

The Pitch for *The Ghost Net* by Michele Kriegman

Using my 15+ years of cybersecurity experience, I envisioned a realistic cyber virus pandemic detonated in New York that disrupts post-COVID North American society. David Archer and Fahdi Rizk use their sophisticated cyber arsenal to fight it even as a Thai-Burmese drug lord and a rogue Chinese programmer unleash a “ghost net” that delivers death to David’s cybersecurity team and threatens the life of David’s wife Susan. The manuscript is complete at 89,000 words.

I maintain my cybersecurity certifications, am fluent in Japanese, and conversant in Thai (after a first career as a journalist for ABC News in Japan and Nippon TV in New York). I plot believable cybersecurity breaches, have them executed from the jungle highlands of the Thai-Burmese border or the teahouse gardens of Japan, and then solve these same hacks. Previously I translated six cyberpunk graphic novels from the Japanese which were published by Tokyopop [*Cyber Idol Mink*, 1-6, 2005]. Cyberpunk inflects moments of *The Ghost Net* which witnesses society’s breakdown under the weight of the cyber virus pandemic.

Just as John LeCarré’s novels created the mystery sub-genre of spy thriller, *The Ghost Net*, which is reminiscent in tone of *The Night Manager*, *The Tailor of Panama*, and *The Constant Gardener*, creates the sub-genre of cybercrime mystery. Cybercrime mysteries are not sci-fi techno-thrillers but realistic mysteries solved by flawed yet decent heroes.

The Synopsis for *The Ghost Net* by Michele Kriegman

David Archer is a cybersecurity team leader for New York City-based Agile Energy. At first, he doesn't appear to be a typical hero: he has a corporate job, a young family, and roots in bucolic Corea, Maine. But he leads what is called a cyberthreat hunt team determined to track down cybercriminals and protect North America's power grid.

When the Heights neighborhood loses power, David and Fahdi Rizk, an ethical hacker, launch what starts out as a routine computer forensic investigation. They soon realize a far more malicious hand is controlling the power grid as the blackout spreads across the United States and Canada. Neonatal life support machines, emergency response equipment, and implanted medical devices fail, driving the death toll exponentially higher than the blackout of '03 because the advent of the Internet of Things introduces an intimate dependence on the power grid. This cyber pandemic quickly reaches the death toll of COVID-19 but affects a much younger population.

David and Fahdi race to hone in on a ghost net as a cause. A ghost net is an evocative term for a clandestine computer network attached to Agile Energy's legitimate computer network. In the process they chase an intriguing red herring that wastes precious time as a cascade of plausible disasters transforms society outside. By-the-books David uncharacteristically slams through a high-risk cybersecurity procedure known as a "disaster recovery cutover". David restores power to the grid, the public cheers, but not without repercussions in the media, the government, and the C-suite.

Meanwhile, on the Thai-Burmese border Khun Lan, a drug kingpin reminiscent of the notorious Khun Sa [featured in “American Gangster”], cultivates an opium pipeline, the Chinese hacker Peixiong Geng who will hack for the highest bidder (but is actually a spy for China’s MSS), and beautiful women for human trafficking. One of them, Chesa, escapes only to make the fateful decision to send Khun Lan a letter boasting about her successful life working in a NYC power company. Game on.

Khun Lan employs a combination of charm and threats to persuade Chesa to click on an email link that downloads MSS-quality malware into the Agile Energy computer network. When she realizes the enormity of what she has done, she makes the desperate decision to protect herself and her family in Burma by killing the only other person who knows, her workplace lover, and then stealing his laptop.

After the NYPD closes down the building for its murder investigation, David’s cybersecurity hunt team continues working, knowing they are locked inside with a killer. Even as FBI agents almost derail them, we watch David and Fahdi deploy state of the art cyber forensics to decipher emails from the missing laptop, trace them to Chesa, and discover a Burmese Internet address just before Chesa, armed, tries to escape.

*6 months later*

David’s wife Susan, a freelance museum curator, flies to Southeast Asian jungle highlands for exhibit research a few days before David is called by his brother, a Coast Guard officer, to a top-secret meeting in international waters off Portsmouth Navy and Coast Guard bases. They hope David’s experience with the cyber pandemic will help them crack a suspected similar hack into their satellite surveillance grid. All their coastal

images show that a normally blue evening ocean (due to common phosphorescent algae nicknamed the “blue tide” and the “ghost net”) has turned black, literally.

It turns out the darkened shoreline was not due to a surveillance “blackout” but to the chemically realistic event of the negative charge of Southeast Asian heroin, which is soluble in even ocean-cold water, killing off the “ghost net” algae; heroin normally infiltrating the East Coast from Colombia or Mexico has a positive charge and is only soluble in hot water.

Khun Lan has agreed to work with the Colombians on the East Coast as an alternate supply chain for heroin when rising demand and prices creates a shortfall of other preferred opiates and even Colombian and Mexican “Black Tar” heroin. Khun Lan’s men are almost successful when they are detected and pursued by the U.S. Coast Guard. Acting to speed their escape or at least avoid prosecution, the smugglers dump several tons of the positively charged evidence into the night sea.

While shipboard, David gets word that Susan has been kidnapped. Khun Lan used Bluetooth and GPS exploits to track and kidnap her because, unaware her research is legit, he assumes she is an operative sent to assassinate him. David’s brother gets him embedded with the joint Thai and American special forces team that is being sent to – not just rescue Susan – but teach the overreaching drug lord a lesson.

In a rapid-fire series of twists, the elite unit learns that Khun Lan has found his way into custody with a nearly unarmed local sheriff who is holding him under house arrest in the converted Buddhist cave monastery that has been Khun Lan’s seat of operations all along. The unit hurries to take over. Just as David steps out of their

vehicle, hoping to be reunited with Susan, a blast rips through their convoy and he finds himself alive but caught in a firefight. David taps into the explosive rage and pain left by a deep family secret and discovers his own brutal efficacy in hand-to-hand combat amid the gilded Buddhas and tilework of the dark sacred cave.

David and the others ultimately secure the room where the sheriff, who has come under the spell of the seemingly Robin Hood-like Khun Lan, explains he “escaped”. Susan, however, is still somewhere underground in the compound and David must use an SSID cyber hack to locate her. Within 24 hours the best-ever cyber specialist love scene happens for them (one of several).

Khun Lan and his Chinese accomplice, Peixiong Geng, may have lost their base in the Golden Triangle but they escaped with their surveillance equipment to continue the cyber war. In fact, we learn China’s MSS, in service to greater geopolitical goals, worked through Peixiong Geng to convince Khun Lan to leave Susan behind.

Real heroes in America’s cyber war don’t get to ride off into the sunset; they deal with the office politics that follows any big operation. This time David Archer and Fahdi Rizk are passed over for promotion but decide to keep the adrenaline going by launching a cyberthreat consulting company on the side called Archer & Rizk [a wink to the triple heritage of the name Archer: Sam Spade’s partner Miles Archer in *The Maltese Falcon*; hardboiled gumshoe Lew Archer in Ross McDonald’s novels; and, a ubiquitous cybersecurity & risk management software].

**Michele Kriegman**  
**InterMarketDirections@gmail.com**