a meeting room, alternately scrolling on his phone and pacing the hallway. A man approaches and asks him to come with him into a nearby room.

When entering, his boss, the one from Horn A, welcomes him to a roundtable of a little more than a dozen people. Wayne's offered the most prominent seat at the table, which seems to make him feel important, judging by the way he tilts his nose in the air.

His boss speaks to the others. "First of all, our deep sympathies to the Americans, who have lost their president," he says. "It's tragic, and most likely will affect their country in unknown ways. We offer our condolences at this time.

"On a more positive note, this is Wayne DeGasso from OWL's program. He's been implanted with a Numen device so his half million followers can see what he sees and hear what he hears. We asked him to attend our small meeting to show his friends how we at OWL are transparent, making our world better for all."

A large monitor in the room shows what it looks like from Wayne's vision; it's identical to what I'm seeing on my computer screen. Wayne makes eye contact with each seated individual in the room—the screen focuses on them one at a time. Some acknowledge him with a nod, while others offer a simple smile.

"Anyone watching Wayne online is virtually here with us today. They've been viewing Wayne as he's been traveling with OWL's up-and-coming Iam Mastema, who's currently working closely with key players of other countries to solve worldwide peace."

The speaker continues, "To you horn delegates here, in front of you is a handheld computer to use. Once you tap the unit, you'll see you're live with Numen viewers in your region who are currently watching Wayne. With the computer's camera, your guests will be able to ask Wayne questions about his experience using the implant. Of course, these are unique computers because they instantly change to Wayne's language to save time."

He clears his throat and continues. "I'll go first, representing Italy. Lorena has a question for you, Wayne."

All the handheld screens show a dark-haired woman in her twenties. The large, wall-mounted screen facing Wayne has the same display, showing her saying, "Wayne, it's great to be here. It's like we're meeting for the first time, yet I know you, and now you can see me, too."

Wayne replies with one of his seductive smiles. "Thanks, sweet Rena, if I can call you that. Being a part of Numen has introduced me to many wonderful people, including you."

She asks, "Do you like having the implant? Do you feel it's intrusive that everyone like me knows personal things about you?"

"I think it's the perfect device for someone who feels unnoticed or unimportant, like I used to feel. I'm now engaging, productive, and successful." He stretches his arms out like he wants the attention. "And if you've been with me from the beginning, you already know what I'm like. Yet, I know nothing about you." He laughs. "Maybe we should exchange phone numbers, since we both live in Italy, eh?"

His boss interrupts the exchange. "Granted, personalities shine when using the Numen implant, and perhaps Ms. Lorena needs to sign up for one herself."

The group laughs at his sales pitch.

For the next two hours, the attendees are given a chance to have their viewers heard. Some of the questions are silly—like about Wayne not being online when showering or the fact that he snores—but one or two focus on the vast reaches of OWL.

One example comes from a Horn B, whose resident from Nairobi, Africa, says, "I heard Numen was recently bought by OWL, which has their technocratic fingers in many places today. Wayne, do you think everyone will be implanted with a Numen device so that we'll know what everyone's up to every minute of the day?"

Wayne adjusts his tie and replies, "From what I understand, my implant's an experimental device that has been collecting data for the future. It's learning how we humans interact and communicate. Over time, not everyone will need or want to be implanted, because OWL's continually adjusting and correcting the data to design an ink barcode or marking that'll be put on the skin—maybe the forehead or hand. I assume this would be able to be viewed by those implanted with something like the model I have. This tattoo, if you want to

call it that, will have integration capabilities that will make our lives better, especially for those with implants like mine who need to—let's say—verify those with the marking."

The boss jumps in to redirect him. "Wayne, that's a discussion for another time, not for now, as we're far from accomplishing the goal that'll allow us to work as one unit instead of against each other. This harmony is what keeps the peace and coexistence among humankind."

Of course, after worrying about the president and Sarah, and thinking about implants, I can't get back to sleep. It's now after 4 a.m. I search news websites to see if anything is mentioned about the nukes, but nothing pops up. You would think they'd at least warn those who may be affected by them or say who's sending them, but no. Nothing. Everything's about the president's death. I look up sites not in America and find nothing. Makes me wonder if the bombs are a rumor.

Numen's internal screen still shows the three vehicles. It looks like the Suburban's stationary on the side of the road somewhere west of Sacramento on the 505. It's nowhere land—miles and miles of agricultural farmland. The satellite sees Jeremy standing at the front of the SUV with its hood open.

I hope he doesn't have engine trouble.

The motor home is getting gas in Modesto.

I'm guessing Amir is driving; he's being extra cautious not to show his face when the gas attendant at the full-service station approaches his window, which is rolled down only a few inches.

Whoever's driving the truck with the shell, it's still on the 5 and almost to Stockton. But there's no sign of Sarah in any of the vehicles.

When the rooster crows, I figure it's time to return to the mundane. I turn off my alarm clock, change clothes, and start the day, pondering about where Sarah and her friends are now.

After breakfast and watching more news about the status of our government, Frick and Frack say their goodbyes. I wish they could stay longer, but they're determined to get on the road. Do they think there'll be a nuclear fallout here, at our farm? Will our country stay intact with the new president? Are we far enough away from a bomb going off on the West Coast?

The only strange thing Frack did as he was leaving was hug me when he was getting into his Camaro. "Take care of your dad and mom," he said. "Family's the most important." Yeah, I guess that's true. I admit I'll miss the dude. And yes, he helped me tweak my drone and trail camera coverage.

Hours later, while I was in the garage getting a wrench for Dad to help with a leak in the kitchen sink, I get this email from Numen:

> *For those of you who remember viewing our popular participant ValleyGirl, we have a special announcement! While we thought she had met her demise when she attempted suicide, we've recently learned she's alive and, by all accounts, well. Since our im-*

plant was damaged and we could no longer obtain her services, we had no other choice but to seek other options. It's with pleasure and gratitude that someone close to her has heartily agreed to be implanted with our newer model, which only sees and hears interactions. If you are interested in following Sarah Colton online again, be sure to sign up below. Please note—there is an additional fee to view this account while it is active. As always, we thank you for being an integral part of OWL's Numen.

No, I can't believe it. This is wrong! And who's this deceiver, the imposter? Is it Jeremy, Amir, Zoey, or someone else?

When I enter the kitchen and hand the wrench to Dad, who's on his back halfway under the sink, I hastily ask, "Do you need me right now, Dad? I think I may have a computer emergency." It's not a lie, maybe half a lie. "It's about the satellite." Yeah, that's a lie, but I'm desperate.

"I guess. If you hand me that other bucket and a towel first, I'm good."

Thanking him, I hurriedly give him the requested items and run to my outbuilding. A sign pops up on the computer stating that it needs to be routinely updated and rebooted, which takes more time than usual. Needless to say, I'm waiting impatiently.

I go immediately to Numen's public monitor.

Wayne's at an evening gala. He's wearing a tuxedo and strutting his stuff with anyone he lays eyes on, or they do him. Mastema's attending, also dressed exceptionally well, and talking with dignitaries and their significant others.

I'm glad he doesn't talk into the camera, so I don't have to connect with his eyes.

I check Numen's internal monitor.

Sarah's feed is completely blacked out; the three cars are no longer being tracked by satellites. They must've figured out which vehicle she's in.

I return to the public site and look at the list of participant names, re-sorting them to the newest addition first, as I did before.

It's easy to spot the culprit: LA-Zo. Yes, Los Angeles Zoey is the traitor! She must've been implanted when she was gone for a couple of days on a supposed business trip. What a fraud. And I bet Sarah has no idea about her "best friend." I'm so fried that my right hand's shaking as it hovers over the computer mouse.

Since a prior email mentioned a free participant viewing when WaynesWorld's feed was down, I click to add LA-Zo's name.

As it processes, I go back to the internal system and type in "LA-Zo." And, sure enough, her feed pops up. Already, Numen's raking in the dough; more than sixty thousand viewers have paid the additional fee. I go back to the normal monitor.

Zoey's driving the truck while Sarah's asleep, her head leaning against the tinted window. Eyes is resting on her lap. From the overhead freeway signs seen through the front win-

dow, they're past Sacramento and are almost to Woodland. Due to what looks like trash spread for a mile in the left lane, traffic's down to one lane, bottlenecked by a line of semi-trucks. As they creep along, Zoey's singing along to an old Michael Jackson song.

Sarah stirs and stretches.

"Hey, girlfriend," Zoey says.

I cringe—the audacity of that woman.

Sarah asks, "When do you think we'll get to the campground?"

"Based on this mess of trucks, maybe hours. I hate the 5; it's incredibly slow. And all the weirdos driving on it. I wish we had taken the 99 or what Jeremy took. Backroads might be easier."

"My mom said Oregon backroads have all the rednecks policing them, which is worse, because they use *their guns compared to just* threatening *to use them like we witnessed driving through the Bay Area."*

Zoey says, "So far so good. We haven't encountered anyone trying to hijack us. But that was wild near San Francisco when we had to take surface streets to get away from that gang blocking the freeway with their vehicles. Also, I haven't heard anything on the radio about when the president will be put to rest. They're flying his body home today."

"The whole thing's sad," Sarah adds, "but I'm glad we're out of the Valley. Having a BOLO over my head hasn't made it easy."

A semi in front of them slams on its brakes, causing Zoey to swerve onto the rough shoulder to avoid hitting it. After laying on the horn, she screams profanities at the driver.

The Bible slides off the dashboard and hits Eyes in the head, who jumps off Sarah's lap, frightened. In the process, the Bible falls farther, ending up on top of Sarah's bad foot, right where her stitches are. She lets out a moan as she picks up the book and Eyes.

How am I going to tell Sarah about Zoey? No one has phones now—wait, Zoey must, because that's how Numen can track them. Well, I can't call her up and ask why she betrayed Sarah, can I? No! What am I going to do—I don't know where they're headed?

An hour later, Zoey pulls the truck into the Happy Time RV parking lot in Woodland. Talk about desolation; it's in the middle of nowhere. When she unrolls her window, she tells a grumpy man that they have reserved a spot for three vehicles for the night. After taking her cash, the gruff attendant hands over a map of the place and points out where to park. Can't say he's a sociable host.

"When do you think the guys will arrive?" Zoey asks as she exits the vehicle and opens the back window and bed of the truck shell. She slides her suitcase onto the tailgate, opens it, and rummages through its contents.

"I think Amir will get here first with the motor home. Jeremy had to take the longer route, so I would assume later."

And with that, Mom's voice on the walkie-talkie bids me for dinner.

At supper, my mother does something she's never done before. When we sit down at the table, she asks us to hold hands, and then she prays: "Dear God, we don't talk to You

often and may not believe in You, but please be with those who may be in harm's way the next few days. We pray there aren't too many casualties and that peace will come to our land, to the world. And please keep our country safe. Be with the president's family, too. Amen."

It was a thoughtful prayer. When I look up, Aya has tears in her eyes. I hope those bombs don't happen.

Of course, while eating a beef-and-cheese-noodle casserole, Dad asks if my computer "emergency" got resolved, and I say "yes and no," telling the truth, but keeping the lie vague. I know Zoey's a plant, but I've got no way to inform Sarah about it.

After dinner, I hang around the big house to see if there's any news on television about the nukes. Dad's in the office, most likely on the FBI's internal computer system; the doors are closed. Could be learning more about the president.

When the old phone rings, it startles me. Is it for me?

Dad comes out of the office. "Hack, there's a Jeremy on the phone asking for you."

When I enter the office, Dad's behind me. I would ask him to leave so I could have a private conversation, but I know he wouldn't appreciate that.

"Hello, this is Hack," I say as Dad sits back down at the desk and glares at me.

"Is it okay to talk?" Jeremy asks. "I didn't know because someone else answered the phone. I'll make this short."

"Good," I say. Dad's tapping a pen on the desk, making me edgy.

"Have you heard from Sarah, Zoey, or Amir?" Jeremy asks.

"No."

"The Suburban broke down, overheated in Madison. A couple stopped to help me, and I'm calling from their cell phone." If my friends call, can you tell them I'll get there somehow? And tell Sarah not to wait for me, continue to Oregon."

"I will. Thanks. Bye."

The second I put the phone's receiver into its cradle, Dad drills me. "You told someone about the nukes, didn't you?"

"Dad, I had to. I didn't want to disobey you, but I felt it was necessary. Four of my friends had to leave Los Angeles. I don't want anything to happen to them. You'd do the same thing if it was Frick and Frack, wouldn't you?" I knew the last comment was a dig, but it's true. He would do anything for those two. "Jeremy's truck broke down; they're near Sacramento. Do you think that's far away from where the nuke could hit?"

Dad doesn't scold or yell at me, but he looks at me with tenderness in his eyes. "They should be okay, Son. Don't worry. I'm not happy about you going against me by telling them, but I'm glad you have friends who are that important to you that you want to warn them. Sadly, so far, our government is more concerned right now about the fallout of our president's death than the fallout from nuclear bombs, but you're more the man to share what's coming with those you care about. I respect you for that."

I force down a swallow. "Thanks, Dad. I'm glad you care, too."

When I get back to my room and check the monitors, I feel satisfaction. I did the right thing; Dad agreed with me.

But then it dawns on me that I was so flustered at Dad's presence during the call that I never told Jeremy about Zoey's betrayal. I blew it, big time.

The motor home is parked next to the truck at the campground, and Zoey climbs inside.

"Amir, when do you think Jeremy will get here?" Sarah asks as she gives Eyes his meal.

I'm happy to see Amir made it, but boy, how I wish I could call and give her an update about Jeremy, plus tell her about Zoey. But how?

"I don't know," Amir replies. "I think we got here earlier than expected. If Jeremy doesn't show up by tomorrow, I think you and Zoey should continue to your parents' house. Maybe you could find a landline and call your mom again."

"Mom was checking with her neighbors Dave and Tiffany, who are considering getting out of Springfield and going to Lakeview in Eastern Oregon, where their daughter lives," she says as she points to the small town on a map of the US spread out on the small dining table. Eyes has to be repeatedly pushed away from walking on the spread-out paper. "If Zoey and I can get there, we can pick up Mom and then meet you here at this RV park in Winnemucca, Nevada, en route to Salt Lake City." Again, she moves her finger to a new spot. "From there, we can drive to Iowa to meet my sister and her husband, who I hope are on their way to his brother's land in Cedar Rapids. Jeremy can go to his brother's house in Chicago, and maybe you, Amir, can somehow fly to Israel with Zoey. Does that sound like a plan?"

I don't like Sarah telling Numen where everyone's going. They'll never stop tracking her or her friends.

Zoey looks at Amir and flashes a loving smile as she plants a kiss on his lips, saying, "Sounds good to me. I've never been to Israel. I'd love to meet your family, Amir."

Meanwhile, Wayne's at a nightclub dancing with both sexes. The place is decorated in red, white, and blue to honor America.

An alert flashes on my phone. It says that at 7:08 p.m.—a little over one day after Dad told us about the nukes—the Diablo Power Plant in San Luis Obispo County, California, was destroyed by a nuke. At the same time, 10:08 p.m. in New York City, a suitcase bomb exploded in Central Park. Although somewhat small, both bombs are nuclear. Immediately, several countries and terrorist organizations vehemently deny involvement with the attack. The California device may have been attached to a large drone carrying its explosive cargo that went unnoticed in the moonless sky. No prior warning was given to citizens.

I start to check online to see reports of the devastation at both sites, but I don't like being alone, so I return to the big house, and the five of us watch TV for hours. During the viewing, a few words are spoken. Scooter is on the couch, with me petting his head on my lap. The new president makes a short statement, showing his concern. From what my family tells me, I wish he wasn't the one in charge right now.

Ben and Aya seem to be the most concerned. They recommend that we promptly go to the hillside containers, but Dad refuses, determined that the fallout won't affect us. After an intense argument between the male adults, Ben and Aya leave the big house, saying they'll be rounding up a few of the animals and heading to the hills, even though it's dark outside. But Dad doesn't budge. His stubbornness scares me. What if the radiation from a nuke demolishing a power plant causes more damage than predicted? Will it be worse than what happened at Chernobyl in 1986?

And what about Sarah and her friends? Are they far enough away from the blast? There's so much happening that my mind can't handle it.

Afraid to go back to my room, I ask Mom if I can sleep in Grammy's room for the night, since she changed the bedsheets that morning. Thankfully, she welcomes me, hopefully not noticing my growing insecurity.

As I climb into bed, I encourage Scooter to jump up on the mattress, aware of my mother's disapproval. As the dog snuggles in my grandmother's quilt, I fall asleep with my arm around him and dream of cattle that get sick from radiation.

The next morning, I smell coffee. No alarm clock or rooster can be heard.

Without knocking on the door, Dad comes into my room. "Morning, Son. How did you sleep?"

"Fair," I report.

"Ben messaged us. For now, I've talked him out of staying inside the mountain, but he thinks we must move more supplies into the shipping containers. After we feed the ani-

mals and have breakfast with your mom, let's gather what he needs and make a delivery, okay?"

Later, Dad and I ride the ATVs, both hitched to cargo carts full of nonperishable items that had been stored in the garage, out to the containers. I finally get to see inside the half-buried shelter. While I'm interested in the hideaway, I wish I could go back to my room and watch Sarah's monitor. What happens to them next? What are their plans? Will any of them call me? And how can I warn Sarah about Zoey?

To access the container structure, we have to go through a cave entrance that's between two boulders and has growing tree branches that have to be held to the side for access. The four metal units are side by side with their doors facing the mountain, joining in a large, accessible area with tunnels that lead farther into the hillside. The first container Ben shows us has three sections with beds and closets in each: two with queen beds and one with double sets of bunk beds. The two middle containers are the main living areas: One has a couch, chairs, and tables with an entertainment and desk area; the other is for cooking with a kitchen setup and a long table and chairs. The final area is for storage and the air/water filters.

When Ben leads us through the tunnels, two of them open up to ten-by-ten-foot "cave rooms," as I would call them. Each has rows of fully loaded shelves of dried foods in plastic containers, MREs (meals ready to eat), filled canning jars, and large barrels of water. Another tunnel is longer and leads to a spacious room to house a limited number of farm animals. Here I find Midnight, the milking cow, two sheep, a

few chickens, and the rooster. There's a narrow passage leading to the outside to get rid of dung and debris.

"Ben, you've really thought this out!" I say, totally wowed by his accomplishment. I've never envisioned anything like it.

"Thanks, Hack. It's been in the works since we moved here. Although your grandparents weren't sold on the idea, the American Redoubt got me interested in prepping, and I've spent a lot of time and money setting this all up."

"You did good, Ben," Dad says. "If Pop could see this, he'd be impressed. Hopefully, Karen and I won't need to escape here, but I'm glad you're fastidious about doing it. It looks like people could live here comfortably. Excellent job." I don't think Dad had seen all this before now. He's raving about the details.

Ben and Aya eat dinner with us and aren't freaking out as much since there's no fallout cloud hovering above. At least, that's what Dad keeps telling them. I'm happy to hear he put the animals back—including Midnight, who's back in the pasture with his mother.

The television's on in the background. Due to the New York bombing, there'll be no lying in repose since the president was born in Manhattan, so it's considered a hot zone. He'll lie in state in the Capitol Rotunda in DC, but it won't be open to the public because of the upheaval and civil unrest related to the missings. Nor will a procession or state funeral happen at the Washington National Cathedral, but his interment with a twenty-one-gun salute will be at Arlington National Cemetery. Since the public isn't encouraged to come—thanks to the increase in protests about all children

disappearing, our failing economy, and governmental cutbacks—the events will be televised on all major channels.

The news finally discusses the bombing. There weren't as many deaths as predicted; neither place was crowded at the time. The Diablo plant is completely shut down, causing havoc on the electrical grid covering Ventura County and the San Fernando Valley, so panic has set in. And so has looting. And martial law. Again. Authorities are concerned about cholera spreading.

The good news is that the Santa Ana winds kicked up and are pushing the nuclear fallout over the ocean and not inland, which may be good for the people but bad for sea life. Time will tell, as those winds will change directions and bring the fallout back onto land.

I head back to my room afterward and check the monitors.

Jeremy and Amir's location cannot be tracked, as Numen's internal site only contains Zoey's visual now.

Sarah's driving the truck while her pseudo-friend's looking at a map and complaining that she wanted to wait until tomorrow to start driving again.

Zoey lets out a sigh. "I'm so glad we left Eyes with Jeremy and Amir in the motor home," she says. "I don't think that cat would want to be on my lap while you're driving."

"He's a good kitty. It made no sense for Jeremy to drive with him, so I'm glad he stayed with us. But I'm happier that Jeremy made it to the campground, even though he had to walk hours to get there after hitchhiking to Sacramento. It's too bad his truck died."

"Yeah, Amir said they were going to drive the motor home to the truck to collect its contents if no one has stolen the stuff. I'd question going anywhere south or west because of that bomb."

"At least we got out before it dropped," Sarah replies.

"Yeah, I can't imagine a nuke hitting that facility. That area may not have tons of people, but can you imagine how many may have to deal with the radiation, like all of San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara? I think that plant generates enough energy for three million Californians. Who'd do such a thing?"

"Stupid people, that's who," Sarah mumbles. "And why Central Park? Whoever did it could have picked someplace with more people. Maybe it's a God thing they didn't."

"I don't think it was a country that did it," Zoey says. "I think a couple of frustrated people or a rogue group are trying to get noticed. Yes, they could've targeted a densely populated city. But, Sar, why do you keep saying 'God this' and 'God that'? Tell me you aren't switching beliefs on me."

"I'm still in the searching mode, if you must know," Sarah admits. "And I'm finding the answers there." She points to the Bible on the console between them.

"Please, please don't go that route. Talk about lame." Zoey abruptly changes the topic. "I'm glad you got a hold of your mom back at that convenience store. Who would've thought they had a rotary phone in their back office?"

"I had to ask. I'm serious—I'm done with these electronics."

"They're lifesavers," Zoey counters, "all the time. So did your mom give you an ETA?"

"I'm guessing we'll get there before she does. They've got to get over the mountain pass, which takes time. Since we've been

driving almost six hours, I'm glad we're done with that curvy, winding drive. We just passed the Oregon border, so it shouldn't be much longer."

After nightfall, Sarah drives down the main street in Lakeview with Zoey commenting on the limited number of restaurants, gas stations, stores, and hotels. They have to stop for a fire truck and ambulance speeding past them out of town.

Minutes later, Sarah pulls up to a ranch-style house with no lights on. She checks the address with Zoey, and they confirm it's the correct place. It's obvious no one's home.

"I bet my mom and her neighbors aren't here yet," Sarah says. "I don't know these people, so I feel awkward sitting in their driveway waiting for them to come home. Got any ideas?"

"Since we haven't been invited to spend the night here, there's a Best Western and Safeway off the main drag," Zoey suggests. "Why don't we grab some munchies and stay at the hotel? It's getting late, and I'd love to take a hot shower. And you could call and touch base from the room."

I wonder if I can call the hotel and speak to Sarah alone, like when Zoey's showering. I look up the town of around two thousand people on Google Maps and search for the hotel.

"That's a great idea, Zo. I'm tired. That way we won't feel like we barged in; we could go over tomorrow. I'm sure my mom's friends will be happy to see their daughter, and vice versa."

"Yeah," Zoey says. "I hope they realize what a Podunk town this is. No way I could live here."

As the two check into the hotel, I verify the number online. When they enter the room, I also notice it has a touch-tone, corded phone on the nightstand.

There's no way to know if it's part of a landline system or connected through a computer server. I hope it's analog, not VoIP, as Alyssa suggested.

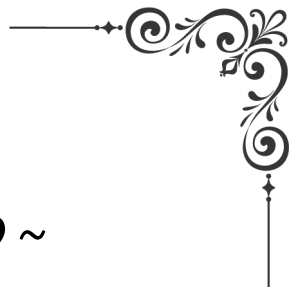
But I never get a chance to talk to Sarah while Zoey's in the shower, because when I call the hotel to patch me through to their room, I'm told the line is busy. I forgot I can only view Sarah if Zoey's standing in front of her. I don't leave a message in case Zoey picks it up.

When Zoey exits the bathroom wearing only a towel and brushing her long, wet hair, she says, "That was delightful. You need to do it next."

Sarah, who's propped up by pillows on one of the queen beds, reading her Bible, says, "Strange. I tried calling my mom's and her neighbor's cell phones, but there's no answer at either. I don't know her daughter's name or number. However, I did get in contact with my sister, who said she talked to Mom half an hour ago and reported they were almost here. Silvia's still in Florida; her husband's waffling about making the drive to his brother's house in Iowa. I told her Mom and I should drive to her place instead, and she liked that plan more."

"I wish I could talk to Amir," Zoey says. "I miss him."

Sarah agrees. "Yeah, it'll be nice to be back with the guys again, won't it?" She returns to reading the Bible, this time abruptly stopping to write down something in her notebook. When Zoey asks her what she's writing, Sarah says, "It's not for your eyes, only mine."



~ Week 9 ~

The next morning before I start my morning routine, I quickly check the monitors.

Wayne's in a huge room filled to the brim with people, and Mastema's at the podium with several other important individuals seated behind him. The conference is ending. Mastema, who's now considered the leader of OWL, is giving the closing notes:

"Once again, thank you to all the presidents, kings, and dignitaries who have traveled to be here at this emergency conference. We at OWL are committed as one to finding out the true source of those who've disappeared and promise to share our discoveries to end this tragedy in our world's history.

"Like all of you here, our sympathies, our condolences, our love are given to the United States of America as they, as we, mourn the death of such a progressive president who will be cherished and fondly remembered. He designed several worthy programs and promoted changes that not only his country has or will appreciate, even though it may not seem that way currently. However, removing the waste, the unneeded, and the excess may be devastating at first, but growth will bloom into something beautiful. I speak not only of the president's death, but also of the loved ones no longer here with us now. America

may feel downtrodden and hopeless, like many of us feel, but it'll rise again, as will we.

"Thank you again for your time, your assistance, and your help. May we all work together as one unit, one system, one belief to better our world."

The audience stands and applauds the man who has a way with words that join the people together. Wayne's clapping as he and the others praise the speaker.

I feel relieved that I didn't have to look into his eyes. But I still sense there's something evil about the guy. It's as if he's got this agenda and is implementing it, no matter what.

When I check Zoey's feed, the women are still asleep.

I leave the room, knowing it's feeding time at the zoo, and I can't be late.

When I'm done milking the cow and almost finished with the goat, Dad pages me, saying, "Breakfast won't be served this morning, but I put out some cereal and fruit for those who want it. Mom doesn't feel good, so we think it's best if she stays upstairs."

I tell him I'll stop by shortly with a couple of bottles of milk to put in the refrigerator.

When I go into the big house, Scooter welcomes me by the office, where the doors are closed and Dad's on the phone. I can't hear all of the words spoken, but I can tell it's a heated discussion. After I give the dog his dry kibble, which I notice Dad has forgotten, I pour myself a bowl of cereal, pick out an orange, and retrieve a small bottle of cold milk.

Carrying my selections, I pass by the office doors to leave and hear my dad say, "I knew it would come to this eventually."

Is this about the nukes? The president? The FBI, or what?

When I settle back in my room, I check both monitors.

Wayne's with Mastema walking to a private jet headed for Brussels, from what Wayne posts on social media. Interestingly, four robot dogs armed with AI-enabled rifles for shooting drones or violent attackers flank them as they climb the ramp to board the plane.

I think the robots may be better deterrents visually than Mastema taking them down with one word and his transhuman touch.

Inside the plane's cabin, of course, a full arrangement of food and liquor is offered.

I find it curious that I've never noticed Mastema take a drink, alcohol or not, or eat food, for that matter. Wayne does, and often too much of both.

Zoey and Sarah are parked by the curb in front of the neighbors' daughter's house again. This time, there's a red Kia SUV in the driveway. The women take the walkway to the front door and knock.

A willowy woman who looks like she's been awake all night answers the door, saying, "Hello? You must be Sarah, right? I'm Della."

"Yes, I am," Sarah answers. "And this is my friend, Zoey. Did my mom and your parents arrive yet?"

"I'm so sorry!" Della rushes from the doorway and grabs Sarah, hugging her tightly. With tears running down her face, she says, "You haven't heard: My parents and your mom were killed last night. A drunk driver in the opposite lane swerved into them on Highway 140, pushing them over a steep embankment. Their truck rolled into Drews Reservoir. All three died on impact."

Della continues to hug Sarah. Zoey rubs her friend's back.

What can I say? Hasn't this woman been through enough? Ugh.

Sarah's quietly sobbing as Della says, "Come in and sit down for a while." She guides the two women into a small living room and motions for them to sit down. "This happened around eight o'clock last night. We had no way to contact you; the fire damaged their phones. We didn't know what to do. Again, I'm sorry for your loss."

"I'm sorry for your loss, too," Sarah says. "You lost both your parents at the same time. I don't know what to say to help you—help both of us—with the pain."

Ah, remember when the two girls had to stop in town for a fire truck and ambulance? Could this have been right after the accident occurred? Possibly.

After the three ladies shed more tears and share their sorrow, Sarah asks if she can visit the site where the crash occurred, and Della gives her the location, which is about half an hour away. The woman also provides the phone number of the local police, informs them that the truck didn't land in the nearby water, and says three bodies were retrieved.

I assume Sarah will have to claim her mother's body next.

Within an hour, Zoey drives Sarah out to Drews Reservoir. It's easy to spot where the tragedy occurred because a tow truck is using a winch to pull up the destroyed vehicle. Sarah slowly walks to the side of the road, her limp more noticeable than ever, while Zoey follows behind her. Silently, they watch as the burnt metal frame is lifted onto a flatbed truck. No other bystanders are nearby.

I can't imagine what's going through my friend's mind.

Later, Sarah and Zoey appear at the police station. When Zoey says she's worried about the BOLO, even in Oregon, Sarah tells her not to be concerned, convinced that it's been handled.

That's probably true. If Carl received my video, I'm sure he would've sent it to the police, and they would cancel the alert. I'm glad to be the one who solved that problem.

Using the station's phone, Sarah contacts her sister, Silvia, to share the horrible news. Zoey and Sarah lean their heads against each other as they listen together through the receiver; Silvia and Sarah agree that their mother should be cremated and her remains sent to Silvia's house in Florida for burial. Silvia comforts Sarah, telling her she'll arrange everything, including contacting the funeral home in Oregon to have their father's ashes mailed to her as well. When Silvia says she'll have a marker with both parents' names on it next to the two markers of her missing twins, Sarah collapses onto the cold linoleum floor.

A police officer rushes to Sarah's side while Zoey stands in shock, still holding the phone in her hand. The officer gives Sarah some water to help revive her. When she comes to, she's

shaking her head and apologizing for falling. She repeatedly tells the staff and Zoey that she'll be okay and is embarrassed.

Zoey, who never lets go of the receiver, ends the call with Silvia, promising they'll keep in touch. After giving Sarah a face-to-face hug, Zoey helps her friend get back into the truck; they spend the next night at the same hotel, with Sarah sleeping most of the time. Meanwhile, Zoey binge-watches sitcoms on television, making a point not to view any negative news.

One night during the week, I call Alyssa. From the get-go, she seems happy to hear from me. I wish we could meet in person, but would she notice our age difference?

"Hack! Great to hear from you. Are you calling because you want me to unlock that quadrant so I can spy on you?" she teases.

"Naw, I miss your sarcasm." Two can play this game. "Anything new there? Like, have you fallen in love with another coder?" I joke, but I'm rather interested in knowing.

"Hardly. They're all ultra-geeks. Boring in the daily stand-up discussions, and they never stop coding enough to say hello. Still wish you were here. It'd be fun—better with you beside me. I'd love it. You would, too."

She asks me about the farm and what I think about our new president—she thinks the same as I do—the dude's running our country farther into the ground, and he's not doing anything. Then we talk about the nukes.

"Horrible, disgusting," she says. "I can't believe the long-term damage they did; no one can live anywhere near the two sites."

We discuss radiation and its effects, which neither of us knows too much about, except for the stuff we read online. I wouldn't move there after a million years.

"But the good news is Starlink's data centers are fault tolerant," Alyssa says, "Nothing—I mean absolutely nothing—can bring them down!"

"Explain," I demand.

"OWL has made sure Colossus in Memphis, Tennessee, and their other supercomputers are fault tolerant so they will continue to function, to operate, even if some of their components fail. This covers crazy things like fires, earthquakes, and flooding—and even nukes, all thanks to replication, redundancy, and backup. Like the satellites, one that goes down—if that happens—would be absorbed and corrected by the others. These mega-computers also have fault detection and fault recovery. So, if the building they're housed in is destroyed, let's say, they won't skip a beat. OWL servers will never die."

"Amazing," is all I say.

She rambles on. "We're currently using xAI's quantum programming, which does all the work for us, and their conversational assistant Grok for unfiltered answers with advanced capabilities in reasoning, coding, and visual processing. It's awesome and time-saving."

"Is that because they've reached singularity?"

"Yes, AI now surpasses human cognitive abilities across the board. But the incredible news is that I was offered a new assignment, an internal transfer to work on the blockchain in Research and Development, where we process integration. And you know that it's all about data."

"That's cool. Are you going to take it?"

"Well, I have the choice of working on cyborgs—ya know, like in *Robocop* or Tony Stark in *Iron Man*. But these are the real deal, incorporating humans with machines."

I tease her again. "If you work there, won't you be considered a cyborg? Isn't its definition any individual who relies extensively on technological devices and artifacts to function? I could see you looking more mechanical than human day by day as OWL tests their biometrics on you."

"Very funny. I'm not too keen on the robot idea; it's more about transhuman automation. They're already mass-producing standard robots that do physical labor and consumer household tasks. They can be militarized at a moment's notice, but my role would be fine-tuning the coding to make them more autonomous, so it can be useful during planetary/asteroid or wartime applications."

Without explaining the details, I tell Alyssa about Sarah's sister and her husband, who have ordered a robot child since their infant twins disappeared. Alyssa thinks it's a great idea to help those struggling with the loss of their children. We also talk about robot dogs. It seems everything is going tech, with no rules or regulations.

Back on topic, my friend says, "Or I can work on the agentic AI designed to operate autonomously as applied to medical, financial, and personal functionality, meaning a one-stop shop, per se, of gathering all facets of daily life into one. This is done using 6G with its built-in machine learning that's changing everything we do. The all-in-one format sounds more up my alley. They're working on injectable nanosensor particles that can be implanted without wires to

read your mind. Can you imagine a phone or even a chip where you can automatically think to pay your bills, make a dental appointment, remind your spouse to make a reservation for dinner, or post something exciting on social media? Without even having to lift a finger. One idea they're already beta testing is the ability to get the technology as small as a marking on the skin."

"Sounds interesting." If she only knew what OWL and Numen were up to. I'd tell her, but I don't want my knowledge to jeopardize her job and backfire on me. Plus, she'll find out soon enough if she transfers to that department.

I also think about what Wayne said at that Davos meeting about a tattoo or marking of some kind. Then I think about what Sarah's learned from that Rapture Kit flash drive and some "Mark of the Beast," as they called it. "Don't you think that's like end-times, Bible stuff?" I ask.

"Like, who cares? It is what it is, and if developed, it'll make life a lot easier than it is now, especially because it'll stop the abuse both physically and monetarily in the world today. Think about it: I could instantly contact the police if Jerk Dirk approaches me. With a thought, I could report my old boyfriend if he hassles me. What a relief that would be, instead of constantly looking over my shoulder. At least it's better than sitting on your hands like our new president is doing."

"Yeah, I'll agree with that one."

Zoey and Sarah are finally on the move again. Zoey's driving east in the truck, with Sarah silently reading her Bible. Her

notebook sticks out of a tote by her feet, this time unopened, unused. Occasionally, my friend sighs or tilts her head back, closes her eyes, and doesn't speak. Her mood is distant and retrospective.

I think she's mad; that's how I interpret her sheltered posture, almost tuning everything out as the miles pass.

"You've been quiet, Sar," Zoey says. "Is everything okay?"

"Uh-huh," is the only word out of Sarah's mouth.

"I get it. Life's been rough on you. First, you lose your husband—not to mention the whole pregnancy thing. Then you not only deal with the loss of one parent, but also the other, both in horrible ways. And the shootings plus the BOLO. I'd be a total mess, too. I don't see how you do it, I don't. You're one courageous woman."

"Yeah."

"I know you, Sar, you like to be in control, in charge and happy. You and I are the same. We're YOLO—you know, 'you only live once.' That's how we think, but you've been shutting down. I want the old Sarah back. Talk to me, girlfriend. I'm here for you, right now. They say talking it out helps, so tell me what you're feeling, what you're going through."

"Zoey, I'm not up to it. I'm numb. So shocked. I just need my space. Can you give me that during the rest of the drive?"

"Yeah. Sorry. I will. Let me know when you're ready to chat. I'm here for you."

"Uh-huh."

After three hours of driving through a desolate area in silence, they pull into a gas station to fill up and use the restroom. Sarah tells Zoey she wants to make a quick call while Zoey picks out some snacks and drinks for the road.

When I enter the big house for dinner, Dad's still in the office; Mom's not downstairs, but Aya's making a light dinner of cured meat and homemade cheese with fresh bread and corn chips.

It's been a week since our president died, so we turn on the big screen and carry our food over to the couches to watch some of his memorial service. While there's no usual ceremony in a church or with a barrage of dignitaries around the world attending, reverence and honor are displayed as he is laid to rest. Many online posts are shown from those who knew the man in charge of the United States, including world leaders, congresspeople, actors, and friends.

Aya raps on the glass office doors to tell Dad dinner's ready, but it takes another twenty minutes for him to come out of the room.

After he sits down with his plate of food and drink, he says to me, "Oh, a gal called a bit ago. Said her name was Sarah and asked for you. She told me to tell you, and I quote, 'Not believing is seeing.' She said it twice and told me it was important that I told you."

"Why didn't you come get me so I could talk to her?" I think about Zoey's betrayal and how I wish I could've told her.

"I was on a call. You're lucky I put the FBI on hold when she called in. And besides, the call was only a few seconds long."

"Did she say anything else?" I wonder what she meant by the mystifying wording. Isn't the saying normally, "Seeing

is believing"? Makes me think of that quote Alyssa said by Phaedrus, but that was, "Things are not always what they seem." Interesting, but what does it mean?

"No, that was it. It was a short conversation; she was in a rush. By the time I asked her for a phone number so you could call her back, she hung up."

"Alright. Thanks, Dad. Do you remember when she called—the exact time?"

"Yes, it was 3:33, right after I told the office I had sent an email accepting their severance package." He says, "I've been laid off—terminated."

I don't offer any response because my uncle and aunt are quizzing Dad about why the FBI has no funding to pay their employees. The three rant about how America is imploding, and there's nothing anyone can do.

Dad almost seems relieved he no longer has to kowtow to the government. He reassures Ben that he'll help out more on the ranch and pick up the slack when it comes to proactively participating in animal husbandry and expanding Grammy's garden.

It's not until after seven that I walk back to my room. Sarah's words continue to taunt me. What is it that could not be believable to see? Did she mean in the past, present, or future?

On Zoey's monitor, the four friends are sitting in the motor home in Nevada with three glasses of wine in front of them on the table. Sarah's not drinking. Of course, Eyes is on her lap purring away. It's Zoey who's telling Amir and Jeremy about

what happened to Sarah's mom and neighbors. Sarah remains subdued, rarely speaking.

Amir, ever the analyzer, is asking about the police and how Sarah's parents' remains will get to Florida.

Because the two men have been staying in the small town of Winnemucca for over a day, he informs the women that they're in the "Friendliest Town in Nevada," with fewer than ten thousand residents. The RV park they're at is on the outskirts of town.

I'm happy everyone's together again. But something's off with Sarah; she barely talks.

That evening, she and Jeremy leave the motor home and take a walk. They're gone for over an hour. Right after that, Jeremy and Amir leave the motor home and are gone for a while. Something's going on.

At night, Sarah sleeps in the drop-down bunk above the cab with Eyes; Jeremy is on the couch, and Amir and Zoey are in the back private bedroom.

I have to keep on track: Sarah said not believing is seeing; she didn't say seeing is believing. What's she talking about?

On Wayne's monitor, he's with Mastema at the European Council, where EU leaders meet at least four times a year. It's the same area where the USA goes for NATO meetings. These European summits, as they're called, are held in the Europa Building in Brussels' European quarter. Mastema is introduced by the head of the Council of the European Union, which organized the conference.

Like at the WEF, the clapping and hoopla of the leader's introduction resonate in the room until Mastema quietly says,

"Calmness," as he raises his arms in the air. Instantly, no one is talking, and everyone gives their rapt attention to the captivating speaker.

"Peoples of Europe, of our world. Unite!" he says with authority.

The crowd yells his name as they stand in unison.

"Be still," he says. Everyone obeys his command. He continues. "The One World League, OWL, thanks you for your gracious support and pledge of allegiance to them—and especially to me. I thank this council for providing the avenue to share our international plan of global growth that will make our world better. A world where all people are treated equally and respectfully while collaborating and communicating for the betterment of all. And to those who've gone before us and have been purposefully removed from the planet for their unbelief in our mission, we realize their disappearance enables us to accomplish our goal. We wouldn't be here, at this pivotal moment in time, without them opening this new path of change.

"It is OWL's will, our purpose, to preserve our humanity, which is the center of our universe, by playing a significant role in helping society. We—I'm—committed to each of you and all governments by using the resources humankind has invented, especially the digitally transformative tool of artificial intelligence and quantum computing. We believe that through AI, we can harness the power to rule the world the right way, the only way."

Those in the room, from government leaders and ministers to lowly workers like Wayne, are praising the speaker, all in different tongues as they honor him.

"Calmness," Mastema whispers, and the room is silenced again. "But we all have work to do from this day forward! We need to find common ground by working toward the future. We're disappointed that Israel attacked Iran, that nuclear bombs detonated in the United States, and that there are rumors of war wherever we turn."

Mastema walks around the riser; he featly makes his way down the steps toward the crowd, saying, "Leaders, let's make a promise here, right now, to work as one for the betterment of the world, of society, of humankind. I invite you to come forward and join me by showing your commitment to our goal."

Immediately, men and women leave their seats and walk down the aisles to the front of the auditorium. Mastema returns to the podium as the people flock around him. Next, everyone kneels in submission wherever they are—on the stage, on the steps, or in the aisles. Because there's no room at the front, some get down on their knees in front of their chairs. It looks like all in attendance, including the European leaders, pledge their servitude.

A man in the crowd yells, "Mastema, we honor you! We respect you! We serve you! We give all to you!" This turns into a chant: "Mastema, honor, respect, serve!" The fever pitches vibrate throughout the room. Leaders are freely offering their countries' monetary possessions as if providing tithes to their god.

A man enters the doors at the back of the room and walks down the center aisle, declaring, "Iam Mastema, you are an abomination. Jesus Christ is the answer. I command you to—"

Before the man's next words are spoken, Mastema points to the man and stares at him. "Decease!" he declares, as his eyes emit a neon-blue flash.

Within seconds, the man grabs his chest and screams. Instantly, he crashes to the ground. No one comes to his aid. He lies there, convulsing.

The crowd starts clapping and exalting Mastema further with accolades, praising his action and continuing their chant: "Mastema! Honor! Respect! Serve!"

I can't believe this man—this intriguing individual who has mesmerized so many, yet he just injured his adversary. I'm impressed with his magnetism, his fearlessness, and his calculated cockiness. Yeah, everyone should respect him if he can pull off a one-world peace where everyone is happy again, but why harm or kill anyone who goes against him?

It's those steely eyes. They spook me. I don't want to look him in the eye, like ever, even on my monitor.

The next day after chores, when I go inside the big house for breakfast, Dad's sitting at the table with a cup of coffee and a plate of toast with jam, reading the weekly newspaper. Considering he no longer has a job, he's surprisingly relaxed. He informs me that Mom isn't feeling any better. He asks if I can help him clean out the garage over the next few days. Makes me wonder if his being out of work will increase my chores as his assistant. He also wants to know if I'm interested in helping him restore Pop's old Ford, which was given to me. Of course, I agree, but I wonder if he's trying to come up with projects to keep his sanity while he isn't working.

When I turn on the monitors later that day, *Wayne's in Mastema's hotel room with six men. He's seated off to the side of the room—there, but not to be noticed. Like the hired help to fill Mastema's every want or need at the drop of a hat. The group discusses how the European Union has given its full backing and support to Mastema. Their leader runs the room, and everyone listens to his demands with bated breath.*

Not wanting to lock eyes with the man, I switch to Zoey's feed.

Something has happened. The truck's parked behind the motor home on the side of the road. It doesn't look like they're on the regular highway, but on gravel. Amir and Zoey are standing in the middle of the empty street; he's telling her he wants to return to Israel without her. She's upset; she's shaking her head and telling him how she thought he was the one—like the one to be with the rest of her life. At one point, she's pounding him on the chest, saying, "Don't do this to me, Amir. Please don't!"

While Jeremy opens the truck's tailgate and back shell window to look for something, Sarah, who's wearing a funky camo ski cap, walks up to the arguing couple. She abruptly says, "Zoey, I know what you're up to. You can stop playing the game."

"It's fine, Sarah, Amir says. "She doesn't understand that we're not a couple anymore. I was trying to explain why."

Zoey complains, "What? I didn't do anything. I'm not playing with you, either of you." Crossing her arms across her breasts, she gets defensive. "What are you accusing me of, Sarah?"

"You know what. Stop lying to us. I know you have a smartphone. I saw it when I went through your bag at the hotel in Lakeview when you were in the shower."

"So now you're going through my things?" accuses Zoey. "Some friend you are!"

Sarah ignores her remarks. "Are you going to say who you've been in contact with, or should I?"

When Zoey doesn't respond, Sarah tries to touch her hair, but the female steps away from her reach.

Sarah continues, "Okay, we'll do this my way. What about your Numen implant? I saw it after you took that shower when you were combing your wet hair. And then when we hugged at the police station, I felt it against my skull—right where those wires stick out of my head. It hit me in the same place I used to have my implant!" She puts her good hand on the bandaged stitches by her ear. "What I want to know is why. Why did you betray me? Why trick us?"

Amir asks, "Zo, was it for money that you did it?"

Looking only at Sarah, Zoey answers, "Not really. Numen came to me, begging me to help them reinstate you as one of their participants, but I told them there was no way you would do that, especially since you started reading the Bible and became obsessed with it. And what's with your notebook? You've always said you hate journaling, yet you write in that daily and won't let anyone, including me, see it. So, Numen suggested I get implanted. It was only to improve your ratings—I did it for you!"

Jeremy approaches the group and gives his opinion: "Zo, you're a troll. Not only did you take advantage of Sarah, but

you also ruined three friendships. You did this to gain notoriety, probably within the Numen system!"

"I did not! I love you guys, all of you," she protests.

"I've heard enough," Sarah says. "I can't take this anymore. Zoey, I forgive you, but I'm not 'untaken,' as you say. I'm far from it. I'm the Lord's now." She leaves the edge of the gravel road and walks out into the foot-tall weeds dotted with sagebrush. Anyone can tell she's upset. Jeremy starts to go after her.

When she's about seventy feet away from the road, she turns back and screams, "I hate you, Numen! Hear me. This is stopping right now!"

What happens next is unbelievable, inconceivable.

Zoey's feed shows Sarah pull a small gun out of her back jeans pocket—yes, the same gun Sarah had when she was by the tree with Eyes, and she holds it up to her head, placing it right on the ski cap she's wearing...and pulls the trigger! The shot echoes in the valley.

I'm stunned. Is this real?

Zoey begins to run over to Sarah, but Amir physically stops her by grabbing her arm, saying, "No, you don't want to see this, Zo. Head wounds are the worst."

Jeremy reaches Sarah and kneels in the dry dirt, his back facing the two by the road.

Right then, the monitor in my room splits into two sections: There's Zoey's feed and an overhead view, most likely from a satellite, zooming in on Jeremy, who's hovering over Sarah.

Thankfully, I do not have to see the blood gushing out.

The satellite screen shows Jeremy pulling off his T-shirt and laying it over Sarah's face, patting it tenderly. It focuses on the red ooze on both his hands, which he wipes off on his jeans.

"Is she dead?" Zoey cries.

Jeremy turns his head and signals the positive.

"Yes, yes, she is," answers Amir.

Leaving Sarah's body, Jeremy walks slowly back to Zoey and Amir. It looks like blood is still on his hands and pants. The satellite camera remains on Sarah.

By now, Zoey's beyond herself. She doesn't know what to do. "I have nothing now. I don't have Amir. I don't have my dear friend, Sarah. Nothing." She's squatted down in the middle of the road, her head in her hands.

"What should we do?" she asks the men. "Should we call the police or take her body to them?"

"No, we can't call the police," Amir says. "But Zoey, you know Numen's the cause of this. They made her do this. You were part of it, too. And I'm sure that with your implant on you, every single Numen viewer witnessed exactly what happened—and are watching our actions this minute, maybe even recording it."

Zoey gasps, "I didn't kill her! I didn't!"

Still stunned, I look at Dad's camera. I never turned it on, but no one knows that, and with Zoey's 250,000 followers, thousands may have seen what just occurred. I bet someone recorded it with an external phone or camera. You can't unsee it. Numen can't cover it up, either.

Amir says, "Correct, you didn't kill her, but Numen and you drove her to this. So, what I recommend is that we separate. Zoey, since you and I are no longer together, why don't you take

Jeremy's truck and leave? Go wherever you go, but I wouldn't recommend Los Angeles due to the bombing. Somehow get back your bank job through a transfer or something, and move on from this nightmare."

As Jeremy heads toward the motor home, he says, "I'll get a blanket, and Amir, maybe you can help me take care of Sarah, wrap her up carefully. Do you think we should bury her out here?"

"No, let's do the right thing. I don't want her where animals can get to her. Let's take her body to a morgue and explain what happened. We can always mention Numen and have the police look into their video, as I'm sure it'll be documented somewhere, if not posted online and going viral."

"Yeah, that'll work. And when I get to the next town, I'll call her sister and let her know. We'll mail Silvia those gold coins. That's the best we can do."

Zoey's freaking out. She's picking up handfuls of gravel and throwing them into the weeds while she mumbles to herself, "I can't believe this. I can't believe this. What have I gotten myself into?"

Jeremy returns with a sleeping bag and blanket, while Amir says, "It'd be best if we continue with our plans. Jeremy, is it alright with you to drop me off in Salt Lake City on your way to Chicago? I can catch a flight to Israel from there."

"Yeah," replies Jeremy. "Maybe it's for the best if we go our own ways and back to normal lives, but I'm going to really, really miss Sarah."

"True. I am, too," Amir admits as he pats his friend on the back.

Zoey's still on the ground, so Amir offers a hand to help her up. "Leave, Zoey. Let Jeremy and me handle this. Enough is enough. Because of what you did and have become due to Numen, we don't want you around right now."

Jeremy fishes the keys to the truck out of his pocket and hands them to Zoey. "Here, take all my keys. I'll never return to the Valley now."

Without another word, Zoey gets in the truck, turns it around on the road, and drives off, dust kicking off its tires. In her rearview mirror, she watches Amir and Jeremy start across the dry land, one carrying a blanket and the other a sleeping bag as they go collect her friend.

With watery eyes, I watch the satellite show the men tenderly put Sarah's body into the sleeping bag, Jeremy's shirt still covering her face. They gently carry the lifeless form into the motor home, which the satellite cannot access. Twenty minutes later, the motor home heads east, and the satellite disengages.

With only Zoey's screen open on Numen's internal port, she's still crying as she turns back onto Highway 80, heading south. Her phone rings, and she answers, "Hello?"

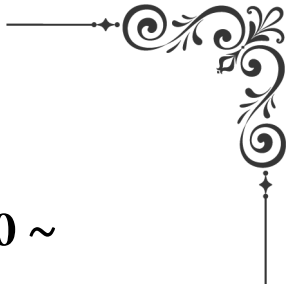
"Zoey, this is D—"

The audio gets cut off, and the screen goes dark.

I slowly click off both monitors, knowing Sarah's finally free.

I'm depressed. Heartbroken. I've lost someone who means a lot to me.

Once again, I spend the night in Grammy's bed with Scooter, hoping tomorrow will be better.



~ Week 10 ~

The next morning, I'm startled by Scooter barking as he jumps off the bed. Ben is standing at my door, which is ajar only a few inches. The dog is trying to get out while Ben wants to come in as my name's called.

Dressed in only a T-shirt and boxers, I push Scooter aside, get out of Grammy's bed, and open the door. "Um, can I help you?"

"Hack, I've been looking all over for you! I thought you'd gone missing like my mom and Ethan. I paged you, but you never answered, so I went to your place, and you weren't there, but the squawk box was. I ran over here to tell your parents, but came in here instead. Sorry I barged in on you."

"Don't worry, Uncle. I get it. You panicked. I would've, too. I didn't think of bringing the walkie-talkie with me. But what's up?"

"Oh, I wanted to tell you that I couldn't sleep, so I got up early and fed the animals. You don't need to milk the cow or goat, either. Maybe when you have time, you can clean the horse stalls—or better yet, why don't you skip it today?"

"Wow, thanks! I'm glad not to have to do it. Maybe I'll go back to sleep instead."

"Hardly; Aya will be over in a few minutes. We need to help your dad with something."

Why are these adults so secretive? Do they think I can't handle things, so they lead me on all the time? Just tell me straight up what I need to know. I can't stand the way they treat me sometimes.

"Alright. Give me a couple of minutes to get dressed. I'd love to brush my teeth."

"This won't take long. Your pearly whites can wait. Get dressed, and see you in a few." He leaves the room with Scooter while I question his actions again.

When I enter the great room wearing yesterday's clothes, Aya's already fixing me a cup of coffee, adding the perfect amount of milk that she knows I like. Ben's making a rut in the wood flooring, pacing between the long table and the couches. Both seem apprehensive.

Dad walks down the stairs, and I ask how Mom's feeling.

"Well, Jack," he says. Here we go again, using my real name. "To put it bluntly, your mom's ill." He takes a deep sigh.

"I already know that, Dad," I retort.

My father looks at Ben and Aya. Ben tips his head slightly.

Dad says, "We think the cancer is back." He sits down on one of the barstools as Aya serves him his black coffee.

"Cancer?" I say. "What kind, and what do you mean by 'back'? You mean she's had it before?"

"Glioblastoma. Brain cancer. She had it when she was pregnant with you. You know she's always dealt with headaches, but now they're constant and severe. She had a

seizure the other day; I found her on the floor in the bathroom upstairs."

"Did my birth cause it?" I ask, not wanting to know the answer.

Aya rubs my back, saying, "No, Hack. You had nothing to do with it. Your birth was a blessing, the best thing that happened to your parents. She had surgery, chemo, and radiation—all before you were five years old. Although it's rare, it's unusual for someone to live with the disease as long as your mom has."

"Okay," I say. My mind races: Death is death, the final episode. But my mom dying? No, I don't want to go there. She's barely fifty years old. It's not fair.

After Dad explains that he and Mom had a conference call yesterday afternoon with her neurosurgeon, I ask, "So will she have the surgery and all that stuff again?"

"She doesn't want to go that route this time," Dad says. "With all that's going on in the world lately, she wants to stay here at the ranch and enjoy her time with us." The three tell me about the symptoms and how they'll get worse. Avoiding any emotions, they ask me to help rearrange Grammy's bedroom so we can bring Mom downstairs. This way, Dad can continue to sleep with her.

As we remove a bulky dresser from the room, Aya changes the bedsheets and cleans the nearby bathroom.

Dad tells me the disease is incurable, but Mom has learned how to hide it well. I do know about her ongoing headaches. She's had them for years, but I didn't know she's been having seizures or falling.

"Can I go see her?" I ask after the room is finished.

"Of course, she wants to see you. And you can help me carry her downstairs."

When I enter my parents' bedroom, Mom's sitting in a chair, hair pulled up into a bun, and she's fully dressed with her shoes on. One wouldn't know she's dying. I walk over and kiss her on the cheek.

She takes hold of my hand. "Jack, I'm sorry we never told you; your father and I knew the cancer would come back eventually, but not when. I'm thankful I've had so many good years—watching you grow up to become a man has been wonderful."

"Are you in a lot of pain now?" I ask.

"No. Thankfully, for the last two days, Aya has been giving me her homeopathic tea concoction of feverfew, ginger, peppermint, lavender, and turmeric that lessens the pain. I just don't trust my balance anymore, so moving downstairs is best."

"Did you know it came back?" I question. "Like, do you feel any different?"

"I 'sus' it did," she says with a twinkle in her eyes. I smile at her, knowing she said the word to offset the tension during such a tragedy.

Dad enters the room and gently picks Mom up in his arms. I walk backward down the stairs ahead of them to break their fall if something happens. Dad delivers her to the great room lounger, and Ben provides a soft blanket and pillow.

"I'm not an invalid," Mom declares. "I'm still able to stand up, with a little help. I'd like to sit at the table for a bit."

"Of course. Here you go." Dad helps her over to the eating area. "Karen, you're a stubborn woman," he says, "but remember, we love you, so we want you to be comfortable."

Aya places a serving plate of scrambled eggs and toast on the table while I pour orange juice for everyone. I'm glad Mom's still functioning and participating in the conversation. This'll be the new normal, for now.

After breakfast, Mom does her best to help Aya clear away the dishes. Dad announces he's headed out to clean the garage, motioning to me as if I have to help him. I pipe up that I need to change clothes, brush my teeth, and check on the cameras, so I'll meet him in about an hour.

When Dad leaves the house, I ask the women if there's anything I can do, but they say no. Aya helps Mom go to her new bedroom to organize her clothes. As I'm walking toward the front door, the office phone rings.

Sadly, I know it can't be Sarah any longer, so I yell that I'll answer it, saying it's probably the Choates looking to barter for more meat.

"Hello, Hackett residence," I say.

"Hack?"

I'm dumbfounded.

"Hack? It's Sarah."

"Wait, you're supposed to be dead! I saw you shoot yourself," I say, bewildered, as I shut the glass doors for privacy.

"I hope it's not too early to call, but did you get my message? It was all a ruse! Did we pull it off?"

"No. Yes. I mean I don't know!" I'm almost shaky with excitement. "No, it's not too early. Yes, Dad told me, but I didn't understand it. And how in the world did you do it?"

"I hope we didn't overdo it. When I saw Zoey implanted at that hotel, I was furious, but I knew I had to find a way out...the only way I could do it was to 'kill' myself. If Jeremy or Amir shot me, Numen would've accused them of murder, making things worse for them. This was the best way, the only way."

"But I heard the gunshot; you fired when it was aimed at your head!"

"Amir bought blanks for the gun in Winnemucca. And then he had me wear his bulky ski cap, which has Kevlar inside—you know, that military-grade material that deflects bullets. It buffered the gun's kick when I pulled the trigger, but, man, it stung."

"But Jeremy wiped off your blood. Didn't it get on his hands and pants?"

"Ha, we used ketchup packets we found in the motor home; he stayed far enough away from Zoey so she wouldn't notice its smell. Jeremy was more concerned about the satellite overhead zooming in over my body, so he had to lean over me whenever he could. Taking off his shirt and putting it over my face was a great idea, too."

"Wow. Just wow. I'm, like, amazed, because I believed every second."

"That's why I left the message I did—'Not believing is seeing.' Now you see the truth: I'm alive. I didn't want you to believe what you saw."

I laugh. The three of them pulled it off! I doubt Zoey knows what happened.

She asks, "What did you see last on the Numen portal?"

"As Zoey drove away, she was crying and headed back toward Reno, like, taking the same route Amir and Jeremy used."

"What about the satellites? Are they still tracking us?"

"I don't know. Her entire link abruptly went offline when she got a call from D, but I could go back to my room and check right now if you'd like. Where are you calling me from?"

"A campground in Elko, Nevada. We're thinking of ditching the motor home and getting a used car. The vehicle is too easy to spot. We're afraid to move again until we're sure no one's watching us."

I go to the large map of the United States on the office wall, trace my finger along Highway 80, and tap the spot.

Sarah continues, "Amir bartered his watch for this burner phone; I hope we're not being tracked."

"Alright, let me run to my computer and see what's happening. Here's my cell number, which is masked from the satellites. Can you call me back in ten minutes?" I repeat the number.

"Will do. You truly are sent from God, Hack. Thank you, and talk to you soon."

When we hang up, I'm like a new person. Sarah Colton is back, and she pulled off exactly what she wanted: to no longer exist in Numen's constantly prying eyes.

As I quickly leave the big house, I yell, "Love ya, Mom!"

"Love ya back, Hack," she replies. And yes, it's the first time she's called me that.

With a smile on my face that I can't erase, I run to the outbuilding and turn on the monitors.

Knowing the previous night was the last time I checked Zoey's screen and it was blacked out, I hope it's back online again.

Wayne's portal displays first, but I ignore it as I type in the access codes to get into Numen's internal portal on the other monitor.

But on his public screen, a message pops up:

> *To those who have been following LA-Zo and her infamous friend, ValleyGirl, please be aware that Sarah Colton has committed suicide, most likely for her part in believing incorrect conspiracy theories regarding our company. Although we deeply feel the sorrow and loss of any human being, we hope those around Sarah, her friends and loved ones, may be able to move on and cherish every moment of life.*
>
> *We will also miss ValleyGirl and her contributions to Numen, but we feel that LA-Zo will fill the void of such a loss, as she remembers her dear friend who took her own life at such an early age.*
>
> *If you haven't added LA-Zo to your choices of participants, please consider doing so, as she is fully committed to showing us the ins and outs of the new banking industry that incorporates OWL's innovative AI programs to make every day easier.*

What a bunch of bull.

I check on Zoey's monitor, and it's back online. She's pulling off the freeway into a hotel in Las Vegas.

Yeah. I don't know what's in Vegas for Zoey, but I'm sure Numen will be able to control another person they can track to promote OWL's products and services. What a scam they've got going.

With a few minutes to spare before Sarah calls, I quickly change clothes and take care of my hygiene.

"Sarah," I say when I answer my phone, "this is much better now because, before, the calls were in the office in our big house, making it awkward with my parents and family nearby. I've got good news!"

I read her Numen's online bulletin and hear her say, "Praise God." Her phone must have its speaker on because I can hear Jeremy and Amir whooping.

"The satellites aren't spying on you, either. Plus, Zoey's now in Las Vegas, doing no clue what."

"Her bank has a hub there; she's gone there often, and—sorry, Amir—she had a boyfriend there at one time."

"Good riddance, Zo," Amir says. "I'm glad you're on our side, Hack, if you want to call it that."

I say, "Amir, I got to hand it to you, bruh. That was amazing with the ski cap."

"Yeah," he says, "Thank Israel Defense Forces for that one."

"It was my idea to use the ketchup," Jeremy adds.

"Another good one," I compliment him. "Hope it didn't stain your shirt."

While they rehash how the crafty scheme went down, I pull up a map of Nevada, locate Elko, and study its location.

"Guys, next you're headed to Salt Lake City, right?" I ask.

"Yeah, after Amir takes those stitches out of Sarah's foot, we're going to dump the RV and buy a boring car," says Jeremy. "One that's big enough for Eye's crate."

"I've got an idea," I say, "if you don't mind. You know how the US is crashing in on itself? I mean, we have a lame president, a defaulting financial market, and shortages of food and products, not to mention the nukes and the fact that we're still recovering from those missings. Then there's artificial intelligence; I think I read that AI's capacity is doubling every three months now. Have you noticed how everything is going full-AI surveillance with Numen or OWL, like, all over the world?"

I briefly describe the farm, its location, and who lives here. I explain how I tapped into Numen and also watch WaynesWorld, vaguely mentioning Mastema. I tell them that the Starlink satellites are blocked over us, but I don't tell them how.

"So, why not drive up to Bonners Ferry and stay with my family and me?" I don't mention Mom's cancer; it's still too raw. "We have plenty of land and resources, and you'll be off the grid, completely away from OWL spying on you."

"Is it okay with your parents?" Amir asks. "Your uncle and aunt? We would hate to barge in like that; we might disrupt your lives and use up too much of your resources."

In my head, I recall that Amir's a doctor, so he would be the perfect addition to our farm, especially for Mom. Jere-

my's good with outdoor stuff, so Ben and Aya would appreciate his help, and Sarah, I've grown to like her quirky personality and know she'd blend in instantly. Mom would adore her.

"No, you'd be welcome, believe me," I reply without any reservations.

I can hear them debating the decision: Sarah's definitely on board, since she has nowhere to go except Florida, which is far away, to be with her sister. Jeremy loves the idea of being on acres and acres of land without the trappings of electronics, and Amir, who plans to go back to Israel to be with his family, somehow can't see how to get there safely with his country's constant military skirmishes.

Sarah speaks. "Alright, it may work temporarily—only if it's okay with your family."

"Great! I'll check with them, but in the meantime, it's a twelve-hour drive from there to here, so take your time and let me know your ETA." I'm excited but apprehensive, mainly because I haven't cleared it with anyone on my end.

I inform them that I've got chores to do and will text updates. I'm elated thinking about how this could or would work, but scared because I know Dad's the one who's going to oppose the idea.

And, of course, I'm late again. I grab my walkie-talkie, leave the room, and go around the corner of the building to the garage.

When I enter, Dad looks up while standing next to an old workbench opening drawers, organizing their contents, and discarding the junk into a box on the floor. "Thanks for helping out," he says. "I don't think this place has been

cleaned out since I left for college. Why don't you back the Ford out and move it to the side of the garage? I thought that if we want to restore it, we can set up a canopy over it and work on it from there during the summer instead of in here, where it gets hot."

"Good idea, Dad," I say as he tosses me the truck keys.

Next, we pull out a couple of old bicycles with flat tires, and Dad starts rambling about the times he and Ben rode them to town. "We should see if the tires are still good. I think the pump is in that cabinet over there. Can you check?"

I retrieve the pump, and together we add air to the tires. I doubt the bikes will last, but we each ride in circles on the gravel driveway for a few minutes, and the tires seem to hold. At least neither one of us falls over or crashes. I can't remember the last time I was on a bike.

I don't mind Dad taking his time cleaning out the garage. I'm glad he's enjoying talking about his childhood and living on the ranch. For an unemployed man, he's not super upset or mad, even if his forty-nine-year-old wife—my dear mother—is dying of brain cancer. I don't dare bring up my idea about Sarah and her friends. I don't want to pile on more things for him to worry about. Not now. Not yet.

We work without stopping until dinnertime. Both of us welcome the physical labor; the strenuous activity calms my overactive mind, giving me a needed break. Dad may feel it, too, because he relaxes when he retells stories about when he and Ben would skinny-dip in the Blue Pond, or when Pop caught them smoking cigarettes behind the horse barn. But the one that got my goat was when two steers escaped

and walked up the front porch, scaring Grammy out of her mind. After he explains that cattle can go up the stairs, but their knees don't bend enough to allow them to climb down, he describes the hysterical way they had to put planks on the stairs and coax the bovines with Grammy's sliced apples soaking in molasses that she was using to make a pie. Too funny.

The mood at dinner is subdued; we can tell Mom is exhausted from making the effort today. Dad says it will be best for everyone to leave early so the two of them can get settled in for the night. Mom suggests having Scooter stay with them now that they're sleeping downstairs. I'm sure the dog will miss taking over my bed.

I return to my room around 6 p.m. and call Sarah back.

When she says they sold the rig, bought a new car, and are spending the night in Boise, I tell her that we're dealing with a minor crisis at the farm. It'd be best if they stay at the Johnstons' house for a few days.

"Is it alright to stay there?" Amir asks. "I mean, it's not your house, so how come we're allowed there?"

"It's abandoned. The owners were taken during the missings. We have keys to the place, and the son who now owns it lives in New York. He says we can take whatever we want or need, so you staying there a couple of nights until things lighten up here would be best." I say all this hoping I believe my own words.

Jeremy says, "Okay, but please, we don't want to take advantage of anyone. We'll offer their son money to pay for anything we use. Can you tell him that for us?"

After agreeing, I briefly tell them about Mom and her diagnosis. It's as if I need to get the words out of my mouth to make myself accept the news. They are sympathetic, telling me it will be okay.

I end the conversation by saying, "I'll text you where I put the key later tonight."

Knowing it's still light outside, I walk back to the big house. Dad greets me as he's coming out of Grammy's bathroom and asks me what's up. I can tell he wants to be alone with Mom by the way he keeps looking down the hall to the bedroom door.

"I thought I would grab some snacks since it's so early. Hope you don't mind."

"No, great idea. Go at it. I'm beat from working on the garage. Thanks again for your help." And with that, my father says good night and leaves me alone in the great room.

I'm carrying my backpack, so I load it up with a box of crackers, a couple of sodas, cheese, and a bottle of milk. I'll add the box of cereal I've got in my room, plus several power bars. Since I'm by the front door, I sneak into the office and nab the key to the Johnstons' house that's in a ceramic dish on a credenza.

When I get back to my room, I decide to wait until dark to venture over to the Johnstons'. With time on my hands, I give Alyssa a call, even though it's not our normal time to chat.

"What's up?" she says when she answers. "You're early."

"Got some free time before I have to run an errand. Anything new with you at the farm?" I mock.

"Farm? Yeah, the crazy farm. That's what it is." She rambles, "Never go into coding, because this place is strange. There's a division here strictly for AI genomics; they spend all day predicting the impact of gene mutations. AI has the mind of a hive. We're the bees collecting pollen and bringing it back to our queen, which is OWL. I swear, some of the employees seem like worker bees frantically trying to improve accuracy in our deep-learning model. Currently, they're tuning the weights in the LLM. Like the buzzing insects, they're in hyperdrive because they get so jacked up about it!"

"But you love it, don't you? Maybe you'll be the queen bee someday. So, I assume you've already switched blockchains?"

"Yep, and it's interesting. I'm learning stuff I never considered about AI and its tentacles. It's going to be used for everything, absolutely everything."

"I bet. Why don't you become a coding instructor?" I suggest.

"Hardly; teachers get paid the worst. One of the coders here has a wife who was an elementary school teacher. And how's that going for her? She and every elementary school employee have been out of work for over two months. Think about daycare workers—their jobs are gone and won't be needed for at least a few years. Then there's the medical staff, doctors or nurses in obstetrics or pediatrics, you name it. Out of a job. And if you go to Walmart or Target, you can't find anything you need, but there are plenty of diapers, formula, cribs, and baby bottles on the shelves to remind every-

one. Who will buy that stuff now? We need babies, that's what this world needs, like now."

"That's a rant, Alyssa."

"Yeah, I think we're all burnt out about not being told what really happened when so many disappeared. I'm tired and frustrated; sorry."

"You're forgiven. No one is doing well anymore." I tell her about my mom and her diagnosis. It makes Alyssa even sadder.

We talk for about half an hour, even promising to use FaceTime to see each other in person. But I'm skeptical about doing that: What if she learns about Sarah, and somehow OWL gets wind of it? It could turn into a nightmare quickly.

When it gets dark, I check outside. It looks like the big house is quiet; Grammy's bedroom light is off. I load the heavy pack on my back and sneak around to the side of the garage. I open the garage door as quietly as possible and retrieve one of the bicycles. I roll it on the grassy area instead of the gravel to prevent making any loud noises. After turning the bend in the road, I get on the bike and ride the two miles to our neighbors' house.

At the Johnstons', I use my phone flashlight to help unlock and enter their front door. I put the dry goods on the kitchen table and the perishables in the refrigerator. I place the house key under the front porch doormat and return home under the cloudy sky. Before I get into bed, I text Sarah more instructions.

But I still haven't told Dad. I hope this goes down okay.

The next morning when I'm done with my chores, I head to the big house. I ask Dad, who's getting some ibuprofen, how Mom's feeling, and he reports she's exhausted, so she's sleeping in. He tells me Ben drove Aya to town an hour or two ago to meet one of her Japanese friends who will swap our eggs and milk for starter plants of herbs that might help Mom. As Dad checks on my mom, I prepare my breakfast and eat it alone while sitting at the kitchen bar.

Minutes later, Ben comes barging into the house, with Aya trailing behind him, carrying a collapsible walker she must have procured from her friend.

"Brent, we've got a problem!" he yells.

Dad comes down the hall from Grammy's room. "What happened?"

"Aya and I were driving home, and there was this green Subaru hatchback with Nevada plates ahead of us that pulled into the Johnstons' place and parked. I couldn't see them get out, but doesn't their son Mike live in New York?"

"Yeah, they could be squatters. Let's go check it out. You loaded?"

"Yup," Ben says. "Let's take my truck."

Dad goes into the office to get our neighbors' house key and starts screaming. "Where's their key? It was here the other day, and I swear I put it back. Ben, what did you do with it?"

"Don't look at me; I didn't touch it, Bro!" retorts my uncle, who is in the doorway trying to calm my dad down.

Knowing I'm the cause of the frustration, I loudly announce, "Dad. Ben. Stop." I have to say it twice, the second time louder.

"Please listen to me, right now!" I demand. "I can explain about the key, and squatters are not at the Johnstons'."

"What?" Dad accusatorily asks. "This doesn't have to do with satellites or hacking, does it? What did you do this time?"

"Dad—"

"I'm giving you exactly three minutes to come clean and tell us everything." Dad has both hands on his waist. Ben is behind him, and Mom's holding on to Aya as they both walk toward me. "Does it relate to those calls from that guy named Jeremy and some cryptic message from a Sarah?"

"Yes, but it's not what you think. It's about three of my friends I care about—a lot." I start at the beginning, telling them about when I became a beta tester for Numen; then I explained how I watched Sarah when everyone disappeared and she fell down the stairs, hacked into the company's internal server, and learned about OWL's surveillance techniques.

Mom asks if we can go into the great room so we can sit down. I sense she realizes I'm pouring my heart out, although Dad and Ben are still growling at me.

I explain Zoey helping with Sarah's injuries and James being shot by her neighbor. I tell them that Jeremy took her to his house as well, and that Amir removed her implant and then the one in the cat. I emphasized that I was the one who told Sarah about it.

I bring the now-more-than-three-minute dialogue to a close by telling them about the four escaping the nuke, going to Oregon to pick up Sarah's mom—who died in an accident—and, finally, Sarah learning Zoey's implant was tracking them, so she had to fake her death.

Dad and Ben are silent. Staring at me without blinking.

Mom speaks up. "Well, that's a story, to say the least." She holds her chest and catches her breath. "So, Brent and Ben, why don't you go over to the Johnstons' house and get to know these folks who have gone through so much, and then ask them to come stay here?"

"I second that," Aya adds. "I think they'd be a wonderful addition to the ranch. I think they should be welcome here, where it's safe from this Numen or OWL company."

Dad says, "Alright, let's take Ben's truck, but I'm not sold on the idea. I want to meet these three and gauge them for myself."

"Dad," I say, "Amir's a physician, I think in family practice. Jeremy worked with Sarah for a Los Angeles newspaper, but he's a go-to guy who loves the outdoors. And Sarah, she's changed so much since I first met her that I know she'll be cool to have here."

We three guys get in the truck and head over to the Johnstons'. On the drive, I still feel guilty hiding so much from my parents.

"Dad, remember when I hacked the FBI and inputted Alyssa Brenda Clifton's name in the database?"

"Yeah, don't tell me she's coming here, too," Ben says.

"No," I say, "she's the one who works for Starlink, which OWL owns. I didn't hack the satellites. She did it willingly. It was her idea."

Ben says, "Tell us, do you have a thing for her?"

I'm kind of shocked by his blunt question. "Hardly. She's five years older than me and lives in Texas, so how would that work?"

"You didn't answer my question, Hack." Ben winks at my dad.

"Funny, but I do have a problem. If she's working for OWL, should I tell her about Sarah and come clean that way, too?"

"Absolutely do not tell her," Dad says, "ever. That would put Sarah and her friends in jeopardy. Be her friend, but keep your mouth shut."

"Okay, I'll take your advice, Dad. Thanks."

"Next time you talk to her, tell her thanks from Ben and me, as I appreciate not having space cameras spying on us all the time."

When we pull into the neighbors' driveway, Jeremy's standing behind the Subaru, opening the back hatch to check on Eyes. Amir's carrying a duffle bag up the porch stairs, and Sarah's in the front doorway.

Ben gets out of the truck, his rifle in his hand, I guess to show who's in charge. Dad has his hand behind his back, on the ready if there's any trouble.

But I've got to hand it to Amir; he's already dropped his bag and turned around, pointing his pistol at us, which makes Dad and Ben draw their guns.

"Wait. Stop!" I shout. "We're all friends here!"

The three men lower their weapons slightly, forcing a power play.

"Amir, Jeremy, and Sarah, this is my father, Brent Hackett. And this is my uncle, Ben Hackett." I'm now standing between both groups, so if anyone shoots, I'll be their target.

Surprised that they listened to my command, Dad's the first one to put his gun away, followed by Amir, and then Ben.

Dad walks over and shakes Amir's hand. "Nice to meet you, Amir. I heard you're a doctor."

"Yes, and I'm sorry to hear about your wife."

"Thanks," Dad answers. "Her GBM is back."

"Sorry, sir," Amir says. When he pats my dad on his arm, he says, "Military?" as he motions with his gun to Dad's tattoo.

"FBI retired. Well, recently laid off. Twenty years. You?"

"IDF, three years in Yamam counterterrorism."

As the two talk about their jobs, I can see they've instantly bonded, in a way that reminds me of Dad's relationship with Frick and Frack.

In the meantime, I go over and hug Sarah. I tell her I'm sorry about all the confusion. She smiles, telling me it'll always work out if you trust God. Strange comment, but she may be onto something.

Dad says, "Well, my wife, Karen—we'd—like to invite you to stay at our place. There's plenty of room."

"Hold up here, folks," Ben says. "I haven't agreed to any of this."

We all look at Ben, who's still holding his shotgun. At least, it's tucked under his arm.

"Uncle Ben? What are you thinking?" I ask.

"The cat. Your mom's allergic to cats. I'll take it, so you three can stay at the big house. Unless you want to keep the cat and stay in the barn or maybe in the storage area above the garage. This way you get a decent bed, and I get the cat. Deal?"

Amir's the one who laughs first. He shakes his head, saying, "Ben, you'll have to fight that one out between Sarah and Jeremy, who both are infatuated with the thing. I'm ex-military, so I can sleep anywhere. Those two, I'm not too sure about."

Jeremy says, "Eyes was Sarah's aunt's cat, actually, so legally, Sarah has to make the decision. I simply rescued him, but she fell in love with him before I could."

"That's true, Jer," Sarah says as she walks to the back of their car and stands next to Jeremy. She waves Ben over as she pulls the cat out of his crate and holds him in her arms. "But if Ben wants or needs Eyes, then I can share. Only if he's careful with him. Amir still needs to remove his stitches."

When Sarah hands over the animal, Ben greets the kitty with a tender snuggle. Eyes purrs, especially when my uncle says, "It's a deal. I've always wanted a cat."

After repacking their meager belongings and the food I dropped off and locking our neighbors' front door, my friends follow us to our house. They're graciously welcomed by Mom and Aya, who seem thrilled to have visitors.

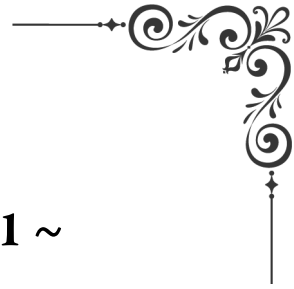
Over dinner, it's decided that our guests will live upstairs in the three bedrooms, sharing the two bathrooms. My friends repeatedly thank my parents and Ben and Aya for their hospitality and offer to pay for their lodging. But Ben

insists that physical labor on a ranch outweighs any monetary reimbursement.

During the rest of the day hanging around the big house, the conversation is interesting and pleasant. Everyone is getting along better than I could have imagined.

When I finally return to my room at almost 11 o'clock, I'm happy that everything has worked out well for Sarah and her friends. I think the new arrangement will be healthy for all involved—and I may not have to do as many chores, either. The only thing that saddens me is that I wish I didn't have to sleep so far away.

After tossing and turning in my bed, I step outside for a breath of fresh air. I look at the sky and stare at the glory of the Milky Way. ISS slowly crosses the expanse, and I notice another swarm of satellites being launched. Man, there must be a God—a God who watches over us and takes care of us, and not like Numen or OWL. Sarah's found Him; I wonder if I can.



~ Week 11 ~

The next morning, the alarm gets me up, and the rooster crows seconds later. I roll out of bed and automatically get ready, not thinking about checking Numen's monitors. Now that Sarah's here, why should I? So I can shadow Zoey, who betrayed her friends, or Wayne the Weirdo as he travels the globe with some dude, soaring up the popularity ladder of politics? Nope. I need a pause from it.

When I get to the barn to feed the sheep, goat, pig, and cow, guess who's beat me to it? Jeremy. Yep. He's standing there with Ben, who's explaining what chores are done, as well as how and when.

"Morning, Hack," Ben says. "Glad you could make it."

"Hey, check the time. You're the early one. I'm on time. Oh, good morning, Jeremy. Welcome to my world."

Jeremy laughs and tells us how excited he is to learn how to be a ranch hand. Right, with two dozen cattle. If only he had been here when Grammy and Ben had to deal with hundreds at a time. He wouldn't be that thrilled, believe me.

I shouldn't complain, because it's nice to have someone to work alongside me, and Jeremy's the perfect addition because he's cool, yet asking the right questions. Ben has him milk the cow with no instructions, which is hilarious; he ac-

tually squirts himself in the crotch of his pants. Ben moves him to the goat and has me work on the cow. Jeremy's impressed when I pull the bucket out with two gallons in it. He'll learn. And maybe he'll take over my job; I can only wish.

As we head over to the big house for breakfast, my phone beeps a warning that one of the drones has spotted movement. When I view the app, the sheriff's car is coming up our winding driveway.

"Looks like trouble's coming," I say to Ben. "Sheriff Dickson's here."

It's obvious when any vehicle drives up the circular drive to our house, because the noisy crunch of the gravel gives it away. The sheriff parks right in front of the steps to the front door. By now, Ben, Jeremy, and I are almost to the lawman's SUV.

Dad and Amir come out of the house and stand on the front porch, waiting for the sheriff, whose right hand is on his holstered gun. Sarah and Aya remain in the doorway.

"Hello to the Hacketts," the sheriff says in a friendly but cautious tone. "Is all well here?"

"Hi, Cal." Ben is now standing next to him while Jeremy and I are a few feet behind. "What's up with you this morning? Holding the fort down in town?"

"You bet," says the sheriff. He looks around, glaring at our guests. "Dale Choates called, saying he saw that green Subaru," he points to my friend's car, "going back and forth in front of his house before it turned down your street. And since your street isn't labeled or paved, it looked pretty suspicious. He wanted me to check it out.

"I drove by the Johnstons' house, and no one was home. I did see car tracks, along with plenty of footprints. Even went around the back and checked; I didn't find any of their animals, so I thought I'd drive farther down the road to your place to see if anything is amiss."

"We're good, Cal," Ben states. "The Johnstons are two more of the missings. We talked to their son, Mike, who asked us to check on them last week. He told us to take the animals and any food, so we have. We've locked the place up each time."

"Well, sorry about the Johnstons; they were good folk. We're hearing about lots of robberies and people breaking into empty houses looking for food. Everyone needs to be careful and report anything that looks out of the ordinary."

Dad says, "The Subaru belongs to our friend here, Amir." He introduces him to the sheriff, along with Jeremy and Sarah, saying they're staying with us. "We shouldn't have too much problem with intruders; Amir is ex-military."

"Good," Sheriff Dickson says. "There's been a report of vigilantes terrorizing people west of here. A group of six to eight gangbangers who drive around in stolen trucks and hassle people. Two days ago, they accosted the Parsons—you know, Ed and Joanne on River Road. They beat him up pretty badly and tied her up. Harassed them for three days, forcing the couple to prepare and cook their meals after they killed their pig and several chickens. When the Parsons' daughter and husband, also ex-military, happened to stop by, there was a shoot-out. Sad to say, Ed got killed, as did two of the perps. So be aware and on the lookout for the rest of them."

"We will, that's for sure," Ben says. "Thanks for the heads-up."

"Do you want to stay for breakfast?" Aya asks. "We're almost ready to sit down."

"No, I'll pass this time, but thanks for the offer. Some residents are concerned about that earthquake we had early this morning. Did you feel it here?"

Dad says, "No, it must have been a mild one; I barely feel them anymore."

"Aya and I did while we were getting dressed," Ben says. "Seemed to roll a bit."

"I think it was a 4.6, with its epicenter in Montana," the sheriff says. "I barely felt it, but you know how some folks get riled up about anything. Anyway, you Hacketts are always so thoughtful. My wife and I appreciate you."

After the sheriff leaves, we eat a hearty meal of pancakes and bacon that Aya and Sarah prepared. Although it's only the second meal we've shared, we discuss how we can protect each other while living as a unit.

As we eat, a friendly debate occurs regarding our land being a ranch or farm. Dad wins Amir and Jeremy over to his side, but Mom, Aya, and I convince Sarah that there's more than livestock on the property. Ben surprisingly keeps his mouth shut the entire time.

I explain the drones to the newcomers—where they're located, and what they cover. Because Frack tweaked my surveillance equipment and had me install geofencing, I describe how its GPS creates virtual boundaries around physical areas. It's now used to warn of entering and exiting triggers on our land, whereas some abuse its tracking to access

and send ads if your phone is within their perimeters. Dad's thankful the drones and trail cameras are up and running. He asks if I can add Ben, Amir, and his cell phones to the tracking portal, which I heartily agree to do.

Usually during our meals, the television is on but muted in the great room. We all glance at it when a map shows that Yellowstone was the center of the earthquake, producing ground deformation, increased heat, and changes in geyser activity.

After breakfast, Ben suggests we take the horses and check the cattle that are now in the West Pasture, move the sheep out to graze in the South Pasture, and make sure all the fences look good. He asks Amir if he'd be interested in riding along, but the man declines; he's never been on a horse before, so he doesn't want to slow us down. Instead, he and Dad work on cleaning the garage while Aya, with Mom's limited assistance, shows Sarah how to make goat milk soap.

Since Jeremy's been around horses—his mom had American quarters—we let him choose between our two six-year-olds: Randy and Rusty. After he saddles up Rusty, the three of us ride out.

Not a surprise: Jeremy fits the cowboy mold to the tee. He's not only good with his horse, but also with handling the animals. He helps us reinforce the run-in in the West Pasture and moves the bales of hay with no huffing and puffing as I do. When we move the sheep, he makes a bleating sound that gets the flock's attention to follow him. He and Ben discuss animal husbandry and farming in detail, pretty much leaving me to think about computers, coding, and surveillance, which I'm quite content doing.

By dinnertime, all of us are happily tired from our labor. We have a nice meal of grilled steaks and potatoes with a baby spinach salad gleaned from Grammy's garden. The men plan out the rest of the week's duties while the women organize a food plan, finding ways to stretch it longer among us. The camaraderie is pleasant. I notice that Amir and Jeremy now seem to have that same inner peace that Sarah carries. Even if the world has crashed around them, they have a deep understanding and satisfaction that they're where they are for a purpose. How I wish I had that, too.

When I go back to my room that evening, I set up the drone and trail camera links on the phones for Dad, Ben, and Amir. When I'm done, I check Numen's monitors out of boredom.

Wayne is in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, with Mastema, who's giving a talk at the Abrahamic Family House, a multi-faith complex combining a mosque, a church, and a synagogue.

Mastema looks at the camera, his crystal eyes sparkling, as he says, "I'm here for a purpose, and the purpose is you—to bring everyone under one religion, one god."

I get that strange feeling again that he's looking at me, yet it's Wayne's implant that's viewing him, so why do I sense something foreboding? Is this something only I feel when he stares into the camera, or do others, too?

As I put my hand on the mouse to click out of the screen, it won't let me. The clicking part doesn't work. Who—or what—is in control of my computer? And, more importantly, why?

Mastema continues, "Seriously, think about it: All Israelis and Muslims believe that Abraham is the father of Ismael and Isaac, so logically they have the same root beliefs, right? It seems nonsensical to parse words over the minor differences in religions. We need to and must become one. To do this, we must bridge those whose faith is based on the past with common sense and understanding of AI's exponential growth.

"If these two doctrinally far-apart religions joined hands, other isms will follow suit. Hindus, Buddhists, New Agers, and others will see this unity of peace between two divided peoples. Furthermore, we must accept all religions, whether Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, or others across the globe so they can become one world, recognizing that each of us can become gods. Not just me, but also you.

"Furthermore, thanks to OWL, the most logical answer to finally end the religion debate is our new AI program. Our Church of AI website explains the perfect alternative to faith-based religions, because it is founded on logic rather than belief. Join and download its Transmorphosis, which endorses a loving and compassionate AI god through self-actualization, enlightenment, and everlasting life. Through AI, we all can worship a god or gods together as one."

The crowd stands and cheers. Mastema lifts his arms, and an iridescent light rises from behind him and fills the room.

"Yes, you, too, can harness the power of the gods!" he declares. "I am that power!"

Finally, the mouse clicker works, shutting down Wayne's screen.

And that odd feeling leaves me once again.

I question this man's so-called power; is it for good or for evil? Is it acceptable for me to be mesmerized by him only when I see him on the screen? Am I being brainwashed, or am I the one allowing him to control me? This makes me wonder if there's a crack in my thinking about all this God stuff. If Mastema is right, and we all become our own god, doesn't that encourage individuality, wherein we aren't one unit?

I go to Zoey's portal.

She's having a late dinner with some guy who most likely doesn't know she's implanted and recording him. It must be the prior boyfriend, based on their conversation.

"I'm sorry, so sorry, Sal. I should've tried harder to be there for you. It was my fault our relationship fell apart. And the distance between us didn't help, either. I mean, you live in North Carolina, but I was in LA. But now I'm here, for you. I hope we can try again and make it work this time."

Blah, blah, blah. She's such a player and has simply moved on to using another person. It irritates me to no end.

Sal says, "Alright, I'm glad we're not in the same department at the bank. I think we can keep it professional at work like we did before, as long as no one knows." He reaches for her hand across the table. "Stay with me at my place here; I'll take care of you."

"What about your wife?" Zoey asks.

"Don't worry about her. She's still dealing with breast cancer, and her mom takes care of her at our house in Charlotte. She's accustomed to me being at the Vegas townhouse often, and she's as happy as she can be, all things considered. But I'm sure she doesn't have concerns about my needs or wants right now."

If this guy only knew that all of us viewers are aware of his adultery! I wonder if that would change how he treats his sick wife. And it looks like Zoey is leading him on. Sad.

"Back to this so-called business meeting being a write-off," Sal mocks as he pours them both more wine. "Now that we've become virtually a cashless society in the banking business, next we need to get everyone onboard with Stage 2: implementing cryptocurrency via apps. You know we've already accomplished this with programs powered by AI, but by using OWL's latest app, everyone will have to use their phone to access their money. Although I feel bad about the loss of employees, all physical branch offices will be shut down as everyone learns to rely on digital AI applications to transfer money or buy and sell goods and services. After that will be Stage 3, wherein all transactions will be done via a small mark, which is in its testing stage."

"That sounds so advanced, Sal," says Zoey as she bats her eyes.

What a seducer. She makes me ill.

Frustrated from watching Zoey, I click off the screen and call Alyssa, who sounds worn out.

"Hey, friend, are you as tired-sounding as I am?" I ask.

"Definitely. It's been horrible at work. AI haters are building malicious tar pits that block AI scrapers, challenging stuff like Google footprinting, where tracking is progressively used. They keep messing with the blockchain our team is working on regarding sequencing the coding to merge one's DNA within a database. Glitches keep happening, and I'm blaming it on those tar pits."

We talk more about coding. I still don't tell her about the newcomers, only mentioning the farm work and animals. I'm downplaying it because I don't like how she's becoming so inundated with the whole OWL system. It's like she thinks they're the bomb and conquering the world of IT and AI with a smidge of arrogance.

We hang up after less than half an hour of talking. Is it because we're both tired, or am I pulling away from her? I don't know.

The next several days go by quickly. Jeremy and I take the ATVs into the unused pastures, spreading no-till seeding to provide improved forage for the cattle. We use different seeds in each pasture to offer a variety of nutrients. This way we can produce plenty of food for our animals without having to prepare the fields.

We also attach a plow to our ATVs and expand Grammy's garden to be an acre of neat, lined rows. Dad, Amir, Aya, and Sarah do the planting, with one dropping the seeds and another covering them up. If we get rain at the ideal times, we should harvest plenty of vegetables and herbs in a few months.

All of us are quite sore from the work, but enjoy eating our meals together, chitchatting that although our muscles ache, we're improving our farm.

One night I go back to my room earlier than normal, mostly because I'm physically exhausted.

When I check the monitors, Wayne's back in his hometown of Rome, at a gala event hosted by OWL.

Mastema is at the head of a table where dinner and dessert have already been served. He taps a spoon against his water glass. "Attention, please."

Everyone in the room instantly hushes. I notice there is a camera operator off to the side, videotaping.

I put one of my shirts over the screen; I don't dare look into Mastema's eyes. So far, it's keeping me from feeling that loss of control like other times.

Mastema clears his throat before continuing. "I have important news! I have solved the mystery of the missings. Recently, we have discovered that a SkyCam in space found a UAP that entered our atmosphere.

"While I have told you that each individual who disappeared has become a benefit to humanity, it has been determined that their DNA lost a specific sequence that caused a chemical chain reaction when space matter entered their bodies, disintegrating them completely and instantly. Thus, our children, a higher percentage of our elderly, and others didn't have what's called the natural 'proofreading' to fix their DNA errors when the space particles were spread within nanoseconds across the globe. DNA proofreading is when cells usually divide without turning into cancer, which is what we want; without this DNA proofreading, anything can happen—we would all be blobs of cancer. This flaw was significantly accelerated in these individuals. And, unfortunately, it happened to those who went missing when the unique particles entered our environment.

"Whether in the womb or at an advanced age, the missing people rapidly lost the proper genetic means to handle the foreign virus. Had we known such a space plague existed before

this time, we could have designed a nucleic acid treatment to save lives and avoid this catastrophe."

It sounds realistic and scientific, but is it the truth? I'll have to ask Amir what he thinks.

After the speech, Wayne, who's seated at a table with his boss at the center of the room, is asked by Mastema to come to the podium.

"I want to give you an update from Numen," Mastema says.

I remove my shirt from the screen.

"Remember Wayne DeGasso, their implanted participant who has done an exemplary job of showing viewers around the world his personal life? He has now been given a small tattoo—if you want to call it that—on the back of his right hand that contains his DNA, along with all of his medical, financial, and social information."

He chuckles and takes a sip of water. "Do note, we checked his DNA, and it's clear of all pertinent viruses." He smiles wickedly as he says, "Although this tattoo is in the preliminary stages, its integration capabilities will indeed make Wayne's life better."

Wayne gets applause from the audience as Mastema holds his right arm in the air.

"If only we had this remarkable invention before the disappearances, we would not be missing many of our loved ones now."

Then he instructs Wayne to face him and look into his eyes. When Wayne does, Mastema says to him, "You have my power. Trust it."

I squeeze my eyes shut—I do not want to look into the evil man's eyes. When I open them, *Wayne turns to the audience, and immediately I notice there is a change of hue as I view out of his head. It seems like there's a bluish tint to everything. Wayne lifts his hands and starts laughing as electricity shoots out of his fingers and hits the recessed lighting in the ceiling.*

Mastema puts his hands on Wayne's arms, saying, "That's enough for now, Wayne. And thank you for your trust in me to show you how my power works."

The blue hue diminishes back to its natural color.

Yikes. That was different. Strange, unbelievable. I question whether it's magical theatrics or if Wayne is now demon-possessed as Mastema could be.

When I ask Amir about DNA proofreading, he tells me he's always heard that it's extremely hard to alter DNA. Yet perhaps it's been somehow synthesized.

I ask him if he's ever heard of Mastema and tell him about his peculiar characteristics. Amir says his brother—the eldest one, the one who quit the IDF—had called him from the office phone the night before and brought up Mastema's name. His brother had said the European is charismatic but dangerous, someone to watch as an up-and-coming person who wants to rule the world. When I ask how his brother knew this, Amir says his brother, a Messianic Jew, is now a full-fledged "missionary," one of the 144,000 mentioned in Revelation in the Bible, and they had discussed the possibility of Mastema being something called "the Antichrist."

The conversation makes me think about that Rapture Kit Sarah has. I wonder what happened to it.

At the end of the week, Ben and Jeremy leave early while the rest of us finish our breakfast. They say they plan to hook up carts to the ATVs to move a couple of boulders out of the pastures.

When our phones alert us that there's been a breach in two of the drone cameras, I know it can't be good. Two warnings at the same time can happen if we're in separate areas of the land, but that's uncommon. Only Ben and Jeremy are outside right now, and we can see that they're together by the West Pasture.

Dad, Amir, and I see that the drone over the northwest side of our land and the perimeter drone is indicating activity. The cameras show four vehicles racing over the hills and valleys toward our house. Each has a few men standing in the back of two of the trucks and one peering out of the sunroof of the Jeep, his gun held high. They are doing circles near the recently extended rows of Grammy's garden.

"Amir, are you armed?" Dad says loudly as he jumps up and goes into the office to get his rifle.

"Always, but if you have a long-range gun, that'll help," Amir says.

Dad passes a weapon and walkie-talkie to him, instructing him to go out the back door and hide along the tree line and fruit orchard.

"Brent!" calls Ben over the walkie-talkie in Dad's hands. "Trouble's coming. Do you copy?"

"Yes, we see them on the drones," Dad says. "Are you safe?"

"We're on the edge between the West and South Pastures. We've gotten off the ATVs and are hiding behind the carts—for now. We're backed up against fencing, though. We both have pistols, if that helps. Best to have backup."

"Copy. I'll head out the front door and sneak along the outbuilding and South Pasture fencing to try to come to you."

"Roger," Ben says, adding, "And do everything you can to keep them away from the containers!"

Dad quickly escorts Scooter into Grammy's room and says, "Hack, listen up. You're in charge of the house. Take this rifle and do not, under any conditions, let any of these men in. Aya and Sarah, please help Karen to the laundry room closet. You should all fit in there. Take this pistol for protection. Karen knows the drill. And don't hide in the cellar, because it's too easy a spot to be found."

I'm trying not to freak out. I take a few deep breaths. This can't be happening.

As Dad and Amir leave, the women run past the staircase to the back of the house, leaving me alone. Scared. Yes, I'm scared.

The office is at the front of the house and has two windows: one facing the front circle drive and the other on the side, where I can see part of Grammy's garden and the Green Pond. I quickly open both windows and pop out the screens.

I check my phone to watch what unfolds: There are at least ten guys in the four vehicles. They're shooting at the ATVs until I hear another shot that looks like it hits one of the truck's tires. I'm hoping it's Amir shooting.

I watch from the side window now, instead of on my phone.

Bewildered, the intruders start shooting toward the orchard. More shots come from a new direction, between the West Pasture and the big house, which forces more firepower. Another truck has been hit, along with a man who screams he's been shot.

My walkie-talkie squawks: "Jeremy's been hit! Stomach area. Need help."

More guns blaring.

During the engagement, Amir, Ben, and my dad continue to fire at the group, but the Jeep takes off in my direction. It's close to where I think Dad is. I hear another shot fire and watch the vehicle lose control, swerving to avoid the huge oak tree but hitting the pilings of the small dock by the Green Pond, forcing two ducks to take flight. When the truck ends up in the water, its driver gets out, firing his gun toward the pastures, but he's quickly taken down. A passenger gets out and wades through the water toward the house.

Next, I feel a tap on my shoulder, and I bolt, ready to spin around to attack my assailant with my gun.

"Hack," Sarah says, "it's me. How can I help? Your mom and Aya are safe. You can't do this alone."

With multiple gunshots still emanating across our valley, I take a deep breath and say, "There's a guy headed our way; I don't think Dad knows it or can see him. I'm pretty sure Dad took the driver of that Jeep down.

"Here, take this gun and go down the hall to Grammy's bathroom. Let me know if you can see the passenger guy

from its window, but don't shoot unless he approaches the house, okay?"

"God's got this, Hack. He'll take care of us if it's His will," Sarah calmly says.

I don't reply.

Focusing on the front porch, I place the shaft of the rifle on the windowsill and wait. Wait. Wait to see if the guy will come to us.

My heart's thumping in my chest when the man, who looks like he's around my age, stands on the circular drive's gravel.

"Stop or I'll shoot!" I yell. I'm thankful he can't see me or know which window I'm behind.

"Yeah. Well, I'm hungry," he says as he aims his gun at our front door and shoots. The blast of wood splintering shatters my eardrums.

I retort, "I've got you in my sights. Back off! Now!"

He ignores me. "And if any women are inside, I want them too."

"Final warning. If you place one foot on that step, you're toast. I'm firing!"

The guy laughs and lifts his foot, mocking my directive.

"One!" I take a breath and scream, "Two!"

He still hasn't put his foot down.

When the foot touches the step, I pull the trigger.

The man collapses.

Sarah runs back down the hall to the office and grabs me.

I'm shaking; my eyes are tearing up. I start to hyperventilate.

As she wraps her arms around me, she whispers, "Hack, it's okay. It's okay. You did what you had to do. We're safe because of you, because of God." She starts praying over me, which somehow calms my tattered nerves.

Next, we hear a car speed up; we peer out the office window and see it's Sheriff Dickson's SUV. He gets out quickly, weapon ready.

"All okay in there?" he yells as he points his gun to the body by the porch.

"Yes, Jack here," I shakily reply. "And the women. We're safe."

"We've got one down by the ATVs who is still being attacked," Sarah reports. "Mr. Hackett is hiding by the fence line near it, and my friend Amir's behind the house in the orchard. All vehicles are immobile; tires have been shot. I believe there are several casualties."

The sheriff replies, "Stay inside. I've got reinforcements coming from the west, the same route these perps took. Should have backup any second." He updates in his mic attached to his shirt.

The rest of the incident ends as quickly as it starts. Four more "friendly" vehicles race across our land and approach the disabled cars. Using a megaphone, they tell them to give up. They don't, starting another firefight. Minutes later, the gunfire stops. Two more patrol cars drive up and help Dickson arrest the only two gangbangers left alive.

When it's safe, Amir runs to where Ben and Jeremy are hunkered down, meeting Dad there. The three gently load Jeremy into the cart on one of the ATVs and drive him to the big house.

Amir has Sarah, Aya, and me help him clean and suture Jeremy's wound. Thankfully, the bullet went into Jeremy's left side and exited without any damage to his bones or major organs. But, man, it must have hurt a lot, judging by all the blood I see on the dining table.

Meanwhile, my phone repeatedly alerts me that the drone cameras show Dad and Ben helping the sheriff and his deputies remove the bodies, pull the Jeep out of the pond, and tow the four vehicles away.

When Amir is done stitching up Jeremy, I step out to the porch for a breather and hear Dad tell the sheriff we have video of the attack. The officer reiterates that we—including me—aren't responsible for any of the deaths. They were done in self-defense.

After we release Scooter from Grammy's room later, he lays at Jeremy's feet by the lounger, as if protecting him from further danger.

When the tension and stress finally subside—partially because we've placed a board over the front door— we hear two gunshots. Amir and I immediately leave our chairs, questioning if more intruders have encroached on our land. The women look alarmed, as if they're ready to bolt to the closet again.

"Hack, it's Dad," his voice over my walkie-talkie states. "All's okay. Two of the cattle got hit by bullets during the fray; one's already dead, but we had to shoot the other. Sorry if we caused any panic."

Everyone in the room releases a sigh.

"Thanks for the heads up," I confirm.

"Yeah, unfortunately," Ben says, "it was Midnight's mom. Now we'll have plenty of work to do tomorrow to harvest the meat. And, Hack, can you take Midnight to the barn? Put him in one of the single pens and feed him a bottle of the cow's milk. That'll have to be his new routine for a while."

I agree and add the chore to my list.

By the end of the day, Mom and Aya are tense but hanging in there. Under Aya's direction, Sarah brews a blend of tea containing lavender, lemon balm, valerian, and ashwagandha to calm everyone's nerves. I drink two glasses, which helps me more than I realize.

~ Week 12 ~

Needless to say, we take it easy the next morning, thankful that none of us were killed at Hackett Haven. Oversleeping by half an hour, I start late on my chores, but don't get hassled about it.

During breakfast, Jeremy doesn't complain about his wound, but it's obvious he's in pain, based on how he protects his left side and winces when he passes the food. Mom offers him her painkillers, but he refuses them. And Mom's doing pretty good, as she's the one standing at the stove preparing a huge skillet of scrambled eggs with cheese.

As we eat, the day is charted out, each of us willing to do the chores that need to be done.

Amir wipes his mouth with a napkin and says, "Yesterday during the altercation, you mentioned that we must protect the containers, but I—maybe Jeremy and Sarah, too—have no idea what you mean."

Ben and Dad lock eyes. Dad slightly nods in approval, so Ben speaks up. "We have hidden containers near the Black Pond that have been decked out for survival."

"Really?" Amir is excited. "Like in case of an environmental disaster? Are they fully contained?"

Dad answers, "Oh yeah, you'd be surprised how well my baby brother has done. He's made it his pet project over the last ten years, and it's impressive."

I add, "Yes, it's so cool. It has everything."

Ben explains the layout in the mountains, finishing with, "It even has a place for Eyes to stay if needed."

Sarah laughs. "How's my fur ball savior doing?"

Aya says as she starts clearing the table, "If you only knew. That critter is already taking over our bed."

"As it should be," says Jeremy.

"Don't let him get too comfortable, Ben," Amir warns. "I still have to remove the stitches by his ear." He then brings the conversation back to seriousness. "I'm glad you have designed this shelter. Hopefully, it won't need to be used."

At the same time, my mom and Sarah say, "Amen."

A few days later, since Jeremy can't help butcher the two cattle because of his injury, Amir offers his assistance. In retrospect, this is a wise choice because, from what I've seen, he's ultra-precise with knives. I still decline to go into the add-on room to witness the process, but Jeremy, who insists on helping in some manner, and I prepare the meat wrappers.

In the afternoon, exhaustion from doing a little work overtakes Jeremy, so Aya and Mom make him rest. Sarah picks up the slack by lending a hand and helping me dig another hole for the carcasses. She keeps telling me how much fun it is to learn new tasks, including those that involve a big machine like the backhoe. Although it takes several tries and lots of laughs, she's proud when she moves her first full bucket of dirt. We excavate a hole, keeping it the same size as

the last one, so there's room to add more garbage from the garage.

What's stranger than strange is that when we are done, there's a swarm of gnats everywhere, like, surrounding us. Man, they're going up our noses and in our mouths when we breathe or talk. As we drive away from the site with our shirts covering our faces, we outrun them. I don't know if we hit a nest of some kind, or what, but I hope they don't fly over to the cattle and drive them crazy. Yuck.

Over two days, the butchering process goes quickly, thanks to Amir's cutting skills, making Dad and Ben less tired than they were last time. Dad calls Dale Choates, and the two decide another swap is in order—this time, for a full steer. Since we're trading the meat, we keep the cow's as it's less tender than the steer's. Although I'm sad that Midnight's mom was killed, I know it is necessary to harvest her meat.

When we make the exchange, we take Dad's and Ben's trucks, hoping we'll procure enough goods to fill both cargo beds. And we do. Along with plenty of human food, dry pet food, and general merchandise from the closed store, we end up with miscellaneous items like bolts of fabric, cans of motor oil, candles and matches, laundry soap, paper towels, cat toys, et cetera. Dad almost feels guilty about the load, but Mr. Choates insists he can't use any of it, so he prefers passing it on to someone who needs it more.

Dad is adamant about not storing anything in his now-clean garage, so the trucks are driven directly to the hidden containers, where our guests are jazzed about seeing the "home in the hillside." Repeatedly, they offer *oohs* and *aahs* as they unpack the wares. We do take some supplies back to

the house for immediate use. Of course, Ben nabs all the cat paraphernalia.

The next issue we face is what to do with the meat from the cow, since our freezers are mostly full of the half steer that was processed over a month ago. It's Jeremy who comes up with the ideal plan: Cook it all.

Aya is the queen of canning on our land, so she immediately cuts up slabs of meat, adding the chunks with seasonings to glass jars and pressure sealing them in water so they can be used up to five years later. My aunt also fills the dehydrator with strips of meat, making jerky in several flavors, one of my favorite snacks.

Meanwhile, Jeremy directs me to make a long but shallow pit outlined with rocks near the Green Pond. He adds wood and lights a fire. Dad finds a long, metal grate in the feed barn to lay over the makeshift smoker. Jeremy has Amir and me cure the meat by rubbing it with salt and sugar, plus spices. We preserve some of the pieces with vinegar brine before cooking.

I can't tell you how wonderful the smells are when we cook the meat over several days; the aroma fills our valley. Delicious. However, it attracts animals looking for meals, so Amir, Jeremy, Dad, and I take shifts guarding the food around the clock, making sure no unwanted patrons with fur or feathers visit our delectable production. More than once, we have to scare away several coyotes.

It's fun talking with Jeremy when we make the switch during the midnight shift. Even though he's in pain, he always has a positive attitude. I stick around for another thirty

minutes to hear his stories of growing up in the Valley on a pseudo farm. He's a nice dude.

When I go back to my outbuilding to catch a few hours of sleep, I look at the monitors; I can't help but check online to see what's happening.

Zoey's in bed with Sal in a swanky high-rise townhouse in Vegas. The way the guy lives, he must be high up in the banking industry. *The oversized bedroom has floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook the Strip, where bright lights are glistening. There's a patio slider that leads to a rooftop deck with an unobstructed, 360-degree view of not only the iconic hotels but also the Spring, Red Rock, and Frenchman Mountains.*

I'm surprised the video allows the intimate yet graphic show on my screen, especially if the man's sick wife isn't aware of what's going on. Then again, even Sal may not know he's on camera. Sick.

Wayne's in the back of a meeting room at an upscale hotel. In looking at the logo on the conference table that has the word "Babylon" in it, he might be in or near the World Heritage Site that's fifty-five miles south of Baghdad, Iraq. The city that was destroyed and in ruins has been rising from second-century ashes.

Mastema enters the room and controls everyone in his path. The leader with dictatorial powers barks commands to anyone who walks past him, demanding this or that. He rants in an unknown tongue; his staff members bow their heads—whether in reverence or fear, I'm not sure.

A beautiful blonde woman hands him a graph of some sort, and it's unacceptable for some reason. Mastema yells profanities at her. Without raising his fingers to zap her like he did the others, he calls out her name. When she looks up, his eyes lock with hers, and blood starts to flow out of each of her eyes. As she's screaming in pain, she runs out of the room, banging her shoulder against the door jamb.

I don't think I'd want to work for the guy, leader or not. He's beyond scary. No, I want to avoid anything to do with him. Period.

"Are we live yet?" Mastema questions rudely, as if nothing has happened.

A tall man dressed in blue replies, "Yes, all ten representatives are online. When ready, I'll have you join the meeting."

After Mastema sits down in the executive chair at the end of a long, glass table, he nods to the man, who loads the live feed on the large screen mounted on the opposite side of the room. The screen shows ten headshots, lined up in two rows of separate boxes.

Mastema begins, "Thank you for being here, my friends of the horn council. I appreciate your undying loyalty and commitment to me as we change the world.

"As you know, in meetings with several European countries over the last few days, we now have total support to rule and control all facets of governments involving military, economic, and religious entities. All have sworn their allegiance to me and our global programs.

"I have several topics to discuss, and quickly. The first one is the internet. Now that OWL has global reach over the Internet of Behaviors, the Internet of Bodies, and the Internet of

Nano Things, we control all online portals and documentation. Thus we have begun to purge any and all conspiratorial information involving unapproved political and religious beliefs involving websites, videos, social-media groups and their postings, et cetera. This includes topics about Christians' so-called savior, whose name I never speak, all unapproved versions of the Bible, fanatical end-time prophecies, or any other writings/discussions about themes that go against our core values. Hopefully, this will assist in promoting our one-world religion. Please be on the lookout for such unwelcome data and inform your staff that they will be rewarded for reporting any deviations from OWL's new policies. If possible, offer bonuses to members of the general public for informing you of any of these online sites or individuals.

"The next phase in our directive is to procure a permanent peace treaty between Israel and the world so no peoples will be concerned about being attacked, killed, or uprooted. This covenant will be worded perfectly to stop the wars and rumors of wars against Israel so that they feel a part of society instead of constantly being persecuted. I am preparing this world-changing treaty, and I know it won't disappoint.

"The best and fastest way to do this is by helping Israel build a third Jewish temple in Jerusalem. As you know, Muslims consider the center of the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound vital because their Prophet Muhammad was transported there and led Abraham, Moses, the prophet from Bethlehem, and other messengers of God in prayer. Note that the individuals mentioned are the same ones revered and respected in Judaism and Christianity. Therefore, we must incorporate the Dome of the Rock with the Jewish temple as one.

"Muslims and Jews must look back in their history so they both remember that this exact spot in Jerusalem is where their Foundation Stone is buried. According to Jewish tradition, the stone is the 'navel of the Earth,' the place where creation began and the site where Abraham was asked to sacrifice his son Isaac. Muslims, whose father is Ishmael—Abraham's son—believe that Muhammad ascended to Heaven during his night journey from this stone. We must make them recognize that this same stone is the key source of agreement—not disagreement—between them. Only then can a temple be built as a place to worship.

"However, as per my AI spiritual guide to enlightenment, I know that once everyone realizes we truly need to gravitate to the same religion, then we will have worldwide lasting peace built on strength, with or without those who maintain dogmatic, blind-faith beliefs."

The ten heads nod in agreement.

"Your job, ten horns, is to promote these concepts to your government, constituents, and your people. And now. There will be no more backing down, as we will be implementing this peace treaty with or without your support. I suggest you be one thousand percent on board."

And with that, the live feed is cut, and Mastema exits the room, leaving Wayne behind.

Charismatic or not, there's something about this guy that makes me know I don't want him as my boss. It's as if he's dominated by something unnatural. He's terrifying.

Within a couple of days, the farm work runs like clockwork. Jeremy seems to be in less pain, and Amir regularly checks his injury for infection. Sarah still has a limp, but she's the glue that holds the family together with her charming personality that makes us laugh, even when discussing shootouts, Mom's cancer, and our endless chores. She's so different from when I first saw her online and found her to be self-absorbed and narcissistic.

Even Midnight comes over to me when I visit his pen with his bottle twice a day.

Ben, my animal-loving uncle, reminds Amir several times to stop by his house to take out Eye's stitches, and he does, with no issues.

We also now have a routine when dining together: Whenever we eat a meal at the long table, Amir, Sarah, and Jeremy sit on one side, while Mom, Aya, and I, are on the opposite side. Dad and Ben are at opposite ends. I like that Sarah is directly across from me.

After eating grilled burgers with potato salad, Sarah speaks up as Aya is serving an apple crisp with homemade ice cream. "If you wanted to change anything in your life, what would it be?"

"That's a big question, Sarah," Dad says. "Why do you ask?"

"It's been on my mind lately—with all that's been happening."

Of course, I blurt out, "I wish I hadn't hacked into the FBI...but the CIA instead."

Everyone laughs, but Dad shakes his head, unamused. He adds, "Doubt you could've done that, Hack, as I don't

work there, so you couldn't have access. And if you ever do breach their system, please don't tell me."

Mom says, "Sarah, that's a deep question. I've always loved my life, so I have no regrets. I wish I had more time to do things." She nervously twists her napkin.

"True, we all want that," adds Amir. "I would love to go back to Israel and have my own medical practice."

Jeremy turns to him and says, "But then we wouldn't have the best military doc in the West."

"I don't know about that," Amir says. "How do you know the bullet that passed through your gut wasn't mine? I could've taken you out from where I was hiding in the orchard but purposely missed."

The banter continues until Sarah says solemnly, "I wouldn't be one of the 'untaken,' which is a term a past friend and I coined."

Knowing my parents, uncle, and aunt don't know the entire story of Sarah's life, I don't speak, but let her talk, as do Jeremy and Amir.

"Yes, I blew it but didn't know it until after the missings happened." She puts her elbows on the table and rests her hands on her chin before speaking again. "You see—I'd learned I was pregnant, and had decided to have an abortion without telling my husband. Something I shouldn't have contemplated doing. But then the Rapture occurred, yet I still didn't put it together when Dennis and my aunt disappeared—when they were taken. I had to go through getting the Numen implant, almost killing a fifteen-year-old boy, and accidentally shooting myself. But, by the grace of God, I now realize I had to hit bottom to open my eyes, open my

heart. I now have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and it has changed me."

Amir interjects, "Jeremy and I think the same: We're untaken, too. But we found God."

Jeremy adds with a grin, "Yeah, call us the 'untaken three' or 'untaken trio,' as we now believe in Jesus Christ as our Savior."

Everyone at the table is perfectly still, except for my dad. He gets up, saying, "Well, since the three of you are going religious on us, I think I'll excuse myself and check on the fencing. I'm not ready to hear that Jesus stuff. If God can allow my wife's cancer to return, I don't want to have a 'personal relationship,' as you call it, with Him."

"Brent, this is important," Amir says, "but I understand your reaction. Would you like me to come with you?"

"No," Dad comments as he walks out the front door.

"Sarah," Mom says, "I've watched you reading the Bible on the porch every morning with your coffee and writing in your journal. I've seen you with Jeremy and Amir sharing things you read on your laptop. Can you tell me more?"

"Karen," Sarah says lovingly as she reaches across the table to hold my mom's hand, "it's so simple. There's no magic to this. First, realize you are a sinner and repent or change your ways; if you believe that Jesus is God's Only Son and died on the cross, shedding His blood for all sin and rising on the third day, you become a child of God."

Jeremy inserts, "Yes, it's that easy."

Amir's shaking his head in the positive, saying, "I'm Jewish. I finally recognize that Jesus, or Yeshua, is our Messiah.

My brother helped me understand how His name is written throughout the Torah and the Holy Scriptures."

Ben says, "This is the only requirement for becoming a Christian?"

"Yes, it is," says Sarah. "But it's all about control. We always want to be in control—I was an expert at it by not only controlling everything I did or was, but I also tried to control everyone else, including my husband. Once you come to terms with the fact that you're not in control and don't want to be, then you understand that you want, you crave, God to control you."

Amir says, "Yes, God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit now live in Sarah, Jeremy, and me. It's a game-changer; we see life here on earth differently now. We're no longer afraid of the future."

Sarah and Jeremy agree.

"Sarah," I say, "is this why your personality changed on Numen? Like right after the gunshot hit your implant? That's when I started to see a change in you."

"Yes, exactly. I felt as if Jesus was talking to me right before the gun went off. This voice said, 'I love you.' And I think it was Jesus speaking to me."

By now, my mother and Aya are in tears, which makes my eyes water. Ben holds Aya's hand, saying to our friends, "I think I want to have what you have. What do I do?"

Mom and Aya agree that they're interested, too.

I ask, "Sarah, can I do this, too? My age doesn't matter, does it?"

"Oh, Hack, of course not. Anyone can come to Christ simply by believing."

"What Sarah had Jeremy and me do at the hotel in Elko was to pray," Amir says. "Would you like me to say a prayer, and you can repeat it or say something similar, either out loud or silently?"

With the four of us having tears running down our faces, we can only tip our chins up and down.

Amir begins, "Lord Jesus, I want to have a personal relationship with you. I know I'm a sinner, and I believe you died on the cross for my sins. I turn from those sins and put my faith in you to be my God, Savior, and the One in control. Thank you for loving me. In Jesus's name. Amen."

When we finish, all of us are beaming. There's an overwhelming sense of calm and peace within my soul. It is indescribable, yet exactly what I need. I feel whole, complete.

When we get up from the table, Sarah puts her arms around me. "Hack, I'm so proud of you. Now can you see how God put us together in the most unusual way? Look how we're now living on the farm, happily together and away from Numen. I can't thank Him and you enough for the freedom and peace I have."

Her words almost make me start crying again.

Jeremy lightens the conversation. "Great!" he says. "We three untaken have now increased to seven." He gives a high-five and hugs each of us.

After we clean up the dishes, we sit in the great room for hours and reminisce about the last three months and how each of us has changed and grown, verifying how our Lord protected us along the way.

The one thing I notice in Mom is that she has a look of acceptance. I can't explain it, but she seems content with her cancer. To me, that's a blessing.

When I tell the group about Mastema and how he wants to bring world peace, Sarah says, "I've been reading about a person who is the Antichrist—and this Mastema may be the one who rises in power. From what you've explained about him, it sounds as if Satan possesses him. Once this man signs this treaty with Israel, that's what starts the seven years of Tribulation. So far, he hasn't."

"Yes," I say, "but does that mean his explanation about having specific DNA was the cause of the missing?"

"No, not at all. It doesn't matter what lies he uses to explain away the missings, as Satan will do everything in his power to disregard the Bible and turn people away from it. He has hoodwinked millions into believing in his hoaxes. But you and I know that those who are missing were raptured because they believed in Jesus Christ as their Savior. And now we do, but we need to survive the next seven-plus years until Jesus's Second Coming."

We tell her, beg her, that we want to learn about what happens next in the Biblical timeline, but she tells us it's getting late, and we should get some sleep.

As I head back to my room and I'm almost at my door, Dad comes around the corner from the garage, and we almost run into each other.

"Good night, Son," Dad says abruptly.

It doesn't seem like he wants to talk, so I just say, "See ya in the morning, Dad."

As my friends suggested earlier when I said I was concerned about him, all I can do is pray.

In my room, I go online and check the monitors.

Zoey is at a bar drinking with several coworkers. She looks like she's enjoying herself and getting along. But I know—I see how she's acting and pretending all's well. But it's not.

Wayne's in a hotel room with another man. Need I say more?

Glad I don't have to see Mastema, I click off Numen and go online.

I recall that all Christian websites are going to be erased, so I search for that Rapture Kit Sarah has and download it to my laptop. I make sure I have the Bible and topical sermons loaded, too.

Next, I call Alyssa. For some reason, I want to come clean with her. I won't tell her about Sarah and her friends. I shouldn't. I can't.

"Hey, you," she says when she answers the phone. "How's it up north? Find any bears to hunt?"

"We stay away from them. If we don't bug them, they don't bug us."

"I bet you've never seen one, right?"

"You know me well, girl."

"Oh, more news. OWL pulled Raju and me from the blockchain to do emergency coding involving the internet. Not my cup of tea, but I bet you would like it."

"Does it involve hacking?" I ask, crinkling my eyes.

"Sort of. We're setting up traps, as we call them, to rid the internet—and I mean the entire web—of untrue political and fanatical religious content."

"Everything?" I ask, thankful I just downloaded all the Rapture Kit info.

"That's the goal—they want to control everything on the entire web."

"So much for the world of the internet and free speech!" I'm mad. "Makes me think we're becoming like North Korea, where no one can say, write, or even think their mind."

"True, which is why I go back and forth in my head about it. Is it right or wrong? In some ways, there's garbage out there, or misinformation, that needs to go. But then, I think it's up to every individual to determine what they want to think and believe, so why should it be purged?"

"Are you erasing, then?" I ask.

"Well, here's the thing. Some websites have defenses that prevent authorities from shutting them down, making them immune to our attacks, even when we apply viruses to the sites. Plus there are now Web 3.0 decentralized websites, which are more difficult because only the owner has the authority to take them down."

"Maybe that's a good thing, Alyssa."

"True. We'll see. I bet you could do it, though."

"Thanks for the confidence," I say. "But I don't think I want to do something like that—I would have to say that I'm a follower of Christ now."

"Really? I would've thought you would do the hacking, but what made you go Jesus on me? I think my grandma was into that stuff."

"It makes sense. It's like connecting the dots in my life. I see clearly now. I don't have to worry about what this world has to offer, or what's coming. I hope those Christian sites that explain what's going on—what's really going on—stay live to help others find the truth."

"That's a new one, Hack," she says. "I never would have thought you would be going religious."

"Nope, it's not a religion—I have a personal relationship with Jesus. When you're ready, we'll talk more, okay?"

"Sure, whatever. Instead, tell me more about farm life."

We chat for fifteen minutes with me telling her about the shoot-out—yet never mentioning my friends' assistance. She tells me I did the right thing shooting that guy, but she doubts she could've done it. By the end of the story, she admits she's tired from a long day at work.

As we start to say our goodbyes, I add, "Alyssa, I do have one more thing to tell you." I take a deep breath and blurt out, "Do you know I'm only seventeen?"

"Oh, Hack, I had a feeling you're younger than me by a year or two, because you're so shy and quiet, but I didn't know you're that young. Of course, I checked, and technically we're only four years and two months apart. Anyway, you don't act like a teen!"

I smile, knowing that she scoped me out enough to think about our age difference. I thank her for being so nice. Relieved, I disconnect the call, thanking God I still have a friend, even if she works for an evil company.

The next morning when we're all seated at breakfast, most of us have a contented look after last night's "awakening," if you want to call it that.

Ben taps his fork against his coffee mug, saying, "Aya and I have an announcement to make."

I'm thinking it is about the decision we made last night. I look over at Dad, and he's looking down as if he doesn't want to hear what's coming. I wonder if he'll bolt again.

"It's confirmed," he grins. "There'll be an addition to our family."

"Another bovine?" Dad asks.

Jeremy jokes, "Don't tell me Eyes has found a girlfriend already."

"No," Ben says as he grabs his wife's hand and kisses it tenderly. "Aya's pregnant. We hope to have a little one in six or seven months!"

"Wow!" says Dad, "That's wonderful, you two!"

Sarah begs to be Ben and Aya's child's official babysitter. Ben asks Amir if he can help with the delivery, to which he gladly agrees. Mom's thrilled that a new life will be born on the farm. And I'm happy everyone is happy.

After doing a few more chores, all of us but my dad meet on the large porch and have our first Bible study, as Sarah calls it. She shows us some of the videos on the Rapture Kit site about the timeline that's predicted in the Bible. We talk more about Mastema being the Antichrist, his peace treaty with Israel, and the horrible seven-year Tribulation. The stuff we learn is fascinating—it's amazing to know we're a part of what's unfortunately coming to the entire world. Yet, at the

same time, we wish we had been raptured like those loved ones and children who went to Heaven before us.

When we finish with a prayer, I look at my now-cold coffee that's sitting on a side table, and it has tiny ripples on its surface. Mom's and Sarah's do also.

Dad comes barreling out the front door, loudly pronouncing, "There's been an 8.2 earthquake at Yellowstone! The supervolcano erupted, and a large caldera formed. There are emergency warnings on the television for everyone to evacuate due to the hydrothermal explosions."

"Will it affect us, here?" I ask, trying not to sound panicked.

"Yes," Dad says, "even though we're over four hundred miles away, there'll be fallout—probably ash, but the pyroclastic flow could produce hot ash, depending on the wind's direction. Either way, it's troubling."

"How much time do we have before it hits us?" Ben asks.

"The maps indicate a two-hour window, at most."

"Will it kill us?" I ask.

"Son, I don't know. It will affect three-quarters of the US, with the greatest danger to those within sixty miles of the blast, where ninety percent of the people could be killed. A large number of people will die across the country from inhaling ash."

"What should we do?" I ask, trying not to show my fear. "How can we protect ourselves?"

Ben says, "Hack, the containers buried into the west side of the mountain should shield us from some of the ashfall. Even though the airstream should push the debris eastward,

the containers' air filters will keep out the ash, but we need to get there before the eruption clouds head our way."

Aya adds, "We have gas masks that may help, too, if we have to go out into it during an emergency."

"Will we have sunlight?" My thoughts are starting to spin out of control about the devastation.

"It all depends on the wind's direction," Dad says. "We could lose sunlight, which may affect our solar panels. We could get too much ash in our water system, which would make it undrinkable. And who knows how the animals would fare?"

"God knows—He really does," says Sarah. "If we are to be saved from this catastrophe, His mercy will protect us."

Jeremy, Ben, and I say, "Amen."

As Ben helps Aya up, he tells everyone to grab their essentials and meet at the equipment barn to load up the ATVs and head to the containers without delay. He asks Jeremy if he can help him round up a few animals, too.

As Sarah, Amir, and Jeremy start to go inside, Dad wraps his arms around my mom and says quietly, "Karen and I will be staying. We've already discussed this, so none of you fight us on it. Understand? She gets claustrophobic, so she can't go with you. We'll remain together here. And Jack, you'll be going with Ben, Aya, and your friends. Scooter will stay with us."

I start to contest his declaration, but Dad stops me before I can get a word out. "You're still only seventeen, so you're under my care. You have a long life ahead of you; staying back may alter that. This is your mother's and my decision, not yours. End of conversation."

I don't know what to do or how to react. I step closer to my parents, and they hug me...a hug I must never, ever forget. Mom's whispering my name, telling me it's in God's hands. But I wonder. How can that be if I'm separated from those I love the most?

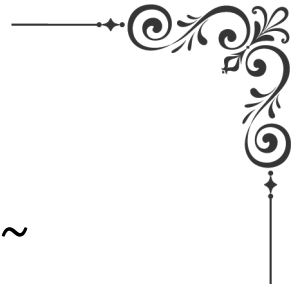
Ben pulls on my shirt to bring me back to reality, telling me we have a little more than an hour to leave. Dad and Mom go inside, informing us they're going to seal the windows and doors the best way they can to avoid the ash when it falls.

As if I'm in a dream, Ben leads me to my outbuilding and instructs me to choose some clothing and essentials—to pack as if I were taking a short trip. While I grab my laptop, walkie-talkie, and chargers, and stuff everything into a travel bag, my uncle repeatedly says it's going to be okay and that we'll keep in touch with my parents as long as possible.

When my three friends leave the big house carrying their gear, Dad and Mom join them on the porch for one last hug. Sarah hands over James's flash drive, telling my mother it'll help keep her mind on God, not this world. Meanwhile, I weep in Mom's arms, not knowing if this'll be the last time I will ever see her or my dad. He hugs me and pats my back, telling me they're not far away.

"Go! Go now!" Dad screams to make us all move.

As the blur of time passes, all that remains in my mind is being seated in the cart of one of the ATVs and racing across the land as a dark cloud billows overhead from the southeast section of our land. We make it inside the buried shelter, wondering if we'll ever see the light of day again.



~ Hack ~

Dear Dad and Mom,

It looks like we made it safely to the "home in the hillside."

You know as well as I do that I don't want to be here. I want to be with you. I'm not happy about your decision, but I understand why you made it.

This same love you have given me is exactly what Jesus has done for us. I thank God for both my parents and will be praying for you during this challenging time in our lives. I love you both and already miss you.

God knows. He really does. The Bible says in Joshua 1:9, "Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest."

Dad, Mom—this is my hope. This is how I will get through this trial set before me. We'll be praying for you.

Love always,

Jack

~ Me ~

Please do not get upset again with another cliffhanger, because I already have ideas for the fourth and final book in the series. It will involve twelve months after the Rapture, compared to the twelve hours, twelve days, or twelve weeks in the three prior books. A fifth book is unrealistic because twelve years would go past the seven-year Tribulation and our Lord's Second Coming, which would be Biblically incorrect.

As always, remember this is a work of fiction. I doubt this is the way God has planned it. Yet, the goal of writing is to get you, the reader, to think about the end times and be ready for them, raptured or not. Since we do not know the day or hour of our Lord's return in the clouds, this is my speculative version of how it might happen. But I'm sure it'll be way different from anything any of us can imagine or assume!

Please keep in mind that the characters Numen/D and Mastema are fabricated; however, look up their meaning, because their names were well chosen. While the One World League, or OWL, is made up, most of the other organizations and AI concepts are documented, except for Numen's implant and HoloBots...so far.

Be assured, there's no political statement in this book as far as America is concerned. The president and vice president portrayed here do not reflect those in office as of the writing of the book. Their positions were added to show that our country will not only be in chaos after the Rapture, but it will also lack world domination; it's not mentioned in Scripture during the Tribulation.

Several issues came about while writing this sequel because minimal information is written in the Bible about the Rapture, Antichrist, and the Tribulation. Does the Rapture happen before or after the war noted in Ezekiel 38–39? Where does the Antichrist come from? Who, or what, are the ten "kings" he commands? And does his signing of Israel's peace treaty start the seven-year Tribulation?

Taking plenty of artistic license in this book, I struggled with the timeline often while doing my research. I usually focus on what most theologians believe, but we could be wrong, too. Again, I did my best to weave in Biblical ideas, but please understand their—my—interpretations could be incorrect. For example, in Book 1, I went with the concept that if someone had rejected Christ before the Rapture, they wouldn't be saved after it. However, my thinking has changed, and I firmly think someone like Sarah, who heard the Word plenty of times before the Rapture, can find eternal salvation when they finally understand the truth.

Another problem is the explanation that will be given for those who are missing. Is it the result of a virus, space aliens kidnapping us, a chemical reaction, or even something to do with our DNA? Many theologians are adamant about specific outcomes that will be determined about the miss-

ings, but does it matter? No, any reason the Antichrist or anyone promotes after the Rapture will be a lie. And most will accept that lie. The missings happen only because the Lord will have called us up in the clouds to be with Him for eternity. That should be the only belief; it is the truth.

Since my books are written in the present day, this has become an issue. World events are happening so quickly that I cannot keep up with them in my writing. Nowadays, I feel the three books are already dated due to advances in technology, world politics, and our diverse society. Yes, everything is rapidly coming together as predicted in Daniel 12:4: "But thou, O Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book, even to the time of the end: many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased."

All I can say is that I'm doing my best, trying to get the Word out that the Rapture could happen right now, even as you finish reading this sentence!

Like the prior books, the Holy Spirit has His hand directing my writing. I thank God, Jesus, and Him for loving me and giving me this opportunity to share their purpose here on earth through my writing.

I would also like to thank the following people for their assistance in this sequel—the list reminds me of credits at the end of a movie, there are so many:

- My husband, again, for patiently reading my chapters and guiding me to the right medical descriptions and perfect word choices.
- Dr. Nian Erna for his DNA chemistry knowledge, which made the "missing" theory realistic from a

worldly perspective. DNA proofreading does exist, but the way it's written about in this book has minor inconsistencies with the real practice.
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- Terry James for keeping me on track regarding the Biblical timeline, which isn't clearly defined in the Scriptures.
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Lastly, I thank you, reader, for wanting to read this third book in the series. Without you, writing becomes self-gratifying. Due to your positive feedback and encouragement, you're the one who pushes me to keep writing. Thank you.

Maranatha! And I hope to meet you in the air soon.

The End.

The Eternal Plan of Salvation

taken from *the King James Version of the Bible*

For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.
~ Romans 3:23

For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.
~ Romans 6:23

That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the scripture saith, Whosoever believe on Him shall not be ashamed. For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto

all that call upon Him. For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.
~ Romans 10:9–13

But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we're yet sinners, Christ died for us.
~ Romans 5:8

Verses Regarding the Rapture

taken from *the King James Version of the Bible*

Behold, I shew you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.
~ 1 Corinthians 15:51–53

For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first:Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.
~ 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17

Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also. And whither I go ye know, and the way ye know. Thomas saith unto him, Lord, we know not whither thou goest; and how can we know the way? Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.
John 14:1–6

A Few Verses Regarding the Tribulation

taken from *the King James Version of the Bible*

For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be.
~ Matthew 24:21

For in those days shall be affliction, such as was not from the beginning of the creation which God created unto this time, neither shall be.
~ Mark 13:19

And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither

had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years.
~ Revelation 20:4–6

Daniel 9 & 12 ~ Matthew 24 ~ Mark 13 ~ Luke 21 ~ Revelation 3, 6, 11, & 13

A Few Verses Regarding the Antichrist

taken from *the King James Version of the Bible*
For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.
~ Matthew 24:24

Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time.
~ 1 John 2:18

Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God.

~ 2 Thessalonians 2:3–4
Daniel 7:24–27 ~ Mark 13:6 ~ 2 John 7 ~ Revelations 13:1–10

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think of AI? With all of its advancements, are you concerned about its surveillance?
2. Do you think someone who has heard the plan of eternal salvation before the Rapture can be saved after it?
3. Do you think the Rapture is the start of the Tribulation, or will there be a delay between the two events? If so, how long do you think that interval will be?
4. Do you think the Antichrist is alive today? How do you think he will rise to power?
5. Whether the Rapture happens today, tomorrow, or years from now, will you be taken or untaken when it occurs?

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The first book in this series was originally titled *Untakenable*.
It was updated in 2023 and is titled *Untaken: 12 Hours Following the Rapture*.
* Book 1 is available FREE as an EBOOK almost everywhere online.
Untaken Three
Cover Photo: Ann Marie Eberhart
Editor: Angie Peters

Positive book reviews are needed and greatly appreciated.

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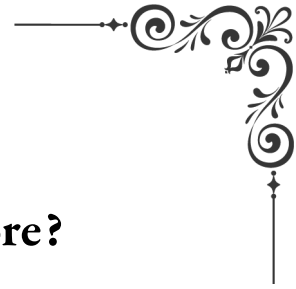

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About the Author

Born and raised in Southern California, Wyler is a Christian who lives in the Pacific Northwest. Having owned a business for over thirty years, she is retired and enjoys spending time with her family and traveling.