

"24 meets Homeland...relentless and riveting".

- Jon Land, *USA Today* bestselling author

FROM THE AUTHOR of *REDEMPTION ROAD*

MARK SHAFF



FORCE **DOUBLING THE PENNY** **TEN**

A Marcus Diablo Novel

The written word is the foundation upon which all other forms of communication are based. Through words the future is speculated upon, the present is chronicled and the past recorded. Words paint pictures, put voices to music, create images, vivid and raw of all things that are, were and what might be.

Definition of writing - Anonymous

"A great novel as well as a superb thriller, Doubling the Penny serves up a smooth blend of personal angst mixed with a potentially devastating attack on the U.S.

24 meets Homeland in Mark Shaff's relentless and riveting take on the mindset of a hero as well as an equally tortured nation. A splendid addition to the triumvirate of Brad Taylor, Brad Thor and the late great Vince Flynn."

-Jon Land, USA Today bestselling author

Force Ten: Doubling the Penny



By Mark Shaff

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Force Ten: Doubling the Penny

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Dedication

To my sons, Lucas and Colton: In so many ways you are responsible for me finding my writers voice. There is this level of emotion, this depth of love that I tap into when I write and when I find myself struggling to see that path all I have to do is think of you. That our lives have provided me with so much material to write about is a testament to the family we are and the love we have for each other.

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To my editors: Michael Carr, once again you mentored me. Your encouragement, prodding and the many, “I have no idea what this means,” allowed me to take another step toward becoming a better writer.

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To Leslie Hinton for the cover design. What can I say but...you nailed it! From a phone conversation, you not only grasped the concept but took it to another level. I’m honored to have your talent as part of the team that put this novel together.

Lastly, to my publisher, LeRue Press, LLC: Well ladies, especially Jan Hermsen, I would not be here if not for you. The quality of this book, from the writing to the cover is due to your consideration and appreciation for my work. How many times did I say, “The manuscript is ready?” With patient understanding you guided me, put up with me, and most importantly stuck with me. I am proud to have *you* on my side and to be a part of *your* team.

Author's Note

In reference to time and distance: I have used the 12 hour and 24 hour clocks, as well as miles and kilometers. This is a distinction between civilian and military terminology, also it is a distinction between the U. S. standard of time and measurement and that, which is used in many parts of the rest of the world.

CHAPTER ONE

*November 29, Black Friday,
Beginnings Ranch, British Columbia*

SHOP OR SHOVEL SHIT.

Just give me a shovel, thought Marcus Diablo as he stood on the flagstone patio in the predawn and stared out across the main compound of Beginnings Ranch. Here, the busiest shopping day of the year didn't mean squat.

Two hundred yards away, in the long shadows of the setting moon, the Coldwater River moved like a thick black snake, its smooth skin glistening as it undulated through meadows and coniferous woodland. On the bank stood a man, his breath making small vapor clouds in the cold air.

With his hands stuffed into the pockets of his canvas work jacket, Marcus headed for the river. The gravel crunched under his boots as he passed one of the steel maintenance buildings and the lit-up bunkhouse, alive with get up and get to work activity.

As he approached the river's edge the man didn't turn. Marcus stopped next to him. This morning, the smell of wood smoke rising in lazy plumes from the chimney flues filled the air. Along with sounds of moving water, cattle complaining, and spur rowels clinking, the entire scene reminded him of some long-ago time. He felt nostalgic for *what used to be*. At the same time, he harbored a deep-seated hope that *what was* would be a safe, happy place for him and his sons.

"I wondered when you might show up," Marcus said.

Colonel Samuel Webb spoke, his gaze still on the river. "You and I have been here, what, almost four months, and every

morning 'bout this same time you come and stand right here. Figured I'd leave it be for a while, give you and the boys some time. Well, times up!"

Marcus shifted from foot to foot. In the darkness he contemplated, as he did every morning. What purpose waited out there for him and his sons? He glanced at his friend. Although, about the same size, the colonel had ten years on him, but it hardly showed. The years of field command, especially with groups of younger officers, kept him youthful in body and mind.

When Marcus spoke his voice had an edge. "In the last sixteen months my boys lost their mother and moved away from the only home they had ever known. Then there's the matter of their father, who was once just a regular dad..."

The colonel interrupted, speaking in the refined Southern drawl that Marcus always found both soothing and disarming. "I've known you long enough to realize that there is very little about you that is 'regular'."

"Maybe so. But how can I expect Bodie at 13, and Garrett, only 9, to wrap their heads around the idea that their dad is a member of Force Ten—an elite private military contracting firm—when I can't even do that?" Marcus stared into the dark water. "On top of that, for the past few days I've had this feeling. Call it a premonition, or maybe just paranoia, but I've got this nagging sense that something big and bad is coming, and soon. Probably just paranoia!" Marcus shrugged.

The colonel looked at his watch, just after 5:00 in the morning. He turned the collar of his jacket up. "Well...I don't put much stock in paranoia." The colonel slapped Marcus lightly on the back. "I'm freezing my ass off out here." The colonel began walking up the gravel drive toward the barn. "Why don't you join me in Ops this morning."

As the colonel and Marcus passed the massive log house the back door to the kitchen opened. Norma Jean Rea, the house manager, head cook, and self-appointed all-around boss at Beginnings, stood there in a flour-dusted apron. In her hands she

held a thermos and a brown paper lunch bag. “Well, fancy that! Two of my favorite men.”

The colonel stepped up to the door and took the offered thermos and bag. In the warm glow coming from the lit-up kitchen, the aroma of fresh bread wafting out into the cold morning air, Marcus watched as Norma and the colonel exchanged a conspiratorial look. Norma laughed as she brushed back a wisp of silver-gray hair, leaving a smudge of white across her forehead.

“I’ll forgive you missing breakfast, just this once.” Norma’s eyes never left the colonel. With a girlish twirl she turned back into the kitchen. Before shutting the door she called out, “I’ll expect you for lunch.” Marcus never knew just how to take Norma. But if she had her sights on the colonel, well, good on him.

The two men continued on toward the big barn that sat on the bluff above the main house. As they approached, Marcus considered how odd it was that this building played such a big role in why he, his sons, their large extended family, and Force 10, were here on this ranch.

* * *

AFTER THE LAST MISSION, MARCUS’S FIRST with Force 10, finding a safe place to regroup and lay low was a top priority. Force 10 had a training facility deep in Australia’s Simpson Desert. But it was on the wrong continent, not to mention too isolated and remote for families and children. Wherever they went, besides being reasonably close to schools and a decent sized town, a ready-made location for an operations and command center was critical. This ranch, and specifically this barn, solved that dilemma.

According to the story the original owner had picked this land to build his ranch on because of what lay behind the barn: a large natural limestone cavern. Here he protected his livestock from the cold, harsh winter until he built a barn. And until he put

up a small cabin it served as shelter for his family as well. The ideal place for an operational command center was buried deep underground, but a cave would do.

The colonel and Marcus entered the barn through the side door into the dim glow from steel-caged lights mounted on posts. Though the colonel came here every day, this was only the second time Marcus had been inside the barn since his arrival at the ranch.

Breathing in the smells of livestock and hay, they walked past the stalls toward the back. A brighter light shone from beyond where normally there would be a wall. Over the years, as heavy equipment became available, the cavern had been enlarged so that today it was over two hundred feet long and, in places, nearly a hundred feet deep, with a high, solid rock dome above.

Stepping into the vast space they moved toward the concrete building tucked into the back corner. Within days of the ranch purchase a Canadian specialty construction firm began building the components for the thirty-by-thirty-foot *wine vault* for the eccentric new owner. At the concrete bunker the colonel entered a code on the keypad. The four-inch-thick steel door whooshed open and they stepped inside.



CHAPTER TWO

INSIDE THE OPS BUNKER, J. T.—Jonathan Tiberius—stood in front of a wall where an arced steel frame held four rows of five sixty-inch TV screens. With a touch pad, he posted information onto the wall of high-resolution monitors, which could show multiple applications simultaneously or could be merged to provide larger views.

Without words the colonel and J. T. began their well-established morning review. On the monitor wall pictures of men, some with heads covered and scraggly beards, others impeccably groomed and in expensive suits, began appearing. Each had a brief synopsis of which terrorist group they were affiliated with, their status in that group and their current location. Other images showed current terrorist-related attacks and conflicts, of which there were dozens every day. That only the high profile attacks made the U. S. news went to the general lack of understanding about just how terrorism works.

Without looking away from the monitors, J. T. said, “Nice of you to join us, Marcus. I was beginning to think you didn’t like me anymore.”

Marcus appraised the young Force 10 tech wizard. At a buck-twenty dripping wet, thick-framed glasses, a pocket protector, and a baby face, “nerd” described him to a tee. He looked like a 20-year-old college kid, not a 38-year-old-genius who had been working for America’s top intelligence-gathering agencies since he was 18.

“I’ve got to say, when you show them like that,” Marcus cocked his head at the screen, “It’s like jihadist poster boys side by side with the successful next door neighbor. One group to fundraise and promote an agenda, the other to incite, radicalize and train—specialized talent for specific jobs. Sounds a bit like Force Ten?”

It pleased the colonel that Marcus fell naturally into the review process. Questioning, commenting, and making assumptions as only he could. The colonel’s stomach grumbled, the wall clock read just before 11:00 A. M. They had been at it for almost four hours and he needed to eat. Besides he had a lunch date he dared not miss. Although the colonel stuck to a routine in all things, J. T.’s sense of time when it came to sleeping and eating seemed immune to any type of regular schedule.

This typified why he had been the colonel’s *first* Force 10 recruit. When he left the Army to start his own private military contracting firm, finding “kick-ass and take-names” types wasn’t the problem. To be successful, he needed someone who could keep his new firm on the cutting edge of intelligence gathering, mission communications, logistical planning, and data analysis, as well as someone who could handle the technical end of managing all manner of complex information, gadgets and hardware. These tasks required an exceptional mind and a dedicated focus. Two things J. T. had in spades.

J. T. spoke. “The *Takbir* is making good time.”

A real-time satellite view of a sleek, black, six-hundred-foot super-yacht powering through the ocean showed on the screen.

The *Takbir* had just completed a weapons retrofit in its homeport at the head of Russia’s Golden Horn Bay in Vladivostok.

“What’s up? Why is she at sea?” asked Marcus.

“A couple of weeks ago, I decided the time had come to get the ship closer to home.”

The colonel and Marcus shared a look.

“You’re not the only one whose sixth sense is pinging,” the

colonel said.

“I’ll be uploading a new software upgrade into the God’s Eye Satellite operating system over the next few days,” said J. T.

The colonel had no idea what the software did, but J. T. knew and that’s all that mattered. Just the concept that a private organization, in this case, Force 10, controlled the most sophisticated spy satellite currently in existence seemed like science fiction, but it wasn’t.

“Do you guys want an update on the money?
The colonel’s stomach grumbled again.

“You okay, Colonel?” J. T. asked with a smirk.

“Well some of us have to eat real food, not...” The colonel pointed at the collection of chips, soda cans, and beef jerky bags on a counter against the wall.

“I take it we still have money, right?” said the colonel.

J. T.’s face was part *Are you stupid?* and part, *Who do you think you’re talking to?*

For thirty years the colonel ran black ops for the U. S military, during which time, he had access to the latest in information and weapons technology. It took a lot to surprise him. The fact that Force 10 controlled a floating palace, now equipped with military-grade weapons, a spy satellite, and a sum of money nearing a trillion dollars, boggled his mind. Combined with operating out of a five-hundred-thousand-acre working cattle ranch in British Columbia’s Nicola Valley went beyond anything he could conjure up in his wildest imagination.

But none of it surprised J. T., or Marcus, for that matter. For J. T., like a kid in a candy store, there was no such thing as too much. And for Marcus, his unrestrained imagination simply refused to recognize anything as impossible.

“Okay, before we go get something to eat, dazzle us with the results of your exceptional money management.”

As the men scanned the information, all the screens except the God’s Eye view of the *Takbir* went dark.

“What the hell just happened?” asked Marcus.

J. T. didn't answer. Instead, he moved to what he called a "console," really just an expensive high-tech recliner. He sat, put on a wireless headset, flipped up an arm-mounted keyboard, and feverishly began typing in commands. "Vanessa, run a systems check," he said aloud.

J. T. had programmed the ops computer with a voice command and interface program. The colonel made a mental note to schedule the most socially-and normal-life-challenged person he knew a vacation, preferably with a flesh and blood companion.

There was a momentary pause, then the sexy voice: "Yes, Jonathan, a substantial portion of the United States Internet system is off-line. Without more data, I cannot determine how extensive."

"How is that possible?"

"Well, Jonathan..." Vanessa's programmed sultry drawl lingered on his name.

J. T. interrupted, uncharacteristically self-conscious. "Vanessa, call me J. T."

"As you wish. J. T., one or more of the Internet interconnectivity hubs has been subjected to a disruptive event that has caused an interruption in the feed. There is redundant backup to protect the storage of critical data. However, there are reports of failures in essential power grids, security, like air traffic control, and widespread cell phone network overloads. I have prepared a map."

The colonel and Marcus studied the map of the United States. Red dots, each with a brief summary of the issues, indicated trouble spots. J. T. brought up live news feeds on several of the monitors. Scenes of looting, police in riot gear, and traffic-clogged streets and highways filled the screens.

"What the hell is this all about?" the colonel said.

"This is the one of the busiest days of the year for the Internet!"

The colonel's look of confusion deepened.

"The day after Thanksgiving. Stores open at O-dark thirty.

People camp out, wait in line all night. Not to mention the billions of dollars in online sales. How don't you know this?"

A ringing phone startled them. The colonel looked around. He couldn't remember how long it had been since he had heard that ordinary ring of an analogue telephone.

"Oh, shit!" J. T. said.

This was the secure line. He called it the "Bat Phone." Only two people had the number: General Walter Kittredge, the colonel's long-time friend and head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Nathan Reynolds, Deputy Director of the FBI. This was the first time it had ever rung.

The colonel crossed the concrete floor to the wall of desktops and picked up the handset.

"Sam, that you?"

"Yes, General."

"Damn glad to hear your voice. I guess you know what's happened."

"Well, General, I'm aware that the Internet is off-line, and it ain't pretty. Beyond that, not much."

"That's right, and I don't claim to be an expert on what that means exactly, but I do know that three of the country's primary Internet hubs, New York, L.A., and Seattle have crashed. Apparently, just about the whole goddamn Internet operates through them. And from what my people tell me, today is one of, if not the busiest, day of the year for the Internet.

"Okay Sam, you know the drill. The 'powers that be' start demanding from those of us with stars on our shoulders, and we in turn, chew our way down the food chain. So consider yourself my main course."

The general sighed then continued. "I got a bad feeling. We're still picking up the pieces from the last attack. For God's sake, there are small, remote pockets, mostly out west, where citizens are in charge, running the show like militias of the old days. And, truth be told, I can't blame 'em."

"You wouldn't be talking about me and Force Ten, now,

would you, Walt?" the colonel asked, his tone as breezy as if they were discussing the weather.

"Shit, Sam, I didn't consider you, honest. Now that you mention it, though, I believe you'd fall into the category, but then, you don't currently reside in the land of the free and the home of the brave, do you?" The general's voice held not a hint of disdain. "You get yourself a dog yet?" A laugh reverberated in the colonel's ear. "Here's what I need, Sam. I'd consider it a personal favor. You're going to get another call soon after you and I are done here. Give the folks a sit-down and the benefit of your wisdom. I know that Force Ten's contract with the U.S. Army is up, but from the intelligence rumor mill, I understand that making money may not be a motivating factor in the jobs you and Force Ten consider."

"I should've known I couldn't just drop off the face of the earth. I'll take the call and we'll see what I can do. Beyond that, we're launching an in-depth analysis of the attack as we speak. We have access to some unique intelligence-gathering tools."

Another chuckle. "When this is over, my friend, you and I need to sit down and you can enlighten me over a bottle of single malt. But right now we need to get out in front of this thing 'cause, as bad as it is—and we're not even an hour into it—the real fireworks are still to come. I just know there's more. Find out what that *more* is!"

"All right, General, I'll get on it. And, hey, when I do get that dog I'm gonna name him after you."

Hanging up the phone, the colonel said to Marcus, "Told you, I don't put much stock in paranoia."



CHAPTER THREE

FBI headquarters, Washington D. C.

DEPUTY DIRECTOR NATHAN REYNOLDS SAT in his corner office inside the J. Edgar Hoover Building going over the day's threat assessment analysis. Sitting back in his chair, he rubbed his eyes. Determining a credible threat from some disgruntled rant often felt like going all in with a pair of twos and no face card.

The red light blinked on his intercom. Hitting the button, he heard the voice of his secretary, "Sir, turn on the TV." Reynolds hit the remote and on came CNN. "A secure, encrypted email transmission just came in from General Kittredge, I'm sending it to you now. Also, you are needed in MTAC. Ten minutes."

The deputy director brought up his internal email as he watched on the TV scenes of mayhem play out in one shopping center after another. As he used the keyboard he said a silent thank you that the FBI used its own secure *intranet*. He read the email.

Picking up his phone, the deputy director hit a series of numbers. A shrill buzz, then a clear dial tone told him he had access to a secure outside line. From memory he punched in a phone number.

"Colonel Webb."

"Deputy Director. Seems like we are back in the shit."

"Yes, Sir. I'd like to get your—Force Ten's—take on what's going on. I have a meeting in a few minutes. Over the next hours the picture of what is happening will begin to take shape. Think you might consider sharing your insight?"

"I promised the general I would. When and where?"

"I'll let you know, but soon. And Colonel, don't feel like you have to come alone."

* * *

INSIDE THE FBI'S MULTIPLE THREAT Alert Center, Deputy Director Nathan Reynolds listened to the briefing being delivered by Cyber Crime Specialist, Agent Sonja Stanwick.

Standing with her back to the large display monitor, which showed pictures of three buildings, she spoke. "Today at 11:00 A. M., Pacific, 2:00 P. M. Eastern, three of the largest and most important interconnectivity hubs in the United States were attacked."

Turning to the screen she pointed. "One Wilshire Data Center in Los Angeles, the Westin Building in Seattle, and 60 Hudson Street, New York City. These facilities provide data management and storage services for a diverse array of private sector businesses. We're talking everything from tech to toilets. Because all this data is transferred via the Internet, these locations also serve as critical Internet transmission centers." She fidgeted with the remote in her hand. "We don't know the extent of the damage, but we believe only some of the servers have been affected. As a precaution, all systems at these locations have been taken offline. As to the cause, we are working on that."

"What actually does that mean, agent?" Demanded the Director of the FBI,
Edward Pinehurst.

"Sir, we are having difficulty getting teams to these buildings," she said with a hint of, *Aren't you aware of what's going on out there?*

Agent Reynolds broke in. "Director, teams are en route and the buildings are locked down. This is the busiest shopping day of the year. The Internet is necessary for inventory management, credit and debit card transactions." News footage

showed on the monitors. “These scenes are playing out at stores and shopping centers across the country. Riots are erupting, streetlights are out, and city, highway, and freeway traffic is at a standstill. Until some calm is restored we won’t be able to conduct proper onsite investigations.”

Turning his attention to the room of agents, “We are all familiar with the recent events in Ferguson and Baltimore, this...” he motioned to the screen behind him, “is much more dangerous. This is not isolated. It’s happening in every city and town across the country. We’re talking rampant looting and vandalism, and...” One of the news programs showed a view from a helicopter as it zoomed in on a man attempting to lock the door of an upscale jewelry store. Something hit the glass storefront, maybe a rock, as a man approached and shot him point blank with a pistol. “That! This is going to get ugly fast. All agents are to work in teams, and anybody who goes out there is fully geared up.” Tuning back to agent Stanwick, “Please continue.”

Trying to shake off the being-in-the-spotlight jitters, the young agent swallowed hard. With her short bobbed hair, navy pantsuit, and black flats, she looked like she’d stepped out of an FBI recruiting video.

With renewed confidence Agent Stanwick continued. “What we do know, Director, is that as of now, for most Americans, the Internet has been turned off. And that’s not the worst of it. There are redundant protocols for such an incident. Stored data is backed up to more than one source in more than one location. In fact, there are dozens of interconnectivity hubs. And if we were talking about storage only, the redundant protocols are sufficient. What we must keep in mind is, these facilities, referred to as ‘the cloud’, house the conduit, the hardwiring, that provides each of us with the data we are so dependent on.” She held up her smart phone.

“This is not about the stored data, it’s about the data we access every minute of everyday: Email, GPS directions, restaurant reviews and reservations, Facebook, YouTube. It’s

about systems, like transportation networks, including traffic lights. Also, air traffic control, financial markets, I could go on, that rely on an Internet connection for part of their operation. So, even though nearly all the data that the attack destroyed is backed up to servers in other locations, no one planned for the sheer demand that instant access to information would place on the redundant systems. Simply put, these back-up systems cannot support both the data storage demands and the volume of Internet traffic. As long as these three locations,” she looked quickly back at the monitor, “remain offline we are going to see a cascade of failures within the redundant network, which by the way,” she held up her phone again, “means these may not even work to make calls.”

Edward Pinehurst stood. “So you’re telling me Agent Stanwick, that...”

“Yes sir.” She took a step forward. “Things are going to get a whole lot worse, before they begin to get better.”



CHAPTER FOUR

Los Angeles, California

BRANDON FRANKS LOOKED AT THE time on his phone and shook his head. A couple of minutes to eleven in the morning and it had already been a long day. Well, no shit. The store opened at 1:30 A.M. and he had been here hours before that. But what did he expect as the manager of a large electronics store in Century City Shopping Center on the busiest shopping day of the year—Black Friday. God, he hated those two words.

There'd been a crowd when he opened the doors. Some people had camped out on the sidewalk for a few days to be first in line for the highly advertised, very limited killer deals. *Don't these people have jobs?* Last year, across town at a competitors' store, a lady got trampled...to death. All for a chance to buy one of only three 48-inch, \$150 flat screen TVs. It gave the term *addicted to TV* a whole new meaning. His store had hired extra security. They had everyone working overtime, and so far so good. The screaming deals—those carrots that everyone dangled—were long gone. But they had a ton of inventory and plenty of *good* deals and, most importantly, a huge captive audience.

Walking around the store, he kept an eye on his people. In the TV aisle a woman stood in front of an empty shelf where 54-inch flat screens had been. "Excuse me, ma'am, can I help you?"

"I thought you would still have some left. I promised my kids."

Her frustration was not the exception this day. "Tell you what." He nodded his head for her to follow. "These 60-inch

models are also on sale and with the manufacture's rebate, only twenty bucks more."

With a customer calmed and a sale made, he approached the front checkout station. The six registers each had long lines. He watched as first one clerk, then another, stared first at their monitors, then up, looking for him.

At the first station Brandon looked at the register. It had power, but where he should have seen data, it read, *Unable to complete transaction at this time. Please try again.* At each register it was the same story. Brandon pulled his cell phone from his back pocket and hit speed dial for the company's IT department. Holding his phone to his ear he expected to hear a reassuring voice on the other end. Instead, he got a recorded *All circuits are busy.*

Then the grumbling began.

"What the hell's going on? I've been in this damn line for almost thirty minutes."

"What's the matter; you all forget how to use a cash register?"

"You don't want to honor your special pricing, so you're pretending your credit card machines don't work? That's bullshit."

Brandon sensed things getting ugly. He jumped up on the counter of station three.

"Please, please." He held his hands in the air. "We are experiencing some kind of technical glitch. Just give us a few minutes. We'll get it figured out."

Hopping down, he tried his phone again with the same result. Finding one of the security men, he whispered, "Calmly and carefully, let's get people moving to the front exit. Tell them we are working to resolve the problem, but until we get it figured out we need to clear the store, as a precautionary measure only. All pricing will be honored."

As the security staff gathered Brandon looked out the glass storefront to a commotion in the parking lot. People

frantically pushing full carts while looking back over their shoulders, others ran by with arms full of clothing still on hangers. Some had boxes of what appeared to be kitchen stuff—pots, pans, and blenders.

Turning back, Brandon looked at the growing unrest in his own store. He knew a shit storm when he saw it. He'd been taught at management training that in case of an emergency, and only as a last resort, he should lock the doors, even with customers still inside. Taking the keys from his pocket he moved to the doors. He got the first pair of five locked. As he moved to the next, a man, a good ten years older, fifty pounds and five inches bigger, stood there with a box that contained a sixty-inch flat screen on the floor leaning against his hip.

Before Brandon could say a word the man slugged him. As Brandon lay on the floor blood gushing from his nose, the man hefted the box up with meaty hands and walked out the door. Brandon got to his feet. His face hurt like hell. As he staunched his bleeding nose with his shirttail, he noticed a female reporter step inside the automatic opening door. She pointed at Brandon, and the man standing next to her trained his camera on his smashed and bloodied face as she thrust a microphone toward him. "Sir, Brandon..." She read his name from the badge clipped above his shirt pocket. "Can you tell me what's happening? Do you know what's going on?"

Brandon ignored the questions. He had bigger problems. He stood and watched as what had been a reasonably calm crowd minutes before, morphed into a raging, looting mob.

He motioned for the register clerks to follow him. As the group made their way up the aisle toward the back of the store, gathering sales staff as they went, two men fighting on the floor blocked the way. The bigger man sat astride the other and hit him again and again in the face, as he yelled, "Push me, will you? You son of a bitch."

A girl of maybe ten stepped out from behind a fallen headphone display and screamed, "Stop Daddy, stop!"

His bloody fist cocked for another blow, the man turned to the yelling girl.

Brandon looked from daughter to father. One face held the expression of unadulterated fear, the other, pure hate, and for what, a \$600 television?

Brandon led his group around and down a side aisle. They dodged shoving and pushing people as merchandise fell from high shelves and smashed to the floor. A gang of people, and that's what they were, thought Brandon—a gang—ripped, tore and smashed model TVs, computers, and cameras attached to theft-proof tethers. The stores only 98" big-screen exploded when it hit the floor. Shards of thin sharp glass flew through the air like mini-spears. Brandon felt the projectiles cut his face and arms. Looking to his group he saw droplets of blood form on exposed skin, and crimson stains spread on clothing.

"Come on, we have to get to a safe place," Brandon said, as he led the way to the back of the store.

One of the clerks tapped him on the shoulder and pointed. "Look."

Two guys, sales associates of the store, each pushed carts over-filled with merchandise. He shook his head. There was nothing he could do to stop them, or the hundreds of thousands of dollars in merchandise walking out the door. He felt like the little Dutch boy with his finger in the dike. And like that situation, there were just too many holes and not even close to enough fingers to hold back the coming flood.

Brandon and his group reached the back of the store. "Inside the break room, now!" he yelled. Taking a last look out at crazy land, he saw that instead of people fleeing the store, scores were flooding in. As he shut and locked the door he prayed his decision to ride it out was the right one.



CHAPTER FIVE

Union Station Shopping Mall, Washington, D. C.

JODIE CHIN AND HER CAMERAMAN stood under the domed ceiling of the Union Square Mall—one of the most popular shopping and dining destinations in Washington D.C. She drew the afternoon assignment to capture the crazed shopping event as it began to wind down. Although, from the hordes of shoppers, some moving like zombies, others on anxiety and caffeine overload, it didn't look like the frenzy had slackened.

"Excuse me," Jodie said to a woman with two small children in tow and her arms loaded with bags. "I'm Jodie Chin with Channel Eight. Can you tell me, was the day successful?"

Before the woman could answer, the noise from shattering glass and yelling voices echoed through the once grand train station lobby. Heads swiveled trying to locate the source. Her journalistic instincts suddenly on high alert, Jodie spoke loudly. "Be ready!" she said to her cameraman as people began moving. No more zombie shuffle or energy drink strut. "Zoom in on their faces, their eyes." The camera panned the lobby: The hunting and the hunted, thought Jodi.

When Jodie looked back the woman and her children had left. The crowds poured out of stores, off escalators and staircases into the lobby. The noise of a coming riot echoed throughout multi-storied rotunda.

Her cameraman touched her shoulder and yelled, "We need to move, now. Back over there." With his camera on his shoulder, he cocked his head toward a space under a wooden stairwell that went up to a mezzanine.

Jodi and her cameraman stood under the stairwell, their

backs to the wall, and shot footage. Everyone was in either “fight or flight” mode. Some ran by, panicked, looking for an exit. Others had their arms loaded with merchandise. A man stopped in front of them, a crazed look in his eyes, his hands filled with jewelry. Twenty feet away, Jodie watched two groups of young men confront each other. They argued over cartons that contained Xbox and PS4 game consoles. Her gut told her to run, but there was nowhere to run to. Quickly the confrontation escalated. In the next instant, she saw guns—lots of guns. Jodie and the cameraman huddled back farther under the stairwell. When the shooting stopped, bodies littered the floor, pools of dark red blood forming Rorschach inkblots on the white marble.

Prairie Island Nuclear Power Plant, Red Wing, Minnesota

JUDD SWAN SAT BEFORE THE twenty-foot long control console inside the Prairie Island Nuclear power plant. He’d been here since 6:00 A. M. and he was glad about it. This morning, his wife and two teenage daughters had left the house before 4:00 A. M. They had a big day of shopping planned in Minneapolis. He hated shopping. Besides, he got double time working today.

For the most part, his job was to watch the screens, gauges and dials that monitored the operation of the plant. He often imagined this room to be like NASA’s Mission Control. It certainly had the sophistication. The advanced digital technology that the IT guys regularly upgraded meant he just had to sit on his ass and watch. The automated systems took care of everything. Sometimes, he thought the only reason to have a human being here was to hit the manual shutdown, which in his five years had never happened.

Looking up at the row of clocks on the wall that showed the time in the different time zones this plant provided power to, he saw it was almost 1:00 P. M.

He rolled his chair away from the console to a section of the desktop and opened his lunch box. As he ate his turkey sandwich he noticed the monitor that showed a series of side-by-side fluctuating bars. The automated systems received a digital signal as power

demands from one area to another fluctuated and made the necessary adjustments. According to the bars the system wasn't doing this.

Across the room, his colleague talked on the phone. Hanging up he said, "Something's happened to the Internet."

Not quite comprehending, Judd stood and walked around the monitoring console to stand before the wall of gauges, dials, and digital readouts that showed the status of the cooling system for the nuclear reactor's core. Everything appeared good there. Ironically, the loss of an Internet signal improved the plant's operational security. However, meant that the digital signals required to make the adjustments in the power grid distribution, as demand shifted from region to region, weren't getting through.

From the readings, in a few moments there was going be a power outage in parts of northern Minnesota in the U. S., and southern Saskatchewan and Manitoba in Canada.



CHAPTER SIX

Mexico City

PETER REVANT SAT INSIDE A suite at the Gran Hotel in downtown Mexico City. He neared the end of his allotted fifteen-minute audience with don Eduardo Gutiérrez and his wife, la señora Isabel Santiago Valdez de Gutiérrez.

Casually he looked at his watch. As if scripted, someone knocked loudly on the door, then one of the guards who had searched him when he arrived came into the room, apologizing profusely for the interruption. As the guard stood at the entrance to the sitting room, Isabel rose and approached him.

Peter watched his hostess. In black jeans and a white blouse, from raven hair to full red lips, every curve and swell screamed temptation. She embodied all he loathed about western infidel women—overtly sexual, brash and aggressive. No wonder those perching strict adherence to the Quran and Sharia Law demanded that women, when in the presence of anyone but their father or husband, be covered. But he kept his thoughts to himself, smiled, and admired the view.

The guard whispered in her ear and then, walking backward a few steps, turned and left the suite. Isabel came and spoke a few hushed words to her husband.

In his late fifties, with stylish, casually long salt-and-pepper hair and a thick mustache, don Eduardo looked tan and fit. To Peter, definitely a man who enjoyed the fruits of his labors and realized that to truly enjoy the splendors of his much younger wife he had to put forth some effort. Eduardo reached out and picked up a remote from the coffee table.

Don Eduardo pointed it at the flat-screen TV mounted on the wall. They watched as an American newscaster, a woman, *go figure*, reported that the Internet in the United States and parts of Canada and Mexico had crashed, and that cell phone networks still working couldn't support the volume of traffic. The newscast bounced from location to location. People appeared frantic and angry. From a mall in Los Angeles, a picture of man with a bloodied face filled the screen. The badge on his shirt read BRANDON, MANAGER, and he stood just inside a big-box electronic store. The female reporter said she had just watched him be assaulted by a customer. The camera panned on a big man as he walked out of the store with a very large box in his hands. The footage shifted to an aerial view that showed freeways gridlocked.

Rising, Peter thought to himself, *If this is what happened in just minutes, give it a few more hours and then see how civilized people behave.* Looking at his hosts staring at the TV, then to their smart phones, then back to the TV, Peter imagined what must be running through their minds: *How much money is this going to cost the Gutiérrez Cartel? Plenty*, he hoped. It would make his proposal all the more attractive.

Without the slightest indication that what played out on the screen bothered him in the least—a sign he hoped would not go unnoticed—Peter said, “Thank you, don Eduardo and señora Gutiérrez, for your gracious hospitality. I will give you some time to consider my proposition.” Reaching into his inside jacket pocket, he took out a plain white business card with nothing but an address on it. “I can be reached here day or night. I will be staying on in your beautiful city for another week. I hope we can do business.” With a slight bow, he finished. “I will show myself out. Thank you both again.”



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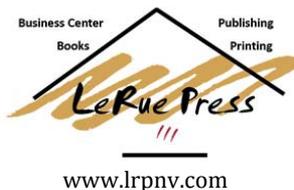
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