

PREFACE

Did you ever have lightning strike so close that there was no delay between the sound and the light; a flash and a KRACK together in the same instant? Did you notice something? Did it seem like your body was twitching up out of your chair before the lightning struck? Like you knew it was about to happen before it did?

Your brain is a funny thing. There are deep structures in there that have been around since the caveman days. They don't come out often, but they're there. Back behind the thinking, feeling, everyday part of your brain is a piece of lizard-brain. It's fast, instinctive, and it doesn't waste time on what or why, it just starts you moving away from danger. People talk about "reaction time". The reaction time of your lizard brain is zero. It takes your conscious brain a half-second to process all the information, catch up and form a picture of what is going on so that you can think about it. By that time, your lizard brain has been working to save your precious hide for a half-second. That's your reaction time.

I don't know if that half-second ever does you any good. All I know is, when the bomb went off, I was already halfway out of my chair.

Chapter 1 Tuesday, September 11th, 2001 7:59AM

He was in a cave.

He didn't know who he was, or how he got here.

The motorcycle's engine purred; brown, rough-hewn walls of stone slipping past. There were no light fixtures, yet the cave was well lit.

The leather of the left arm of his jacket was crusted with dried blood, and red-brown drops were splattered across the blue gas tank. He was carrying a pistol in a shoulder holster. A sword was belted to his waist.

He was quickly approaching the end of the cave. He sped through the opening onto a steel bridge that stretched into the distance. His tires sang across the gridded metal. A bloody red moon lit the scene around him. The bridge crossed a plain which extended to the horizon. The plain was covered with ancient white bones. Ribs and skulls and femurs tangled as far as he could see.

There was a figure standing on the bridge ahead. Before he hit the man, he twisted the handlebars sharply, turning and skidding to a stop. He faced the other. A big man, in filthy clothes, his wiry brown hair a nimbus around his head. The other stared at him and leered with a lunatic grin. A pistol was tucked into the front of his jeans.

The other snapped into action, reaching for his gun. He drew his pistol. Both guns fired and—

I woke up, in the middle of a dream, facing someone....

I turned a bleary eye to my nightstand, as the scraps of the dream blew away like leaves in the wind, leaving only a chilly sense of foreboding behind. My iPod jutted up from its cradle on the alarm clock. I'd jury-rigged a connection to a pair of self-amplifying Bose speakers for better sound quality. Iggy Pop blared through the room, singing "Looking for the Joke." I rolled out of bed and headed for the kitchen.

This September Tuesday was overcast. Not the kind that promises an all-day rain, or even a decent shower or two, just a lead blanket thrown over the sky. Florida didn't sparkle in that flat light. A week and a half into September, you would think that clouds cutting out the sun's rays might have

had a welcome cooling effect. The bump it gave the humidity erased any benefit of the shade. I could already feel the close, oppressive damp, despite the A/C.

I reached through the door of the second bedroom, taking a cherry-wood practice *katana* from a shelf. In the sparsely furnished living room, I tossed my robe on a hassock and took up a fighting stance with the dull weapon. I spun into a series of kendo exercises, whirling around the room, tapping certain places on walls and doorjambs with my hands, feet, or sword, blurring from attack to defense.

I time it by the music. Ten songs is over half an hour, my target. As *Rockaway Beach* faded from the speakers I returned to my guard stance, then relaxed. Dripping with sweat, I turned to the shower.

I don't have to get into the office by 9:00, but I keep the routine. I'm a creature of habit. A shower and a pot of coffee, a chunk of baguette smeared with Irish butter. I remember what I wore that day. It was practically my uniform. Button-down chambray work shirt and jeans, humidity be damned. Most of my day would be spent sitting on my ass in front of a computer in the office, blasting the A/C, and I could always come home and change if I needed to do outside work.

I poured a glass full of water and walked into the second bedroom. Taking a small cup from the floor, I measured a quarter ounce of blue fertilizer from a plastic soda bottle and swirled it into the glass. I went to the plant in front of the window and poured the water slowly, drenching the roots hidden in the sandy soil.

Empty glass in hand, I looked at the hanging weapons and the stacks of gear. I touched one of the five guns, my old long-barreled Smith and Wesson 41. A competition piece from my college days. I stood back and wondered, not for the first time, what the weapons really said about me.

I had more firepower than I had any need for. I wasn't the kind of person to own more guns than I could shoot at the same time, but here I was with five. To the extent that I needed a gun, a simple pistol would be enough. I could lie and say I bought them for defense. Fuck that. I brought them because I'd need them if the world fell apart. I sometimes questioned my motives, but the guns remained.

Fucking prepper, shaking my head. If this was a sign of my personality issues, I could always sell most of this gear for what I paid, no harm no foul. Everything but the swords.

I reached out and ran my hand over the sheaths of the swords. They were an expensive indulgence. If I ever gave up the desire to be prepared for anything, I would never recoup their cost by selling them. Still, they were elegant. I had worked hard to learn how to use them. They were as real as I could find, not cheap American knockoffs. Muramoto was renowned for forging blades the old-fashioned way, folding the steel and beating it out time and time again; creating a blade that would stay razor sharp even under harsh use.

I flicked off the light and went back to the kitchen, softly closing the door behind me.

I live a block from work. I walk my way in, somewhere around 9:00. It's not like the boss is going to chew my ass for being five minutes late. That's one of the perks of being the boss.

I swung around the corner to come face-to-face with the motel's nicest feature. The sign. If you're trying to attract drive-by business, you have to have a really eye-catching sign. It's a point I think a lot of motel owners miss. I mean, if you've got ten seconds of an out-of-town driver's attention to reel 'em in, you want to have a *really* special sign.

Florida is the land of the tourist trap, and we've been working the sign angle for ages. Back in the 50s and 60s there was bright shiny neon all over the state reaching out to tourist's wallets. People don't go for that anymore, and the neon that's left is an eye-catching curiosity. When I renovated the place I splurged on that sign, banking on the lessons of days gone by.

At the top it read "The Relax Inn" in bright blue that could be read a mile away. "Reasonable Rates" and "Vacancy" used the same blue at the bottom of the sign. Most of the space was taken up in the middle, where the stylized figure of a woman diving into waves made it immediately clear that we have a nice pool. I don't have any way to measure it, but I'm convinced that retro neon sign gave me an edge over the competition.

I walked around the motel rooms, making sure everything was in order. Twelve cars, at \$69 a night on a Tuesday with nothing special going on, that was pretty good.

Lakeland's a good town for a motel. A town of over a hundred thousand people generates plenty of reasons for short-term stays. What with the car show, the air show, spring training, and two colleges worth of move-ins and alumni weekends, there was practically always something bringing in visitors. The savvy vacationer could stay here where it was relatively cheap and drive an hour in any

direction to a choice Florida destination. Halfway between the Mouse and the beach, we were in a sweet spot for the motel trade that I shamelessly cashed in on.

I stood there musing on the sign and the motel for longer than I needed to. It happens to me more and more as thirty gets farther away. That “how the heck did I get here” feeling.

Six years ago, I was snug and reasonably happy teaching math at one of the smaller community colleges. Married with a daughter, suburban home, all the trimmings of a bland middle-class existence. Everything seemed to go south all at once. The marriage soured. She and our daughter moved away after the divorce was final. The college's enrollment was down and, in a totally unrelated attack on my peace of mind, downsized me with very little warning. I was in a bad way. My mental health went down the same drain the rest of my life had.

I spiraled down. I managed to scrape together a down payment on a simple 2/1 in a neighborhood I wouldn't have driven through a year earlier. I forced myself to get the resumes out, forced myself to smile in the interviews, but it just wasn't a good time to be looking. There were too many dead ends and too few smiles.

I was on the target-shooting team in college, so yeah, I had always had guns in the house. My target weapons mostly. Guns and depression are a very bad combination. Forty percent of Major Depressives commit suicide, I read. Hell, that makes most cancers sound safe. Some nights it was touch and go.

Anyway, fate intervened. My twin brother, Devin, was a diehard lottery player. He'd endured so many lectures from me about the statistics of the lottery, it embarrasses me. Then he picked the winning numbers. It wasn't stupid money, no eighty-foot yachts, but it was a respectable number of millions. He came to see me in my shitty little unkempt house and said, “What can I do, Kevin? What's going to help? You've got to tell me because I'm all out of ideas.”

Well, I'd been walking by this down-at-heels motel for a few years on the way to the 7-11 and I'd had some fantasies about how to do it up right. I asked Devin to co-sign the loan with me. He'd only be out money if I defaulted, and I'd have a project I could throw myself into. It worked.

The motel's office building was a little larger than the norm. In back, the long L of the two-story motel cuddled itself around the pool. Everything was quiet and looked neat and clean. I stared up at

the leaden sky, a scrim of sweat covering my body. The dull gray clouds seemed to stare down on me, like pitiless gods.

The usual summer day in Florida started crystal clear and sunny. Clouds built up all day, finishing in a pounding but brief thunderstorm in the late afternoon. I was used to that. Days like this were more common in winter. The sky, and the weakened light it let through, deepened the sense of foreboding my dream had given me. I knocked a wooden fencepost for luck.

Malcolm was at the desk listening to the radio. He was a slim black man in his late twenties, a little under my 6'2", padded out with just enough wiry muscle that we probably weighed the same. He was dressed in his signature white short-sleeved button-down and jeans. Malcolm was always careful to come across as a well put-together young man.

He had a business degree from USF, so the job was technically beneath his education. He told me that he wanted to spend a few years learning the hospitality business from the ground up before striking out on his own. Most business owners would've said "Thanks, but no thanks." I liked his style, though, so I brought him on board. It was a good decision. Malcolm was a rock and kept things humming along. I had upgraded him to Manager quickly and started leaving more of the work to him.

Malcolm was a man I'd come to like, and trust. No steady girlfriend, which seemed like a waste of a nice guy. Scraps of family in Tampa; I never got the full picture but gathered that he hadn't come from a happy place. He rented a duplex just a couple of doors down from me, which gave him the same easy commute that I had. We'd have a bachelors' barbecue at my place every couple of weeks. Even after a handful of those I wouldn't have said I really knew him well, not deep down anyway. He was a good kid, ran the office smoothly and efficiently, and some day I'd be proud to say I knew him when.

He barely seemed to notice me when I came in, just looked up briefly and went back to staring at the radio, frowning at it intently.

"Morning Malcolm, what's new...", I began.

He frowned harder and held up one hand to stop me while pointing at the radio with the other.

"...New York correspondent. Again, this is just in. A light plane is reported to have struck one of the Twin Towers. We don't have any more information at this time, but will be bringing you updates as they come in. This is

Lakshmee Prakash for NPR. With me is representative Eric Conyers of Iowa to discuss the reaction to the Fed's recent decision...

I told myself the chills running over my body were from walking into the air conditioning from the sweltering parking lot. My mind flashed back to my second bedroom and the deadly little toys stored there. A 'light plane'? That didn't sound too bad. Why was my body reacting like it was more?

“Sorry, Kevin,” Malcolm said, twisting down the volume. “I wanted to hear if they had any more yet. That sounds bad.”

“Jesus, it sure could be. Imagine a plane full of gas falling all the way to the street at rush hour? Keep listening and tell me what they find out. Is there anything on TV about it?” I still remember the image that came to mind: a little Cessna 182 top-wing tumbling down through the concrete canyons of downtown New York, spilling fuel, catching some cabs on fire. If only.

“I tried, but the cable is acting weird again.”

“Oh, fuck me, not again. Any complaints from the rooms? My damn internet better be up or I'm going back to bed.”

Malcolm laughed, “No, the internet seems okay and the guests haven't said anything. Everything's pretty quiet. I can let you know if it comes back on.”

“Sounds good. Man, that is not a pretty picture to wake up to. How the hell does a light plane hit a skyscraper in the middle of New York, anyway?”

“It does seem awfully strange. NPR didn't know hardly anything about it except what you heard, so it could be the real story is still coming. That's just the first report, the real story's bound to be different than just that little scrap. The coffee's fresh, by the way.”

“Good. And yeah, holler if anything new comes on. Or if the cable company clown-car gets their act together and we get a signal. I'll poke around on the Internet, see if I can find anything.” I said as I grabbed a cup from the rack and stirred in some creamer. That chill lingered, and the spoon chattered against the mug.

I held up my hand and watched it quaver. This was a sign I had become painfully familiar with. I was walking in the shadow of a panic attack. It was a physical reminder to keep my thoughts calm, my fear in check.

Your typical motel office isn't very spacious. A computer desk, and a filing cabinet, and barely enough room to turn around in was what you'd find in most places. I had a different attitude. When we renovated the place, I'd played some creative games with old storage closets and put aside a nice 10x12 room. I had two desks that I could swivel between, one for the motel, and one for my side work. The motel side was what you'd expect: a computer, ledgers, filing cabinets. What you didn't find in many motel offices was a worktable with electronic gear, a soldering station, and several pieces of arcane-looking computer innards.

The thing about motel management that I discovered in my first year is that it's kind of boring. I don't do boring. There were a certain number of necessary hours every week needed to keep the motel running. There was the housekeeping staff to manage, Malcolm and the night manager, Drake. I might be a little overstaffed by having Malcolm run the front when I could have done it perfectly well myself. But it was boring, and like I said, I just don't do boring.

I spent that first year after we opened analyzing everything. The motel had been renovated to a quality level that was nice enough to attract family trade. I splurged on advertising, betting that a location half a mile from a major parkway would live up to the investment. I hired good people and paid them well, refusing to cut corners.

It paid off. The business was up, running and humming, sooner than I had expected. I'd had a steep learning curve, but that was something I was good at, and I mastered the essentials of small business management quickly.

At the beginning, I was coming out of the shadows of a very dark hole in my mind. I latched on to the multitude of little problems involved in starting a business like a drowning man. I poured my energy into finding and fixing the problems that came up like they were steps in a recovery program. In a very real way, they were.

In the end, I found that I needed to spend just under 20 hours a week, average, on the business. The note I'd co-signed with Devin was being paid off steadily. My home mortgage didn't amount to much, and the profit was enough to support a modest lifestyle. All good.

I wasn't satisfied, though. Far from it. What the hell was I supposed to do with the other hours in the week? I liked to work, as long as it was interesting work. I like solving problems. Teaching had been a trade that had always given me new challenges; I needed something to put my brain to work on, I needed puzzles to solve.

Fortunately, teaching wasn't the only thing I knew how to do. I'd read enough of the signs while I was in school to minor in Computer Science. I loved to code, and I was good at it. Hence the overpowered computer on the second desk, the chunks of computer arcana on the worktable, the nice fat pipe to the internet.

It was a year past the millennium, and it was the Age of Tech. The Silicon Valley corps and startups were crunching out reams of code to power the new age. Sometimes, though, they'd hit snags. There were any of a dozen ways they could need a little helping hand. That's where I came in. Through outsourcing websites, the big boys would subcontract pieces they needed help with. Freelancers like me would audition and bid for the projects, and progress would rumble on.

Not only did this keep me occupied and out of trouble, it also made for much more than a modest lifestyle. For the moment I was letting the money pile up; I figured in a few years I would make a life change and start spending it. Maybe give Malcolm the keys and take off around the world, living on the profits. Who knows?

Chapter 2 A hundred searchlights

I picked my latest paperback up off the office chair. *Into the Wasteland* by Bruce Gibson. I was hopelessly addicted to post-apocalyptic fiction and cyberpunk. This was my third time around reading this one and it was getting pretty dog-eared. It was time to get out and find some new titles. Some guy in California had put together an actual bookstore on the Internet with the unlikely name of "Amazon". I wanted to try it out for hard-to-find titles.

I put the book to the side and entered my password on the first desk's PC. While Windows98 struggled its way to consciousness, I spun around and logged into the workstation on the second desk. The UNIX prompt came back in about two seconds. A few terse commands opened the graphic desktop and Netscape.

Finding information on the internet was an art. It was getting easier all the time as the general population graduated from AOL to the World Wide Web, but you still had to know your way around.

I settled on USENET for a first look. That bulletin board had been running for thirty years; it was a good place to start. I pulled up news.currentevents and started scanning. It didn't take long. It

didn't take any time at all. The latest message was titled "WTC ON FIRE". At least a dozen messages below it were similar. All-caps subject lines screamed "CODE RED" and "911 ON 911" at me.

I felt a chill run down my spine. My image of the little Cessna tumbling down suddenly seemed like wishful thinking. I felt a whisper of presentiment, like I'd slipped into the first chapter of one of my pulp novels. I opened the most recent message.

SHAKESTHECLOWN@ATT.NET (09:16 09/11/01):

THIS IS NOT A DRILL. I AM IN MY OFFICE IN STATEN ISLAND WITH A CLEAR VIEW OF NYC. BOTH OF THE WTC TOWERS HAVE DARK BLACK SMOKE POURING OUT NEAR THE TOP. I SAW THE SECOND PLANE HIT A FEW MINUTES AGO. AIRLINER. LOOKS LIKE SEVERAL FLOORS ARE ON FIRE. RUMORS ON RADIO ABOUT PLANES HITTING THE TOWERS ARE CONFIRMED. CODE RED.

The chill deepened, it felt like my brain was in an ice bucket. I thought of my swords, waiting in their nondescript sheaths. Was this the day?

I sampled the other most recent titles, and they all echoed the first. No more details, but they were definitely confirming a massive disaster. Two planes? How do two planes accidentally fly into the Twin Towers? Oh sweet holy fucking shit, there is no good coming out of this.

"Kevin? KEVIN!", Malcolm yelled from the front office with a note of panic in his voice.

I came out to the sound of CBS's Special Report music, and there it was on the screen just like ShakesTheClown had described it. My throat caught. I couldn't speak. What could I say in the face of that horrible image? As the smoke poured out of the tower, my mind raced. Was this an accident? How could two planes just accidentally run into the towers? Was it an act of war? If it was, why airliners instead of cruise missiles? It didn't make any sense.

Malcolm and I watched in silence as the black smoke poured out. We spoke very little. Not long after we got the cable signal, the alert came through that the Pentagon had been hit. The TV segued through images of horror, the cable announcers ever more desperate to keep their cool.

The first tower came down.

I looked at my watch, mystified. Had I really come to work just a little over an hour ago?

When the second tower went down, I decided that that was enough for now. "Come on," I said, snapping off the TV. I ducked into the back office and came back with a six pack from the fridge.

“What if something else happens?” asked Malcolm.

“Well for one, we just lost the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and countless lives so I don’t see what else *can* happen, and for two, there’s always the nightly news. I need a break. You do too.”

I led Malcolm out the door to the pool area and set the beer down on a table near the back. I cracked open two bottles and settled down in a lawn chair facing the pool. Facing east, in fact, with the rooms at my back to the west. For a long time I would wonder at that choice of spot. Was it a coincidence that I sat with the building behind me and the pool at my feet? Or was that the lizard brain, already at work?

We drank in the same silence that had gripped us for the last hour, each lost in his own thoughts.

“Kevin... is it... is it war?” Malcolm stuttered out.

“Well, I don’t know. See, on the one hand—”

There was a moment there where time seemed frozen. A moment in which all the color of the world was washed out into a chiaroscuro of the brightest of bright whites against the harshest shadows of pure black. It was as if someone had thrown the switch on a hundred searchlights parked just behind the building. There was no sound, no sound at all. Just bright painful light reaching into every crack and crevice. I could barely see. There was the brightest light imaginable, and there was shadow, and that’s all there was.

Time unfroze, and the world moved again. The lizard-brain was working; I was already halfway out of the chair. I came up all the way, my hands tearing at the buttons of my shirt, yanking it off.

Yep, it's war. My paranoid fantasies had come true.

“GET IN THE POOL! NOW, MALCOLM, NOW! GET IN THE GODDAMN POOL!” I screamed. I took about five seconds to shuck off my loafers and shirt and toss my phone and wallet on the pile. I grabbed Malcolm’s arm and pulled him to the edge.

“KEEP YOUR HEAD UNDERWATER! ONLY COME UP TO BREATHE! STAY DOWN!” I shouted, then jumped in.

I could hear Malcolm’s splash through the water. I felt my way to the corner, found the safety bar at the steps, and used it to press my body to the bottom of the shallow end. Three feet of water from the air to my head. It would have to be enough. I waited as long as I could, then surfaced, gulped air, and retreated to the bottom. Every minute or so. Lather, rinse, repeat.

And the hellish light shone on.

I guessed that I was good for about a minute underwater between breaths. My mind raced for those cold, wet minutes. I was definitely CODE RED myself, more than I'd ever been. This was not a drill. This was the real deal, and I'd have to think fast and carefully to have any chance of making it to tomorrow.

I had a sudden sharp image of Meghan at Busch Gardens, laughing and tearing into her cotton candy. I could hear her laughter on the wind. My gorge rose, nausea twisting my body. Great and terrible forces were at work in the world of my precious child. Mad gods of war trampled their jackboots over her city. *Oh god, Meghan!* I squeezed my eyes tight, fighting the urge to cry underwater. *Oh, you bastards. What the hell have you done to my child?* I surfaced, tested the air and took a few gulping breaths, then back down again.

Concentrate, think! What was going on? Which way should I lean? How am I going to survive the next second, and the next, and the next? I've always liked the dark, dystopian side of science fiction. I had read the world's ending in dozens of different stories. I was now in the middle of one of my novels, watching the story play out in real time. I knew that there was a good chance that I was already a dead man walking. Whatever radiation I'd already received could kill me tonight or a year from now.

My train of thought hiccupped and jittered. It was a mistake. A terrible, grisly mistake. Someone had overreacted to the attack. Maybe some automatic system in the Pentagon had been set off when it was hit. I beat my head steadily against the cool steel. Maybe there were other planes after I turned off the radio and a fleet of fuel-heavy jets had been crashing into army bases and nuclear plants and...

The blast wave that was coming was a big question mark. The aftermath... hell, read a dozen post-nuclear-exchange stories and you could write a dozen different endings for how that would play out. There was one solid guarantee: no matter how many writers had imagined the aftermath, none of them had it right. I would write my own story today, different than anything that had ever been laid down in print.

Images, projections of what was happening short miles away weighed on me. I remembered seeing a picture of a monk in Vietnam who'd set himself on fire at a protest. I had marveled at how awful it would have been, what a horrible way it would be to die. I thought of the busy streets of

Tampa, Brandon, Clearwater, St. Petersburg, and wondered how many people were burning. Millions. An unimaginable scale of death. A symphony of suffering.

I had to focus. What I knew wasn't special; anybody from my generation would have known some of it. The blast wave was the first concern.

I'd read the Cold War literature of the military scientists. I'd seen the maps of intensity versus distance for various sized weapons. The figure that stuck out in my head was a blast wave speed of 200 miles per hour. At 35 miles away, a 20 megaton blast would break windows. Tampa wasn't *supposed* to get that much, but there was no way to be sure. Plan for the worst.

The light hammered on, my watery view of the pool floor as brightly lit as an operating room. The skyscrapers of downtown Tampa are tumbling, killing everyone inside. I attended the opening of a Monet traveling exhibit there in May. Was the exhibit still here? Was all the subtle beauty of those paintings turning to dust along with the rest of the city?

Focusing on the old facts and figures, remembering the terrible predictions and calculations of death was oddly soothing. I had done the required reading for today's lecture. I expected a five or ten megaton air burst at about 10,000 feet. That would maximize blast and thermal damage to the city without wasting energy trying to penetrate underground. As shallow as the water table is in Florida, there was virtually no underground to penetrate. I was thirty-five miles from MacDill Air Force Base, give or take. Thirty five miles should be a survivable distance. In theory.

Of course, none of those military scientists had written their predictions based on actual 20MT air burst tests – that would have been frowned upon by the international community. It was all extrapolated from the data that came out of Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Bikini Atoll; mixed with measurements of underground tests.

Plan for the worst.

Two hundred mph. Thirty five miles. It would take the blast about a sixth of an hour to get here. Ten minutes, give or take.

A rolling, roiling cloud of dust and dirt and debris racing across the land faster than a small plane. In fact, there would be airplanes falling out of the air for a long distance away. The passengers screaming in fear. The black line of the blast front marching across the land. Life and sanity on one side, death and chaos on the other. In the areas farthest from the center people don't die right away. They die slower.

Eight. It was time for my eighth trip to the surface. Time for a decision. I stood up in the pool, the water at my waist. The heat was the first thing that I noticed. It was *hot*. Not killing hot. Not ‘burn your lungs out when you draw a breath’ hot, that was a relief. It sure was hot, though.

I had mounted a big thermometer by the pool fence with a sign to remind our northern guests to drink lots of water. The needle was pegged at 120F. The designers apparently hadn’t thought to make accurate measurements of post-nuclear air quality a priority. Over 120, but not too far over, I thought. The books said that 20 Megatons would make paper burst into flame at this distance. It hadn’t gotten that hot, that was for sure. The paint on the office wall looked fine, too.

The light level had gone way down in eight minutes. The back of the motel office was reflecting a glow, but it was softer and more yellow than the Klieg light effect of the primary explosion. That fit with an air burst; the kernel of the event had dissipated and fallen to ground, wreaking a new kind of havoc but letting the curve of the Earth block the radiated light at this distance. The other thing that struck me was the silence. No traffic, no birds. Hardly any noise at all. A woman was screaming somewhere in the middle distance, but that was it.

I sloshed my way quickly to the other corner of the pool. Malcolm had figured out the trick of holding on to the safety bar to stay on the bottom. For very little instruction that spoke well of the kid’s thought processes. I reached under and grabbed his shoulder, hauling him upright.

Malcolm came up, wiping water from his face. He didn’t freak out, another point in his favor, he just looked at me from under beetled brows and said, “We’re living in one of your damn books, aren’t we?”

“Looks that way.” I said, “More on that later. The blast wave will be here any second. Best if we’re underwater when it hits. Try to stay down as long as you can when you feel it. Go!”

With that I ducked back under, shimmied my way to the safety bar, and tried to calm my raging brain.

They bit the World Trade Center, they bit the Pentagon. Something was missing, something obvious. What was it? If you were kamikaze-flying airliners into the American infrastructure you’d have some kind of symbolism in your targets. What...

The White House.

Oh shit, they wouldn't skip that, would they? That would explain a lot. Dubya, down in the deep bunker, the football in his lap. Had he sent the missiles flying? Had some automatic system done it for him? Did the Russians exploit a sudden weakness in America's defenses? We will never know.

Two trips to the surface later, I was trying to remember everything I knew about fallout and fighting desperately against thoughts of panic when--

WHAP

It was like somebody had smacked the surface of the pool with a giant piece of plywood. The water squeezed in all over my body like a giant watery hand. I was too surprised to hang on to the air in my lungs, but I had the peace of mind to wait as many seconds as I could before surfacing. I gulped on air that now felt gritty and got back down to the bottom. Nothing fell in the pool as near as I could tell, but I could hear a sound like a long, insanely loud peal of thunder rolling over the land.

There couldn't be anything good happening overhead, so I decided to wait it out. Fifteen minutes should be enough. I settled back in to the now-familiar cycle of simulated drowning, trying to block out thoughts of fallout and gritty air.

No. No. There's some mistake. My daughter's out there, she could be hurt. What have they done to my child? Stop. Just please stop.

Fifteen breaths later, I stood up for the second time, shuffled over and shook Malcolm's shoulder, then climbed warily out of the pool to sit on a deck chair. Malcolm joined me, a little shakily.

The sky was the yellow-brown that you see in pictures from California during wildfire season. There was a layer of dust over everything, like in a house that's been shut up for twenty years. It was still eerily quiet, but there were a few more voices screaming within earshot. One might have been coming from the back of the motel. I decided that my duties to my guests were null and void now.

"It was a nuke, wasn't it?" asked Malcolm.

"Pretty sure, but let's take a look." I led him to the side door of the pool enclosure and out into the parking lot where we had a clear horizon.

It was there all right. From this distance we could only see the cap and part of the stem, but it was a mushroom cloud. Black sooty veins ran over a core of hellfire red. It glowed with an evil,

malevolent light. It was moving, swirling, pulsing like a live thing. It was horrible to look at, but so blackly fascinating that it was hard to look away.

She's gone. Better to accept it now than later. No sweet sixteen, no high school graduation. No grandkids. Nine years raising her, protecting her, nurturing her; all of it was for nothing. All of that, gone in a flash. It doesn't seem possible.

Malcolm spun away, walking back toward the pool, mumbling under his breath, “Nope, no we did not just see that. No sir. That is not okay, this is not okay.” He stood by the pool, face up toward the sky. “Aaaaauuggghhhh!” he screamed into the rumble of the explosion. He grabbed a chair and threw it across the pool apron, and another. He threw half of the furniture into the pool shouting a brisk “Yeeaaugh!” with each one. At the far end, he grabbed the fence, swaying forward and back, shaking the bars as hard as he could.

I knew how he felt, but I was too numb to move. I stood and stared at that awful scene, the images of horror bubbling up from my subconscious. Every thought of my daughter drove an icicle through my chest. I wanted to scream and throw things, too, but I was afraid I wouldn't stop if I started.

Malcolm eventually sagged against the fence, shook himself, and walked back to me, giving a rueful glare at the cloud as he came into the open. He shook his head, as if to clear it. He waited, head down, as his breath slowed and evened out.

“Are we getting irradiated out here?”

“Not so much I think,” I said. “Most of the gamma rays are generated in the initial explosion. That's why we got in the pool. Water is a great insulator against radiation. With our heads under three feet of water, we weren't getting much of a dose. Just a little with the first flash. You felt how hot it got?”

“Yeah. Scared me when I noticed it.”

“Well, that was the thermal radiation from the blast. The pool was handy for that, too. I don't know if it got hot enough for skin burns here, but it might have. I wouldn't want to have been out in the open with no cover. Then the blast wave – the water spread the overpressure out over the entire pool. It eased up the pressure on your ears, otherwise we might not be hearing very well right now. Or ever. If it had blown out windows or thrown the chairs around, the water would have slowed things down and kept us safer.”

Calm. So calm in the face of losing the one thing that made my life worth living. The one reason I made it when I was spiraling down, my light in dark places.

I spared Malcolm the images of flash-burned bodies lining the streets of the Greater Tampa Bay area. The thoughts of people in the outlying communities running around with their clothes and hair on fire. I didn't mention the blackened mangroves, the highways full of burning cars, each one occupied. I didn't point out that the Tampa skyline was now a jumble of masonry spread over the downtown streets. To say those things out loud would be too much. To say those things out loud was to risk madness.

We walked back to our seats by the pool. I picked a beer out of the six-pack holder and held it up. "Thirsty?" I asked.

"Oh hell yes.", Malcolm replied, giving me a piercing look, "That was pretty sharp, Kevin. It didn't take you two seconds after the flash to get in that pool."

"Well, like you said, it's like something out of one of my books. I've thought about it, what I'd do in certain situations. It's just something I know a little about and keep in the back of my mind. I've made some little preparations over the years. Once I saw that first tower go down I was kind of in Red Alert mode.

Malcolm cast a penetrating sidelong gaze at me. "That's why we came out here for a beer when the tower fell? You were already planning?"

"We could've made it to the pool fine from the office." I took a long pull on the longneck bottle, "but yeah, that's why I came out here."

Malcolm nodded soberly. He tipped the bottle back and drank off the half that was left in a series of slow, steady draws. "Well thanks for your fascination with the end of the world. I don't know if I'm safe, but I guess I'm safer. I owe you one for that."

"I don't know how safe we are, but yeah, we're a tiny bit safer because we were in the pool. The day ain't over yet though. I have a feeling the fun's just getting started." I said, finishing my beer.

Malcolm put his bottle back in the cardboard holder and paused. "This wasn't in the water. Is the beer radioactive?"

"Common question. No. The radiation passes through it but doesn't make it radioactive. The dust of the explosion is covered with the radioactive material that made the bomb. If that drifts over and falls on us, then we get exposed to radiation."

He stared around: at the awful color of the sky, at the dust coating the table next to him, at the road across from us. He started to shake, tremors in his arms first. Soon most of his body was shaking and spasming. He breathed in short, harsh, indrawn breaths. I watched him carefully, ready to help if he needed it, but he seemed to be under control, so I held off.

The fit died out slowly. After a few minutes his breathing had slowed, and the shaking had stopped. He opened his eyes and flopped back exhaustedly in the chair.

“So what’s next?”

Chapter 3 Paper money and broken electronics

Malcolm’s question hung in the air. I bowed my head, eyes closed, running through the options in my mind.

Now what? That was the first question in my mind, too.

A lot of things had been processing themselves in the back of my mind as I lay at the bottom of the pool, thinly avoiding freaking out. The first thing... man, I hated to spring this on Malcolm right away, but it could become important any minute.

“Listen Malcolm,” I started, “this is a bad scene, and I know you’re freaked out, but I need you to absorb some harsh news. You’re alive, I’m alive, and we’ll keep it that way. You need to know this so you can move if you need to.”

“Look man, I’ve got a fucking news flash for you. That is a fucking mushroom cloud. Last time I checked that meant a nuclear weapon. We’re dead men. What are we doing standing around and talking?” Malcolm’s voice was winding up to a high, panicked tone that I didn’t like.

I softened my voice. “Yeah, it was a nuke. And yeah, I can’t think of any worse way to start the day. You’re breathing, I’m breathing. We’re not dead. I mean to keep it that way.” My hand was twitching. *Slow down.* “It doesn’t feel like it right now, but we are very, very lucky. And we are alive.” I spoke as calmly as I could manage under the circumstances.

“Man, I am having trouble believing you. That, that *thing* looks an awful lot like the end of the world to me.” Malcolm was darting quick glances at the sky, my face, the furniture in the pool, the red light twinkling off the cars in the parking lot. He looked like an animal caught in a trap.

“Hey,” I said, laying my hand on his shoulder, “look right in my eyes and take some deep breaths.”

“It was the end of the world for a lot of people,” I began when he calmed a bit, “we’ll process that later. It doesn’t have to be the end of the world for us. Now, there’s some things you need to know to protect you. They’re not happy things. If you know them, you have a better chance to survive this.”

“Okay. Okay, okay, okay. I’m listening.” He kept his eyes locked on mine, pleading for answers.

“Alright, this is what it is. A few years ago, the US and the Russians agreed to share their targets for nuclear strikes as part of an arms limitation agreement.”

“They told us what they had pointed at us?” Malcolm asked, his eyes wide.

“Yeah. Tampa was down for three bombs. Two 5-megaton warheads from one missile and a 10-megaton on its own rocket.” Going through the technical side of it was calming me down. My hand was still.

“Just how much is a megaton?” Malcolm asked.

“If I’m right, we just lived through a 10-megaton bomb going off 35 miles away.”

Malcolm broke my gaze and walked slowly back to the parking lot. He put his head down, as if gathering his strength, then looked to the west. The light made his face look like it was smeared with blood. I silently joined him.

“Seems like an awful lot for a mild-mannered city like Tampa,” Malcolm mused still staring at the cloud.

“You’re forgetting MacDill, the Air Force Base. It’s a big deal.” I explained.

“Uh-huh. I got it. Where’re the other two?” Malcolm spoke slowly at the gravity of what he was hearing. I was encouraged, maybe he had fought the fear to a standstill. For now anyway.

“Good question. Maybe bombs don’t work in a mushroom cloud, maybe the Star Wars satellites shot it down, maybe they’re being held back. I don’t know.”

There was silence for a while. I let Malcolm be the one to break it.

“So, there’s no way of knowing. It’ll happen or it won’t, we could wait for days and not be any safer.”

“All true. What’s your thinking?”

“About what?” Malcolm responded, puzzled.

“About what we do now.” I answered, searching the young man’s face. “Think it through. What do you want?”

“You’re serious.” Malcolm paused, “Let me think”

He thought for a long stretch, then began to speak, slowly and deliberately. “We either stay or we go. If we stay, we have to decide what we’re holding on to and how it’ll support us. If we go, it’s because we think that there will be something out there that will give us a better life than what we would have here. There are a lot of...” His voice broke, and he took a minute to compose himself.

He went on in a soft, mumbling, stream-of-consciousness. “There are a lot of dead people in Tampa. We’re alive, so there are live people here. In between there must be a lot of... injured people. Some might be able to get away from the center of the blast. Some might come here. Some folks here must be hurt. Too many to care for. Everyone will be unhappy. There will be a lot of mouths to feed. We don’t have crops. I don’t know what we’re going to eat. I don’t think that staying here is an option.”

He looked over and caught me eye-to-eye. His voice was firmer. “I say go, if you know where to go.”

“Come on.”

I took a moment to get dressed, then I led Malcolm back to the office and told him to try every bit of electronics he could find. I headed to my office and my worktable. I turned to my latest project. It was a single-board computer in a backplane housing.

Any coding geek has a backup battery. You don’t want to lose an hour’s work if the power flickers. The light on the power strip glowed red, the only light in the office. Good news. Batteries and light bulbs still worked. I flipped the switch and turned on the backplane. No lights. The board was toast. That was enough to convince me. I headed back out.

“Nothing works, Kevin.” Malcolm said from behind the desk. “The little light at the end of the TV remote doesn’t blink when I hit the buttons. So even batteries aren’t working.”

“Oh, the batteries are working fine,” I said, “it’s the chips that are dead. There were always rumors that the Soviets would light up a big-ass nuke a hundred miles over Kansas. They must have done it. It put out a pulse of electromagnetic energy that fried every chip in the nation that wasn’t specially made. The military might have working chips. We don’t.”

“No chips. No power. No phone. Kevin, why don’t I hear traffic right now?”

Pretty sharp, my friend. You may be an asset that I never knew I needed. “Cars depend on chips. No chips, no car.”

“I see some potential problems there.”, Malcolm said tensely.

“Well, it sure does make things more interesting, that’s for certain.”

Malcolm looked at me appraisingly. “You knew this could happen, didn’t you? You have a plan for it.”

I nodded slowly. “Yes, for a nuclear exchange big enough to reach Tampa, an EMP was a pretty safe assumption. ‘Plan’ might be too strong a word. I have ideas on how to get around some problems, and I realize that a lot of things aren’t possible without the tech working. I’ve got some stuff at the house that will come in handy.”

“So...”, and now Malcolm looked away, uncertainty in his eyes, “did your plans include a sidekick? Today is too much for me to process. I don’t know what kind of questions to ask, much less what to do with the answers. No lie, Kevin, you’re two steps ahead of the game. I’d throw in with you.”

Malcolm jumped up from the couch and began to pace the room. He was dejected, his back bowed.

His eyes narrowed, a pained expression on his face. “Look, I wasn’t in good with my people in the first place and anyway most of them were in Tampa. I guess they’re all dead. I’ve got nothing to hold me here. And I sure don’t have any idea what to do now.”

I nodded slowly. “I’m glad you’re the one to bring it up. No, I didn’t imagine a sidekick, but I can see where two sets of eyes and hands could come in real handy sometimes. I like you, Malcolm. You’re a nice guy, you’re dependable, you’re intelligent, you’d make a good partner.”

“We have to have an understanding, though,” and here I felt my face harden, “There’s a lot of good people dead and bad people walking around. I think human life should be protected, but I’m willing to put mine first. I won’t kill without cause, but I will kill to save my life. I’ve never done any harm to another person, but this situation we’re in is going to drive some people over the edge. As long as they keep it to themselves, they can go about their business, but if they work to hurt me or mine, their lives are forfeit. Are we good?”

Before us that towering, monstrous cloud writhed and grew. The mushroom cap had flattened to blanket the land with shadow. Fiery orange and white cloud had given way to monstrous coal-red bubbles veined with black, squirming like snakes. Malcolm was right. That cloud was the end of the world.

That doesn't mean I have to die.

Malcolm was looking up at me with a new respect. He closed his eyes for a minute, then nodded to himself and put out his hand. I took it, and we shook on it.

“Okay,” Malcolm turned to me and spread his hands, “now what?”

“Well,” I said, “first thing is, we pack. Follow me on over to my house.”

“Aren't you going to lock up?” Malcolm asked once we hit the parking lot.

“The only thing in there is paper money and broken electronics. Money only has value because we all agree that it has value. It used to be a promise from the government to trade you for gold and silver if you asked, now it isn't even that. It's a meme. A structure we all agree to follow.”

“What's valuable is whatever's rare,” I went on, “Food will be valuable. Fresh water. Ammunition. I sure as hell hope gold keeps its value. Hmm. Drugs and alcohol are always popular for trade. Things like that. We're back to the barter system for a while,” I concluded.

We reached my front door.

“Will it save time if I run pack?” Malcolm asked. “Just tell me what I need.”

“I'm thinking that all you need is the clothes you're standing up in. We don't have a lot of storage space. Do you have any valuables? Any keepsakes that you'd hate to leave behind? A gun?”

“No,” Malcolm shook his head, “nothing like any of that. You don't grow up in my old neighborhood without learning your way around guns. Doesn't mean I want to own one.”

His brow knitted. “Hey now. Every good survivalist has guns,” concern and uncertainty clear in his voice, “You've got guns, and you might have to shoot people. You might want me to shoot people. I don't know about that.” He was shaking his head firmly.

“I'm not saying it'll definitely happen, but America is the land of the gun and people will react to fear with firearms. We'll be armed. That can stop a fight, if you've got better guns than the other

guy. There's always going to be some people who just won't stop, though. Yeah, we might have to shoot people like that. You have to be cool with the possibility."

Malcolm gave me a long, hard stare. Shook his head. Looked up, then down at me in a piercing glare. "You said: 'I won't kill without cause, but I'll kill to save my life'. As long as that's the way we do it, I'm in."

"Fair enough. Ammo is precious so I won't be able to give you any practice. For now, a boom and a flash might be enough to drive off most folks. Just one thing. Always aim for the center of the body so that you have the best chance of hitting something. Oh, and don't draw it unless you're ready to use it." I pursed my lips. "Can you drive a motorcycle?" I asked.

"A little. My cousin had one of those crotch rocket bikes. He showed me how the clutch and brakes worked and let me drive around the block a few times. I've seen yours, I might could manage it."

"Okay. Good to know. There's no sense in you going home. Come on over to the garage, you can watch the moment of truth."