

CHAPTER 15

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The faded green camper van hadn't moved, more alarming was that the employee door was unlocked. Zach noticed the dim glow from a computer monitor through the cleanroom window. Through the glass he saw two people in sleeping bags on a piece of camping foam. Carlos had his back to the glass and was concentrating on a spreadsheet on the lab computer monitor. Zach lightly tapped on the glass.

Carlos turned, grabbed his notes and came out into the hallway. "Señor Zach, I examined your reliability data and have found a possible problem with your quad panels."

"What? Zach looked back through the glass. Maria had just sat up and was shaking Cecelia trying to wake her up.

Carlos noticed the concern on Zach's face. "They slept there because the filtered air in the cleanroom was easier on my daughter's undersized sinus passage. I didn't think you'd mind. The van is musty."

"No, it's okay." Zach was still looking through the glass. "Tell your wife to let your daughter sleep. It will be a couple of hours before any other employee shows up."

Carlos opened the door and spoke in Spanish. The light outrush of filtered air blew his thinning hair off of his bald spot. Cecelia twisted from Maria and slithered down further in the sleeping bag.

"Let's go talk in my office." Zach started down the hallway.

Carlos was older and more seasoned than Zach; he didn't mince words. "The fracturing of the thin film solar cells can't be prevented when you stack them. Their thermal expansion breakdown starts around fifty degrees. Stacking them individually compounds heat dissipation and expansion."

"You're wrong about that! One hundred and twenty two degrees is the critical temperature. That's why my panels need to be mounted over ground or water source cooling." Zach switched on his computer

33 so to pull up data to prove Carlos wrong.

34 Carlos looked down to double check at his notes. "Señor, fifty
35 degrees Celsius equals one hundred and twenty degrees Fahrenheit."

36 "I know that! We purchase our thin film cells from China. China
37 uses the metric system."

38 Carlos now realized that Zach was going to have to confront
39 information that would change his life. He'd been there; when the
40 doctors told him that Cecelia had three copies of chromosome 21.
41 Similar as with the quad panels—more was not better.

42 Zach found the data sheet and his finger slowly tapped the plus
43 key on the keyboard to enlarge the font. There it was °F at the very
44 top of the temperature chart. He leaned forward to get a closer look!
45 Sure enough, for the past four years he'd been testing and using the
46 metric system. He was stunned to find out that the thin film solar cells
47 would start to fracture @ **122 °F**. With a knotted gut Zach left Son
48 Source and started to drive—his life was changed.

49 Not a soul was at Son Source when Birch arrived. He re-labeled
50 and boxed the last twenty panels. Then he lined up the ten pallets of
51 fifty panels each in front of the shipping door. The shipping company
52 said they would be there before lunch. Instead of working on the
53 weekend Birch would be going home early; mainly due to the help
54 from Maria and Cecelia the day before. Twenty minutes past noon the
55 panels were loaded onto a flatbed. Birch signed the overseas manifest
56 and left all the documents on Zach's desk. He locked up and headed
57 home to unload hay. The green camper van was around the corner
58 and out of site.

59 This was the only weekend left for an overnight hike before Ben's
60 graduation. Numb, lost and still dazed Zach stopped by the sporting
61 goods store and picked out a 357 revolver. The salesman suggested
62 38 calibers for ammunition. Zach had a license to carry, yet never had
63 fired a 357 magnum.

64 Saturday morning Ben and Zach hiked the Piedmont Ridge trail and
65 then headed to a more remote area where they could camp overnight.

66 While Ben gathered firewood Zach got the gun and ammunition
67 from the spare tire compartment of the van. From the concealed

68 weapons class Zach knew technically a Park Ranger could confiscate
69 the gun in a state park. Ben dropped the firewood and then
70 approached the rear of the van. "What's that?"

71 "I purchased this three fifty seven so you'd know how to shoot
72 before you go into the service."

73 "Cool. Can I see it?" Ben held out his hand.

74 "Sure." Zack handed the hefty nickel plated revolver over. "Always
75 handle a gun as if its loaded."

76 "That makes sense." Ben was careful to keep the barrel pointed
77 down. "Can we shoot it?"

78 "That why I bought it. I feel bad that I've never did the man stuff
79 that a good father should do. Now that you're graduating and all. I
80 probably should have taught you how to ride a motorcycle."

81 "You know how to ride a motorcycle?" Ben had a puzzled look.

82 "No, but we both could have learned together."

83 Ben pushed the thumb lever forward and the cylinder moved out to
84 the left. "Do you have bullets?"

85 "Yeah, a couple boxes." Zach retrieved a brown bag next to the
86 spare tire. "The salesman suggested shooting the thirty eight caliber
87 ones first." He handed the box of 38 Special's to Ben and then found
88 some empty beer cans and water bottles. By dusk neither were virgin
89 gun slingers any longer. There was yet another father/son ritual Zach
90 wanted to fulfill before the day was over. It too was in a brown paper
91 sack concealed in the spare tire compartment.

92 The tent was up, dinner consumed and the campfire bellowed a
93 yellowish orange glow. The short strut to the back of the van was
94 supposed to make Zach feel cool; oddly it felt more like the walk of
95 shame. He pulled a glass flask shaped bottle from the brown bag,
96 broke the seal and took a big gulp. The rush of heat down his throat
97 made him feel like a bona fide man.

98 The heat of the campfire was warm and soothing as the 100 proof
99 Southern Comfort. Zach took one more drink and held the bottle out.
100 "If you're old enough to join up for the service, you're old enough to
101 have a drink." The campfire flames flickered against the clear glass
102 and sloshing brown liquid.

103 Ben took the flask shaped bottle and put his entire mouth over the
104 neck. As fast as the brown liquid entered his mouth it got spit back
105 out. The fire roared as the 100 proof alcohol sprayed onto it. Ben
106 jumped back. "Wow! That was awesome."

107 "Yeah, maybe you might want to mix it with water or soda."

108 Ben took a smaller drink and swallowed hard. "I'd rather drink one
109 of your beers."

110 "Sure, grab me one too." Zach took another drink resealed the
111 flask and leaned it against the fire ring.

112 The proverbial Father/Son talk drifted off script as they finished off
113 a six pack. More whiskey got spit on the fire and before the fire faded
114 to a few orange embers Zach shared about his first year at college and
115 experimenting with marijuana. The part he wasn't honest about was
116 why he quit smoking pot. The part about how Sally got pregnant and
117 that she wouldn't live with anyone using drugs.

118 Their laughter and stupidity turned to amazement as they lay in
119 their sleeping bags and gazed up into star filled night sky. All the
120 important stuff Zach had planned to say around the campfire had not
121 been said. Ben capped off the day when he spoke three simple words,
122 "Love you Dad."

123 "Love you too." Zach zipped the door on the tent shut and kissed
124 Ben on the back of the head. Now with back against back Zach
125 vehemently prayed Godspeed for Ben and for all the other high school
126 graduates that choose service over self.

127 The morning was unusually cold for May and froze out any
128 semblance of dry mouth or a hangover. The joint decision was to
129 forget about campfire breakfast and to stop at a pancake house. When
130 Ben put the tent in the van he pushed the brown bag to the side and
131 an unopened box of ammunition slid out. "We should shoot some of
132 these 357 mags."

133 Zach threw the sleeping bags in the side door of the van and
134 replied, "Yeah okay."

135 Ben walked out about thirty feet from the back of the van put four
136 empty beer bottles on a stump and yelled back. "I'm first up."

137 Now standing under the lift gate Zack loaded the gun. "These

138 bullets are not that much bigger than the thirty eight specials." He
139 handed the hefty stainless hunk of metal to Ben. "Remember to..."

140 **Kaboom!** Gunshot residue instantly flew out into both of their
141 eyes. Zach got the worst of it because he was standing to the side.
142 The percussion got trapped under the lift gate and the van filled with
143 the gray smelling smoke. "Holy Shit," Ben yelled.

144 "What? Zach yelled while he rubbed at the black gun powered on
145 his face and in his eyes.

146 "I can't hear anything!" Ben lowered the gun. GSR was all over
147 both hands. He set the 357 on top the cooler and turned toward Zach.
148 "Are you okay?"

149 "Yeah, I think so," Zach barely heard him. "Gun power got in my
150 eyes."

151 "I'm sorry! I didn't know those mag bullets were so much more
152 powerful." Ben was rubbing at both sides of his head trying to ease the
153 ringing in his ears.

154 "I didn't have a clue! Talk about powerful."

155 "We could call them quad powered bullets!" Ben flashed a smile.

156 Zach caught the reference to his quad panels and flashed a smile
157 back. They didn't talk much as they finished loading up because the
158 minor Tinnitus blocked out hearing or having a discussion.

159 A conversation finally started up again over pancakes sausage and
160 eggs. The conversation was louder than normal and a State Trooper
161 having coffee at the counter took note when they mentioned how
162 much more powerful the 357 magnums were over the 38 calibers.

163 By the time they entered the kitchen through the garage the
164 Tinnitus was almost gone. The ear ringing started up again when Sally
165 laid into Zach about Dr. Kurtz stopping by in her skin tight jogging
166 outfit to see if he would come over ASAP.

167 "I need to go work on my speech," Ben darted toward his bedroom
168 to avoid any wrath that might be directed at him. He knew Sally would
169 go off when she saw how they had trashed the family van.

170 Zach was tired of the ongoing belittling and mistrust. Their
171 marriage was at the point where he was ready to take action, no
172 matter how drastic. He headed out to unload the van. "Ungrateful

173 bitch," he said after the kitchen door slammed shut.

174 From across the cul-de-sac Coreen noticed Zack at the curb
175 dumping ice out of the cooler. She hurried out the door, down the step
176 and ran across the hot pavement. "Zach, do you have a few minutes?"

177 Hunched over the ice chest Zack noticed her long black legs that
178 had the smoothness of sculptured ebony. The green jogging shorts
179 were skimpy, so was the sleeveless yellow top. The mascot logo of a
180 duck zapped his memory. Coreen earned a track scholarship at the
181 University of Oregon. Zach straightened up and said, "Ducks can't run
182 they waddle."

183 Coreen frowned. "You don't think I've heard that one before. I did
184 my doctorate at the University of Washington. I've heard plenty of
185 those Husky F***** ones too."

186 The F bomb shocked Zach. But that's what he liked about Coreen;
187 she told it like it was. "Karl's more skinny than Husky." Zach's ill
188 humor fell flat.

189 "Not funny," Coreen's eyes moved toward movement in the
190 garage. "It's fun to watch those two girls practice their ballet."

191 "Yeah, they both have aspirations of dancing on Broadway." Zach
192 looked back at Coreen.

193 "You need to have Mr. Gomez see an Oncologist for some blood
194 work. The MRI showed unusual areas of gray matter on his adrenal
195 gland and pancreases."

196 "Can you run those tests for Carlos at Dallas Memorial?"

197 "No." Coreen's stoic demeanor turned to alarm. "That's not a real
198 gun is it?"

199 Zach whipped his head around! Kendra had the 357 Magnum
200 pointed at Chelsea's stomach. He hurriedly walked toward the garage
201 and spoke in a calm but firm tone. "Kendra point the gun at the
202 ground."

203 "I'm just playing. Like Ben's video game." Her finger was on the
204 trigger.

205 Zach reached out and took the gun out of her grip. "Never point a
206 gun at anybody!"

207 "Benny always shoots off the heads."

208 "Honey, that's a game; its pretend. You shouldn't be around when
209 your brother is playing video games."

210 "Okay Daddy." Kendra and Chelsea started dancing again.

211 Zach walked back to the end of the driveway. "I'm glad the
212 salesman sold me this gun lock." Zach pulled up on the plastic coated
213 red cable that was threaded through the barrel.

214 "No kidding." Coreen took her focus off the 357 and replied, "Karl
215 uses gun locks plus a gun safe."

216 "For now, I'll keep this gun in a safe place at work."

217 "If you want to target practice or know anything about the Right to
218 Bear Arms talk to my husband."

219 "Actually, I won't be shooting this gun again or anytime soon. My
220 ears are still ringing from this morning."

221 "Guns are not toys! Shooting that Magnum without good ear
222 protection could cause irreparable ear damage."

223 "We only shot one Magnum round. The Thirty Eights Specials
224 weren't that loud."

225 "That's a stupid rationalization! You sound like the cancer patients
226 that say they only smoke one pack a day not two." Coreen was known
227 for her abrupt bed side manner. "Anyway, have Mr. Gomez see an
228 Oncologist ASAP."

229 After Dr. Kurtz jogged off a jacked up 4WD came around the
230 corner and stopped at the end of the driveway. Linda jumped out and
231 Zach attempted to hide the gun in the cooler. Both girls ran toward the
232 truck. Chelsea wrapped her arms around Linda's waist. "Mommy we
233 have a ballet recital tonight."

234 "I know that's why we're here. We need to get you cleaned up and
235 dressed." Linda and the girls ran into the garage and then into the
236 house.

237 Rick leaned out the window. "Is that gun forged or cast steel?"

238 Zach walked over to the driver's door. "I don't know? You tell me."
239 He held the gun up to the window.

240 Rick yanked his arm inside the truck! "I'm on parole. I can't touch
241 a weapon."

242 "Oh..." Zach pulled the revolver back from the window. "What's the

243 difference?

244 "Forged steel is better because it's lighter and stronger. If you're
245 going to conceal carry the gun can be smaller. But then I'd choose a
246 9mil."

247 "I don't like a 9mil because they don't have a safety." Zach's words
248 were an attempt to not seem like a firearm imbecile.

249 "That revolver doesn't have a manual safety. If you dropped it on
250 the hammer there's a good chance it would fire." Rick pointed out the
251 window at the gun. "A double action weapon can get you killed in a
252 gun fight."

253 "I didn't purchase this for a gun fight," Zach replied

254 "I meant for protection. Like if you needed to protect yourself or
255 your family."

256 Zach wasn't a firearms expert and not up for a debate on guns.
257 "Rick, not to change the subject but what are you doing next Friday
258 night."

259 Rick thought for a moment. "Not much. What do you need Bro."

260 "I need a driver or should I say a pickup man."

261 "What?" Don't mess with me Bro. I told you I'm on parole."

262 Zach explained the situation and how important it was that Sally
263 not get wind of his plan. Rick explained to Zach that a drug addict
264 couldn't be relied on, even if it was something for his own kid. Rick
265 agreed to do the job just for gas money but didn't guarantee anything
266 except his silence.

267 Zach was handing two twenties to Rick when Linda and Chelsea
268 came rushing out of the garage. "Don't tell your wife either."

269 "I got your back Bro." The jacked up 4WD roared up and then
270 circled out of the cul-de-sac.

271 Zach stashed the gun under the passenger seat of the Prius. He
272 finished unpacking it and sprayed air fresher on the upholstery and
273 headliner. The lingering smell of gun power was impossible to cover
274 over. Sally might even mistake the pungent smell as marijuana.

275 After opening all the van windows so to air out more, Zach entered
276 the kitchen and headed down the hall to Kendra's bedroom. "Do you
277 want me to come to your dance recital tonight?" he asked form the

278 doorway.

279 "No. Pastor Tom is coming to watch me."

280 "What? Pastor Tom! Why?" Zach responded loud enough that Ben

281 heard the rant behind his closed door. "Where's your mom?"

282 "She upstairs, getting ready. Mom invited Pastor Tom."

283 Ben opened his bedroom door. "What's up Dad?"

284 "Oh nothing. I just need to go talk with your Mom."

285 "I heard you yell out Pastor Tom."

286 "Yeah, I guess he's going to go to your sister's ballet recital

287 tonight."

288 "Good... But I'm not going. I need to work on my speech." Ben

289 hesitated again; something was bugging him. "You know how Pastor

290 Tom said he was a Green Beret and all?"

291 "Yeah, he's told the story many times. How he did secret

292 operations all the way up in Cambodia. How he helped to bring the

293 Vietnam War to an end."

294 "Well... My recruiter checked for his service record and said there's

295 nothing showing Pastor Tom being a Green Beret or serving in

296 Vietnam"

297 "That's weird. He has a Purple Heart for being injured in combat."

298 "Yeah," its weird. I thought to try out to be a Green Beret but there

299 is no way I'm going to go sit in military school and cram to learn in a

300 second language. After this Friday I don't plan to be in another

301 classroom."

302 "What?" Zach was puzzled, alarmed and surprised.

303 "Yeah to become a Green Beret you need to speak a second

304 language. They test to see what language you'd be able to pick up.

305 Then its classroom stuff for twenty weeks or more."

306 "Well that something else I learned today. First thing was not to

307 shoot a Magnum load without ear plugs."

308 "No kidding about that. I checked the Navy Seal site and they got

309 these Peltor noise canceling headsets that they issue. But, most

310 soldiers switch them off one the battle field.

311 *Battlefield—battlefield—battlefield*, echoed in Zach's skull.

312 "Dad, maybe you could invent headsets that play music and then

313 switch into noise cancelling mode on the battlefield.”

314 “Yeah maybe... I need to go talk to your mom.”

315 Upstairs Zach sat on the edge of the king bed; finally he heard the
316 shower shut off. *Battlefield—battlefield—battlefield* still echoed in his
317 head.

318 With a white towel wrapped around her head and another around
319 her torso Sally came out of the master bath. “Did you and your
320 girlfriend have a good chat?”

321 Zach ignored the insinuation. “When were you going to tell me
322 about Pastor Tom coming to the ballet recital?”

323 “I invited him because I didn’t think you and Ben would be home
324 from your guy’s only camping trip so early.”

325 “Oh.” Zach stood up walked to the door, he stopped and turned.
326 “Could you ask Pastor Tom what second language he learned to be
327 Green Beret?”

328 “What?” Sally looked back over her bare shoulder.

329 “Talk to your son, he’ll explain it to you.” Zach left the bedroom
330 went down the stairs out into the garage got in the Prius and left. He
331 headed toward Fort Worth. *Battlefield—battlefield—battlefield* rattled in
332 his head.

333 Working in the soup kitchen helped. Comparing his problems to the
334 men, women and even children in line just for a plate of food made for
335 an eye opening reality check. Zach served Frank again and they briefly
336 spoke about Ben’s graduation the coming Friday.

337 After the last pot was cleaned and cafeteria floor mopped David
338 dug out two beers from his stash hidden in the oversized refrigerator.
339 Deacon Dave wasn’t much about religion; he was more about action
340 and hands-on. Tears did ball up in his eyes when he talked about an
341 old war buddy who was a Green Beret who after the war became a
342 priest. Their brotherhood started on the high school football field but
343 there was a twenty year gap in their friendship. Fr. Paul did speak
344 French, the second language in Vietnam during the war.

345 Zach also learned that while Fr. Paul was combating evil he bled
346 out after being bound in a chair and then stabbed through the hand.
347 The fact that Paul was a gay catholic priest that tested HIV positive

348 was another story for another time.

349 In the silence Zach drove back to Dallas. It seemed that human
350 elements and some entire families faced issues out of their control. It
351 was just plain bad luck. Son Source was broke and breakthrough solar
352 quad panels were not scientifically possible. *Why should anyone trust*
353 *in God?* Were the words now stuck in his head. He'd just served food
354 to a long line of people that were thankful to just have a warm meal.
355 In his deep gut Zach knew a family needed more than just—**Daily**
356 **Bread.**