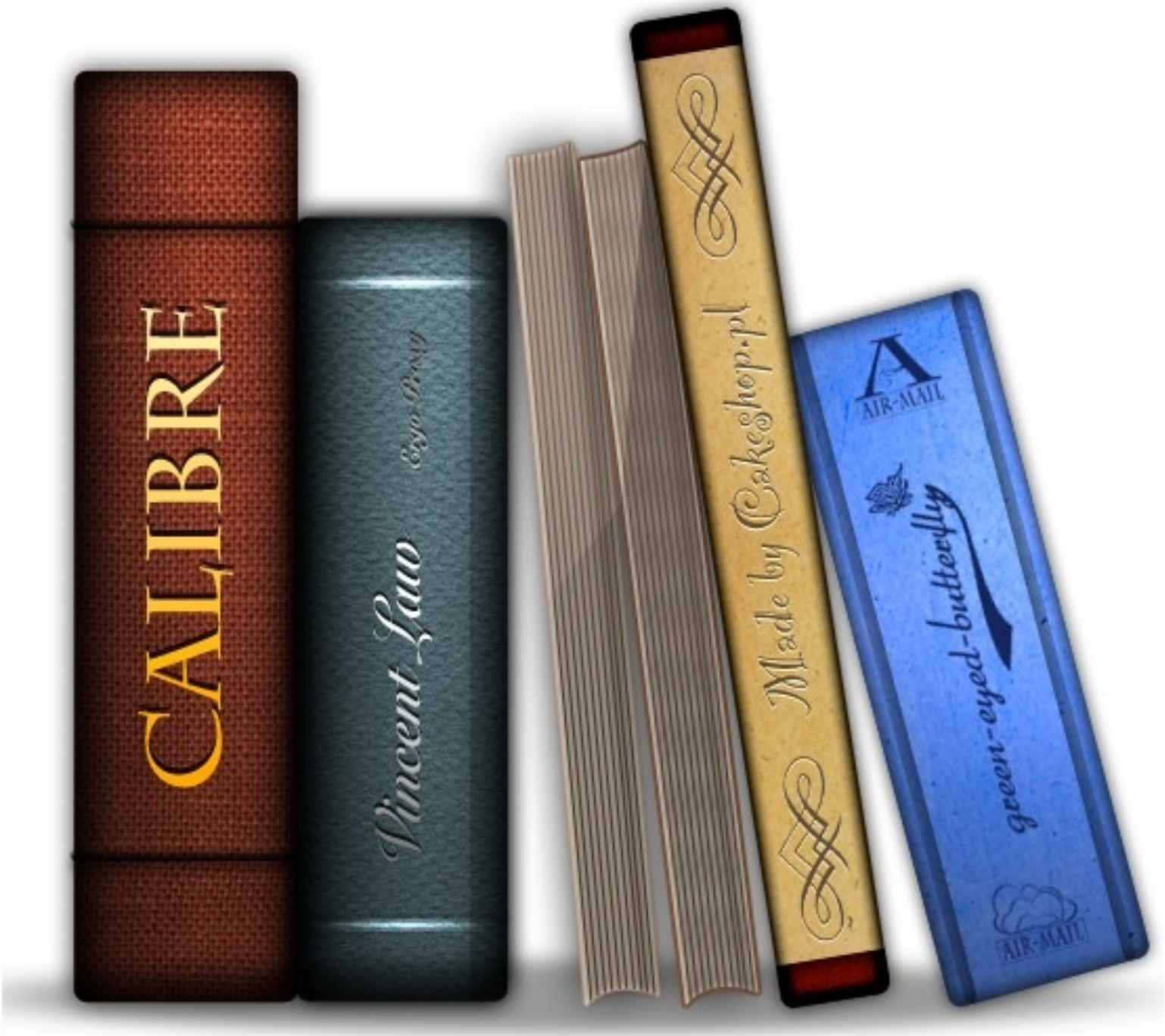
Digital Fortress

Brown, Dan



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Digital Fortress
DIGITAL FORTRESS

Dan Brown
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For my parents . . .
my mentors and heroes

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PROLOGUE

PLAZA DE ESPAÑA SEVILLE, SPAIN 11:00 A.M.

It is said that in death, all things become clear; Ensei Tankadonow knew it was true. As he clutched his chest and fell to theground in pain, he realized the horror of his mistake.

People appeared, hovering over him, trying to help. But Tankadodid not want help—it was too late for that.

Trembling, he raised his left hand and held his fingers outward.*Look at my hand!* The faces around him stared, but he couldtell they did not understand.

On his finger was an engraved golden ring. For an instant, themarkings glimmered in the Andalusian sun. Ensei Tankado knew it wasthe last light he would ever see.

CHAPTER 1

They were in the smoky mountains at their favoritebed-and-breakfast. David was smiling down at her. “What do yousay, gorgeous? Marry me?”

Looking up from their canopy bed, she knew he was the one.Forever. As she stared into his deepgreen eyes, somewhere in thedistance a deafening bell began to ring. It was pulling him away.She reached for him, but her arms clutched empty air.

It was the sound of the phone that fully awoke Susan Fletcherfrom her dream. She gasped, sat up in bed, and fumbled for thereceiver. “Hello?”

“Susan, it’s David. Did I wake you?”

She smiled, rolling over in bed. “I was just dreaming ofyou. Come over and play.”

He laughed. “It’s still dark out.”

“Mmm.” She moaned sensuously. “Then *definitely* come over and play. We can sleep in before we headnorth.”

David let out a frustrated sigh. “That’s why I’mcalling. It’s about our trip. I’ve got topostpone.”

Susan was suddenly wide awake. “What!”

“I’m sorry. I’ve got to leave town. I’ll beback by tomorrow. We can head up first thing in the morning.We’ll still have two days.”

“But I made reservations,” Susan said, hurt. “Igot our old room at Stone Manor.”

“I know, but—”

“Tonight was supposed to be *special*—tocelebrate six months. You *do* remember we’re engaged,don’t you?”

“Susan.” He sighed. “I really can’t go intoit now, they’ve got a car waiting. I’ll call you from theplane and explain everything.”

“Plane?” she repeated. “What’s goingon? Why would the university . . . ?”

“It’s not the university. I’ll phone and explainlater. I’ve really got to go; they’re calling for me.I’ll be in touch. I promise.”

“David!” she cried. “What’s—”

But it was too late. David had hung up.

Susan Fletcher lay awake for hours waiting for him to call back.The phone never rang.

* * *

Later that afternoon Susan sat dejected in the tub. Shesubmerged herself in the soapy water and tried to forget StoneManor and the Smoky Mountains. *Where could he be?* shewondered. *Why hasn't he called?*

Gradually the water around her went from hot to lukewarm andfinally to cold. She was about to get out when her cordless phonebuzzed to life. Susan bolted upright, sloshing water on the flooras she grappled for the receiver she'd left on the sink.

"David?"

"It's Strathmore," the voice replied. Susan slumped. "Oh." She was unable to hide herdisappointment. "Good afternoon, Commander."

"Hoping for a younger man?" The voice chuckled.

"No, sir," Susan said, embarrassed. "It'snot how it—"

"Sure it is." He laughed. "David Becker's agood man. Don't ever lose him."

"Thank you, sir."

The commander's voice turned suddenly stern. "Susan,I'm calling because I need you in here. Pronto."

She tried to focus. "It's Saturday, sir. we don'tusually—"

"I know," he said calmly. "It's anemergency."

Susan sat up. *Emergency?* She had never heard the wordcross Commander Strathmore's lips. *An emergency? InCrypto?* She couldn't imagine. "Y-yes, sir." Shepaused. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Make it sooner." Strathmore hung up.

* * *

Susan Fletcher stood wrapped in a towel and dripped on theneatly folded clothes she'd set out the nightbefore—hiking shorts, a sweater for the cool mountainevenings, and the new lingerie she'd bought for the nights.Depressed, she went to her closet for a clean blouse and skirt. *An emergency? In Crypto?*

As she went downstairs, Susan wondered how the day could getmuch worse. She was about to find out.

CHAPTER 2

Thirty thousand feet above a dead-calm ocean, David Beckerstared miserably from the Learjet 60's small, oval window.He'd been told the phone on board was out of order, andhe'd never had a chance to call Susan.

"What am I doing here?" he grumbled to himself. Butthe answer was simple—there were men to whom you justdidn't say no.

"Mr. Becker," the loudspeaker crackled."We'll be arriving in half an hour."

Becker nodded gloomily to the invisible voice. *Wonderful*.He pulled the shade and tried to sleep. But he could only think ofher.

CHAPTER 3

Susan's volvo sedan rolled to a stop in the shadow of theten-foot-high, barbed Cyclone fence. A young guard placed his handon the roof.
"ID, please."

Susan obliged and settled in for the usual half-minute wait. Theofficer ran her card through a computerized scanner. Finally helooked up. "Thank you, Ms. Fletcher." He gave animperceptible sign, and the gate swung open.
Half a mile ahead Susan repeated the entire procedure at anequally imposing electrified fence. *Come on, guys . . .I've only been through here a million times.*

As she approached the final checkpoint, a stocky sentry with twoattack dogs and a machine gun glanced down at her license plate andwaved her through. She followed Canine Road for another 250 yardsand pulled into Employee Lot C. *Unbelievable,* she thought.*Twenty-six thousand employees and a twelve-billion-dollarbudget; you'd think they could make it through the weekendwithout me.* Susan gunned the car into her reserved spot andkilled the engine.

After crossing the landscaped terrace and entering the mainbuilding, she cleared two more internal checkpoints and finallyarrived at the windowless tunnel that led to the new wing. Avoice-scan booth blocked her entry.
NATIONAL SECURITY AGENCY (NSA)
CRYPTO FACILITY
AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY
The armed guard looked up. "Afternoon, Ms.Fletcher."
Susan smiled tiredly. "Hi, John."
"Didn't expect you today."

"Yeah, me neither." She leaned toward the parabolicmicrophone. "Susan Fletcher," she stated clearly. Thecomputer instantly confirmed the frequency concentrations in hervoice, and the gate clicked open. She stepped through.
* * *

The guard admired Susan as she began her walk down the cementcauseway. He noticed that her strong hazel eyes seemed distanttoday, but her cheeks had a flushed freshness, and hershoulderlength, auburn hair looked newly blown dry. Trailing herwas the faint scent of Johnson's Baby Powder. His eyes fellthe length of her slender torso—to her white blouse with thebra barely visible beneath, to her knee-length khaki skirt, andfinally to her legs . . . Susan

Fletcher’s legs.
Hard to imagine they support a 170 IQ, he mused tohimself.
He stared after her a long time. Finally he shook his head asshe disappeared in the distance.
* * *
As Susan reached the end of the tunnel, a circular, vaultlikedoor blocked her way. The enormous letters read: crypto.

Sighing, she placed her hand inside the recessed cipher box andentered her five-digit PIN. Seconds later the twelve-ton slab ofsteel began to revolve. She tried to focus, but her thoughts reeledback to him.

David Becker. The only man she’d ever loved. The youngestfull professor at Georgetown University and a brilliantforeign-language specialist, he was practically a celebrity in theworld of academia. Born with an eidetic memory and a love oflanguages, he’d mastered six Asian dialects as well asSpanish, French, and Italian. His university lectures on etymologyand linguistics were standingroom only, and he invariably stayedlate to answer a barrage of questions. He spoke with authority andenthusiasm, apparently oblivious to the adoring gazes of hisstar-struck coeds.

Becker was dark—a rugged, youthful thirty-five with sharpgreen eyes and a wit to match. His strong jaw and taut featuresreminded Susan of carved marble. Over six feet tall, Becker movedacross a squash court faster than any of his colleagues couldcomprehend. After soundly beating his opponent, he would cool offby dousing his head in a drinking fountain and soaking his tuft ofthick, black hair. Then, still dripping, he’d treat hisopponent to a fruit shake and a bagel.

As with all young professors, David’s university salary wasmodest. From time to time, when he needed to renew his squash clubmembership or restring his old Dunlop with gut, he earned extramoney by doing translating work for government agencies in andaround Washington. It was on one of those jobs that he’d metSusan.

It was a crisp morning during fall break when Becker returnedfrom a morning jog to his three-room faculty apartment to find hisanswering machine blinking. He downed a quart of orange juice as helistened to the playback. The message was like many herecеived—a government agency requesting his translatingservices for a few hours later that morning. The only strange thingwas that Becker had never heard of the organization.
“They’re called the National Security Agency,”Becker said, calling a few of his colleagues for background.
The reply was always the same. “You mean the NationalSecurity *Council?”*

Becker checked the message. “No. They said *Agency.*The NSA.”
“Never heard of ’em.”

Becker checked the GAO Directory, and it showed no listingeither. Puzzled, Becker called one of his old squash buddies, anex-political analyst turned research clerk at the Library ofCongress. David was shocked by his friend’s explanation.

Apparently, not only did the NSA exist, but it was consideredone of the most influential government organizations in the world.It had been gathering global electronic intelligence data andprotecting U.S. classified information for over half a century.Only 3 percent of Americans were even aware it existed.
“NSA,” his buddy joked, “stands for ‘No SuchAgency.’ ”

With a mixture of apprehension and curiosity, Becker acceptedthe mysterious agency’s offer. He drove the thirty-seven milesto their eighty-six-acre headquarters hidden discreetly in thewooded hills of Fort Meade, Maryland. After passing through endlesssecurity checks and being issued a six-hour, holographic guestpass, he was escorted to a plush research facility where he wastold he would spend the afternoon providing “blindsupport” to the Cryptography Division—an elite group ofmathematical brainiacs known as the code-breakers.
For the first hour, the cryptographers seemed unaware Becker waseven there. They hovered around an enormous table and spoke alanguage Becker had never heard. They spoke of stream ciphers,selfdecimated generators, knapsack variants, zero knowledgeprotocols, unicity points. Becker observed, lost. They scrawledsymbols on graph paper, pored over computer printouts, andcontinuously referred to the jumble of text on the overheadprojector.

JHdja3jKHDhmado/ertwtjlw+jgj328
5jhalsfnHKhhhfafOhhdfgaf/fj37we
ohi93450s9djfd2h/HHrtyFHLf89303
95jspjf2j0890Ihj98yhfi080ewrt03
jojr845h0roq+jt0eu4tqefqe//oujw
08UY0IH0934jtpwfiajer09qu4jr9gu
ivjP$duw4h95pe8rtugvjw3p4e/ikkc
mffuerhfgv0q394ikjrmg+unhvs9oer
irk/0956y7u0poikIOjp9f8760qwerqi

Eventually one of them explained what Becker had alreadysurmised. The scrambled text was a code—a“ciphertext”—groups of numbers and lettersrepresenting encrypted words. The cryptographers’ job was tostudy the code and extract from it the original message, or“cleartext.” The NSA had

called Becker because theysuspected the original message was written in Mandarin Chinese; hewas to translate the symbols as the cryptographers decryptedthem.

For two hours, Becker interpreted an endless stream of Mandarinsymbols. But each time he gave them a translation, thecryptographers shook their heads in despair. Apparently the codewas not making sense. Eager to help, Becker pointed out that allthe characters they'd shown him had a common trait—theywere also part of the Kanji language. Instantly the bustle in theroom fell silent. The man in charge, a lanky chain-smoker namedMorante, turned to Becker in disbelief.

"You mean these symbols have multiple meanings?"

Becker nodded. He explained that Kanji was a Japanese writingsystem based on modified Chinese characters. He'd been givingMandarin translations because that's what they'd askedfor.

"Jesus Christ." Morante coughed. "Let's trythe Kanji."

Like magic, everything fell into place. The cryptographers were duly impressed, but nonetheless, theystill made Becker work on the characters out of sequence."It's for your own safety," Morante said. "Thisway, you won't know what you're translating."

Becker laughed. Then he noticed nobody else was laughing.

When the code finally broke, Becker had no idea what darksecrets he'd helped reveal, but one thing was forcertain—the NSA took code-breaking seriously; the check inBecker's pocket was more than an entire month'suniversity salary.

On his way back out through the series of security checkpointsin the main corridor, Becker's exit was blocked by a guardhanging up a phone. "Mr. Becker, wait here, please."

"What's the problem?" Becker had not expected themeeting to take so long, and he was running late for his standingSaturday afternoon squash match.

The guard shrugged. "Head of Crypto wants a word.She's on her way out now."

"She?" Becker laughed. He had yet to see afemale inside the NSA.

"Is that a problem for you?" a woman's voiceasked from behind him.

Becker turned and immediately felt himself flush. He eyed the IDcard on the woman's blouse. The head of the NSA'sCryptography Division was not only a woman, but an attractive womanat that.

"No," Becker fumbled. "I just . . ."

"Susan Fletcher." The woman smiled, holding out herslender hand.

Becker took it. "David Becker."

“Congratulations, Mr. Becker. I hear you did a fine jobtoday. Might I chat with you about it?”

Becker hesitated. “Actually, I’m in a bit of a rush atthe moment.” He hoped spurning the world’s most powerfulintelligence agency wasn’t a foolish act, but his squash matchstarted in forty-five minutes, and he had a reputation to uphold:David Becker was never late for squash . . . class maybe, but *never* squash.

“I’ll be brief.” Susan Fletcher smiled.“Right this way, please.”

Ten minutes later, Becker was in the NSA’s commissaryenjoying a popover and cranberry juice with the NSA’s lovelyhead cryptographer, Susan Fletcher. It quickly became evident toDavid that the thirty-eight-year-old’s high-ranking positionat the NSA was no fluke—she was one of the brightest women hehad ever met. As they discussed codes and code-breaking, Beckerfound himself struggling to keep up—a new and excitingexperience for him.

An hour later, after Becker had obviously missed his squashmatch and Susan had blatantly ignored three pages on the intercom,both of them had to laugh. There they were, two highly analyticalminds, presumably immune to irrational infatuations—butsomehow, while they sat there discussing linguistic morphology andpseudo–random number generators, they felt like a couple ofteenagers—everything was fireworks.

Susan never did get around to the real reason she’d wantedto speak to David Becker—to offer him a trial post in theirAsiatic Cryptography Division. It was clear from the passion withwhich the young professor spoke about teaching that he would neverleave the university. Susan decided not to ruin the mood by talkingbusiness. She felt like a schoolgirl all over again; nothing wasgoing to spoil it. And nothing did.

* * *

Their courtship was slow and romantic—stolen escapeswhenever their schedules permitted, long walks through theGeorgetown campus, late-night cappuccinos at Merlutti’s,occasional lectures and concerts. Susan found herself laughing morethan she’d ever thought possible. It seemed there was nothingDavid couldn’t twist into a joke. It was a welcome releasefrom the intensity of her post at the NSA.

One crisp, autumn afternoon they sat in the bleachers watchingGeorgetown soccer get pummeled by Rutgers.

“What sport did you say you play?” Susan teased.“Zucchini?”

Becker groaned. “It’s called *squash*.”

She gave him a dumb look.

“It’s *like* zucchini,” he explained,“but the court’s smaller.”

Susan pushed him.
Georgetown's left wing sent a corner-kick sailing out ofbounds, and a boo went up from the crowd. The defensemen hurriedback downfield.
"How about you?" Becker asked. "Play anysports?"
"I'm a black belt in Stairmaster."
Becker cringed. "I prefer sports you can win." Susan smiled. "Overachiever, are we?"
Georgetown's star defenseman blocked a pass, and there wasa communal cheer in the stands. Susan leaned over and whispered inDavid's ear. "Doctor."
He turned and eyed her, lost.
"Doctor," she repeated. "Say the first thing thatcomes to mind."
Becker looked doubtful. "Word associations?"
"Standard NSA procedure. I need to know who I'mwith." She eyed him sternly. "Doctor."
Becker shrugged. "Seuss."
Susan gave him a frown. "Okay, try this one . . .'kitchen.' "
He didn't hesitate. "Bedroom."
Susan arched her eyebrows coyly. "Okay, how about this . .. 'cat.' "
"Gut," Becker fired back.
"Gut?"
"Yeah. Catgut. Squash racquet string ofchampions."
"That's pleasant." She groaned.
"Your diagnosis?" Becker inquired.
Susan thought a minute. "You're a childish, sexuallyfrustrated squash fiend."
Becker shrugged. "Sounds about right."
* * *
It went on like that for weeks. Over dessert at all-night dinersBecker would ask endless questions.
Where had she learned mathematics?
How did she end up at the NSA? How did she get so captivating?

Susan blushed and admitted she'd been a late bloomer. Lankyand awkward with braces through her late teens, Susan said her AuntClara had once told her God's apology for Susan'splainness was to give her brains. A premature apology, Beckerthought.

Susan explained that her interest in cryptography had started injunior high school. The president of the computer club, a toweringeighth grader named Frank Gutmann, typed her a love poem andencrypted it with a number-substitution scheme. Susan begged toknow what it said. Frank flirtatiously refused. Susan took the codehome and stayed up all night with a flashlight

under her coversuntil she figured out the secret—every number represented aletter. She carefully deciphered the code and watched in wonder asthe seemingly random digits turned magically into beautiful poetry.In that instant, she knew she'd fallen in love—codes andcryptography would become her life.

Almost twenty years later, after getting her master's inmathematics from Johns Hopkins and studying number theory on a fullscholarship from MIT, she submitted her doctoral thesis, *Cryptographic Methods, Protocols, and Algorithms for ManualApplications.* Apparently her professor was not the only one whoread it; shortly afterward, Susan received a phone call and a planeticket from the NSA.

Everyone in cryptography knew about the NSA; it was home to thebest cryptographic minds on the planet. Each spring, as theprivate-sector firms descended on the brightest new minds in theworkforce and offered obscene salaries and stock options, the NSAwatched carefully, selected their targets, and then simply steppedin and doubled the best standing offer. What the NSA wanted, theNSA bought. Trembling with anticipation, Susan flew toWashington's Dulles International Airport where she was met byan NSA driver, who whisked her off to Fort Meade.

There were forty-one others who had received the same phone callthat year. At twenty-eight, Susan was the youngest. She was alsothe only female. The visit turned out to be more of a publicrelations bonanza and a barrage of intelligence testing than aninformational session. In the week that followed, Susan and sixothers where invited back. Although hesitant, Susan returned. Thegroup was immediately separated. They underwent individualpolygraph tests, background searches, handwriting analyses, andendless hours of interviews, including taped inquiries into theirsexual orientations and practices. When the interviewer asked Susanif she'd ever engaged in sex with animals, she almost walkedout, but somehow the mystery carried her through—the prospectof working on the cutting edge of code theory, entering "ThePuzzle Palace," and becoming a member of the most secretiveclub in the world—the National Security Agency.

Becker sat riveted by her stories. "They actually asked youif you'd had sex with animals?"

Susan shrugged. "Part of the routine backgroundcheck."

"Well . . ." Becker fought off a grin. "What didyou say?" She kicked him under the table. "I told them no!" Thenshe added, "And until last night, it was true."

* * *

In Susan's eyes, David was as close to perfect as she couldimagine. He only had one unfortunate quality; every time they wentout, he insisted on picking up

the check. Susan hated seeing himlay down a full day's salary on dinner for two, but Becker wasimmovable. Susan learned not to protest, but it still bothered her.*I make more money than I know what to do with,* she thought.*I should be paying.*

Nonetheless, Susan decided that aside from David's outdatedsense of chivalry, he was ideal. He was compassionate, smart,funny, and best of all, he had a sincere interest in her work.Whether it was during trips to the Smithsonian, bike rides, orburning spaghetti in Susan's kitchen, David was perpetuallycurious. Susan answered what questions she could and gave David thegeneral, unclassified overview of the National Security Agency.What David heard enthralled him.

Founded by President Truman at 12:01 a.m. on November 4, 1952,the NSA had been the most clandestine intelligence agency in theworld for almost fifty years. The NSA's seven-page inceptiondoctrine laid out a very concise agenda: to protect U.S. governmentcommunications and to intercept the communications of foreignpowers.

The roof of the NSA's main operations building was litteredwith over five hundred antennas, including two large radomes thatlooked like enormous golf balls. The building itself wasmammoth—over two million square feet, twice the size of CIAheadquarters. Inside were eight million feet of telephone wire andeighty thousand square feet of permanently sealed windows.

Susan told David about COMINT, the agency's globalreconnaissance division—a mind-boggling collection oflistening posts, satellites, spies, and wiretaps around the globe.Thousands of communiqués and conversations were interceptedevery day, and they were all sent to the NSA's analysts fordecryption. The FBI, CIA, and U.S. foreign policy advisors alldepended on the NSA's intelligence to make theirdecisions.

Becker was mesmerized. "And code-breaking? Where do *you* fit in?"

Susan explained how the intercepted transmissions oftenoriginated from dangerous governments, hostile factions, andterrorist groups, many of whom were inside U.S. borders. Theircommunications were usually encoded for secrecy in case they endedup in the wrong hands—which, thanks to COMINT, they usuallydid. Susan told David her job was to study the codes, break them byhand, and furnish the NSA with the deciphered messages. This wasnot entirely true.

Susan felt a pang of guilt over lying to her new love, but shehad no choice. A few years ago it would have been accurate, butthings had changed at the NSA. The whole world of cryptography hadchanged. Susan's new duties were classified, even to many inthe highest echelons of power. "Codes," Becker

said, fascinated. “How do youknow where to start? I mean . . . how do you break them?”
Susan smiled. “You of all people should know. It’slike studying a foreign language. At first the text looks likegibberish, but as you learn the rules defining its structure, youcan start to extract meaning.”
Becker nodded, impressed. He wanted to know more.

With Merlutti’s napkins and concert programs as herchalkboard, Susan set out to give her charming new pedagogue aminicourse in cryptography. She began with Julius Caesar’s“perfect square” cipher box.

Caesar, she explained, was the first code-writer in history.When his foot-messengers started getting ambushed and his secretcommuniqués stolen, he devised a rudimentary way to encrypthis directives. He rearranged the text of his messages such thatthe correspondence looked senseless. Of course, it was not. Eachmessage always had a letter-count that was a perfectsquare—sixteen, twenty-five, one hundred—depending on howmuch Caesar needed to say. He secretly informed his officers thatwhen a random message arrived, they should transcribe the text intoa square grid. If they did, and read topto-bottom, a secretmessage would magically appear.

Over time Caesar’s concept of rearranging text was adoptedby others and modified to become more difficult to break. Thepinnacle of noncomputer-based encryption came during World War II.The Nazis built a baffling encryption machine named Enigma. Thedevice resembled an old-fashioned typewriter with brassinterlocking rotos that revolved in intricate ways and shuffledcleartext into confounding arrays of seemingly senseless charactergroupings. Only by having another Enigma machine, calibrated theexact same way, could the recipient break the code.
Becker listened, spellbound. The teacher had become thestudent.
One night, at a university performance of *The Nutcracker,*Susan gave David his first basic code to break. He sat through theentire intermission, pen in hand, puzzling over the eleven-lettermessage:
HL FKZC VD LDS

Finally, just as the lights dimmed for the second half, he gotit. To encode, Susan had simply replaced each letter of her messagewith the letter preceding it in the alphabet. To decrypt the code,all Becker had to do was shift each letter one space forward in thealphabet—“A” became “B,” “B”became “C,” and so on. He quickly shifted the remainingletters. He never imagined four little syllables could make him sohappy:
IM GLAD WE MET
He quickly scrawled his response and handed it to her: ID SNN

Susan read it and beamed.

Becker had to laugh; he was thirty-five years-old, and his heartwas doing backflips. He'd never been so attracted to a womanin his life. Her delicate European features and soft brown eyesreminded him of an ad for Estée Lauder. If Susan's bodyhad been lanky and awkward as a teenager, it sure wasn't now.Somewhere along the way, she had developed a willowygrace—slender and tall with full, firm breasts and a perfectlyflat abdomen. David often joked that she was the first swimsuitmodel he'd ever met with a doctorate in applied mathematicsand number theory. As the months passed, they both started tosuspect they'd found something that could last a lifetime.

They'd been together almost two years when, out of theblue, David proposed to her. It was on a weekend trip to the SmokyMountains. They were lying on a big canopy bed at Stone Manor. Hehad no ring—he just blurted it out. That's what she lovedabout him—he was so spontaneous. She kissed him long and hard.He took her in his arms and slipped off her nightgown.

"I'll take that as a yes," he said, and they madelove all night by the warmth of the fire.

That magical evening had been six months ago—beforeDavid's unexpected promotion to chairman of the ModernLanguage Department. Their relationship had been in a downhillslide ever since.

CHAPTER 4

The crypto door beeped once, waking Susan from her depressingreverie. The door had rotated past its fully open position andwould be closed again in five seconds, having made a complete360-degree rotation. Susan gathered her thoughts and steppedthrough the opening. A computer made note of her entry.

Although she had practically lived in Crypto since itscompletion three years ago, the sight of it still amazed her. Themain room was an enormous circular chamber that rose five stories.Its transparent, domed ceiling towered 120 feet at its centralpeak. The Plexiglas cupola was embedded with a polycarbonatemesh—a protective web capable of withstanding a two-megatonblast. The screen filtered the sunlight into delicate laceworkacross the walls. Tiny particles of dust drifted upward in wideunsuspecting spirals—captives of the dome's powerfuldeionizing system.

The room's sloping sides arched broadly at the top and thenbecame almost vertical as they approached eye level. Then theybecame subtly translucent and graduated to an opaque black as theyreached the floor—a shimmering expanse of polished black tilethat shone with an eerie luster, giving one the unsettlingsensation that the floor was transparent. Black ice.

Pushing through the center of the floor like the tip of acolossal torpedo was the machine for which the dome had been built.Its sleek black contour arched twenty-three feet in the air beforeplunging back into the floor below. Curved and smooth, it was as ifan enormous killer whale had been frozen midbreach in a frigidsea.

This was TRANSLTR, the single most expensive piece of computingequipment in the world—a machine the NSA swore did notexist.

Like an iceberg, the machine hid 90 percent of its mass andpower deep beneath the surface. Its secret was locked in a ceramicsilo that went six stories straight down—a rocketlike hullsurrounded by a winding maze of catwalks, cables, and hissingexhaust from the freon cooling system. The power generators at thebottom droned in a perpetual low-frequency hum that gave theacoustics in Crypto a dead, ghostlike quality.

* * *

TRANSLTR, like all great technological advancements, had been achild of necessity. During the 1980s, the NSA witnessed arevolution in telecommunications that would change the world ofintelligence reconnaissance

forever—public access to theInternet. More specifically, the arrival of E-mail.

Criminals, terrorists, and spies had grown tired of having theirphones tapped and immediately embraced this new means of globalcommunication. E-mail had the security of conventional mail and thespeed of the telephone. Since the transfers traveled throughunderground fiber-optic lines and were never transmitted into theairwaves, they were entirely intercept-proof—at least that wasthe perception.

In reality, intercepting E-mail as it zipped across the Internetwas child's play for the NSA's technogurus. The Internetwas not the new home computer revelation that most believed. It hadbeen created by the Department of Defense three decadesearlier—an enormous network of computers designed to providesecure government communication in the event of nuclear war. Theeyes and ears of the NSA were old Internet pros. People conductingillegal business via E-mail quickly learned their secrets were notas private as they'd thought. The FBI, DEA, IRS, and otherU.S. law enforcement agencies—aided by the NSA's staff ofwily hackers—enjoyed a tidal wave of arrests andconvictions.

Of course, when the computer users of the world found out theU.S. government had open access to their E-mail communications, acry of outrage went up. Even pen pals, using E-mail for nothingmore than recreational correspondence, found the lack of privacyunsettling. Across the globe, entrepreneurial programmers beganworking on a way to keep E-mail more secure. They quickly found oneand public-key encryption was born.

Public-key encryption was a concept as simple as it wasbrilliant. It consisted of easy-to-use, homecomputer software thatscrambled personal E-mail messages in such a way that they weretotally unreadable. A user could write a letter and run it throughthe encryption software, and the text would come out the other sidelooking like random nonsense—totally illegible—a code.Anyone intercepting the transmission found only an unreadablegarble on the screen.

The only way to unscramble the message was to enter thesender's "pass-key"—a secret series ofcharacters that functioned much like a PIN number at an automaticteller. The pass-keys were generally quite long and complex; theycarried all the information necessary to instruct the encryptionalgorithm exactly what mathematical operations to follow tore-create the original message.

A user could now send E-mail in confidence. Even if thetransmission was intercepted, only those who were given the keycould ever decipher it.

The NSA felt the crunch immediately. The codes they were facingwere no

longer simple substitution ciphers crackable with penciland graph paper—they were computer-generated hash functionsthat employed chaos theory and multiple symbolic alphabets toscramble messages into seemingly hopeless randomness.

At first, the pass-keys being used were short enough for theNSA's computers to "guess." If a desired pass-keyhad ten digits, a computer was programmed to try every possibilitybetween 0000000000 and 9999999999. Sooner or later the computer hitthe correct sequence. This method of trial-and-error guessing wasknown as "brute force attack." It was time-consuming butmathematically guaranteed to work.

As the world got wise to the power of brute-force code-breaking,the pass-keys started getting longer and longer. The computer timeneeded to "guess" the correct key grew from weeks tomonths and finally to years.

By the 1990s, pass-keys were over fifty characters long andemployed the full 256-character ASCII alphabet of letters, numbers,and symbols. The number of different possibilities was in theneighborhood of 1_{120}—ten with 120 zeros after it.Correctly guessing a pass-key was as mathematically unlikely aschoosing the correct grain of sand from a three-mile beach. It wasestimated that a successful brute-force attack on a standardsixty-four-bit key would take the NSA's fastestcomputer—the top-secret Cray/Josephson II—over nineteenyears to break. By the time the computer guessed the key and brokethe code, the contents of the message would be irrelevant.

Caught in a virtual intelligence blackout, the NSA passed atop-secret directive that was endorsed by the President of theUnited States. Buoyed by federal funds and a carte blanche to dowhatever was necessary to solve the problem, the NSA set out tobuild the impossible: the world's first universalcode-breaking machine.

Despite the opinion of many engineers that the newly proposedcode-breaking computer was impossible to build, the NSA lived byits motto: Everything is possible. The impossible just takeslonger.

Five years, half a million man-hours, and $1.9 billion later,the NSA proved it once again. The last of the three million,stamp-size processors was hand-soldered in place, the finalinternal programming was finished, and the ceramic shell was weldedshut. TRANSLTR had been born.

Although the secret internal workings of TRANSLTR were theproduct of many minds and were not fully understood by any oneindividual, its basic principle was simple: Many hands make lightwork.

Its three million processors would all work inparallel—counting upward at blinding speed, trying every newpermutation as they went. The hope was that

even codes withunthinkably colossal passkeys would not be safe fromTRANSLTR's tenacity. This multibillion-dollar masterpiecewould use the power of parallel processing as well as some highlyclassified advances in cleartext assessment to guess pass-keys andbreak codes. It would derive its power not only from its staggeringnumber of processors but also from new advances in quantumcomputing—an emerging technology that allowed information tobe stored as quantum-mechanical states rather than solely as binarydata.

The moment of truth came on a blustery Thursday morning inOctober. The first live test. Despite uncertainty about how fastthe machine would be, there was one thing on which the engineersagreed—if the processors all functioned in parallel, TRANSLTRwould be powerful. The question was *how* powerful.

The answer came twelve minutes later. There was a stunnedsilence from the handful in attendance when the printout sprang tolife and delivered the cleartext—the broken code. TRANSLTR hadjust located a sixty-four-character key in a little over tenminutes, almost a million times faster than the two decades itwould have taken the NSA's second-fastest computer.

Led by the deputy director of operations, Commander Trevor J.Strathmore, the NSA's Office of Production had triumphed.TRANSLTR was a success. In the interest of keeping their success asecret, Commander Strathmore immediately leaked information thatthe project had been a complete failure. All the activity in theCrypto wing was supposedly an attempt to salvage their $2 billionfiasco. Only the NSA elite knew the truth—TRANSLTR wascracking hundreds of codes every day.

With word on the street that computer-encrypted codes wereentirely unbreakable—even by the allpowerful NSA—thesecrets poured in. Drug lords, terrorists, and embezzlersalike—weary of having their cellular phone transmissionsintercepted—were turning to the exciting new medium ofencrypted E-mail for instantaneous global communications. Neveragain would they have to face a grand jury and hear their own voicerolling off tape, proof of some long-forgotten cellular phoneconversation plucked from the air by an NSA satellite.

Intelligence gathering had never been easier. Codes interceptedby the NSA entered TRANSLTR as totally illegible ciphers and werespit out minutes later as perfectly readable cleartext. No moresecrets.

To make their charade of incompetence complete, the NSA lobbiedfiercely against all new computer encryption software, insisting itcrippled them and made it impossible for lawmakers to catch andprosecute the criminals. Civil rights groups rejoiced, insistingthe NSA shouldn't be reading their mail

anyway. Encryptionsoftware kept rolling off the presses. The NSA had lost thebattle—exactly as it had planned. The entire electronic globalcommunity had been fooled . . . or so it seemed.

CHAPTER 5

“Where is everyone?” Susan wondered as she crossed thedeserted Crypto floor. *Some emergency.*

Although most NSA departments were fully staffed seven days aweek, Crypto was generally quiet on Saturdays. Cryptographicmathematicians were by nature high-strung workaholics, and thereexisted an unwritten rule that they take Saturdays off except inemergencies. Code-breakers were too valuable a commodity at the NSAto risk losing them to burnout.

As Susan traversed the floor, TRANSLTR loomed to her right. Thesound of the generators eight stories below sounded oddly ominoustoday. Susan never liked being in Crypto during off hours. It waslike being trapped alone in a cage with some grand, futuristicbeast. She quickly made her way toward the commander’soffice.

Strathmore’s glass-walled workstation, nicknamed “thefishbowl” for its appearance when the drapes were open, stoodhigh atop a set of catwalk stairs on the back wall of Crypto. AsSusan climbed the grated steps, she gazed upward atStrathmore’s thick, oak door. It bore the NSA seal—a baldeagle fiercely clutching an ancient skeleton key. Behind that doorsat one of the greatest men she’d ever met.

Commander Strathmore, the fifty-six-year-old deputy director ofoperations, was like a father to Susan. He was the one who’dhired her, and he was the one who’d made the NSA her home.When Susan joined the NSA over a decade ago, Strathmore was headingthe Crypto Development Division—a training ground for newcryptographers—new *male* cryptographers. AlthoughStrathmore never tolerated the hazing of anyone, he was especiallyprotective of his sole female staff member. When accused offavoritism, he simply replied with the truth: Susan Fletcher wasone of the brightest young recruits he’d ever seen, and he hadno intention of losing her to sexual harassment. One of thecryptographers foolishly decided to test Strathmore’sresolve.

One morning during her first year, Susan dropped by the newcryptographers’ lounge to get some paperwork. As she left, shenoticed a picture of herself on the bulletin board. She almostfainted in embarrassment. There she was, reclining on a bed andwearing only panties.

As it turned out, one of the cryptographers had digitallyscanned a photo from a

pornographic magazine and editedSusan's head onto someone else's body. The effect hadbeen quite convincing.

Unfortunately for the cryptographer responsible, CommanderStrathmore did not find the stunt even remotely amusing. Two hourslater, a landmark memo went out:

EMPLOYEE CARL AUSTIN TERMINATED FOR
INAPPROPRIATE CONDUCT.

From that day on, nobody messed with her; Susan Fletcher wasCommander Strathmore's golden girl.

But Strathmore's young cryptographers were not the onlyones who learned to respect him; early in his career Strathmoremade his presence known to his superiors by proposing a number ofunorthodox and highly successful intelligence operations. As hemoved up the ranks, Trevor Strathmore became known for his cogent,reductive analyses of highly complex situations. He seemed to havean uncanny ability to see past the moral perplexities surroundingthe NSA's difficult decisions and to act without remorse inthe interest of the common good.

There was no doubt in anyone's mind that Strathmore lovedhis country. He was known to his colleagues as a patriot and avisionary . . . a decent man in a world of lies.

In the years since Susan's arrival at the NSA, Strathmorehad skyrocketed from head of Crypto Development tosecond-in-command of the entire NSA. Now only one man outrankedCommander Strathmore there—Director Leland Fontaine, themythical overlord of the Puzzle Palace—never seen,occasionally heard, and eternally feared. He and Strathmore seldomsaw eye to eye, and when they met, it was like the clash of thetitans. Fontaine was a giant among giants, but Strathmorediдn't seem to care. He argued his ideas to the director withall the restraint of an impassioned boxer. Not even the Presidentof the United States dared challenge Fontaine the way Strathmoredid. One needed political immunity to do that—or, inStrathmore's case, political indifference.

* * * Susan arrived at the top of the stairs. Before she could knock,Strathmore's electronic door lock buzzed. The door swung open,and the commander waved her in.

"Thanks for coming, Susan. I owe you one."

"Not at all." She smiled as she sat opposite hisdesk.

Strathmore was a rangy, thick-fleshed man whose muted featuressomehow disguised his hard-nosed efficiency and demand forperfection. His gray eyes usually suggested a confidence anddiscretion born from experience, but today they looked wild andunsettled.

“You look beat,” Susan said.
“I’ve been better.” Strathmore sighed.
I’ll say, she thought.

Strathmore looked as bad as Susan had ever seen him. Histhinning gray hair was disheveled, and even in the room’scrisp air-conditioning, his forehead was beaded with sweat. Helooked like he’d slept in his suit. He was sitting behind amodern desk with two recessed keypads and a computer monitor at oneend. It was strewn with computer printouts and looked like somesort of alien cockpit propped there in the center of his curtainedchamber.
“Tough week?” she inquired.
Strathmore shrugged. “The usual. The EFF’s all over meabout civilian privacy rights again.”

Susan chuckled. The EFF, or Electronics Frontier Foundation, wasa worldwide coalition of computer users who had founded a powerfulcivil liberties coalition aimed at supporting free speech on-lineand educating others to the realities and dangers of living in anelectronic world. They were constantly lobbying against what theycalled “the Orwellian eavesdropping capabilities of
governmentagencies”—particularly the NSA. The EFF was a perpetualthorn in Strathmore’s side.
“Sounds like business as usual,” she said. “Sowhat’s this big emergency you got me out of the tubfor?”

Strathmore sat a moment, absently fingering the computertrackball embedded in his desktop. After a long silence, he caughtSusan’s gaze and held it. “What’s the longestyou’ve ever seen TRANSLTR take to break a code?”
The question caught Susan entirely off guard. It seemedmeaningless. *This is what he called me in for?*
“Well . . .” She hesitated. “We hit a COMINTintercept a few months ago that took about an hour, but it had aridiculously long key—ten thousand bits or something likethat.”
Strathmore grunted. “An hour, huh? What about some of theboundary probes we’ve run?”
Susan shrugged. “Well, if you include diagnostics,it’s obviously longer.”
“How *much* longer?”

Susan couldn’t imagine what Strathmore was getting at.“Well, sir, I tried an algorithm last March with a segmentedmillion-bit key. Illegal looping functions, cellular automata, theworks. TRANSLTR still broke it.”
“How long?”
“Three hours.”

Strathmore arched his eyebrows. “Three hours? Thatlong?”

Susan frowned, mildly offended. Her job for the last three yearshad been to fine-tune the most secret computer in the world; mostof the programming that made TRANSLTR so fast was hers. Amillionbit key was hardly a realistic scenario.

“Okay,” Strathmore said. “So even in extremeconditions, the longest a code has ever survived inside TRANSLTR isabout three hours?”

Susan nodded. “Yeah. More or less.”

Strathmore paused as if afraid to say something he might regret.Finally he looked up. “TRANSLTR’s hit something . ..” He stopped.

Susan waited. “More than three hours?”

Strathmore nodded.

She looked unconcerned. “A new diagnostic? Something fromthe Sys-Sec Department?”

Strathmore shook his head. “It’s an outsidefile.”

Susan waited for the punch line, but it never came. “Anoutside file? You’re joking, right?”

“I wish. I queued it last night around eleven thirty. Ithasn’t broken yet.”

Susan’s jaw dropped. She looked at her watch and then backat Strathmore. “It’s *still* going? Over fifteenhours?”

Strathmore leaned forward and rotated his monitor toward Susan.The screen was black except for a small, yellow text box blinkingin the middle.

TIME ELAPSED: 15:09:33

AWAITING KEY: _____

Susan stared in amazement. It appeared TRANSLTR had been workingon one code for over fifteen hours. She knew the computer’sprocessors auditioned thirty million keys per second—onehundred billion per hour. If TRANSLTR was still counting, thatmeant the key had to be enormous—over ten billion digits long.It was absolute insanity.

“It’s impossible!” she declared. “Have youchecked for error flags? Maybe TRANSLTR hit a glitchand—”

“The run’s clean.”

“But the pass-key must be huge!”

Strathmore shook his head. “Standard commercial algorithm.I’m guessing a sixty-four-bit key.”

Mystified, Susan looked out the window at TRANSLTR below. Sheknew from experience that it could locate a sixty-four-bit key inunder ten minutes. “There’s got to be someexplanation.”

Strathmore nodded. “There is. You’re not going to likeit.”

Susan looked uneasy. “Is TRANSLTR malfunctioning?”
“TRANSLTR’s fine.”
“Have we got a virus?”
Strathmore shook his head. “No virus. Just hear meout.”

Susan was flabbergasted. TRANSLTR had never hit a code itcouldn’t break in under an hour. Usually the cleartext wasdelivered to Strathmore’s printout module within minutes. Sheglanced at the high-speed printer behind his desk. It wasempty.

“Susan,” Strathmore said quietly. “This is goingto be hard to accept at first, but just listen a minute.” Hechewed his lip. “This code that TRANSLTR’s workingon—it’s unique. It’s like nothing we’ve everseen before.” Strathmore paused, as if the words were hard forhim to say. “This code is unbreakable.”

Susan stared at him and almost laughed. *Unbreakable? What wasTHAT supposed to mean?* There was no such thing as anunbreakable code—some took longer than others, but every codewas breakable. It was mathematically guaranteed that sooner orlater TRANSLTR would guess the right key. “I *beg* yourpardon?”
“The code’s unbreakable,” he repeated flatly.
Unbreakable? Susan couldn’t believe the word hadbeen uttered by a man with twenty-seven years of code analysisexperience.
“Unbreakable, sir?” she said uneasily. “Whatabout the Bergofsky Principle?”

Susan had learned about the Bergofsky Principle early in hercareer. It was a cornerstone of bruteforce technology. It was alsoStrathmore’s inspiration for building TRANSLTR. The principleclearly stated that if a computer tried enough keys, it wasmathematically guaranteed to find the right one. A code’ssecurity was not that its pass-key was unfindable but rather thatmost people didn’t have the time or equipment to try.
Strathmore shook his head. “This code’sdifferent.”
“Different?” Susan eyed him askance. *An unbreakablecode is a mathematical impossibility! He knows that!*
Strathmore ran a hand across his sweaty scalp. “This codeis the product of a brand-new encryption algorithm—onewe’ve never seen before.”

Now Susan was even more doubtful. Encryption algorithms werejust mathematical formulas, recipes for scrambling text into code.Mathematicians and programmers created new algorithms every day.There were hundreds of them on the market—PGP, Diffie-Hellman,ZIP, IDEA, El Gamal. TRANSLTR broke all of their codes every day,no problem. To TRANSLTR all codes looked identical, regardless ofwhich algorithm wrote them.

“I don’t understand,” she argued.“We’re not talking about reverse-

engineering some complexfunction, we're talking brute force. PGP, Lucifer, DSA—itdoesn't matter. The algorithm generates a key it thinks issecure, and TRANSLTR keeps guessing until it finds it."

Strathmore's reply had the controlled patience of a goodteacher. "Yes, Susan, TRANSLTR will *always* find thekey—even if it's huge." He paused a long moment."Unless . . ."

Susan wanted to speak, but it was clear Strathmore was about todrop his bomb. *Unless what?*

"Unless the computer doesn't know when it'sbroken the code." Susan almost fell out of her chair. "What!"

"Unless the computer guesses the correct key but just keepsguessing because it doesn't realize it found the rightkey." Strathmore looked bleak. "I think this algorithmhas got a rotating cleartext."

Susan gaped.

The notion of a rotating cleartext function was first put forthin an obscure, 1987 paper by a Hungarian mathematician, JosefHarne. Because brute-force computers broke codes by examiningcleartext for identifiable word patterns, Harne proposed anencryption algorithm that, in addition to encrypting, shifteddecrypted cleartext over a time variant. In theory, the perpetualmutation would ensure that the attacking computer would neverlocate recognizable word patterns and thus never know when it hadfound the proper key. The concept was somewhat like the idea ofcolonizing Mars—fathomable on an intellectual level, but, atpresent, well beyond human ability.

"Where did you get this thing?" she demanded.

The commander's response was slow. "A public sectorprogrammer wrote it."

"What?" Susan collapsed back in her chair."We've got the best programmers in the world downstairs!All of us working together have never even come *close* towriting a rotating cleartext function. Are you trying to tell mesome punk with a PC figured out how to do it?"

Strathmore lowered his voice in an apparent effort to calm her."I wouldn't call this guy a punk."

Susan wasn't listening. She was convinced there had to besome other explanation: A glitch. A virus. Anything was more likelythan an unbreakable code.

Strathmore eyed her sternly. "One of the most brilliantcryptographic minds of all time wrote this algorithm."

Susan was more doubtful than ever; the most brilliantcryptographic minds of all time were in her department, and shecertainly would have heard about an algorithm like this.

“Who?” she demanded.
“I’m sure you can guess.” Strathmore said.“He’s not too fond of the NSA.”
“Well, that narrows it down!” she snappedsarcastically.
“He worked on the TRANSLTR project. He broke the rules.Almost caused an intelligence nightmare. I deported him.”
Susan’s face was blank only an instant before going white.“Oh my God . . .”
Strathmore nodded. “He’s been bragging all year abouthis work on a brute-force–resistant algorithm.”
“B-but . . .” Susan stammered. “I thought he wasbluffing. He actually *did* it?”
“He did. The ultimate unbreakable code-writer.”
Susan was silent a long moment. “But . . . that means . ..” Strathmore looked her dead in the eye. “Yes. Ensei Tankadojust made TRANSLTR obsolete.”

CHAPTER 6

Although Ensei Tankado was not alive during the Second WorldWar, he carefully studied everything about it—particularlyabout its culminating event, the blast in which 100,000 of hiscountrymen where incinerated by an atomic bomb.

Hiroshima, 8:15 a.m. August 6, 1945—a vile act ofdestruction. A senseless display of power by a country that hadalready won the war. Tankado had accepted all that. But what hecould never accept was that the bomb had robbed him of ever knowinghis mother. She had died giving birth to him—complicationsbrought on by the radiation poisoning she'd suffered so manyyears earlier.

In 1945, before Ensei was born, his mother, like many of herfriends, traveled to Hiroshima to volunteer in the burn centers. Itwas there that she became one of the hibakusha—the radiatedpeople. Nineteen years later, at the age of thirty-six, as she layin the delivery room bleeding internally, she knew she was finallygoing to die. What she did not know was that death would spare herthe final horror—her only child was to be born deformed.

Ensei's father never even saw his son. Bewildered by theloss of his wife and shamed by the arrival of what the nurses toldhim was an imperfect child who probably would not survive thenight, he disappeared from the hospital and never came back. EnseiTankado was placed in a foster home.

Every night the young Tankado stared down at the twisted fingersholding his daruma wish-doll and swore he'd haverevenge—revenge against the country that had stolen his motherand shamed his father into abandoning him. What he didn't knowwas that destiny was about to intervene.

In February of Ensei's twelfth year, a computermanufacturer in Tokyo called his foster family and asked if theircrippled child might take part in a test group for a new keyboardthey'd developed for handicapped children. His familyagreed.

Although Ensei Tankado had never seen a computer, it seemed heinstinctively knew how to use it. The computer opened worlds he hadnever imagined possible. Before long it became his entire life. Ashe got older, he gave classes, earned money, and eventually earneda scholarship to Doshisha University. Soon Ensei Tankado was knownacross Tokyo as *fugusha kisai*—the crippled genius.

Tankado eventually read about Pearl Harbor and Japanese warcrimes. His hatred of America slowly faded. He became a devoutBuddhist. He forgot his childhood vow of revenge; forgiveness wasthe only path to enlightenment.

By the time he was twenty, Ensei Tankado was somewhat of anunderground cult figure among programmers. IBM offered him a workvisa and a post in Texas. Tankado jumped at the chance. Three yearslater he had left IBM, was living in New York, and was writingsoftware on his own. He rode the new wave of public-key encryption.He wrote algorithms and made a fortune.

Like many of the top authors of encryption algorithms, Tankadowas courted by the NSA. The irony was not lost on him—theopportunity to work in the heart of the government in a country hehad once vowed to hate. He decided to go on the interview. Whateverdoubts he had disappeared when he met Commander Strathmore. Theytalked frankly about Tankado's background, the potentialhostility he might feel toward the U.S., his plans for the future.Tankado took a polygraph test and underwent five weeks of rigorouspsychological profiles. He passed them all. His hatred had beenreplaced by his devotion to Buddha. Four months later Ensei Tankadowent to work in the Cryptography Department of the NationalSecurity Agency.

Despite his large salary, Tankado went to work on an old Mopedand ate a bag lunch alone at his desk instead of joining the restof the department for prime rib and vichyssoise in the commissary.The other cryptographers revered him. He was brilliant—ascreative a programmer as any of them had ever seen. He was kind andhonest, quiet, and of impeccable ethics. Moral integrity was ofparamount importance to him. It was for this reason that hisdismissal from the NSA and subsequent deportation had been such ashock.

* * *

Tankado, like the rest of the Crypto staff, had been working onthe TRANSLTR project with the understanding that if successful, itwould be used to decipher E-mail only in cases preapproved by theJustice Department. The NSA's use of TRANSLTR was to beregulated in much the same way the FBI needed a federal court orderto install a wiretap. TRANSLTR was to include programming thatcalled for passwords held in escrow by the Federal Reserve and theJustice Department in order to decipher a file. This would preventthe NSA from listening indiscriminately to the personalcommunications of law-abiding citizens around the globe.

However, when the time came to enter that programming, theTRANSLTR staff was told there had been a change of plans. Becauseof the time pressures often associated with the NSA'santiterrorist work, TRANSLTR was to be a free-standing decryptiondevice whose day-to-day operation would be

regulated solely by theNSA.

Ensei Tankado was outraged. This meant the NSA would, in effect,be able to open everyone's mail and reseal it without theirknowing. It was like having a bug in every phone in the world.Strathmore attempted to make Tankado see TRANSLTR as alaw-enforcement device, but it was no use; Tankado was adamant thatit constituted a gross violation of human rights. He quit on thespot and within hours violated the NSA's code of secrecy bytrying to contact the Electronic Frontier Foundation. Tankado stoodpoised to shock the world with his story of a secret machinecapable of exposing computer users around the world to unthinkablegovernment treachery. The NSA had had no choice but to stophim.

Tankado's capture and deportation, widely publicized amongon-line newsgroups, had been an unfortunate public shaming. AgainstStrathmore's wishes, the NSA damage
controlspecialists—nervous that Tankado would try to convince peopleof TRANSLTR's existence—generated rumors that destroyedhis credibility. Ensei Tankado was shunned by the global computercommunity—nobody trusted a cripple accused of spying,particularly when he was trying to buy his freedom with absurdallegations about a U.S. code-breaking machine.

The oddest thing of all was that Tankado seemed to understand;it was all part of the intelligence game. He appeared to harbor noanger, only resolve. As security escorted him away, Tankado spokehis final words to Strathmore with a chilling calm.

"We all have a right to keep secrets," he'd said."Someday I'll see to it we can."

CHAPTER 7

Susan's mind was racing— *Ensei Tankado wrote aprogram that creates unbreakable codes!* She could barely graspthe thought.

"Digital Fortress," Strathmore said. "That'swhat he's calling it. It's the ultimatecounterintelligence weapon. If this program hits the market, everythird grader with a modem will be able to send codes the NSAcan't break. Our intelligence will be shot."

But Susan's thoughts were far removed from the politicalimplications of Digital Fortress. She was still struggling tocomprehend its existence. She'd spent her life breaking codes,firmly denying the existence of the ultimate code. *Every code isbreakable—the Bergofsky Principle!* She felt like anatheist coming face to face with God.

"If this code gets out," she whispered,"cryptography will become a dead science."

Strathmore nodded. "That's the least of ourproblems."

"Can we pay Tankado off? I know he hates us, but can'twe offer him a few million dollars? Convince him not todistribute?"

Strathmore laughed. "A few million? Do you know what thisthing is worth? Every government in the world will bid top dollar.Can you imagine telling the President that we're stillcable-snooping the Iraqis but we can't read the interceptsanymore? This isn't just about the NSA, it's about theentire intelligence community. This facility provides support foreveryone—the FBI, CIA, DEA; they'd all be flying blind.The drug cartels' shipments would become untraceable, majorcorporations could transfer money with no paper trail and leave theIRS out in the cold, terrorists could chat in total secrecy—itwould be chaos."

"The EFF will have field day," Susan said, pale.

"The EFF doesn't have the first clue about what we dohere," Strathmore railed in disgust. "If they knew howmany terrorist attacks we've stopped because we can decryptcodes, they'd change their tune."

Susan agreed, but she also knew the realities; the EFF wouldnever know how important TRANSLTR was. TRANSLTR had helped foildozens of attacks, but the information was highly classified andwould never be released. The rationale behind the secrecy wassimple: The government could not afford the mass hysteria caused byrevealing the truth; no one knew how the public would

react to thenews that there had been two nuclear close calls by fundamentalistgroups on U.S. soil in the last year.

Nuclear attack, however, was not the only threat. Only lastmonth TRANSLTR had thwarted one of the most ingeniously conceivedterrorist attacks the NSA had ever witnessed. An antigovernmentorganization had devised a plan, code-named Sherwood Forest. Ittargeted the New York Stock Exchange with the intention of"redistributing the wealth." Over the course of six days,members of the group placed twenty-seven nonexplosive flux pods inthe buildings surrounding the Exchange. These devices, whendetonated, create a powerful blast of magnetism. The simultaneousdischarge of these carefully placed pods would create a magneticfield so powerful that all magnetic media in the Stock Exchangewould be erased—computer hard drives, massive ROM storagebanks, tape backups, and even floppy disks. All records of whoowned what would disintegrate permanently.

Because pinpoint timing was necessary for simultaneousdetonation of the devices, the flux pods were interconnected overInternet telephone lines. During the two-day countdown, thepods' internal clocks exchanged endless streams of encryptedsynchronization data. The NSA intercepted the data-pulses as anetwork anomaly but ignored them as a seemingly harmless exchangeof gibberish. But after TRANSLTR decrypted the data streams,analysts immediately recognized the sequence as anetworksynchronized countdown. The pods were located and removed afull three hours before they were scheduled to go off.

Susan knew that without TRANSLTR the NSA was helpless againstadvanced electronic terrorism. She eyed the Run-Monitor. It stillread over fifteen hours. Even if Tankado's file broke rightnow, the NSA was sunk. Crypto would be relegated to breaking lessthan two codes a day. Even at the present rate of 150 a day, therewas still a backlog of files awaiting decryption.

* * *

"Tankado called me last month," Strathmore said,interrupting Susan's thoughts.

Susan looked up. "Tankado called *you?"*

He nodded. "To warn me."

"Warn you? He hates you."

"He called to tell me he was perfecting an algorithm thatwrote unbreakable codes. I didn't believe him."

"But why would he tell you about it?" Susan demanded."Did he want you to buy it?"

"No. It was blackmail."

Things suddenly began falling into place for Susan. “Ofcourse,” she said, amazed. “He wanted you to clear hisname.”
“No,” Strathmore frowned. “Tankado wantedTRANSLTR.”
“TRANSLTR?”
“Yes. He ordered me to go public and tell the world we haveTRANSLTR. He said if we admitted we can read public E-mail, hewould destroy Digital Fortress.”
Susan looked doubtful.
Strathmore shrugged. “Either way, it’s too late now.He’s posted a complimentary copy of Digital Fortress at hisInternet site. Everyone in the world can download it.”
Susan went white. “He *what!”*

“It’s a publicity stunt. Nothing to worry about. Thecopy he posted is encrypted. People can download it, but nobody canopen it. It’s ingenious, really. The source code for DigitalFortress has been encrypted, locked shut.”
Susan looked amazed. “Of course! So everybody can *have* a copy, but nobody can open it.”
“Exactly. Tankado’s dangling a carrot.”
“Have you seen the algorithm?”
The commander looked puzzled. “No, I told you it’sencrypted.”

Susan looked equally puzzled. “But we’ve got TRANSLTR;why not just decrypt it?” But when Susan saw Strathmore’sface, she realized the rules had changed. “Oh my God.”She gasped, suddenly understanding. “Digital Fortress isencrypted with *itself?”*
Strathmore nodded. “Bingo.”

Susan was amazed. The formula for Digital Fortress had beenencrypted using Digital Fortress. Tankado had posted a pricelessmathematical recipe, but the text of the recipe had been scrambled.And it had used *itself* to do the scrambling.
“It’s Biggleman’s Safe,” Susan stammered inawe.

Strathmore nodded. Biggleman’s Safe was a hypotheticalcryptography scenario in which a safe builder wrote blueprints foran unbreakable safe. He wanted to keep the blueprints a secret, sohe built the safe and locked the blueprints inside. Tankado haddone the same thing with Digital Fortress. He’d protected hisblueprints by encrypting them with the formula outlined in hisblueprints.
“And the file in TRANSLTR?” Susan asked.
“I downloaded it from Tankado’s Internet site likeeveryone else. The NSA is now the proud owner of the DigitalFortress algorithm; we just can’t open it.”

Susan marveled at Ensei Tankado's ingenuity. Withoutrevealing his algorithm, he had proven to the NSA that it wasunbreakable.

Strathmore handed her a newspaper clipping. It was a translatedblurb from the Nikkei Shimbun, the Japanese equivalent of the WallStreet Journal, stating that the Japanese programmer Ensei Tankadohad completed a mathematical formula he claimed could writeunbreakable codes. The formula was called Digital Fortress and wasavailable for review on the Internet. The programmer would beauctioning it off to the highest bidder. The column went on to saythat although there was enormous interest in Japan, the few U.S.software companies who had heard about Digital Fortress deemed theclaim preposterous, akin to turning lead to gold. The formula, theysaid, was a hoax and not to be taken seriously.

Susan looked up. "An auction?"

Strathmore nodded. "Right now every software company inJapan has downloaded an encrypted copy of Digital Fortress and istrying to crack it open. Every second they can't, the biddingprice climbs."

"That's absurd," Susan shot back. "All thenew encrypted files are uncrackable unless you have TRANSLTR.Digital Fortress could be nothing more than a generic,public-domain algorithm, and none of these companies could breakit."

"But it's a brilliant marketing ploy," Strathmoresaid. "Think about it—all brands of bulletproof glassstop bullets, but if a company dares you to put a bullet through*theirs,* suddenly everybody's trying."

"And the Japanese actually *believe* Digital Fortressis different? Better than everything else on the market?"

"Tankado may have been shunned, but everybody knowshe's a genius. He's practically a cult icon amonghackers. If Tankado says the algorithm's unbreakable,it's unbreakable."

But they're *all* unbreakable as far as the publicknows!"

"Yes . . ." Strathmore mused. "For themoment."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?"

Strathmore sighed. "Twenty years ago no one imaginedwe'd be breaking twelve-bit stream ciphers. But technologyprogressed. It always does. Software manufacturers assume at somepoint computers like TRANSLTR will exist. Technology is progressingexponentially, and eventually current publickey algorithms willlose their security. Better algorithms will be needed to stay aheadof tomorrow's computers."

"And Digital Fortress is it?" "Exactly. An algorithm that resists brute force will neverbecome obsolete, no matter how powerful code-breaking

computersget. It could become a world standard overnight."
Susan pulled in a long breath. "God help us," shewhispered. "Can we make a bid?"

Strathmore shook his head. "Tankado gave us our chance. Hemade that clear. It's too risky anyway; if we get caught,we're basically admitting that we're afraid of hisalgorithm. We'd be making a public confession not only that wehave TRANSLTR but that Digital Fortress is immune."
"What's the time frame?"
Strathmore frowned. "Tankado planned to announce thehighest bidder tomorrow at noon."
Susan felt her stomach tighten. "Then what?"
"The arrangement was that he would give the winner thepass-key."
"The *pass-key?"*
"Part of the ploy. Everybody's already got thealgorithm, so Tankado's auctioning off the pass-key thatunlocks it."

Susan groaned. "Of course." It was perfect. Clean andsimple. Tankado had encrypted Digital Fortress, and he alone heldthe pass-key that unlocked it. She found it hard to fathom thatsomewhere out there—probably scrawled on a piece of paper inTankado's pocket—there was a sixty-fourcharacterpass-key that could end U.S. intelligence gathering forever.

Susan suddenly felt ill as she imagined the scenario. Tankadowould give his pass-key to the highest bidder, and that companywould unlock the Digital Fortress file. Then it probably wouldembed the algorithm in a tamper-proof chip, and within five yearsevery computer would come preloaded with a Digital Fortress chip.No commercial manufacturer had ever dreamed of creating anencryption chip because normal encryption algorithms eventuallybecome obsolete. But Digital Fortress would never become obsolete;with a rotating cleartext function, no brute-force attack wouldever find the right key. A new digital encryption standard. Fromnow until forever. Every code unbreakable. Bankers, brokers,terrorists, spies. One world—one algorithm.
Anarchy.
"What are the options?" Susan probed. She was wellaware that desperate times called for desperate measures, even atthe NSA.

"We can't remove him, if that's what you'reasking." It was exactly what Susan was asking. In her years with the NSA,Susan had heard rumors of its loose affiliations with the mostskilled assassins in the world—hired hands brought in to dothe intelligence community's dirty work.
Strathmore shook his head. "Tankado's too smart toleave us an option like

that.”
Susan felt oddly relieved. “He’s protected?”
“Not exactly.”
“In hiding?”
Strathmore shrugged. “Tankado left Japan. He planned tocheck his bids by phone. But we know where he is.”
“And you don’t plan to make a move?”
“No. He’s got insurance. Tankado gave a copy of hispass-key to an anonymous third party . . . in case anythinghappened.”
Of course, Susan marveled. *A guardian angel*.“And I suppose if anything happens to Tankado, the mystery mansells the key?”
“Worse. Anyone hits Tankado, and his partnerpublishes.”
Susan looked confused. “His partner *publishes* thekey?”
Strathmore nodded. “Posts it on the Internet, puts it innewspapers, on billboards. In effect, he *gives* itaway.”
Susan’s eyes widened. “Free downloads?”
“Exactly. Tankado figured if he was dead, he wouldn’tneed the money—why not give the world a little farewellgift?”
There was a long silence. Susan breathed deeply as if to absorbthe terrifying truth. *Ensei Tankado has created an unbreakablealgorithm. He’s holding us hostage.*

She suddenly stood. Her voice was determined. “We mustcontact Tankado! There must be a way to convince him not torelease! We can offer him triple the highest bid! We can clear hisname! Anything!”
“Too late,” Strathmore said. He took a deep breath.“Ensei Tankado was found dead this morning in Seville,Spain.”

CHAPTER 8

The twin-engine Learjet 60 touched down on the scorching runway.Outside the window, the barren landscape of Spain's lowerextremadura blurred and then slowed to a crawl.

"Mr. Becker?" a voice crackled. "We'rehere."

Becker stood and stretched. After unlatching the overheadcompartment, he remembered he had no luggage. There had been notime to pack. It didn't matter—he'd been promisedthe trip would be brief, in and out.

As the engines wound down, the plane eased out of the sun andinto a deserted hangar opposite the main terminal. A moment laterthe pilot appeared and popped the hatch. Becker tossed back thelast of his cranberry juice, put the glass on the wet bar, andscooped up his suit coat.

The pilot pulled a thick manila envelope from his flight suit."I was instructed to give you this." He handed it toBecker. On the front, scrawled in blue pen, were the words:

KEEP THE CHANGE.

Becker thumbed through the thick stack of reddish bills."What the . . . ?"

"Local currency," the pilot offered flatly.

"I know what it is," Becker stammered. "Butit's . . . it's too much. All I need is taxi fare."Becker did the conversion in his head. "What's in here isworth *thousands* of dollars!"

"I have my orders, sir." The pilot turned and hoistedhimself back into the cabin. The door slid shut behind him.

Becker stared up at the plane and then down at the money in hishand. After standing a moment in the empty hangar, he put theenvelope in his breast pocket, shouldered his suit coat, and headedout across the runway. It was a strange beginning. Becker pushed itfrom his mind. With a little luck he'd be back in time tosalvage some of his Stone Manor trip with Susan.

In and out, he told himself. *In and out.* There was no way he could have known.

CHAPTER 9

Systems security technician Phil Chartrukian had only intendedto be inside Crypto a minute—just long enough to grab somepaperwork he'd forgotten the day before. But it was not tobe.

After making his way across the Crypto floor and stepping intothe Sys-Sec lab, he immediately knew something was not right. Thecomputer terminal that perpetually monitored TRANSLTR'sinternal workings was unmanned and the monitor was switchedoff.

Chartrukian called out, "Hello?"

There was no reply. The lab was spotless—as if no one hadbeen there for hours.

Although Chartrukian was only twenty-three and relatively new tothe Sys-Sec squad, he'd been trained well, and he knew thedrill: There was *always* a Sys-Sec on duty in Crypto . . .especially on Saturdays when no cryptographers were around.

He immediately powered up the monitor and turned to the dutyboard on the wall. "Who's on watch?" he demandedaloud, scanning the list of names. According to the schedule, ayoung rookie named Seidenberg was supposed to have started a doubleshift at midnight the night before. Chartrukian glanced around theempty lab and frowned. "So where the hell is he?"

As he watched the monitor power up, Chartrukian wondered ifStrathmore knew the Sys-Sec lab was unmanned. He had noticed on hisway in that the curtains of Strathmore's workstation wereclosed, which meant the boss was in—not at all uncommon for aSaturday; Strathmore, despite requesting his cryptographers takeSaturdays off, seemed to work 365 days a year.

There was one thing Chartrukian knew for certain—ifStrathmore found out the Sys-Sec lab was unmanned, it would costthe absent rookie his job. Chartrukian eyed the phone, wondering ifhe should call the young techie and bail him out; there was anunspoken rule among Sys-Sec that they would watch each other'sbacks. In Crypto, Sys-Secs were second-class citizens, constantlyat odds with the lords of the manor. It was no secret that thecryptographers ruled this multibillion-dollar roost; SysSecs weretolerated only because they kept the toys running smoothly.

Chartrukian made his decision. He grabbed the phone. But thereceiver never reached his ear. He stopped short, his eyestransfixed on the monitor now

coming into focus before him. As ifin slow motion, he set down the phone and stared in open-mouthedwonder.

In eight months as a Sys-Sec, Phil Chartrukian had never seenTRANSLTR's Run-Monitor post anything other than a double zeroin the *hours* field. Today was a first.

TIME ELAPSED: 15:17:21

"Fifteen hours and seventeen minutes?" he choked."Impossible!"

He rebooted the screen, praying it hadn't refreshedproperly. But when the monitor came back to life, it looked thesame.

Chartrukian felt a chill. Crypto's Sys-Secs had only oneresponsibility: Keep TRANSLTR "clean"—virusfree.

Chartrukian knew that a fifteen-hour run could only mean onething—infection. An impure file had gotten inside TRANSLTR andwas corrupting the programming. Instantly his training kicked in;it no longer mattered that the Sys-Sec lab had been unmanned or themonitors switched off. He focused on the matter athand—TRANSLTR. He immediately called up a log of all the filesthat had entered TRANSLTR in the last forty-eight hours. He beganscanning the list.

Did an infected file get through? he wondered. *Couldthe security filters have missed something?*

As a precaution, every file entering TRANSLTR had to passthrough what was known as Gauntlet—a series of powerfulcircuit-level gateways, packet filters, and disinfectant programsthat scanned inbound files for computer viruses and potentiallydangerous subroutines. Files containing programming"unknown" to Gauntlet were immediately rejected. They hadto be checked by hand. Occasionally Gauntlet rejected entirelyharmless files on the basis that they contained programming thefilters had never seen before. In that case, the Sys-Secs did ascrupulous manual inspection, and only then, on confirmation thatthe file was clean, did they bypass Gauntlet's filters andsend the file into TRANSLTR.

Computer viruses were as varied as bacterial viruses. Like theirphysiological counterparts, computer viruses had one goal—toattach themselves to a host system and replicate. In this case, thehost was TRANSLTR.

Chartrukian was amazed the NSA hadn't had problems withviruses before. Gauntlet was a potent sentry, but still, the NSAwas a bottom feeder, sucking in massive amounts of digitalinformation from systems all over the world. Snooping data was alot like having indiscriminate sex—protection or noprotection, sooner or later you caught something.

Chartrukian finished examining the file list before him. He wasnow more

puzzled than before. Every file checked out. Gauntlet hadseen nothing out of the ordinary, which meant the file in TRANSLTRwas totally clean.

"So what the hell's taking so long?" he demandedof the empty room. Chartrukian felt himself break a sweat. Hewondered if he should go disturb Strathmore with the news.

"A virus probe," Chartrukian said firmly, trying tocalm himself down. "I should run a virus probe."

Chartrukian knew that a virus probe would be the first thingStrathmore would request anyway. Glancing out at the desertedCrypto floor, Chartrukian made his decision. He loaded the viralprobe software and launched it. The run would take about fifteenminutes.

"Come back clean," he whispered. "Squeaky clean.Tell Daddy it's nothing."

But Chartrukian sensed it was *not* "nothing."Instinct told him something very unusual was going on inside thegreat decoding beast.

CHAPTER 10

“Ensei Tankado is dead?” Susan felt a wave of nausea.“You killed him? I thought you said—”
“We didn’t touch him,” Strathmore assured her.“He died of a heart attack. COMINT phoned early this morning.Their computer flagged Tankado’s name in a Seville police logthrough Interpol.”
“Heart attack?” Susan looked doubtful. “He wasthirty years old.”
“Thirty-two,” Strathmore corrected. “He had acongenital heart defect.”
“I’d never heard that.”

“Turned up in his NSA physical. Not something he braggedabout.” Susan was having trouble accepting the serendipity of thetiming. “A defective heart could kill him—just likethat?” It seemed too convenient.
Strathmore shrugged. “Weak heart . . . combine it with theheat of Spain. Throw in the stress of blackmailing the NSA. . ..”
Susan was silent a moment. Even considering the conditions, shefelt a pang of loss at the passing of such a brilliant fellowcryptographer. Strathmore’s gravelly voice interrupted herthoughts.

“The only silver lining on this whole fiasco is thatTankado was traveling alone. Chances are good his partnerdoesn’t know yet he’s dead. The Spanish authorities saidthey’d contain the information for as long as possible. Weonly got the call because COMINT was on the ball.” Strathmoreeyed Susan closely. “I’ve got to find the partner beforehe finds out Tankado’s dead. That’s why I called you in.I need your help.”

Susan was confused. It seemed to her that Ensei Tankado’stimely demise had solved their entire problem.“Commander,” she argued, “if the authorities aresaying he died of a heart attack, we’re off the hook; hispartner will know the NSA is not responsible.”

“Not responsible?” Strathmore’s eyes widened indisbelief. “Somebody blackmails the NSA and turns up dead afew days later—and we’re *not responsible?* I’dbet big money Tankado’s mystery friend won’t see it thatway. Whatever happened, we look guilty as hell. It could easilyhave been poison, a rigged autopsy, any number of things.”Strathmore paused. “What was your first reaction when I toldyou Tankado was dead?”
She frowned. “I thought the NSA had killed him.”

“Exactly. If the NSA can put five Rhyolite satellites ingeosynchronous orbit

over the Mideast, I think it's safe toassume we have the resources to pay off a few Spanishpolicemen." The commander had made his point.
Susan exhaled. *Ensei Tankado is dead. The NSA will beblamed.* "Can we find his partner in time?"

"I think so. We've got a good lead. Tankado madenumerous public announcements that he was working with a partner. Ithink he hoped it would discourage software firms from doing himany harm or trying to steal his key. He threatened that if therewas any foul play, his partner would publish the key, and all firmswould suddenly find themselves in competition with freesoftware."
"Clever." Susan nodded.
Strathmore went on. "A few times, in public, Tankadoreferred to his partner by name. He called him NorthDakota."
"North Dakota? Obviously an alias of some sort."

"Yes, but as a precaution I ran an Internet inquiry usingNorth Dakota as a search string. I didn't think I'd findanything, but I turned up an E-mail account." Strathmorepaused. "Of course I assumed it wasn't the North Dakotawe were looking for, but I searched the account just to be sure.Imagine my shock when I found the account was full of E-mail fromEnsei Tankado." Strathmore raised his eyebrows. "And themessages were full of references to Digital Fortress andTankado's plans to blackmail the NSA."

Susan gave Strathmore a skeptical look. She was amazed thecommander was letting himself be played with so easily."Commander," she argued, "Tankado knows full wellthe NSA can snoop Email from the Internet; he would *never*use E-mail to send secret information. It's a trap. EnseiTankado *gave* you North Dakota. He *knew* you'd runa search. Whatever information he's sending, he *wanted*you to find—it's a false trail."

"Good instinct," Strathmore fired back, "exceptfor a couple of things. I couldn't find anything under NorthDakota, so I tweaked the search string. The account I found wasunder a
variation—NDAKOTA."
Susan shook her head. "Running permutations is standardprocedure. Tankado knew you'd try variations until you hitsomething. NDAKOTA's far too easy an alteration."
"Perhaps," Strathmore said, scribbling words on apiece of paper and handing it to Susan. "But look atthis."
Susan read the paper. She suddenly understood theCommander's thinking. On the paper was North Dakota'sE-mail address.
NDAKOTA@ara.anon.org

It was the letters ARA in the address that had caughtSusan's eye. ARA stood for American Remailers Anonymous, awell-known anonymous server.

Anonymous servers were popular among Internet users who wantedto keep their identities secret. For a fee, these companiesprotected an E-mailer's privacy by acting as a middleman forelectronic mail. It was like having a numbered post officebox—a user could send and receive mail without ever revealinghis true address or name. The company received E-mail addressed toaliases and then forwarded it to the client's real account.The remailing company was bound by contract never to reveal theidentity or location of its real users.

"It's not proof," Strathmore said. "Butit's pretty suspicious."

Susan nodded, suddenly more convinced. "So you'resaying Tankado didn't care if anybody searched for NorthDakota because his identity and location are protected byARA."

"Exactly."

Susan schemed for a moment. "ARA services mainly U.S.accounts. You think North Dakota might be over heresomewhere?"

Strathmore shrugged. "Could be. With an American partner,Tankado could keep the two pass-keys separated geographically.Might be a smart move."

Susan considered it. She doubted Tankado would have shared hispass-key with anyone except a very close friend, and as sherecalled, Ensei Tankado didn't have many friends in theStates.

"North Dakota," she mused, her cryptological mindmulling over the possible meanings of the alias. "What doeshis E-mail to Tankado sound like?"

"No idea. COMINT only caught Tankado's outbound. Atthis point all we have on North Dakota is an anonymousaddress."

Susan thought a minute. "Any chance it's adecoy?"

Strathmore raised an eyebrow. "How so?"

"Tankado could be sending bogus E-mail to a dead account inhopes we'd snoop it. We'd think he's protected, andhe'd never have to risk sharing his pass-key. He could beworking alone."

Strathmore chuckled, impressed. "Tricky idea, except forone thing. He's not using any of his usual home or businessInternet accounts. He's been dropping by Doshisha Universityand logging on to their mainframe. Apparently he's got anaccount there that he's managed to keep secret. It's avery well-hidden account, and I found it only by chance."Strathmore paused. "So . . . if Tankado wanted us to snoop hismail, why would he use a secret account?"

Susan contemplated the question. "Maybe he used a secretaccount so you wouldn't suspect a ploy? Maybe Tankado hid theaccount just deep enough that

you'd stumble on to it and thinkyou got lucky. It gives his E-mail credibility."
Strathmore chuckled. "You should have been a field agent.The idea's a good one. Unfortunately, every letter Tankadosends gets a response. Tankado writes, his partnerresponds."
Susan frowned. "Fair enough. So, you're saying NorthDakota's for real."

"Afraid so. And we've got to find him. And *quietly.* If he catches wind that we're onto him, it'sall over."
Susan now knew exactly why Strathmore had called her in."Let me guess," she said. "You want me to snoopARA's secure database and find North Dakota's realidentity?"
Strathmore gave her a tight smile. "Ms. Fletcher, you readmy mind."

When it came to discreet Internet searches, Susan Fletcher wasthe woman for the job. A year ago, a senior White House officialhad been receiving E-mail threats from someone with an anonymousEmail address. The NSA had been asked to locate the individual.Although the NSA had the clout to demand the remailing companyreveal the user's identity, it opted for a more subtlemethod—a "tracer."

Susan had created, in effect, a directional beacon disguised asa piece of E-mail. She could send it to the user's phonyaddress, and the remailing company, performing the duty for whichit had been contracted, would forward it to the user's realaddress. Once there, the program would record its Internet locationand send word back to the NSA. Then the program would disintegratewithout a trace. From that day on, as far as the NSA was concerned,anonymous remailers were nothing more than a minor annoyance.
"Can you find him?" Strathmore asked.
"Sure. Why did you wait so long to call me?"

"Actually"—he frowned—"I hadn'tplanned on calling you at all. I didn't want anyone else inthe loop. I tried to send a copy of your tracer myself, but youwrote the damn thing in one of those new hybrid languages; Icouldn't get it to work. It kept returning nonsensical data. Ifinally had to bite the bullet and bring you in."

Susan chuckled. Strathmore was a brilliant cryptographicprogrammer, but his repertoire was limited primarily to algorithmicwork; the nuts and bolts of less lofty "secular"programming often escaped him. What was more, Susan had written hertracer in a new, crossbreed programming language called LIMBO; itwas understandable that Strathmore had encountered problems."I'll take care of it." She smiled, turning toleave. "I'll be at my terminal."
"Any idea on a time frame?"

Susan paused. "Well . . . it depends on how efficiently ARAforwards their

mail. If he's here in the States and usessomething like AOL or Compuserve, I'll snoop his credit cardand get a billing address within the hour. If he's with auniversity or corporation, it'll take a little longer."She smiled uneasily. "After that, the rest is up toyou."

Susan knew that "the rest" would be an NSA striketeam, cutting power to the guy's house and crashing throughhis windows with stun guns. The team would probably think it was ona drug bust. Strathmore would undoubtedly stride through the rubblehimself and locate the sixty-four-character pass-key. Then he wouldddestroy it. Digital Fortress would languish forever on theInternet, locked for all eternity.

"Send the tracer carefully," Strathmore urged."If North Dakota sees we're onto him, he'll panic,and I'll never get a team there before he disappears with thekey."

"Hit and run," she assured. "The moment thisthing finds his account, it'll dissolve. He'll never knowwe were there."

The commander nodded tiredly. "Thanks."

Susan gave him a soft smile. She was always amazed how even inthe face of disaster Strathmore could muster a quiet calm. She wasconvinced it was this ability that had defined his career andlifted him to the upper echelons of power.

As Susan headed for the door, she took a long look down atTRANSLTR. The existence of an unbreakable algorithm was a conceptshe was still struggling to grasp. She prayed they'd findNorth Dakota in time.

"Make it quick," Strathmore called, "andyou'll be in the Smoky Mountains by nightfall."

Susan froze in her tracks. She knew she had never mentioned hertrip to Strathmore. She wheeled. *Is the NSA tapping myphone?*

Strathmore smiled guiltily. "David told me about your tripthis morning. He said you'd be pretty ticked about postponingit."

Susan was lost. "You talked to David this *morning?"*

"Of course." Strathmore seemed puzzled by Susan'sreaction. "I had to brief him."

"Brief him?" she demanded. "For *what?"* "For his trip. I sent David to Spain."

CHAPTER 11

Spain. *I sent David to Spain.* The commander's wordsstung.
"David's in Spain?" Susan was incredulous."You sent him to Spain?" Her tone turned angry. *"Why?"*

Strathmore looked dumbfounded. He was apparently not accustomedto being yelled at, even by his head cryptographer. He gave Susan aconfused look. She was flexed like a mother tiger defending hercub.
"Susan," he said. "You spoke to him, didn'tyou? David *did* explain?"
She was too shocked to speak. *Spain? That's why Davidpostponed our Stone Manor trip?*
"I sent a car for him this morning. He said he was going tocall you before he left. I'm sorry. I thought—"
"Why would you send David to Spain?"
Strathmore paused and gave her an obvious look. "To get theother pass-key."
"What other pass-key?"
"Tankado's copy."
Susan was lost. "What are you talking about?"
Strathmore sighed. "Tankado surely would have had a copy ofthe pass-key on him when he died. I sure as hell didn't wantit floating around the Seville morgue."
"So you sent David Becker?" Susan was beyond shock.Nothing was making sense. "David doesn't even work foryou!"
Strathmore looked startled. No one ever spoke to the deputydirector of the NSA that way. "Susan," he said, keepinghis cool, "that's the point. I needed—"
The tiger lashed out. "You've got twenty thousandemployees at your command! What gives you the right to send myfiancé?"
"I needed a civilian courier, someone totally removed fromgovernment. If I went through regular channels and someone caughtwind—"

"And David Becker is the only civilian you know?" "No! David Becker is *not* the only civilian I know!But at six this morning, things were happening quickly! Davidspeaks the language, he's smart, I trust him, and I thoughtI'd do him a favor!"
"A favor?" Susan sputtered. "Sending him to Spainis a favor?"
"Yes! I'm paying him ten thousand for one day'swork. He'll pick up Tankado's belongings, and he'llfly home. That's a favor!"

Susan fell silent. She understood. It was all about money.

Her thoughts wheeled back five months to the night the presidentof Georgetown University had offered David a promotion to thelanguage department chair. The president had warned him that histeaching hours would be cut back and that there would be increasedpaperwork, but there was also a substantial raise in salary. Susanhad wanted to cry out *David, don't do it! You'll bemiserable. We have plenty of money—who cares which one of usearns it?* But it was not her place. In the end, she stood byhis decision to accept. As they fell asleep that night, Susan triedto be happy for him, but something inside kept telling her it wouldbe a disaster. She'd been right—but she'd nevercounted on being *so* right.

"You paid him ten thousand dollars?" she demanded."That's a dirty trick!"

Strathmore was fuming now. "Trick? It wasn't anygoddamn trick! I didn't even tell him about the money. I askedhim as a personal favor. He agreed to go."

"Of course he agreed! You're my boss! You're thedeputy director of the NSA! He couldn't say no!"

"You're right," Strathmore snapped. "Whichis why I called him. I didn't have the luxuryof—"

"Does the director know you sent a civilian?"

"Susan," Strathmore said, his patience obviouslywearing thin, "the director is not involved. He knows nothingabout this."

Susan stared at Strathmore in disbelief. It was as if she nolonger knew the man she was talking to. He had sent herfiancé—a teacher—on an NSA mission and then failedto notify the director about the biggest crisis in the history ofthe organization.

"Leland Fontaine *hasn't* beennotified?"

Strathmore had reached the end of his rope. He exploded."Susan, now listen here! I called you in here because I needan ally, not an inquiry! I've had one hell of morning. Idownloaded Tankado's file last night and sat here by theoutput printer for hours praying TRANSLTR could break it. At dawn Iswallowed my pride and dialed the director—and let me tellyou, *that* was a conversation I was *really* lookingforward to. Good morning, sir. I'm sorry to wake you. Why am Icalling? I just found out TRANSLTR is obsolete. It's becauseof an algorithm my entire top-dollar Crypto team couldn't comeclose to writing!" Strathmore slammed his fist on thedesk.

Susan stood frozen. She didn't make a sound. In ten years,she had seen Strathmore lose his cool only a handful of times, andnever once with her.

Ten seconds later neither one of them had spoken. FinallyStrathmore sat back down, and Susan could hear his breathingslowing to normal. When he finally

spoke, his voice was eerily calmand controlled.

"Unfortunately," Strathmore said quietly, "itturns out the director is in South America meeting with thePresident of Colombia. Because there's absolutely nothing hecould do from down there, I had two options—request he cut hismeeting short and return, or handle this myself." There was along silence. Strathmore finally looked up, and his tired eyes metSusan's. His expression softened immediately. "Susan,I'm sorry. I'm exhausted. This is a nightmare come true.I know you're upset about David. I didn't mean for you tofind out this way. I thought you knew."

Susan felt a wave of guilt. "I overreacted. I'm sorry.David is a good choice."

Strathmore nodded absently. "He'll be backtonight."

Susan thought about everything the commander was goingthrough—the pressure of overseeing TRANSLTR, the endless hoursand meetings. It was rumored his wife of thirty years was leavinghim. Then on top of it, there was Digital Fortress—the biggestintelligence threat in the history of the NSA, and the poor guy wasflying solo. No wonder he looked about to crack.

"Considering the circumstances," Susan said, "Ithink you should probably call the director."

Strathmore shook his head, a bead of sweat dripping on his desk."I'm not about to compromise the director's safetyor risk a leak by contacting him about a major crisis he can donothing about."

Susan knew he was right. Even in moments like these, Strathmorewas clear-headed. "Have you considered calling thePresident?"

Strathmore nodded. "Yes. I've decided againstit."

Susan had figured as much. Senior NSA officials had the right tohandle verifiable intelligence emergencies without executiveknowledge. The NSA was the only U.S. intelligence organization thatenjoyed total immunity from federal accountability of any sort.Strathmore often availed himself of this right; he preferred towork his magic in isolation.

"Commander," she argued, "this is too big to behandled alone. You've got to let somebody else in onit."

"Susan, the existence of Digital Fortress has majorimplications for the future of this organization. I have nointention of informing the President behind the director'sback. We have a crisis, and I'm handling it." He eyed herthoughtfully. "I *am* the deputy director ofoperations." A weary smile crept across his face. "Andbesides, I'm not alone. I've got Susan Fletcher on myteam."

In that instant, Susan realized what she respected so much aboutTrevor Strathmore. For ten years, through thick and thin, he hadalways led the way for her. Steadfast. Unwavering. It was hisdedication that amazed her—his

unshakable allegiance to hisprinciples, his country, and his ideals. Come what may, CommanderTrevor Strathmore was a guiding light in a world of impossibledecisions.

“You *are* on my team, aren’t you?” heasked.

Susan smiled. “Yes, sir, I am. One hundredpercent.” “Good. Now can we get back to work?”

CHAPTER 12

David Becker had been to funerals and seen dead bodies before,but there was something particularly unnerving about this one. Itwas not an immaculately groomed corpse resting in a silk-linedcoffin. This body had been stripped naked and dumpedunceremoniously on an aluminum table. The eyes had not yet foundtheir vacant, lifeless gaze. Instead they were twisted upwardtoward the ceiling in an eerie freeze-frame of terror andregret.

"¿Dónde están sus efectos?" Beckerasked in fluent Castillian Spanish. "Where are hisbelongings?"

"Allí," replied the yellow-toothed lieutenant. Hepointed to a counter of clothing and other personal items.

"¿Es todo? Is that all?"

"Sí."

Becker asked for a cardboard box. The lieutenant hurried off tofind one. It was Saturday evening, and the Seville morgue was technicallyclosed. The young lieutenant had let Becker in under direct ordersfrom the head of the Seville Guardia—it seemed the visitingAmerican had powerful friends.

Becker eyed the pile of clothes. There was a passport, wallet,and glasses stuffed in one of the shoes. There was also a smallduffel the Guardia had taken from the man's hotel.Becker's directions were clear: Touch nothing. Read nothing.Just bring it all back. Everything. Don't miss anything.

Becker surveyed the pile and frowned. *What could the NSApossible want with this junk?*

The lieutenant returned with a small box, and Becker beganputting the clothes inside.

The officer poked at the cadaver's leg. "¿Quienes? Who is he?"

"No idea."

"Looks Chinese."

Japanese, Becker thought.

"Poor bastard. Heart attack, huh?"

Becker nodded absently. "That's what they toldme."

The lieutenant sighed and shook his head sympathetically."The Seville sun can be cruel. Be careful out theretomorrow."

"Thanks," Becker said. "But I'm headedhome."

The officer looked shocked. "You just got here!"

“I know, but the guy paying my airfare is waiting for theseitems.”
The lieutenant looked offended in the way only a Spaniard can beoffended. “You mean you’re not going to *experience*Seville?”
“I was here years ago. Beautiful city. I’d love tostay.”
“So you’ve seen La Giralda?”
Becker nodded. He’d never actually climbed the ancientMoorish tower, but he’d seen it.

“How about the Alcazar?” Becker nodded again, remembering the night he’d heard Pacode Lucia play guitar in the courtyard—Flamenco under the starsin a fifteenth-century fortress. He wished he’d known Susanback then.
“And of course there’s Christopher Columbus.” Theofficer beamed. “He’s buried in our cathedral.”
Becker looked up. “Really? I thought Columbus was buried inthe Dominican Republic.”
“Hell no! Who starts these rumors? Columbus’s body ishere in Spain! I thought you said you went to college.”
Becker shrugged. “I must have missed that day.”
“The Spanish church is very proud to own hisrelics.”
The Spanish church. Becker knew here was only one churchin Spain—the Roman Catholic church. Catholicism was biggerhere than in Vatican City.
“We don’t, of course, have his entire body,” thelieutenant added. “Solo el escroto.”
Becker stopped packing and stared at the lieutenant. *Solo elescroto?* He fought off a grin. “Just hisscrotum?”
The officer nodded proudly. “Yes. When the church obtainsthe remains of a great man, they saint him and spread the relics todifferent cathedrals so everyone can enjoy theirsplendor.”
“And you got the . . .” Becker stifled a laugh.
“Oye! It’s a pretty important part!” the officerdefended. “It’s not like we got a rib or a knuckle likethose churches in Galicia! You should really stay and seeit.”
Becker nodded politely. “Maybe I’ll drop in on my wayout of town.”
“Mala suerte.” The officer sighed. “Bad luck. Thecathedral’s closed till sunrise mass.”
“Another time then.” Becker smiled, hoisting the box.“I should probably get going. My flight’s waiting.”He made a final glance around the room.
“You want a ride to the airport?” the officer asked.“I’ve got a MotoGuzzi out front.”
“No thanks. I’ll catch a cab.” Becker had drivena motorcycle once in college

and nearly killed himself on it. Hehad no intention of getting on one again, regardless of who wasdriving.

"Whatever you say," the officer said, heading for thedoor. "I'll get the lights." Becker tucked the box under his arm. *Have I goteverything?* He took a last look at the body on the table. Thefigure was stark naked, faceup under fluorescent lights, clearlyhiding nothing. Becker found his eyes drawn again to the strangelydeformed hands. He gazed a minute, focusing more intently.

The officer killed the lights, and the room went dark.

"Hold on," Becker said. "Turn those backon."

The lights flickered back on.

Becker set his box on the floor walked over to the corpse. Heleaned down and squinted at the man's left hand.

The officer followed Becker's gaze. "Pretty ugly,huh?"

But the deformity was not what had caught Becker's eye.He'd seen something else. He turned to the officer."You're sure everything's in this box?"

The officer nodded. "Yeah. That's it."

Becker stood for moment with his hands on his hips. Then hepicked up the box, carried it back over to the counter, and dumpedit out. Carefully, piece by piece, he shook out the clothing. Thenhe emptied the shoes and tapped them as if trying to remove apebble. After going over everything a second time, he stepped backand frowned.

"Problem?" asked the lieutenant. "Yeah," Becker said. "We're missingsomething."

CHAPTER 13

Tokugen Numataka stood in his plush, penthouse office and gazedout at the Tokyo skyline. His employees and competitors knew him as*akuta same*—the deadly shark. For three decadeshe'd outguessed, outbid, and outadvertised all the Japanesecompetition; now he was on the brink of becoming a giant in theworld market as well.

He was about to close the biggest deal of his life—a dealthat would make his Numatech Corp. the Microsoft of the future. Hisblood was alive with the cool rush of adrenaline. Business waswar—and war was exciting.

Although Tokugen Numataka had been suspicious when the call hadcome three days ago, he now knew the truth. He was blessed with *myouri*—good fortune. The gods had chosen him.

* * *

"I have a copy of the Digital Fortress pass-key," theAmerican accent had said. "Would you like to buy it?"

Numataka had almost laughed aloud. He knew it was a ploy.Numatech Corp. had bid generously for Ensei Tankado's newalgorithm, and now one of Numatech's competitors was playinggames, trying to find out the amount of the bid.

"You have the pass-key?" Numataka feignedinterest.

"I do. My name is North Dakota."

Numataka stifled a laugh. Everyone knew about North Dakota.Tankado had told the press about his secret partner. It had been awise move on Tankado's part to have a partner; even in Japan,business practices had become dishonorable. Ensei Tankado was notsafe. But one false move by an overeager firm, and the pass-keywould be published; every software firm on the market wouldsuffer.

Numataka took a long pull on his Umami cigar and played alongwith the caller's pathetic charade. "So you'reselling your pass-key? Interesting. How does Ensei Tankado feelabout this?"

"I have no allegiance to Mr. Tankado. Mr. Tankado wasfoolish to trust me. The pass-key is worth hundreds of times whathe is paying me to handle it for him."

"I'm sorry," Numataka said. "Your pass-keyalone is worth nothing to me. When Tankado finds out whatyou've done, he will simply publish his copy, and the marketwill be flooded."

“You will receive both pass-keys,” the voice said.“Mr. Tankado’s *and* mine.”
Numataka covered the receiver and laughed aloud. Hecouldn’t help asking. “How much are you asking for bothkeys?”
“Twenty million U.S. dollars.”
Twenty million was almost exactly what Numataka had bid.“Twenty million?” He gasped in mock horror.“That’s outrageous!”
“I’ve seen the algorithm. I assure you it’s wellworth it.”
No shit, thought Numataka. *It’s worth ten timesthat.* “Unfortunately,” he said, tiring of the game,“we both know Mr. Tankado would never stand for this. Think ofthe legal repercussions.”
The caller paused ominously. “What if Mr. Tankado were nolonger a factor?”
Numataka wanted to laugh, but he noted an odd determination inthe voice. “If Tankado were no longer a factor?” Numatakaconsidered it. “Then you and I would have a deal.” “I’ll be in touch,” the voice said. The line wentdead.

CHAPTER 14

Becker gazed down at the cadaver. Even hours after death, theAsian's face radiated with a pinkish glow of a recent sunburn.The rest of him was a pale yellow—all except the small area ofpurplish bruising directly over his heart.
Probably from the CPR, Becker mused. *Too bad itdidn't work.*

He went back to studying the cadaver's hands. They werelike nothing Becker had ever seen. Each hand had only three digits,and they were twisted and askew. The disfigurement, however, wasnot what Becker was looking at.
"Well, I'll be." The lieutenant grunted fromacross the room. "He's Japanese, not Chinese."
Becker looked up. The officer was thumbing through the deadman's passport.
"I'd rather you didn't look atthat," Becker requested. *Touch nothing. Readnothing.*
"Ensei Tankado . . . born January—"
"Please," Becker said politely. "Put itback."
The officer stared at the passport a moment longer and thentossed it back on the pile. "This guy's got a class-3visa. He could have stayed here for years."
Becker poked at the victim's hand with a pen. "Maybehe lived here."
"Nope. Date of entry was last week."
"Maybe he was *moving* here," Becker offeredcurtly.
"Yeah, maybe. Crummy first week. Sunstroke and a heartattack. Poor bastard."
Becker ignored the officer and studied the hand."You're positive he wasn't wearing any jewelry whenhe died?"
The officer looked up, startled. "Jewelry?"
"Yeah. Take a look at this."
The officer crossed the room.
The skin on Tankado's left hand showed traces of sunburn,everywhere except a narrow band of flesh around the smallestfinger.
Becker pointed to the strip of pale flesh. "See how thisisn't sunburned here? Looks like he was wearing aring."
The officer seemed surprised. "A *ring?"* Hisvoice sounded suddenly perplexed. He studied the corpse'sfinger. Then he flushed sheepishly. "My God." Hechuckled. "The story was *true?"*
Becker had a sudden sinking feeling. "I beg yourpardon?"
The officer shook his head in disbelief. "I would havementioned it before . . .

but I thought the guy was nuts."
Becker was not smiling. "What guy?"
"The guy who phoned in the emergency. Some Canadiantourist. Kept talking about a ring. Babbling in the worst damnSpanish I ever heard."
"He said Mr. Tankado was wearing a *ring?"*
The officer nodded. He pulled out a Ducado cigarette, eyed theno fumar sign, and lit up anyway. "Guess I should have saidsomething, but the guy sounded totally loco."
Becker frowned. Strathmore's words echoed in his ears. *Iwant everything Ensei Tankado had with him. Everything. Leavenothing. Not even a tiny scrap of paper.*
"Where is the ring now?" Becker asked.
The officer took a puff. "Long story." Something told Becker this was *not* good news. "Tellme anyway."

CHAPTER 15

Susan Fletcher sat at her computer terminal inside Node 3. Node3 was the cryptographers' private, soundproofed chamber justoff the main floor. A two-inch sheet of curved one-way glass gavethe cryptographers a panorama of the Crypto floor while prohibitinganyone else from seeing inside.

At the back of the expansive Node 3 chamber, twelve terminalssat in a perfect circle. The annular arrangement was intended toencourage intellectual exchange between cryptographers, to remindthem they were part of a larger team—something like acode-breaker's Knights of the Round Table. Ironically, secretswere frowned on inside Node 3.

Nicknamed the Playpen, Node 3 had none of the sterile feel ofthe rest of Crypto. It was designed to feel like home—plushcarpets, high-tech sound system, fully stocked fridge, kitchenette,a Nerf basketball hoop. The NSA had a philosophy about Crypto:Don't drop a couple billion bucks into a code-breakingcomputer without enticing the best of the best to stick around anduse it.

Susan slipped out of her Salvatore Ferragamo flats and dug herstockinged toes into the thick pile carpet. Well-paid governmentemployees were encouraged to refrain from lavish displays ofpersonal wealth. It was usually no problem for Susan—she wasperfectly happy with her modest duplex, Volvo sedan, andconservative wardrobe. But shoes were another matter. Even whenSusan was in college, she'd budgeted for the best.

You can't jump for the stars if your feet hurt, heraunt had once told her. *And when you get where you'regoing, you darn well better look great!*

Susan allowed herself a luxurious stretch and then settled downto business. She pulled up her tracer and prepared to configure it.She glanced at the E-mail address Strathmore had given her. NDAKOTA@ara.anon.org

The man calling himself North Dakota had an anonymous account,but Susan knew it would not remain anonymous for long. The tracerwould pass through ARA, get forwarded to North Dakota, and thensend information back containing the man's real Internetaddress.

If all went well, it would locate North Dakota soon, andStrathmore could confiscate the pass-key. That would leave onlyDavid. When he found Tankado's copy, both pass-keys could bedestroyed; Tankado's little time bomb would be harmless, adeadly explosive without a detonator.

Susan double-checked the address on the sheet in front of herand entered the information in the correct datafield. She chuckledthat Strathmore had encountered difficulty sending the tracerhimself. Apparently he'd sent it twice, both times receivingTankado's address back rather than North Dakota's. It wasa simple mistake, Susan thought; Strathmore had probablyinterchanged the datafields, and the tracer had searched for thewrong account.

Susan finished configuring her tracer and queued it for release.Then she hit return. The computer beeped once.

TRACER SENT.

Now came the waiting game.

Susan exhaled. She felt guilty for having been hard on thecommander. If there was anyone qualified to handle this threatsingle-handed, it was Trevor Strathmore. He had an uncanny way ofgetting the best of all those who challenged him.

Six months ago, when the EFF broke a story that an NSA submarinewas snooping underwater telephone cables, Strathmore calmly leakeda conflicting story that the submarine was actually illegallyburying toxic waste. The EFF and the oceanic environmentalistsspent so much time bickering over which version was true, the mediaeventually tired of the story and moved on.

Every move Strathmore made was meticulously planned. He dependedheavily on his computer when devising and revising his plans. Likemany NSA employees, Strathmore used NSA-developed software calledBrainStorm—a risk-free way to carry out "what-if"scenarios in the safety of a computer.

BrainStorm was an artificial intelligence experiment describedby its developers as a Cause & Effect Simulator. It originallyhad been intended for use in political campaigns as a way to createreal-time models of a given "political environment." Fedby enormous amounts of data, the program created a relationaryweb—a hypothesized model of interaction between politicalvariables, including current prominent figures, their staffs, theirpersonal ties to each other, hot issues, individuals'motivations weighted by variables like sex, ethnicity, money, andpower. The user could then enter any hypothetical event andBrainStorm would predict the event's effect on "theenvironment."

Commander Strathmore worked religiously with BrainStorm—notfor political purposes, but as a TFM device; Time-Line, Flowchart,& Mapping software was a powerful tool for outlining complexstrategies and predicting weaknesses. Susan suspected there wereschemes hidden in Strathmore's computer that someday wouldchange the world.

Yes, Susan thought, *I was too hard on him.*
Her thoughts were jarred by the hiss of the Node 3 doors. Strathmore burst in. "Susan," he said. "Davidjust called. There's been a setback."

CHAPTER 16

“A ring?” Susan looked doubtful. “Tankado’smissing a ring?”
“Yes. We’re lucky David caught it. It was a realheads-up play.”
“But you’re after a pass-key, not jewelry.”
“I know,” Strathmore said, “but I think theymight be one and the same.”
Susan looked lost.
“It’s a long story.”
She motioned to the tracer on her screen. “I’m notgoing anywhere.”

Strathmore sighed heavily and began pacing. “Apparently,there were witnesses to Tankado’s death. According to theofficer at the morgue, a Canadian tourist called the Guardia thismorning in a panic—he said a Japanese man was having a heartattack in the park. When the officer arrived, he found Tankado deadand the Canadian there with him, so he radioed the paramedics.While the paramedics took Tankado’s body to the morgue, theofficer tried to get the Canadian to tell him what happened. Allthe old guy did was babble about some ring Tankado had given awayright before he died.”
Susan eyed him skeptically. “Tankado *gave away* aring?”

“Yeah. Apparently he forced it in this old guy’sface—like he was begging him to take it. Sounds like the oldguy got a close look at it.” Strathmore stopped pacing andturned. “He said the ring was engraved—with some sort oflettering.”
“Lettering?”
“Yes, and according to him, it wasn’t English.”Strathmore raised his eyebrows expectantly.
“Japanese?”

Strathmore shook his head. “My first thought too. But getthis—the Canadian complained that the letters didn’tspell anything. Japanese characters could never be confused withour Roman lettering. He said the engraving looked like a cat hadgotten loose on a typewriter.”
Susan laughed. “Commander, you don’t reallythink—”

Strathmore cut her off. “Susan, it’s crystal clear.Tankado engraved the Digital Fortress pass-key on his ring. Gold isdurable. Whether he’s sleeping, showering, eating—thepass-key would always be with him, ready at a moment’s noticefor instant publication.”
Susan looked dubious. “On his finger? In the open likethat?”

“Why not? Spain isn’t exactly the encryption capitalof the world. Nobody would have any idea what the letters meant.Besides, if the key is a standard sixty-four-bit—even in broaddaylight, nobody could possibly read and memorize all sixty-fourcharacters.”

Susan looked perplexed. “And Tankado gave this ring to atotal stranger moments before he died? Why?”

Strathmore’s gaze narrowed. “Why do youthink?”

It took Susan only a moment before it clicked. Her eyeswidened.

Strathmore nodded. “Tankado was trying to get rid of it. Hethought we’d killed him. He felt himself dying and logicallyassumed we were responsible. The timing was too coincidental. Hefigured we’d gotten to him, poison or something, a slow-actingcardiac arrestor. He knew the only way we’d dare kill him isif we’d found North Dakota.”

Susan felt a chill. “Of course,” she whispered.“Tankado thought that we neutralized his insurance policy sowe could remove *him* too.”

It was all coming clear to Susan. The timing of the heart attackwas so fortunate for the NSA that Tankado had assumed the NSA wasresponsible. His final instinct was revenge. Ensei gave away hisring as a last-ditch effort to publish the pass-key. Now,incredibly, some unsuspecting Canadian tourist held the key to themost powerful encryption algorithm in history.

Susan sucked in a deep breath and asked the inevitable question.“So where is the Canadian now?”

Strathmore frowned. “That’s the problem.”

“The officer doesn’t know where he is?”

“No. The Canadian’s story was so absurd that theofficer figured he was either in shock or senile. So he put the oldguy on the back of his motorcycle to take him back to his hotel.But the Canadian didn’t know enough to hang on; he fell offbefore they’d gone three feet—cracked his head and brokehis wrist.”

“What!” Susan choked.

“The officer wanted to take him to a hospital, but theCanadian was furious—said he’d walk back to Canada beforehe’d get on the motorcycle again. So all the officer could dowas walk him to a small public clinic near the park. He left himthere to get checked out.”

Susan frowned. “I assume there’s no need to ask whereDavid is headed.”

CHAPTER 17

David Becker stepped out onto the scorching tile concourse ofPlaza de España. Before him, El Ayuntamiento—the ancientcity council building—rose from the trees on a three-acre bedof blue and white azulejo tiles. Its Arabic spires and carvedfacade gave the impression it had been intended more as a palacethan a public office. Despite its history of military coups, fires,and public hangings, most tourists visited because the localbrochures plugged it as the English military headquarters in thefilm *Lawrence of Arabia*. It had been far cheaper forColumbia Pictures to film in Spain than in Egypt, and the Moorishinfluence on Seville's architecture was enough to convincemoviegoers they were looking at Cairo.

Becker reset his Seiko for local time: 9:10 p.m.—stillafternoon by local standards; a proper Spaniard never ate dinnerbefore sunset, and the lazy Andalusian sun seldom surrendered theskies before ten.

Even in the early-evening heat, Becker found himself walkingacross the park at a brisk clip. Strathmore's tone had soundeda lot more urgent this time than it had that morning. His neworders left no room for misinterpretation: Find the Canadian, getthe ring. Do whatever is necessary, just get that ring.

Becker wondered what could possibly be so important about a ringwith lettering all over it. Strathmore hadn't offered, andBecker hadn't asked. *NSA*, he thought. *Never SayAnything.*

* * *

On the other side of Avenida Isabela Católica, the clinicwas clearly visible—the universal symbol of a red cross in awhite circle painted on the roof. The Guardia officer had droppedthe Canadian off hours ago. Broken wrist, bumped head—no doubtthe patient had been treated and discharged by now. Becker justhoped the clinic had discharge information—a local hotel orphone number where the man could be reached. With a little luck,Becker figured he could find the Canadian, get the ring, and be onhis way home without any more complications.

Strathmore had told Becker, "Use the ten thousand cash tobuy the ring if you have to. I'll reimburse you."

"That's not necessary," Becker had replied.He'd intended to return the money anyway. He hadn't goneto Spain for money, he'd gone for Susan. Commander TrevorStrathmore was Susan's mentor and guardian. Susan owed

him alot; a one-day errand was the least Becker could do.

Unfortunately, things this morning hadn't gone quite asBecker had planned. He'd hoped to call Susan from the planeand explain everything. He considered having the pilot radioStrathmore so he could pass along a message but was hesitant toinvolve the deputy director in his romantic problems.

Three times Becker had tried to call Susan himself—firstfrom a defunct cellular on board the jet, next from a pay phone atthe airport, then again from the morgue. Susan was not in. Davidwondered where she could be. He'd gotten her answering machinebut had not left a message; what he wanted to say was not a messagefor an answering machine.

As he approached the road, he spotted a phone booth near thepark entrance. He jogged over, snatched up the receiver, and usedhis phone card to place the call. There was a long pause as thenumber connected. Finally it began to ring.

Come on. Be there.

After five rings the call connected. "Hi. This is Susan Fletcher. Sorry I'm not in rightnow, but if you leave your name . . ."

Becker listened to the message. *Where is she?* By nowSusan would be panicked. He wondered if maybe she'd gone toStone Manor without him. There was a beep.

"Hi. It's David." He paused, unsure what to say.One of the things he hated about answering machines was that if youstopped to think, they cut you off. "Sorry I didn'tcall," he blurted just in time. He wondered if he should tellher what was going on. He thought better of it. "CallCommander Strathmore. He'll explain everything."Becker's heart was pounding. *This is absurd*, hethought. "I love you," he added quickly and hung up.

Becker waited for some traffic to pass on Avenida Borbolla. Hethought about how Susan undoubtedly would have assumed the worst;it was unlike him not to call when he'd promised to.

Becker stepped out onto the four-lane boulevard. "In andout," he whispered to himself. "In and out." He wastoo preoccupied to see the man in wire-rim glasses watching fromacross the street.

CHAPTER 18

Standing before the huge plate-glass window in his Tokyoskyrise, Numataka took a long pull on his cigar and smiled tohimself. He could scarcely believe his good fortune. He had spokento the American again, and if all was going according to thetimetable, Ensei Tankado had been eliminated by now, and his copyof the pass-key had been confiscated.

It was ironic, Numataka thought, that he himself would end upwith Ensei Tankado's pass-key. Tokugen Numataka had metTankado once many years ago. The young programmer had come toNumatech Corp. fresh out of college, searching for a job. Numatakahad denied him. There was no question that Tankado was brilliant,but at the time there were other considerations. Although Japan waschanging, Numataka had been trained in the old school; he lived bythe code of menboko—honor and face. Imperfection was not to betolerated. If he hired a cripple, he would bring shame on hiscompany. He had disposed of Tankado's résumé withouta glance.

Numataka checked his watch again. The American, North Dakota,should have called by now. Numataka felt a tinge of nervousness. Hehoped nothing was wrong.

If the pass-keys were as good as promised, they would unlock themost sought-after product of the computer age—a totallyinvulnerable digital encryption algorithm. Numataka could embed thealgorithm in tamper-proof, spray-sealed VSLI chips and mass marketthem to world computer manufacturers, governments, industries, andperhaps, even the darker markets . . . the black market of worldterrorists.

Numataka smiled. It appeared, as usual, that he had found favorwith the shichigosan—the seven deities of good luck. NumatechCorp. was about to control the only copy of Digital Fortress thatwould ever exist. Twenty million dollars was a lot ofmoney—but considering the product, it was the steal of thecentury.

CHAPTER 19

“What if someone else is looking for the ring?” Susanasked, suddenly nervous. “Could David be in danger?”

Strathmore shook his head. “Nobody else knows the ringexists. That’s why I sent David. I wanted to keep it that way.Curious spooks don’t usually tail Spanish teachers.”

“He’s a professor,” Susan corrected, immediatelyregretting the clarification. Every now and again Susan got thefeeling David wasn’t good enough for the commander, that hethought somehow she could do better than a schoolteacher.

“Commander,” she said, moving on, “if you briefedDavid by car phone this morning, someone could have interceptedthe—”

“One-in-a-million shot,” Strathmore interrupted, histone reassuring. “Any eavesdropper had to be in the immediatevicinity and know exactly what to listen for.” He put his handon her shoulder. “I would never have sent David if I thoughtit was dangerous.” He smiled. “Trust me. Any sign oftrouble, and I’ll send in the pros.”

Strathmore’s words were punctuated by the sudden sound ofsomeone pounding on the Node 3 glass. Susan and Strathmoreturned.

Sys-Sec Phil Chartrukian had his face pressed against the paneand was pounding fiercely, straining to see through. Whatever hewas excitedly mouthing was not audible through the soundproofedglass. He looked like he’d seen a ghost.

“What the hell is Chartrukian doing here?” Strathmoregrowled. “He’s not on duty today.”

“Looks like trouble,” Susan said. “He probablysaw the Run-Monitor.”

“Goddamn it!” the commander hissed. “Ispecifically called the scheduled Sys-Sec last night and told himnot to come in!”

Susan was not surprised. Canceling a Sys-Sec duty was irregular,but Strathmore undoubtedly had wanted privacy in the dome. The lastthing he needed was some paranoid Sys-Sec blowing the lid offDigital Fortress.

“We better abort TRANSLTR,” Susan said. “We canreset the Run-Monitor and tell Phil he was seeing things.”

Strathmore appeared to consider it, then shook his head.“Not yet. TRANSLTR is fifteen hours into this attack. I wantto run it a full twenty-four—just to be

sure."

This made sense to Susan. Digital Fortress was the first everuse of a rotating cleartext function. Maybe Tankado had overlookedsomething; maybe TRANSLTR would break it after twenty-four hours.Somehow Susan doubted it.

"TRANSLTR keeps running," Strathmore resolved. "Ineed to know for sure this algorithm is untouchable."

Chartrukian continued pounding on the pane.

"Here goes nothing." Strathmore groaned. "Back meup."

The commander took a deep breath and then strode to the slidingglass doors. The pressure plate on the floor activated, and thedoors hissed open.

Chartrukian practically fell into the room. "Commander,sir. I . . . I'm sorry to bother you, but the RunMonitor . .. I ran a virus probe and—"

"Phil, Phil, Phil," the commander gushed pleasantly ashe put a reassuring hand on Chartrukian's shoulder. "Slowdown. What seems to be the problem?"

From the easygoing tone in Strathmore's voice, nobody wouldever have guessed his world was falling in around him. He steppedaside and ushered Chartrukian into the sacred walls of Node 3. TheSys-Sec stepped over the threshold hesitantly, like a well-traineddog that knew better. From the puzzled look on Chartrukian's face, it was obvioushe'd never seen the inside of this place. Whatever had beenthe source of his panic was momentarily forgotten. He surveyed theplush interior, the line of private terminals, the couches, thebookshelves, the soft lighting. When his gaze fell on the reigningqueen of Crypto, Susan Fletcher, he quickly looked away. Susanintimidated the hell out of him. Her mind worked on a differentplane. She was unsettlingly beautiful, and his words always seemedto get jumbled around her. Susan's unassuming air made it evenworse.

"What seems to be the problem, Phil?" Strathmore said,opening the refrigerator. "Drink?"

"No, ah—no, thank you, sir." He seemedtongue-tied, not sure he was truly welcome. "Sir . . . I thinkthere's a problem with TRANSLTR."

Strathmore closed the refrigerator and looked at Chartrukiancasually. "You mean the Run-Monitor?"

Chartrukian looked shocked. "You mean you've *seen* it?"

"Sure. It's running at about sixteen hours, ifI'm not mistaken."

Chartrukian seemed puzzled. "Yes, sir, sixteen hours. Butthat's not all, sir. I ran a virus probe, and it'sturning up some pretty strange stuff."

"Really?" Strathmore seemed unconcerned. "Whatkind of stuff?"

Susan watched, impressed with the commander'sperformance.

Chartrukian stumbled on. "TRANSLTR's processingsomething very advanced.

The filters have never seen anything likeit. I'm afraid TRANSLTR may have some sort of virus."

"A virus?" Strathmore chuckled with just a hint ofcondescension. "Phil, I appreciate your concern, I really do.But Ms. Fletcher and I are running a new diagnostic, some veryadvanced stuff. I would have alerted you to it, but I wasn'taware you were on duty today."

The Sys-Sec did his best to cover gracefully. "I switchedwith the new guy. I took his weekend shift."

Strathmore's eyes narrowed. "That's odd. I spoketo him last night. I told him not to come in. He said nothing aboutswitching shifts."

Chartrukian felt a knot rise in his throat. There was a tensesilence.

"Well." Strathmore finally sighed. "Sounds likean unfortunate mix-up." He put a hand on the SysSec'sshoulder and led him toward the door. "The good news is youdon't have to stay. Ms. Fletcher and I will be here all day.We'll hold the fort. You just enjoy your weekend."

Chartrukian was hesitant. "Commander, I really think weshould check the —" "Phil," Strathmore repeated a little more sternly,"TRANSLTR is fine. If your probe saw something strange,it's because *we* put it there. Now if you don'tmind . . ." Strathmore trailed off, and the SysSecunderstood. His time was up.

* * *

"A diagnostic, my ass!" Chartrukian muttered as hefumed back into the Sys-Sec lab. "What kind of loopingfunction keeps three million processors busy for sixteenhours?"

Chartrukian wondered if he should call the Sys-Sec supervisor.*Goddamn cryptographers,* he thought. *They just don'tunderstand security!*

The oath Chartrukian had taken when he joined Sys-Sec beganrunning through his head. He had sworn to use his expertise,training, and instinct to protect the NSA'smultibillion-dollar investment.

"Instinct," he said defiantly. *It doesn't takea psychic to know this isn't any goddamn diagnostic!*

Defiantly, Chartrukian strode over to the terminal and fired upTRANSLTR's complete array of system assessment software.

"Your baby's in trouble, Commander," he grumbled."You don't trust instinct? I'll get youproof!"

CHAPTER 20

La Clínica de Salud Pública was actually a convertedelementary school and didn't much resemble a hospital at all.It was a long, one-story brick building with huge windows and arusted swing set out back. Becker headed up the crumblingsteps.

Inside, it was dark and noisy. The waiting room was a line offolding metal chairs that ran the entire length of a long narrowcorridor. A cardboard sign on a sawhorse read oficina with an arrowpointing down the hall.

Becker walked the dimly lit corridor. It was like some sort ofeerie set conjured up for a Hollywood horror flick. The air smelledof urine. The lights at the far end were blown out, and the lastforty or fifty feet revealed nothing but muted silhouettes. Ableeding woman . . . a young couple crying . . . a little girlpraying . . . Becker reached the end of the darkened hall. The doorto his left was slightly ajar, and he pushed it open. It wasentirely empty except for an old, withered woman naked on a cotstruggling with her bedpan.

Lovely. Becker groaned. He closed the door. *Where thehell is the office?*

Around a small dog-leg in the hall, Becker heard voices. Hefollowed the sound and arrived at a translucent glass door thatsounded as if a brawl were going on behind it. Reluctantly, Beckerpushed the door open. The office. *Mayhem.* Just as he'dfeared.

The line was about ten people deep, everyone pushing andshouting. Spain was not known for its efficiency, and Becker knewhe could be there all night waiting for discharge info on theCanadian. There was only one secretary behind the desk, and she wasfending off disgruntled patients. Becker stood in the doorway amoment and pondered his options. There was a better way.

"Con permiso!" an orderly shouted. A fast-rollinggurney sailed by.

Becker spun out of the way and called after the orderly"¿Dónde está el teléfono?"

Without breaking stride, the man pointed to a set of doubledoors and disappeared around the corner. Becker walked over to thedoors and pushed his way through.

The room before him was enormous—an old gymnasium. Thefloor was a pale green and seemed to swim in and out of focus underthe hum of the fluorescent lights. On the wall, a basketball hoophung limply from its backboard. Scattered across the floor were afew dozen patients on low cots. In

the far corner, just beneath aburned-out scoreboard, was an old pay phone. Becker hoped itworked.

As he strode across the floor, he fumbled in his pocket for acoin. He found 75 pesetas in cinco-duros coins, change from thetaxi—just enough for two local calls. He smiled politely to anexiting nurse and made his way to the phone. Scooping up thereceiver, Becker dialed Directory Assistance. Thirty seconds laterhe had the number for the clinic's main office.

Regardless of the country, it seemed there was one universaltruth when it came to offices: Nobody could stand the sound of anunanswered phone. It didn't matter how many customers werewaiting to be helped, the secretary would always drop what she wasdoing to pick up the phone.

Becker punched the six-digit exchange. In a moment he'dhave the clinic's office. There would undoubtedly be only oneCanadian admitted today with a broken wrist and a concussion; hisfile would be easy to find. Becker knew the office would behesitant to give out the man's name and discharge address to atotal stranger, but he had a plan.

The phone began to ring. Becker guessed five rings was all itwould take. It took nineteen. "Clínica de Salud Pública," barked thefrantic secretary.

Becker spoke in Spanish with a thick Franco-American accent."This is David Becker. I'm with the Canadian Embassy. Oneof our citizens was treated by you today. I'd like hisinformation such that the embassy can arrange to pay hisfees."

"Fine," the woman said. "I'll send it to theembassy on Monday."

"Actually," Becker pressed, "it's importantI get it immediately."

"Impossible," the woman snapped. "We're verybusy."

Becker sounded as official as possible. "It is an urgentmatter. The man had a broken wrist and a head injury. He wastreated sometime this morning. His file should be right ontop."

Becker thickened the accent in his Spanish—just clearenough to convey his needs, just confusing enough to beexasperating. People had a way of bending the rules when they wereexasperated.

Instead of bending the rules, however, the woman cursedself-important North Americans and slammed down the phone.

Becker frowned and hung up. Strikeout. The thought of waitinghours in line didn't thrill him; the clock wasticking—the old Canadian could be anywhere by now. Maybe hehad decided to go back to Canada. Maybe he would sell the ring.Becker didn't have hours to wait in line. With reneweddetermination, Becker snatched up the receiver and redialed. Hepressed the phone to his ear and leaned back against the wall. Itbegan to

ring. Becker gazed out into the room. One ring . . . tworings . . . three—
A sudden surge of adrenaline coursed through his body.

Becker wheeled and slammed the receiver back down into itscradle. Then he turned and stared back into the room in stunnedsilence. There on a cot, directly in front of him, propped up on apile of old pillows, lay an elderly man with a clean white cast onhis right wrist.

CHAPTER 21

The American on Tokugen Numataka's private line soundedanxious.
"Mr. Numataka—I only have a moment."
"Fine. I trust you have both pass-keys."
"There will be a small delay," the Americananswered.
"Unacceptable," Numataka hissed. "You said Iwould have them by the end of today!"
"There is one loose end."
"Is Tankado dead?"
"Yes," the voice said. "My man killed Mr.Tankado, but he failed to get the pass-key. Tankado gave it awaybefore he died. To a tourist."
"Outrageous!" Numataka bellowed. "Then how canyou promise me exclusive __"
"Relax," the American soothed. "You will haveexclusive rights. That is my guarantee. As soon as the missingpass-key is found, Digital Fortress will be yours."
"But the pass-key could be copied!"
"Anyone who has seen the key will be eliminated."
There was a long silence. Finally Numataka spoke. "Where isthe key now?"
"All you need to know is that it *will* befound."
"How can you be so certain?"
"Because I am not the only one looking for it. AmericanIntelligence has caught wind of the missing key. For obviousreasons they would like to prevent the release of Digital Fortress.They have sent a man to locate the key. His name is DavidBecker."
"How do you know this?"
"That is irrelevant."
Numataka paused. "And if Mr. Becker locates thekey?"
"My man will take it from him." "And after that?"
"You needn't be concerned," the American saidcoldly. "When Mr. Becker finds the key, he will be properlyrewarded."

CHAPTER 22

David Becker strode over and stared down at the old man asleepon the cot. The man's right wrist was wrapped in a cast. Hewas between sixty and seventy years old. His snow-white hair wasparted neatly to the side, and in the center of his forehead was adeep purple welt that spread down into his right eye.

A little bump? he thought, recalling thelieutenant's words. Becker checked the man's fingers.There was no gold ring anywhere. Becker reached down and touchedthe man's arm. "Sir?" He shook him lightly."Excuse me . . . sir?"

The man didn't move.

Becker tried again, a little louder. "Sir?"

The man stirred. "Qu'est-ce . . . quelle heureest—" He slowly opened his eyes and focused on Becker. Hescowled at having been disturbed. "Qu'est-ce-que vousvoulez?"

Yes, Becker thought, *a French Canadian!* Beckersmiled down at him. "Do you have a moment?"

Although Becker's French was perfect, he spoke in what hehoped would be the man's weaker language, English. Convincinga total stranger to hand over a gold ring might be a little tricky;Becker figured he could use any edge he could get.

There was a long silence as the man got his bearings. Hesurveyed his surroundings and lifted a long finger to smooth hislimp white mustache. Finally he spoke. "What do youwant?" His English carried a thin, nasal accent.

"Sir," Becker said, overpronouncing his words as ifspeaking to a deaf person, "I need to ask you a fewquestions."

The man glared up at him with a strange look on his face."Do you have some sort of problem?"

Becker frowned; the man's English was impeccable. Heimmediately lost the condescending tone. "I'm sorry tobother you, sir, but were you by any chance at the Plaza deEspaña today?"

The old man's eyes narrowed. "Are you from the CityCouncil?"

"No, actually I'm—"

"Bureau of Tourism?"

"No, I'm—"

"Look, I know why you're here!" The old manstruggled to sit up. "I'm not going to be intimidated! IfI've said it once, I've said it a thousandtimes—Pierre

Cloucharde writes the world the way he *lives* the world. Some of your corporate guidebooks might sweepthis under the table for a free night on the town, but the *Montreal Times* is *not* for hire! I refuse!"
"I'm sorry, sir. I don't think youunder—"

"Merde alors! I understand perfectly!" He wagged abony finger at Becker, and his voice echoed through the gymnasium."You're not the first! They tried the same thing at theMoulin Rouge, Brown's Palace, and the Golfigno in Lagos! But*what* went to press? The truth! The worst WellingtonI've ever eaten! The filthiest tub I've ever seen! Andthe rockiest beach I've ever walked! My readers expect noless!"
Patients on nearby cots began sitting up to see what was goingon. Becker looked around nervously for a nurse. The last thing heneeded was to get kicked out.

Cloucharde was raging. "That miserable excuse for a policeofficer works for *your* city! He made me get on hismotorcycle! Look at me!" He tried to lift his wrist. "*Now* who's going to write my column?"
"Sir, I—"
"I've never been so uncomfortable in my forty-threeyears of travel! Look at this place! You know, my column issyndicated in over—"
"Sir!" Becker held up both hands urgently signalingtruce. "I'm not interested in your column; I'm fromthe Canadian Consulate. I'm here to make sure you'reokay!"

Suddenly there was a dead quiet in the gymnasium. The old manlooked up from his bed and eyed the intruder suspiciously.
Becker ventured on in almost a whisper. "I'm here tosee if there's anything I can do to help." *Like bringyou a couple of Valium.*
After a long pause, the Canadian spoke. "Theconsulate?" His tone softened considerably.
Becker nodded.
"So, you're *not* here about my column?"
"No, sir."

It was as if a giant bubble had burst for Pierre Cloucharde. Hesettled slowly back down onto his mound of pillows. He lookedheartbroken. "I thought you were from the city . . . trying toget me to . . ." He faded off and then looked up. "Ifit's not about my column, then why *are* youhere?"
It was a good question, Becker thought, picturing the SmokyMountains. "Just an informal diplomatic courtesy," helied.
The man looked surprised. "A diplomatic courtesy?"

"Yes, sir. As I'm sure a man of your stature is wellaware, the Canadian

government works hard to protect its countrymenfrom the indignities suffered in these, er—shall wesay—less *refined* countries."
Cloucharde's thin lips parted in a knowing smile. "Butof course . . . how pleasant."
"You *are* a Canadian citizen, aren'tyou?"
"Yes, of course. How silly of me. Please forgive me.Someone in my position is often approached with . . . well . . .you understand."
"Yes, Mr. Cloucharde, I certainly do. The price one paysfor celebrity."
"Indeed." Cloucharde let out a tragic sigh. He was anunwilling martyr tolerating the masses. "Can you believe thishideous place?" He rolled his eyes at the bizarresurroundings. "It's a mockery. And they've decidedto keep me overnight."
Becker looked around. "I know. It's terrible. I'msorry it took me so long to get here."
Cloucharde looked confused. "I wasn't even aware youwere coming."
Becker changed the subject. "Looks like a nasty bump onyour head. Does it hurt?"
"No, not really. I took a spill this morning—the priceone pays for being a good Samaritan. The wrist is the thingthat's hurting me. Stupid Guardia. I mean, really! Putting aman of *my* age on a motorcycle. It'sreprehensible."
"Is there anything I can get for you?"
Cloucharde thought a moment, enjoying the attention. "Well,actually . . ." He stretched his neck and tilted his head leftand right. "I *could* use another pillow if it's nottoo much trouble."
"Not at all." Becker grabbed a pillow off a nearby cotand helped Cloucharde get comfortable.
The old man sighed contentedly. "Much better . . . thankyou."
"Pas du tout," Becker replied.
"Ah!" The man smiled warmly. "So you *do*speak the language of the civilized world."
"That's about the extent of it," Becker saidsheepishly.
"Not a problem," Cloucharde declared proudly. "Mycolumn is syndicated in the U.S.; my English is firstrate."
"So I've heard." Becker smiled. He sat down onthe edge of Cloucharde's cot. "Now, if you don'tmind my asking, Mr. Cloucharde, why would a man such as yourselfcome to a place like *this?* There are far better hospitals inSeville."
Cloucharde looked angry. "That police officer . . . hebucked me off his motorcycle and then left me bleeding in thestreet like a stuck pig. I had to walk

over here."
"He didn't offer to take you to a betterfacility?"
"On that godawful bike of his? No thanks!"
"What exactly happened this morning?"
"I told it all to the lieutenant."
"I've spoken to the officer and—"
"I hope you reprimanded him!" Clouchardeinterrupted.
Becker nodded. "In the severest terms. My office will befollowing up."

"I should hope so." "Monsieur Cloucharde." Becker smiled, pulling a penout of his jacket pocket. "I'd like to make a formalcomplaint to the city. Would you help? A man of your reputationwould be a valuable witness."
Cloucharde looked buoyed by the prospect of being quoted. He satup. "Why, yes . . . of course. It would be mypleasure."
Becker took out a small note pad and looked up. "Okay,let's start with this morning. Tell me about theaccident."
The old man sighed. "It was sad really. The poor Asianfellow just collapsed. I tried to help him—but it was nouse."
"You gave him CPR?"
Cloucharde looked ashamed. "I'm afraid I don'tknow how. I called an ambulance."
Becker remembered the bluish bruises on Tankado's chest."Did the paramedics administer CPR?"

"Heavens, no!" Cloucharde laughed. "No reason towhip a dead horse—the fellow was long gone by the time theambulance got there. They checked his pulse and carted him off,leaving me with that horrific policeman."
That's strange, Becker thought, wondering where thebruise had come from. He pushed it from his mind and got to thematter at hand. "What about the ring?" he said asnonchalantly as possible.
Cloucharde looked surprised. "The lieutenant told you aboutthe ring?"
"Yes, he did."
Cloucharde seemed amazed. "Really? I didn't think hebelieved my story. He was so rude—as if he thought I werelying. But my story was accurate, of course. I pride myself onaccuracy."
"Where is the ring?" Becker pressed.
Cloucharde didn't seem to hear. He was glassy-eyed, staringinto space. "Strange piece really, all thoseletters—looked like no language I'd ever seen."
"Japanese, maybe?" Becker offered.
"Definitely not."
"So you got a good look at it?"

“Heavens, yes! When I knelt down to help, the man keptpushing his fingers in my face. He wanted to give me the ring. Itwas most bizarre, horrible really—his hands were quitedreadful.”
“And that’s when you took the ring?”
Cloucharde went wide-eyed. “That’s what the officertold you! That *I* took the ring?”
Becker shifted uneasily.

Cloucharde exploded. “I knew he wasn’t listening!That’s how rumors get started! I told him the Jap fellow gaveaway the ring—but not to *me!* There’s no way Iwould take anything from a dying man! My heavens! The thought ofit!”
Becker sensed trouble. “So you don’t have thering?”
“Heavens, no!”
A dull ache crept through the pit of his stomach. “Then whohas it?”
Cloucharde glared at Becker indignantly. “The German! TheGerman has it!”
Becker felt like the floor had been pulled out from under him.“German? What German?”
“The German in the park! I told the officer about him! Irefused the ring but the fascist swine accepted it!”
Becker set down his pen and paper. The charade was over. Thiswas trouble. “So a *German* has the ring?”
“Indeed.”
“Where did he go?”
“No idea. I ran to call the police. When I got back, he wasgone.”
“Do you know who he was?”
“Some tourist.”
“Are you sure?”
“My life is tourists,” Cloucharde snapped. “Iknow one when I see one. He and his lady friend were out strollingthe park.”
Becker was more and more confused every moment. “Ladyfriend? There was somebody *with* the German?”
Cloucharde nodded. “An escort. Gorgeous redhead. Mon Dieu!Beautiful.”
“An escort?” Becker was stunned. “As in . . . aprostitute?”
Cloucharde grimaced. “Yes, if you must use the vulgarterm.”
“But . . . the officer said nothing about—”
“Of course not! I never mentioned the escort.”Cloucharde dismissed Becker with a patronizing wave of his goodhand. “They aren’t criminals—it’s absurd thatthey’re harassed like common thieves.”
Becker was still in a mild state of shock. “Was thereanyone else there?”
“No, just the three of us. It was hot.”

“And you’re positive the woman was aprostitute?”

“Absolutely. No woman that beautiful would be with a manlike that unless she were well paid! Mon Dieu! He was fat, fat, *fat!* A loudmouthed, overweight, obnoxious German!”Cloucharde winced momentarily as he shifted his weight, but heignored the pain and plowed on. “This man was abeast—three hundred pounds at least. He locked onto that poordear like she was about to run away—not that I’d blameher. I mean really! Hands all over her. Bragged that he had her allweekend for three hundred dollars! *He’s* the one whoshould have dropped dead, not that poor Asian fellow.”Cloucharde came up for air, and Becker jumped in.

“Did you get his name?”

Cloucharde thought for a moment and then shook his head.“No idea.” He winced in pain again and settled slowlyback into his pillows.

Becker sighed. The ring had just evaporated before his eyes.Commander Strathmore was not going to be happy.

Cloucharde dabbed at his forehead. His burst of enthusiasm hadtaken its toll. He suddenly looked ill.

Becker tried another approach. “Mr. Cloucharde, I’dlike to get a statement from the German and his escort as well. Doyou have any idea where they’re staying?”

Cloucharde closed his eyes, his strength fading. His breathinggrew shallow.

“Anything at all?” Becker pressed. “Theescort’s name? There was a long silence.

Cloucharde rubbed his right temple. He was suddenly lookingpale. “Well . . . ah . . . no. I don’t believe . ..” His voice was shaky.

Becker leaned toward him. “Are you all right?”

Cloucharde nodded lightly. “Yes, fine . . . just a little .. . the excitement maybe . . .” He trailed off.

“Think, Mr. Cloucharde.” Becker urged quietly.“It’s important.”

Cloucharde winced. “I don’t know . . . the woman . . .the man kept calling her . . .” He closed his eyes andgroaned.

“What was her name?”

“I really don’t recall . . .” Cloucharde wasfading fast.

“Think.” Becker prodded. “It’s importantthat the consular file be as complete as possible. I’ll needto support your story with statements from the other witnesses. Anyinformation you can give me to help locate them . . .”

But Cloucharde was not listening. He was dabbing his foreheadwith the sheet. “I’m sorry . . . perhaps tomorrow . ..” He looked nauseated.

“Mr. Cloucharde, it’s important you remember this *now.”* Becker suddenly

realized he was speaking too loudly.People on nearby cots were still sitting up watching what was goingon. On the far side of the room a nurse appeared through the doubledoors and strode briskly toward them.
“Anything at all,” Becker pressed urgently.
“The German called the woman—”
Becker lightly shook Cloucharde, trying to bring him back.
Cloucharde’s eyes flickered momentarily. “Her name . ..”
Stay with me, old fella . . .
“Dew . . .” Cloucharde’s eyes closed again. Thenurse was closing in. She looked furious.
“Dew?” Becker shook Cloucharde’s arm.

The old man groaned. “He called her . . .” Clouchardewas mumbling now, barely audible. The nurse was less than ten feet away yelling at Becker in angrySpanish. Becker heard nothing. His eyes were fixed on the oldman’s lips. He shook Cloucharde one last time as the nursebore down on him.

The nurse grabbed David Becker’s shoulder. She pulled himto his feet just as Cloucharde’s lips parted. The single wordleaving the old man’s mouth was not actually spoken. It wassoftly sighed—like a distant sensual remembrance.“Dewdrop . . .”
The scolding grasp yanked Becker away.
Dewdrop? Becker wondered. *What the hell kind of nameis Dewdrop?* He spun away from the nurse and turned one lasttime to Cloucharde. “Dewdrop? Are you *sure?”*
But Pierre Cloucharde was fast asleep.

CHAPTER 23

Susan sat alone in the plush surroundings of Node 3. She nurseda lemon mist herb tea and awaited the return of her tracer.

As senior cryptographer, Susan enjoyed the terminal with thebest view. It was on the back side of the ring of computers andfaced the Crypto floor. From this spot, Susan could oversee all ofNode 3. She could also see, on the other side of the one-way glass,TRANSLTR standing dead-center of the Crypto floor.

Susan checked the clock. She had been waiting almost an hour.American Remailers Anonymous was apparently taking their timeforwarding North Dakota's mail. She sighed heavily. Despiteher efforts to forget her morning conversation with David, thewords played over and over in her head. She knew she'd beenhard on him. She prayed he was okay in Spain.

Her thoughts were jarred by the loud hiss of the glass doors.She looked up and groaned. Cryptographer Greg Hale stood in theopening.

Greg Hale was tall and muscular with thick blond hair and a deepcleft chin. He was loud, thickfleshed, and perpetuallyoverdressed. His fellow cryptographers had nicknamed him"Halite"—after the mineral. Hale had always assumedit referred to some rare gem—paralleling his unrivaledintellect and rock-hard physique. Had his ego permitted him toconsult an encyclopedia, he would have discovered it was nothingmore than the salty residue left behind when oceans dried up.

Like all NSA cryptographers, Hale made a solid salary. However,he had a hard time keeping that fact to himself. He drove a whiteLotus with a moon roof and a deafening subwoofer system. He was agadget junkie, and his car was his showpiece; he'd installed aglobal positioning computer system, voice-activated door locks, afive-point radar jammer, and a cellular fax/phone so he'dnever be out of touch with his message services. His vanity plateread megabyte and was framed in violet neon.

Greg Hale had been rescued from a childhood of petty crime bythe U.S. Marine Corps. It was there that he'd learned aboutcomputers. He was one of the best programmers the Marines had everseen, well on his way to a distinguished military career. But twodays before the completion of his third tour of duty, his futuresuddenly changed. Hale accidentally killed a fellow Marine in adrunken brawl. The Korean art of self-defense, Taekwondo, provedmore deadly than

defensive. He was promptly relieved of hisduty.

After serving a brief prison term, Halite began looking for workin the private sector as a programmer. He was always up front aboutthe incident in the marines, and he courted prospective employersby offering a month's work without pay to prove his worth. Hehad no shortage of takers, and once they found out what he could dowith a computer, they never wanted to let him go.

As his computer expertise grew, Hale began making Internetconnections all over the world. He was one of the new breed ofcyberfreaks with E-mail friends in every nation, moving in and outof seedy electronic bulletin boards and European chat groups.He'd been fired by two different employers for using theirbusiness accounts to upload pornographic photos to some of hisfriends.

* * *

"What are *you* doing here?" Hale demanded,stopping in the doorway and staring at Susan. He'd obviouslyexpected to have Node 3 to himself today.

Susan forced herself to stay cool. "It's Saturday,Greg. I could ask you the same question." But Susan knew whatHale was doing there. He was the consummate computer addict.Despite the Saturday rule, he often slipped into Crypto on weekendsto use the NSA's unrivalled computing power to run newprograms he was working on.

"Just wanted to retweak a few lines and check myE-mail," Hale said. He eyed her curiously. "What was ityou said *you*'re doing here?"

"I didn't," Susan replied.

Hale arched a surprised eyebrow. "No reason to be coy. Wehave no secrets here in Node 3, remember? All for one and one forall."

Susan sipped her lemon mist and ignored him. Hale shrugged andstrode toward the Node 3 pantry. The pantry was always his firststop. As Hale crossed the room, he sighed heavily and made a pointof ogling Susan's legs stretched out beneath her terminal.Susan, without looking up, retracted her legs and kept working.Hale smirked.

Susan had gotten used to Hale hitting on her. His favorite linewas something about interfacing to check the compatibility of theirhardware. It turned Susan's stomach. She was proud to complainto Strathmore about Hale; it was far easier just to ignore him.

Hale approached the Node 3 pantry and pulled open the latticedoors like a bull. He slid a Tupperware container of tofu out ofthe fridge and popped a few pieces of the gelatinous whitesubstance in his mouth. Then he leaned on the stove and smoothedhis gray Bellvienne slacks and well-starched shirt. "You gonnabe here long?"

"All night," Susan said flatly.

“Hmm . . .” Halite cooed with his mouth full. “Acozy Saturday in the Playpen, just the two of us.”
“Just the *three* of us,” Susan interjected.“Commander Strathmore’s upstairs. You might want todisappear before he sees you.”
Hale shrugged. “He doesn’t seem to mind *you*here. He must really enjoy your company.”
Susan forced herself to keep silent.

Hale chuckled to himself and put away his tofu. Then he grabbeda quart of virgin olive oil and took a few swigs. He was a healthfiend and claimed olive oil cleaned out his lower intestine. Whenhe wasn’t pushing carrot juice on the rest of the staff, hewas preaching the virtues of high colonics.
Hale replaced the olive oil and went to down his computerdirectly opposite Susan. Even across the wide ring of terminals,Susan could smell his cologne. She crinkled her nose.
“Nice cologne, Greg. Use the entire bottle?
Hale flicked on his terminal. “Only for you,dear.”

As he sat there waiting for his terminal to warm up, Susan had asudden unsettling thought. What if Hale accessed TRANSLTR’sRun-Monitor? There was no logical reason why he would, butnonetheless Susan knew he would never fall for some half-bakedstory about a diagnostic that stumped TRANSLTR for sixteen hours.Hale would demand to know the truth. The truth was something Susanhad no intention of telling him. She did not trust Greg Hale. Hewas not NSA material. Susan had been against hiring him in thefirst place, but the NSA had had no choice. Hale had been theproduct of damage control.
The Skipjack fiasco.

Four years ago, in an effort to create a single, public-keyencryption standard, Congress charged the nation’s bestmathematicians, those at the NSA, to write a new superalgorithm.The plan was for Congress to pass legislation that made the newalgorithm the nation’s standard, thus alleviating theincompatibilities now suffered by corporations that used differentalgorithms.

Of course, asking the NSA to lend a hand in improving public-keyencryption was somewhat akin to asking a condemned man to build hisown coffin. TRANSLTR had not yet been conceived, and an encryptionstandard would only help to proliferate the use of code-writing andmake the NSA’s already difficult job that much harder.

The EFF understood this conflict of interest and lobbiedvehemently that the NSA might create an algorithm of poorquality—something it could break. To

appease these fears,Congress announced that when the NSA's algorithm was finished,the formula would be published for examination by the world'smathematicians to ensure its quality.

Reluctantly, the NSA's Crypto team, led by CommanderStrathmore, created an algorithm they christened Skipjack. Skipjackwas presented to Congress for their approval. Mathematicians fromall over the world tested Skipjack and were unanimously impressed.They reported that it was a strong, untainted algorithm and wouldmake a superb encryption standard. But three days before Congresswas to vote their certain approval of Skipjack, a young programmerfrom Bell Laboratories, Greg Hale, shocked the world by announcinghe'd found a back door hidden in the algorithm.

The back door consisted of a few lines of cunning programmingthat Commander Strathmore had inserted into the algorithm. It hadbeen added in so shrewd a way that nobody, except Greg Hale, hadseen it. Strathmore's covert addition, in effect, meant thatany code written by Skipjack could be decrypted via a secretpassword known only to the NSA. Strathmore had come within inchesof turning the nation's proposed encryption standard into thebiggest intelligence coup the NSA had ever seen; the NSA would haveheld the master key to every code written in America.

The computer-savvy public was outraged. The EFF descended on thescandal like vultures, ripping Congress to shreds for theirnaïveté and proclaiming the NSA the biggest threat to thefree world since Hitler. The encryption standard was dead.

It had come as little surprise when the NSA hired Greg Hale twodays later. Strathmore felt it was better to have him on the insideworking for the NSA than on the outside working against it.

Strathmore faced the Skipjack scandal head-on. He defended hisactions vehemently to Congress. He argued that the public'scraving for privacy would come back to haunt them. He insisted thepublic needed someone to watch over them; the public needed the NSAto break codes in order to keep the peace. Groups like the EFF feltdifferently. And they'd been fighting him ever since.

CHAPTER 24

David Becker stood in a phone booth across the street from LaClínica de Salud Pública; he'd just been ejected forharassing patient number 104, Monsieur Cloucharde.

Things were suddenly more complicated than he'danticipated. His little favor to Strathmore—picking up somepersonal belongings—had turned into a scavenger hunt for somebizarre ring.

He'd just called Strathmore and told him about the Germantourist. The news had not been received well. After demanding thespecifics, Strathmore had fallen silent for a long time."David," he had finally said very gravely, "findingthat ring is a matter of national security. I'm leaving it inyour hands. Don't fail me." The phone had gone dead.

David stood in the phone booth and sighed. He picked up thetattered Guía Telefónica and began scanning the yellowpages. "Here goes nothing," he muttered to himself.

There were only three listings for Escort Services in thedirectory, and he didn't have much to go on. All he knew wasthat the German's date had red hair, which conveniently wasrare in Spain. The delirious Cloucharde had recalled theescort's name as Dewdrop. Becker cringed—Dewdrop? Itsounded more like a cow than a beautiful girl. Not a good Catholicname at all; Cloucharde must have been mistaken.

Becker dialed the first number.

* * *

"Servicio Social de Sevilla," a pleasant female voiceanswered.

Becker affected his Spanish with a thick German accent."Hola, ¿hablas Aleman?"

"No. But I speak English" came the reply. Becker continued in broken English. "Thank you. I wonderingif you to help me?"

"How can we be of service?" The woman spoke slowly inan effort to aid her potential client. "Perhaps you would likean escort?"

"Yes, please. Today my brother, Klaus, he has girl, verybeautiful. Red hair. I want same. For tomorrow, please."

"Your brother Klaus comes here?" The voice wassuddenly effervescent, like they were old friends.

"Yes. He very fat. You remember him, no?"

“He was here today, you say?”
Becker could hear her checking the books. There would be noKlaus listed, but Becker figured clients seldom used their realnames.
“Hmm, I’m sorry,” she apologized. “Idon’t see him here. What was the girl’s name your brotherwas with?”
“Had red hair,” Becker said, avoiding thequestion.
“Red hair?” she repeated. There was a pause.“This is Servicio Social de Sevilla. Are you sure your brothercomes here?”
“Sure, yes.”
“Señor, we have no redheads. We have only pureAndalusian beauties.”
“Red hair,” Becker repeated, feeling stupid.
“I’m sorry, we have no redheads at all, but ifyou—”
“Name is Dewdrop,” Becker blurted, feeling evenstupider.
The ridiculous name apparently meant nothing to the woman. Sheapologized, suggested Becker was confusing her with another agency,and politely hung up.
Strike one.
* * *
Becker frowned and dialed the next number. It connectedimmediately. “Buenas noches, Mujeres España. May I helpyou?”
Becker launched into his same spiel, a German tourist who waswilling to pay top dollar for the redhaired girl who was out withhis brother today.
This time the response was in polite German, but again noredheads. “Keine Rotköpfe, I’m sorry.” Thewoman hung up.
Strike two.
Becker looked down at the phone book. There was only one numberleft. The end of the rope already.
He dialed.
* * *
“Escortes Belén,” a man answered in a very slicktone.
Again Becker told his story.
“Sí, sí, señor. My name is SeñorRoldán. I would be pleased to help. We have two redheads.Lovely girls.”
Becker’s heart leapt. “Very beautiful?” herepeated in his German accent. “Red hair?”
“Yes, what is your brother’s name? I will tell you whowas his escort today. And we can send her to youtomorrow.”
“Klaus Schmidt.” Becker blurted a name recalled froman old textbook.
A long pause. “Well, sir . . . I don’t see a KlausSchmidt on our registry, but perhaps your brother chose to bediscreet—perhaps a wife at home?” He

laughedinappropriately.

"Yes, Klaus married. But he very fat. His wife no lie withhim." Becker rolled his eyes at himself reflected in thebooth. *If Susan could hear me now,* he thought. "I fatand lonely too. I want lie with her. Pay lots of money."

Becker was giving an impressive performance, but he'd gonetoo far. Prostitution was illegal in Spain, and SeñorRoldán was a careful man. He'd been burned before byGuardia officials posing as eager tourists. *I want lie withher.* Roldán knew it was a setup. If he said yes, he wouldbe heavily fined and, as always, forced to provide one of his mosttalented escorts to the police commissioner free of charge for anentire weekend.

When Roldán spoke, his voice not quite as friendly."Sir, this is Escortes Belén. May I ask who'scalling?"

"Aah . . . Sigmund Schmidt," Becker inventedweakly.

"Where did you get our number?"

"La Guía Telefónica—yellow pages."

"Yes, sir, that's because we are an escortservice."

"Yes. I want escort." Becker sensed something waswrong.

"Sir, Escortes Belén is a service providing escorts tobusinessmen for luncheons and dinners. This is why we are listed inthe phone book. What we do is legal. What you are looking for is a*prostitute."* The word slid off his tongue like a viledisease.

"But my brother . . ."

"Sir, if your brother spent the day kissing a girl in thepark, she was not one of ours. We have strict regulations aboutclient-escort contact."

"But . . ."

"You have us confused with someone else. We only have tworedheads, Inmaculada and Rocío, and neither would allow a manto sleep with them for money. That is called prostitution, and itis illegal in Spain. Good night, sir."

"But—"

CLICK.

Becker swore under his breath and dropped the phone back intoits cradle. Strike three. He was certain Cloucharde had said theGerman had hired the girl for the entire weekend.

* * *

Becker stepped out of the phone booth at the intersection ofCalle Salado and Avenida Asunción. Despite the traffic, thesweet scent of Seville oranges hung all around him. It wastwilight—the most romantic hour. He thought of Susan.Strathmore's words invaded his mind: *Find the ring.*Becker flopped miserably on a bench and pondered his next move.

What move?

CHAPTER 25

Inside the Clínica de Salud Pública, visiting hourswere over. The gymnasium lights had been turned out. PierreCloucharde was fast asleep. He did not see the figure hunched overhim. The needle of a stolen syringe glinted in the dark. Then itdisappeared into the IV tube just above Cloucharde's wrist.The hypodermic contained 30 cc of cleaning fluid stolen from ajanitor's cart. With great force, a strong thumb rammed theplunger down and forced the bluish liquid into the old man'sveins.

Cloucharde was awake only for a few seconds. He might havescreamed in pain had a strong hand not been clamped across hismouth. He lay trapped on his cot, pinned beneath a seeminglyimmovable weight. He could feel the pocket of fire searing its wayup his arm. There was an excruciating pain traveling through hisarmpit, his chest, and then, like a million shattering pieces ofglass, it hit his brain. Cloucharde saw a brilliant flash of light. . . and then nothing.
The visitor released his grip and peered through the darkness atthe name on the medical chart. Then he slipped silently out.

On the street, the man in wire-rim glasses reached to a tinydevice attached to his belt. The rectangular pack was about thesize of a credit card. It was a prototype of the new Monoclecomputer. Developed by the U.S. Navy to help technicians recordbattery voltages in cramped quarters on submarines, the miniaturecomputer packed a cellular modem and the newest advances inmicrotechnology. Its visual monitor was a transparent liquidcrystal display, mounted in the left lens of a pair of eyeglasses.The Monocle reflected a whole new age in personal computing; theuser could now look *through* his data and still interact withthe world around him.

The Monocle's real coup, though, was not its miniaturedisplay but rather its data entry system. A user enteredinformation via tiny contacts fixed to his fingertips; touching thecontacts together in sequence mimicked a shorthand similar to courtstenography. The computer would then translate the shorthand intoEnglish.

The killer pressed a tiny switch, and his glasses flickered tolife. His hands inconspicuously at his sides, he began touchingdifferent fingertips together in rapid succession. A messageappeared before his eyes.

SUBJECT: P. CLOUCHARDE—TERMINATED He smiled. Transmitting notification of kills was part of hisassignment. But including victim's names . .

. that, to theman in the wire-rim glasses, was elegance. His fingers flashedagain, and his cellular modem activated.
MESSAGE SENT

CHAPTER 26

Sitting on the bench across from the public clinic, Beckerwondered what he was supposed to do now. His calls to the escortagencies had turned up nothing. The commander, uneasy aboutcommunication over unsecured public phones, had asked David not tocall again until he had the ring. Becker considered going to thelocal police for help—maybe they had a record of a red-headedhooker—but Strathmore had given strict orders about that too.*You are invisible. No one is to know this ring exists.*

Becker wondered if he was supposed to wander the drugged-outdistrict of Triana in search of this mystery woman. Or maybe he wassupposed to check all the restaurants for an obese German.Everything seemed like a waste of time.

Strathmore's words kept coming back: *It's a matterof national security . . . you must find that ring.*

A voice in the back of Becker's head told him he'dmissed something—something crucial—but for the life ofhim, he couldn't think what it would be. *I'm ateacher, not a damned secret agent!* He was beginning to wonderwhy Strathmore hadn't sent a professional.

Becker stood up and walked aimlessly down Calle Deliciaspondering his options. The cobblestone sidewalk blurred beneath hisgaze. Night was falling fast.

Dewdrop.

There was something about that absurd name that nagged at theback of his mind. *Dewdrop.* The slick voice of SeñorRoldán at Escortes Belén was on endless loop in his head.*"We only have two redheads . . . Two redheads, Inmaculadaand Rocío . . . Rocío . . . Rocío . .."*

Becker stopped short. He suddenly knew. *And I call myself alanguage specialist?* He couldn't believe he'd missedit.

Rocío was one of the most popular girl's names inSpain. It carried all the right implications for a young Catholicgirl—purity, virginity, natural beauty. The connotations ofpurity all stemmed from the name's literalmeaning—*Drop of Dew!*

The old Canadian's voice rang in Becker's ears. *Dewdrop.* Rocío had translated her name to the onlylanguage she and her client had in common—English. Excited,Becker hurried off to find a phone.

Across the street, a man in wire-rim glasses followed just outof sight.

CHAPTER 27

On the Crypto floor, the shadows were growing long and faint.Overhead, the automatic lighting gradually increased to compensate.Susan was still at her terminal silently awaiting news from hertracer. It was taking longer than expected.

Her mind had been wandering—missing David and willing GregHale to go home. Although Hale hadn't budged, thankfullyhe'd been silent, engrossed in whatever he was doing at histerminal. Susan couldn't care less what Hale was doing, aslong as he didn't access the Run-Monitor. He obviouslyhadn't—sixteen hours would have brought an audible yelpof disbelief.

Susan was sipping her third cup of tea when it finallyhappened—her terminal beeped once. Her pulse quickened. Aflashing envelope icon appeared on her monitor announcing thearrival of E-mail. Susan shot a quick glance toward Hale. He wasabsorbed in his work. She held her breath and doubleclicked theenvelope.

"North Dakota," she whispered to herself."Let's see who you are."

When the E-mail opened, it was a single line. Susan read it. Andthen she read it again.

DINNER AT ALFREDO'S? 8 PM?

Across the room, Hale muffled a chuckle. Susan checked themessage header.

FROM: GHALE@crypto.nsa.gov Susan felt a surge of anger but fought it off. She deleted themessage. "Very mature, Greg."

"They make a great carpaccio." Hale smiled. "Whatdo you say? Afterward we could—"

"Forget it."

"Snob." Hale sighed and turned back to his terminal.That was strike eighty-nine with Susan Fletcher. The brilliantfemale cryptographer was a constant frustration to him. Hale hadoften fantasized about having sex with her—pinning her againstTRANSLTR's curved hull and taking her right there against thewarm black tile. But Susan would have nothing to do with him. InHale's mind, what made things worse was that she was in lovewith some university teacher who slaved for hours on end forpeanuts. It would be a pity for Susan to dilute her superior genepool procreating with some geek—particularly when she couldhave Greg. *We'd have perfect children,* he thought.

"What are you working on?" Hale asked, trying adifferent approach.

Susan said nothing.
“Some team player *you* are. Sure I can’t have apeek?” Hale stood and started moving around the circle ofterminals toward her.
Susan sensed that Hale’s curiosity had the potential tocause some serious problems today. She made a snap decision.“It’s a diagnostic,” she offered, falling back onthe commander’s lie.
Hale stopped in his tracks. “Diagnostic?” He soundeddoubtful. “You’re spending Saturday running a diagnosticinstead of playing with the prof?”
“His name is David.”
“Whatever.”
Susan glared at him. “Haven’t you got anything betterto do?”
“Are you trying to get rid of me?” Hale pouted.
“Actually, yes.”
“Gee, Sue, I’m hurt.”
Susan Fletcher’s eyes narrowed. She hated being called Sue.She had nothing against the nickname, but Hale was the only onewho’d ever used it.

“Why don’t I help you?” Hale offered. He wassuddenly circling toward her again. “I’m great withdiagnostics. Besides, I’m dying to see what diagnostic couldmake the mighty Susan Fletcher come to work on aSaturday.”
Susan felt a surge of adrenaline. She glanced down at the traceron her screen. She knew she couldn’t let Hale seeit—he’d have too many questions. “I’ve got itcovered, Greg,” she said.

But Hale kept coming. As he circled toward her terminal, Susanknew she had to act fast. Hale was only a few yards away when shemade her move. She stood to meet his towering frame, blocking hisway. His cologne was overpowering.
She looked him straight in the eye. “I said no.”
Hale cocked his head, apparently intrigued by her odd display ofsecrecy. He playfully stepped closer. Greg Hale was not ready forwhat happened next.
With unwavering cool, Susan pressed a single index fingeragainst his rock-hard chest, stopping his forward motion.

Hale halted and stepped back in shock. Apparently Susan Fletcherwas serious; she had *never* touched him before, ever. Itwasn’t quite what Hale had had in mind for their firstcontact, but it was a start. He gave her a long puzzled look andslowly returned to his terminal. As he sat back down, one thingbecame perfectly clear: The lovely Susan Fletcher was working onsomething important, and it sure as hell wasn’t anydiagnostic.

CHAPTER 28

Señor Roldán was sitting behind his desk at EscortesBelén congratulating himself for deftly sidestepping theGuardia's newest pathetic attempt to trap him. Having anofficer fake a German accent and request a girl for thenight—it was entrapment; what would they think of next?

The phone on his desk buzzed loudly. Señor Roldánscooped up the receiver with a confident flair. "Buenasnoches, Escortes Belén."

"Buenas noches," a man's voice said inlightning-fast Spanish. He sounded nasal, like he had a slightcold. "Is this a hotel?"

"No, sir. What number are you dialing?" SeñorRoldán was not going to fall for any more tricks thisevening.

"34-62-10," the voice said.

Roldán frowned. The voice sounded vaguely familiar. Hetried to place the accent—Burgos, maybe? "You'vedialed the correct number," Roldán offered cautiously,"but this is an escort service."

There was a pause on the line. "Oh . . . I see. I'msorry. Somebody wrote down this number; I thought it was a hotel.I'm visiting here, from Burgos. My apologies for disturbingyou. Good nigh—"

"Espére! Wait!" Señor Roldáncouldn't help himself; he was a salesman at heart. Was this areferral? A new client from up north? He wasn't going to let alittle paranoia blow a potential sale.

"My friend," Roldán gushed into the phone."I thought I recognized a bit of a Burgos accent on you. Imyself am from Valencia. What brings you to Seville?"

"I sell jewelry. Majórica pearls."

"Majóricas, reeaally! You must travel quite abit."

The voice coughed sickly. "Well, yes, I do."

"In Seville on business?" Roldán pressed. Therewas no way in hell this guy was Guardia; he was a customer with acapital C. "Let me guess—a friend gave you our number? Hetold you to give us a call. Am I right?"

The voice was obviously embarrassed. "Well, no, actually,it's nothing like that."

"Don't be shy, señor. We are an escort service,nothing to be ashamed of. Lovely girls, dinner dates, that is all.Who gave you our number? Perhaps he is a regular. I can give you aspecial rate."

The voice became flustered. "Ah . . . nobody actually *gave* me this number. I

found it with a passport. I'mtrying to find the owner."
Roldán's heart sank. This man was not a customer afterall. "You *found* the number, you say?"

"Yes, I found a man's passport in the park today. Yournumber was on a scrap of paper inside. I thought perhaps it was theman's hotel; I was hoping to return his passport to him. Mymistake. I'll just drop it off at a police station on my wayout of—"

"Perdón," Roldán interrupted nervously."Might I suggest a better idea?" Roldán pridedhimself on discretion, and visits to the Guardia had a way ofmaking his customers ex-customers. "Consider this," heoffered. "Because the man with the passport had our number, heis most likely a client here. Perhaps I could save you a trip tothe police."
The voice hesitated. "I don't know. I should probablyjust—"

"Do not be too hasty, my friend. I'm ashamed to admitthat the police here in Seville are not always as efficient as thepolice up north. It could be *days* before this man'spassport is returned to him. If you tell me his name, I could seethat he gets his passport *immediately."*
"Yes, well . . . I suppose there's no harm . . ."Some paper rustled, and the voice returned. "It's aGerman name. I can't quite pronounce it . . . Gusta . . .Gustafson?"
Roldán didn't recognize the name, but he had clientsfrom all over the world. They never left their real names."What does he look like—in his photo? Perhaps I willrecognize him."
"Well . . ." the voice said. "His face is very,very fat."
Roldán immediately knew. He remembered the obese face well.It was the man with Rocío. It was odd, he thought, to have twocalls about the German in one night.
"Mr. Gustafson?" Roldán forced a chuckle."Of course! I know him well. If you bring me his passport,I'll see he gets it."
"I'm downtown without a car," the voiceinterrupted. "Maybe you could come to me?"
"Actually," Roldán hedged, "I can'tleave the phone. But it's really not that far ifyou—"
"I'm sorry, it's late to be out wandering about.There's a Guardia precinct nearby. I'll drop it there,and when you see Mr. Gustafson, you can tell him where itis."
"No, wait!" Roldán cried. "The police reallyneedn't be involved. You said you're downtown, right? Doyou know the Alfonso XIII Hotel? It's one of the city'sfinest."

“Yes,” the voice said. “I know the Alfonso XIII.It’s nearby.”
“Wonderful! Mr. Gustafson is a guest there tonight.He’s probably there now.”
The voice hesitated. “I see. Well, then . . . I suppose itwould be no trouble.”

“Superb! He’s having dinner with one of our escorts inthe hotel restaurant.” Roldán knew they were probably inbed by now, but he needed to be careful not to offend thecaller’s refined sensibilities. “Just leave the passportwith the concierge, his name is Manuel. Tell him I sent you. Askhim to give it to Rocío. Rocío is Mr. Gustafson’sdate for the evening. She will see that the passport is returned.You might slip your name and address inside—perhaps Mr.Gustafson will send you a little thank you.” “A fine idea. The Alfonso XIII. Very well, I’ll takeit over right now. Thank you for your help.”

* * *

David Becker hung up the phone. “Alfonso XIII.” Hechuckled. “Just have to know how to ask.”

Moments later a silent figure followed Becker up Calle Deliciasinto the softly settling Andalusian night.

CHAPTER 29

Still unnerved from her encounter with Hale, Susan gazed outthrough the one-way glass of Node 3. The Crypto floor was empty.Hale was silent again, engrossed. She wished he would leave.

She wondered if she should call Strathmore; the commander couldsimply kick Hale out—after all, it *was* Saturday. Susanknew, however, that if Hale got kicked out, he would immediatelybecome suspicious. Once dismissed, he probably would start callingother cryptographers asking what they thought was going on. Susandecided it was better just to let Hale be. He would leave on hisown soon enough.

An unbreakable algorithm. She sighed, her thoughtsreturning to Digital Fortress. It amazed her that an algorithm likethat could really be created—then again, the proof was rightthere in front of her; TRANSLTR appeared useless against it.

Susan thought of Strathmore, nobly bearing the weight of thisordeal on his shoulders, doing what was necessary, staying cool inthe face of disaster.

Susan sometimes saw David in Strathmore. They had many of thesame qualities—tenacity, dedication, intelligence. SometimesSusan thought Strathmore would be lost without her; the purity ofher love for cryptography seemed to be an emotional lifeline toStrathmore, lifting him from the sea of churning politics andreminding him of his early days as a code-breaker.

Susan relied on Strathmore too; he was her shelter in a world ofpower-hungry men, nurturing her career, protecting her, and, as heoften joked, making all her dreams come true. There was some truthto that, she thought. As unintentional as it may have been, thecommander was the one who'd made the call that brought DavidBecker to the NSA that fateful afternoon. Her mind reeled back tohim, and her eyes fell instinctively to the pull-slide beside herkeyboard. There was a small fax taped there.

The fax had been there for seven months. It was the only codeSusan Fletcher had yet to break. It was from David. She read it forthe five-hundredth time.

PLEASE ACCEPT THIS HUMBLE FAX
MY LOVE FOR YOU IS WITHOUT WAX.

He'd sent it to her after a minor tiff. She'd beggedhim for months to tell her what it meant, but he had refused. *Without wax.* It was David's revenge. Susan had taughtDavid a lot about code-breaking, and to keep him on his toes,

shehad taken to encoding all of her messages to him with some simpleencryption scheme. Shopping lists, love notes—they were allencrypted. It was a game, and David had become quite a goodcryptographer. Then he'd decided to return the favor.He'd started signing all his letters "Without wax,David." Susan had over two dozen notes from David. They wereall signed the same way. *Without wax.*

Susan begged to know the hidden meaning, but David wasn'ttalking. Whenever she asked, he simply smiled and said, *"You're* the code-breaker."

The NSA's head cryptographer had triedeverything—substitutions, cipher boxes, even anagrams.She'd run the letters "without wax" through hercomputer and asked for rearrangements of the letters into newphrases. All she'd gotten back was: taxi hut wow. It appearedEnsei Tankado was not the only one who could write unbreakablecodes.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the pneumaticdoors hissing open. Strathmore strode in.

"Susan, any word yet?" Strathmore saw Greg Hale andstopped short. "Well, good evening, Mr. Hale." Hefrowned, his eyes narrowing. "On a Saturday, no less. To whatdo we owe the honor?"

Hale smiled innocently. "Just making sure I pull myweight."

"I see." Strathmore grunted, apparently weighing hisoptions. After a moment, it seemed he too decided not to rockHale's boat. He turned coolly to Susan. "Ms. Fletcher,could I speak to you for a moment? *Outside?"*

Susan hesitated. "Ah . . . yes, sir." She shot anuneasy glance at her monitor and then across the room at Greg Hale."Just a minute."

With a few quick keystrokes, she pulled up a program calledScreenLock. It was a privacy utility. Every terminal in Node 3 wasequipped with it. Because the terminals stayed on around the clock,ScreenLock enabled cryptographers to leave their stations and knowthat nobody would tamper with their files. Susan entered herfive-character privacy code, and her screen went black. It wouldremain that way until she returned and typed the propersequence.

Then she slipped on her shoes and followed the commanderout.

* * *

"What the hell is *he* doing here?" Strathmoredemanded as soon as he and Susan were outside Node 3.

"His usual," Susan replied. "Nothing."

Strathmore looked concerned. "Has he said anything aboutTRANSLTR?"

"No. But if he accesses the Run-Monitor and sees itregistering seventeen hours, he'll have something to say allright."

Strathmore considered it. "There's no reason he'daccess it."

Susan eyed the commander. “You want to send himhome?”
“No. We’ll let him be.” Strathmore glanced overat the Sys-Sec office. “Has Chartrukian left yet?”
“I don’t know. I haven’t seen him.”

“Jesus.” Strathmore groaned. “This is acircus.” He ran a hand across the beard stubble that haddarkened his face over the past thirty-six hours. “Any wordyet on the tracer? I feel like I’m sitting on my hands upthere.”
“Not yet. Any word from David?”
Strathmore shook his head. “I asked him not to call meuntil he has the ring.”
Susan looked surprised. “Why not? What if he needshelp?”
Strathmore shrugged. “I can’t help him fromhere—he’s on his own. Besides, I’d rather not talkon unsecured lines just in case someone’s listening.”
Susan’s eyes widened in concern. “What’s *that* supposed to mean?”
Strathmore immediately looked apologetic. He gave her areassuring smile. “David’s fine. I’m just beingcareful.”
* * *

Thirty feet away from their conversation, hidden behind theone-way glass of Node 3, Greg Hale stood at Susan’s terminal.Her screen was black. Hale glanced out at the commander and Susan.Then he reached for his wallet. He extracted a small index card andread it.
Double-checking that Strathmore and Susan were still talking,Hale carefully typed five keystrokes on Susan’s keyboard. Asecond later her monitor sprang to life.
“Bingo.” He chuckled.

Stealing the Node 3 privacy codes had been simple. In Node 3,every terminal had an identical detachable keyboard. Hale hadsimply taken his keyboard home one night and installed a chip thatkept a record of every keystroke made on it. Then he had come inearly, swapped his modified keyboard for someone else’s, andwaited. At the end of the day, he switched back and viewed the datarecorded by the chip. Even though there were millions of keystrokesto sort through, finding the access code was simple; the firstthing a cryptographer did every morning was type the privacy codethat unlocked his terminal. This, of course, made Hale’s jobeffortless—the privacy code always appeared as the first fivecharacters on the list.
It was ironic, Hale thought as he gazed at Susan’s monitor.He’d stolen the privacy codes just for kicks. He was happy nowhe’d done it; the program on Susan’s screen lookedsignificant.

Hale puzzled over it for a moment. It was written inLIMBO—not one of his specialties. Just by looking at it,though, Hale could tell one thing for certain—

this was *not* a diagnostic. He could make sense of only two words. Butthey were enough.

TRACER SEARCHING . . .

"Tracer?" he said aloud. "Searching for *what?*" Hale felt suddenly uneasy. He sat a moment studyingSusan's screen. Then he made his decision.

Hale understood enough about the LIMBO programming language toknow that it borrowed heavily from two other languages—C andPascal—both of which he knew cold. Glancing up to check thatStrathmore and Susan were still talking outside, Hale improvised.He entered a few modified Pascal commands and hit return. Thetracer's status window responded exactly as he had hoped.

TRACER ABORT?

He quickly typed: YES

ARE YOU SURE? Again he typed: YES

After a moment the computer beeped.

TRACER ABORTED

Hale smiled. The terminal had just sent a message tellingSusan's tracer to self-destruct prematurely. Whatever she waslooking for would have to wait.

Mindful to leave no evidence, Hale expertly navigated his wayinto her system activity log and deleted all the commands he'djust typed. Then he reentered Susan's privacy code.

The monitor went black. When Susan Fletcher returned to Node 3, Greg Hale was seatedquietly at his terminal.

CHAPTER 30

Alfonso XIII was a small four-star hotel set back from thePuerta de Jerez and surrounded by a thick wrought-iron fence andlilacs. David made his way up the marble stairs. As he reached forthe door, it magically opened, and a bellhop ushered himinside.

"Baggage, señor? May I help you?"

"No, thanks. I need to see the concierge."

The bellhop looked hurt, as if something in their two-secondencounter had not been satisfactory. "Por aquí,señor." He led Becker into the lobby, pointed to theconcierge, and hurried off.

The lobby was exquisite, small and elegantly appointed.Spain's Golden Age had long since passed, but for a while inthe mid-1600s, this small nation had ruled the world. The room wasa proud reminder of that era—suits of armor, militaryetchings, and a display case of gold ingots from the New World.

Hovering behind the counter marked conserje was a trim,well-groomed man smiling so eagerly that it appeared he'dwaited his entire life to be of assistance. "En qué puedoservirle, señor? How may I serve you?" He spoke with anaffected lisp and ran his eyes up and down Becker's body. Becker responded in Spanish. "I need to speak toManuel."

The man's well-tanned face smiled even wider."Sí, sí, señor. I am Manuel. What is it youdesire?"

"Señor Roldán at Escortes Belén told me youwould—"

The concierge silenced Becker with a wave and glanced nervouslyaround the lobby. "Why don't you step over here?" Heled Becker to the end of the counter. "Now," hecontinued, practically in a whisper. "How may I helpyou?"

Becker began again, lowering his voice. "I need to speak toone of his escorts whom I believe is dining here. Her name isRocío."

The concierge let out his breath as though overwhelmed."Aaah, Rocío—a beautiful creature."

"I need to see her immediately."

"But, señor, she is with a client."

Becker nodded apologetically. "It's important."*A matter of national security.*

The concierge shook his head. "Impossible. Perhaps if youleft a—"

"It will only take a moment. Is she in the diningroom?"

The concierge shook his head. “Our dining room closed halfan hour ago. I’m afraid Rocío and her guest have retiredfor the evening. If you’d like to leave me a message, I cangive it to her in the morning.” He motioned to the bank ofnumbered message boxes behind him.

“If I could just call her room and—”

“I’m sorry,” the concierge said, his politenessevaporating. “The Alfonso XIII has strict policies regardingclient privacy.”

Becker had no intention of waiting ten hours for a fat man and aprostitute to wander down for breakfast.

“I understand,” Becker said. “Sorry to botheryou.” He turned and walked back into the lobby. He strodedirectly to a cherry roll-top desk that had caught his eye on hisway in. It held a generous supply of Alfonso XIII postcards andstationery as well as pens and envelopes. Becker sealed a blankpiece of paper in an envelope and wrote one word on theenvelope.

ROCÍO.

Then he went back to the concierge.

“I’m sorry to trouble you again,” Becker saidapproaching sheepishly. “I’m being a bit of a fool, Iknow. I was hoping to tell Rocío personally how much I enjoyedour time together the other day. But I’m leaving town tonight.Perhaps I’ll just leave her a note after all.” Beckerlaid the envelope on the counter.

The concierge looked down at the envelope and clucked sadly tohimself. *Another lovesick heterosexual,* he thought. *Whata waste.* He looked up and smiled. “But of course, Mr. . .. ?”

“Buisán,” Becker said. “MiguelBuisán.”

“Of course. I’ll be sure Rocío gets this in themorning.”

“Thank you.” Becker smiled and turned to go.

The concierge, after discreetly checking out Becker’sbackside, scooped up the envelope off the counter and turned to thebank of numbered slots on the wall behind him. Just as the manslipped the envelope into one of the slots, Becker spun with onefinal inquiry.

“Where might I call a taxi?”

The concierge turned from the wall of cubbyholes and answered.But Becker did not hear his response. The timing had been perfect.The concierge’s hand was just emerging from a box marked Suite301.

Becker thanked the concierge and slowly wandered off looking forthe elevator. *In and out,* he repeated to himself.

CHAPTER 31

Susan returned to Node 3. Her conversation with Strathmore hadmade her increasingly anxious about David's safety. Herimagination was running wild.

"So," Hale spouted from his terminal. "What didStrathmore want? A romantic evening alone with his headcryptographer?"

Susan ignored the comment and settled in at her terminal. Shetyped her privacy code and the screen came to life. The tracerprogram came into view; it still had not returned any informationon North Dakota.

Damn, Susan thought. *What's taking solong?*

"You seem uptight," Hale said innocently. "Havingtrouble with your diagnostic?"

"Nothing serious," she replied. But Susan wasn'tso sure. The tracer was overdue. She wondered if maybe she'dmade a mistake while writing it. She began scanning the long linesof LIMBO programming on her screen, searching for anything thatcould be holding things up.

Hale observed her smugly. "Hey, I meant to ask you,"he ventured. "What do you make of that unbreakable algorithmEnsei Tankado said he was writing?"

Susan's stomach did a flip. She looked up."Unbreakable algorithm?" She caught herself. "Oh,yeah . . . I think I read something about that."

"Pretty incredible claim."

"Yeah," Susan replied, wondering why Hale had suddenlybrought it up. "I don't buy it, though. Everyone knows anunbreakable algorithm is a mathematical impossibility."

Hale smiled. "Oh, yeah . . . the BergofskyPrinciple."

"And common sense," she snapped.

"Who knows . . ." Hale sighed dramatically."There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt ofin your philosophy."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Shakespeare," Hale offered."*Hamlet.*"

"Read a lot while you were in jail?"

Hale chuckled. "Seriously, Susan, did you ever think thatmaybe it *is* possible, that maybe Tankado really *did*write an unbreakable algorithm?"

This conversation was making Susan uneasy. "Well, *we*couldn't do it." "Maybe Tankado's better than we are."

"Maybe." Susan shrugged, feigning disinterest.

“We corresponded for a while,” Hale offered casually.“Tankado and me. Did you know that?”
Susan looked up, attempting to hide her shock.“Really?”
“Yeah. After I uncovered the Skipjack algorithm, he wroteme—said we were brothers in the global fight for digitalprivacy.”
Susan could barely contain her disbelief. *Hale knows Tankadopersonally!* She did her best to look uninterested.

Hale went on. “He congratulated me for proving thatSkipjack had a back door—called it a coup for privacy rightsof civilians all over the world. You gotta admit, Susan, the backdoor in Skipjack was an underhanded play. Reading the world’sE-mail? If you ask me, Strathmore *deserved* to getcaught.”
“Greg,” Susan snapped, fighting her anger, “thatback door was so the NSA could decode E-mail that threatened thisnation’s security.”
“Oh, really?” Hale sighed innocently. “Andsnooping the average citizen was just a lucky byproduct?”
“We don’t snoop average citizens, and you know it. TheFBI can tap telephones, but that doesn’t mean they listen to*every* call that’s ever made.”
“If they had the manpower, they would.”
Susan ignored the remark. “Governments should have theright to gather information that threatens the commongood.”

“Jesus Christ”—Hale sighed—“you soundlike you’ve been brainwashed by Strathmore. You know damn wellthe FBI can’t listen in whenever they want—they’vegot to get a warrant. A spiked encryption standard would mean theNSA could listen in to *anyone, anytime, anywhere.”*

“You’re right—as we *should* be ableto!” Susan’s voice was suddenly harsh. “If youhadn’t uncovered the back door in Skipjack, we’d haveaccess to *every* code we need to break, instead of just whatTRANSLTR can handle.”

“If I hadn’t found the back door,” Hale argued,“someone else would have. I saved your asses by uncovering itwhen I did. Can you imagine the fallout if Skipjack had been incirculation when the news broke?”
“Either way,” Susan shot back, “now we’vegot a paranoid EFF who think we put back doors in *all* ouralgorithms.”
Hale asked smugly, “Well, don’t we?”
Susan eyed him coldly.

“Hey,” he said, backing off, “the point is mootnow anyway. You built TRANSLTR. You’ve got your instantinformation source. You can read *what* you want, *when*you want—no questions asked. You win.”
“Don’t you mean *we* win? Last I heard, youworked for the NSA.”
“Not for long,” Hale chirped.

“Don’t make promises.”
“I’m serious. Someday I’m getting out ofhere.”
“I’ll be crushed.”

In that moment, Susan found herself wanting to curse Hale foreverything that wasn’t going right. She wanted to curse himfor Digital Fortress, for her troubles with David, for the factthat she wasn’t in the Smokys—but none of it was hisfault. Hale’s only fault was that he was obnoxious. Susanneeded to be the bigger person. It was her responsibility as headcryptographer to keep the peace, to educate. Hale was young andnäive.

Susan looked over at him. It was frustrating, she thought, thatHale had the talent to be an asset in Crypto, but he stillhadn’t grasped the importance of what the NSA did.

“Greg,” Susan said, her voice quiet and controlled,“I’m under a lot of pressure today. I just get upset whenyou talk about the NSA like we’re some kind of high-techpeeping Tom. This organization was founded for one purpose—toprotect the security of this nation. That may involve shaking a fewtrees and looking for the bad apples from time to time. I thinkmost citizens would gladly sacrifice some privacy to know that thebad guys can’t maneuver unchecked.”

Hale said nothing.

“Sooner or later,” Susan argued, “the people ofthis nation need to put their trust somewhere. There’s a lotof good out there—but there’s also a lot of bad mixed in.Someone has to have access to all of it and separate the right fromwrong. That’s our job. That’s our duty. Whether we likeit or not, there is a frail gate separating democracy from anarchy.The NSA guards that gate.”

Hale nodded thoughtfully. “Quis custodiet ipsoscustodes?”

Susan looked puzzled.

“It’s Latin,” Hale said. “From *Satires* of Juvenal. It means ‘Who will guard theguards?’ ”

“I don’t get it,” Susan said. “ ‘Whowill guard the guards?’ ”

“Yeah. If *we’re* the guards of society, then whowill watch *us* and make sure that *we’re* notdangerous?”

Susan nodded, unsure how to respond. Hale smiled. “It’s how Tankado signed all his lettersto me. It was his favorite saying.”

CHAPTER 32

David Becker stood in the hallway outside suite 301. He knewthat somewhere behind the ornately carved door was the ring. *Amatter of national security.*
Becker could hear movement inside the room. Faint talking. Heknocked. A deep German accent called out.
“Ja?”
Becker remained silent.
“Ja?”
The door opened a crack, and a rotund Germanic face gazed downat him.
Becker smiled politely. He did not know the man’s name.“Deutscher, ja?” he asked. “German, right?”
The man nodded, uncertain. Becker continued in perfect German. “May I speak to you amoment?”
The man looked uneasy. “Was willst du? What do youwant?”
Becker realized he should have rehearsed this before brazenlyknocking on a stranger’s door. He searched for the rightwords. “You have something I need.”
These were apparently not the right words. The German’seyes narrowed.
“Ein ring,” Becker said. “Du hast einen Ring. Youhave a ring.”
“Go away,” the German growled. He started to close thedoor. Without thinking, Becker slid his foot into the crack andjammed the door open. He immediately regretted the action.
The German’s eyes went wide. “Was tust du?” hedemanded. “What are you doing?”
Becker knew he was in over his head. He glanced nervously up anddown the hall. He’d already been thrown out of the clinic; hehad no intention of going two for two.
“Nimm deinen Fuß weg!” the German bellowed.“Remove your foot!”
Becker scanned the man’s pudgy fingers for a ring. Nothing.*I’m so close,* he thought. “Ein Ring!” Beckerrepeated as the door slammed shut.
* * *

David Becker stood a long moment in the well-furnished hallway.A replica of a Salvador Dali hung nearby. “Fitting.”Becker groaned. *Surrealism. I’m trapped in an absurddream.* He’d woken up that morning in his own bed but hadsomehow ended up in Spain breaking into a stranger’s hotelroom on a quest for some magical ring.

Strathmore's stern voice pulled him back to reality: *Youmust find that ring.*
Becker took a deep breath and blocked out the words. He wantedto go home. He looked back to the door marked 301. His ticket homewas just on the other side—a gold ring. All he had to do wasget it.
He exhaled purposefully. Then he strode back to suite 301 andknocked loudly on the door. It was time to play hardball.
* * *

The German yanked open the door and was about to protest, butBecker cut him off. He flashed his Maryland squash club ID andbarked, "Polizei!" Then Becker pushed his way into theroom and threw on the lights.
Wheeling, the German squinted in shock. "Wasmachst—"

"Silence!" Becker switched to English. "Do youhave a prostitute in this room?" Becker peered around theroom. It was as plush as any hotel room he'd ever seen. Roses,champagne, a huge canopy bed. Rocío was nowhere to be seen.The bathroom door was closed.

"Prostituiert?" The German glanced uneasily at theclosed bathroom door. He was larger than Becker had imagined. Hishairy chest began right under his triple chin and sloped outward tohis colossal gut. The drawstring of his white terry-cloth AlfonsoXIII bathrobe barely reached around his waist.
Becker stared up at the giant with his most intimidating look."What is your name?"
A look of panic rippled across the German's corpulent face."Was willst du? What do you want?"
"I am with the tourist relations branch of the SpanishGuardia here in Seville. Do you have a prostitute in thisroom?"
The German glanced nervously at the bathroom door. He hesitated."Ja," he finally admitted.
"Do you know this is illegal in Spain?"
"Nein," the German lied. "I did not know.I'll send her home right now."
"I'm afraid it's too late for that," Beckersaid with authority. He strolled casually into the room. "Ihave a proposition for you."
"Ein Vorschlag?" The German gasped. "Aproposition?"
"Yes. I can take you to headquarters right now . . ."Becker paused dramatically and cracked his knuckles.
"Or what?" the German asked, his eyes widening infear.
"Or we make a deal."
"What kind of deal?" The German had heard storiesabout the corruption in the Spanish Guardia Civil.
"You have something I want," Becker said.

“Yes, of course!” the German effused, forcing a smile.He went immediately to the wallet on his dresser. “Howmuch?”

Becker let his jaw drop in mock indignation. “Are youtrying to bribe an officer of the law?” he bellowed.

“No! Of course not! I just thought . . .” The obeseman quickly set down his wallet. “I . . . I . . .” He wastotally flustered. He collapsed on the corner of the bed and wrunghis hands. The bed groaned under his weight. “I’msorry.”

Becker pulled a rose from the vase in the center of the room andcasually smelled it before letting it fall to the floor. He spunsuddenly. “What can you tell me about the murder?”

The German went white. “Mord? Murder?”

“Yes. The Asian man this morning? In the park? It was anassassination—Ermordung.” Becker loved the German wordfor assassination. Ermordung. It was so chilling.

“Ermordung? He . . . he was . . . ?”

“Yes.”

“But . . . but that’s impossible,” the Germanchoked. “I was there. He had a heart attack. I saw it. Noblood. No bullets.”

Becker shook his head condescendingly. “Things are notalways as they seem.”

The German went whiter still.

Becker gave an inward smile. The lie had served its purpose. Thepoor German was sweating profusely.

“Wh-wh-at do you want?” he stammered. “I knownothing.”

Becker began pacing. “The murdered man was wearing a goldring. I need it.”

“I-I don’t have it.”

Becker sighed patronizingly and motioned to the bathroom door.“And Rocío? Dewdrop?”

The man went from white to purple. “You know Dewdrop?”He wiped the sweat from his fleshy forehead and drenched histerry-cloth sleeve. He was about to speak when the bathroom doorswung open.

Both men looked up.

Rocío Eva Granada stood in the doorway. A vision. Longflowing red hair, perfect Iberian skin, deepbrown eyes, a highsmooth forehead. She wore a white terry-cloth robe that matched theGerman’s. The tie was drawn snugly over her wide hips, and theneck fell loosely open to reveal her tanned cleavage. She steppedinto the bedroom, the picture of confidence.

“May I help you?” she asked in throaty English.

Becker gazed across the room at the stunning woman before himand did not blink. “I need the ring,” he said coldly.

“Who are you?” she demanded.
Becker switched to Spanish with a dead-on Andalusian accent.“Guardia Civil.”
She laughed. “Impossible,” she replied in Spanish.
Becker felt a knot rise in his throat. Rocío was clearly alittle tougher than her client. “Impossible?” herepeated, keeping his cool. “Shall I take you downtown toprove it?”
Rocío smirked. “I will not embarrass you by acceptingyour offer. Now, who are you?”
Becker stuck to his story. “I am with the SevilleGuardia.”
Rocío stepped menacingly toward him. “I know everypolice officer on the force. They are my best clients.”
Becker felt her stare cutting right through him. He regrouped.“I am with a special tourist task force. Give me the ring, orI’ll have to take you down to the precinct and—”
“And what?” she demanded, raising her eyebrows in mockanticipation.
Becker fell silent. He was in over his head. The plan wasbackfiring. *Why isn’t she buying this?*

Rocío came closer. “I don’t know who you are orwhat you want, but if you don’t get out of this suite rightnow, I will call hotel security, and the *real* Guardia willarrest you for impersonating a police officer.”

Becker knew that Strathmore could have him out of jail in fiveminutes, but it had been made very clear to him that this matterwas supposed to be handled discreetly. Getting arrested was notpart of the plan.
Rocío had stopped a few feet in front of Becker and wasglaring at him.
“Okay.” Becker sighed, accentuating the defeat in hisvoice. He let his Spanish accent slip. “I am not with theSeville police. A U.S. government organization sent me to locatethe ring. That’s all I can reveal. I’ve been authorizedto pay you for it.” There was a long silence.
Rocío let his statement hang in the air a moment beforeparting her lips in a sly smile. “Now that wasn’t sohard, was it?” She sat down on a chair and crossed her legs.“How much can you pay?”

Becker muffled his sigh of relief. He wasted no time gettingdown to business. “I can pay you 750,000 pesetas. Fivethousand American dollars.” It was half what he had on him butprobably ten times what the ring was actually worth.
Rocío raised her eyebrows. “That’s a lot ofmoney.”
“Yes it is. Do we have a deal?”
Rocío shook her head. “I wish I could sayyes.”
“A million pesetas?” Becker blurted. “It’sall I have.”

“My, my.” She smiled. “You Americans don’tbargain very well. You wouldn’t last a day in ourmarkets.”
“Cash, right now,” Becker said, reaching for theenvelope in his jacket. *I just want to go home.*
Rocío shook her head. “I can’t.”
Becker bristled angrily. “Why not?” “I no longer have the ring,” she said apologetically.“I’ve already sold it.”

CHAPTER 33

Tokugen Numataka stared out his window and paced like a cagedanimal. He had not yet heard from his contact, North Dakota. *Damn Americans! No sense of punctuality!*

He would have called North Dakota himself, but he didn'thave a phone number for him. Numataka hated doing business thisway—with someone else in control.

The thought had crossed Numataka's mind from the beginningthat the calls from North Dakota could be a hoax—a Japanesecompetitor playing him for the fool. Now the old doubts were comingback. Numataka decided he needed more information.

He burst from his office and took a left down Numatech'smain hallway. His employees bowed reverently as he stormed past.Numataka knew better than to believe they actually lovedhim—bowing was a courtesy Japanese employees offered even themost ruthless of bosses.

Numataka went directly to the company's main switchboard.All calls were handled by a single operator on a Corenco 2000,twelve-line switchboard terminal. The woman was busy but stood andbowed as Numataka entered.

"Sit down," he snapped.

She obeyed.

"I received a call at four forty-five on my personal linetoday. Can you tell me where it came from?" Numataka kickedhimself for not having done this earlier.

The operator swallowed nervously. "We don't havecaller identification on this machine, sir. But I can contact thephone company. I'm sure they can help."

Numataka had no doubt the phone company could help. In thisdigital age, privacy had become a thing of the past; there was arecord of everything. Phone companies could tell you exactly whohad called you and how long you'd spoken.

"Do it," he commanded. "Let me know what you findout."

CHAPTER 34

Susan sat alone in Node 3, waiting for her tracer. Hale haddecided to step outside and get some air—a decision for whichshe was grateful. Oddly, however, the solitude in Node 3 providedlittle asylum. Susan found herself struggling with the newconnection between Tankado and Hale. “Who will guard the guards?” she said to herself. *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes.* The words kept circling in herhead. Susan forced them from her mind.

Her thoughts turned to David, hoping he was all right. She stillfound it hard to believe he was in Spain. The sooner they found thepass-keys and ended this, the better.

Susan had lost track of how long she’d been sitting therewaiting for her tracer. Two hours? Three? She gazed out at thedeserted Crypto floor and wished her terminal would beep. There wasonly silence. The late-summer sun had set. Overhead, the automaticfluorescents had kicked on. Susan sensed time was running out.

She looked down at her tracer and frowned. “Come on,”she grumbled. “You’ve had plenty of time.” Shepalmed her mouse and clicked her way into her tracer’s statuswindow. “How long have you been running, anyway?”

Susan opened the tracer’s status window—a digitalclock much like the one on TRANSLTR; it displayed the hours andminutes her tracer had been running. Susan gazed at the monitorexpecting to see a readout of hours and minutes. But she sawsomething else entirely. What she saw stopped the blood in herveins.

TRACER ABORTED

“Tracer aborted!” she choked aloud.“Why?”

In a sudden panic, Susan scrolled wildly through the data,searching the programming for any commands that might have told thetracer to abort. But her search went in vain. It appeared hertracer had stopped all by itself. Susan knew this could mean onlyone thing—her tracer had developed a bug.

Susan considered “bugs” the most maddening asset ofcomputer programming. Because computers followed a scrupulouslyprecise order of operations, the most minuscule programming errorsoften had crippling effects. Simple syntactical errors—such asa programmer mistakenly inserting a comma instead of aperiod—could bring entire systems to their knees. Susan hadalways thought the term “bug” had an amusing origin:

It came from the world’s first computer—the Mark1—a room-size maze of

electromechanical circuits built in 1944in a lab at Harvard University. The computer developed a glitch oneday, and no one was able to locate the cause. After hours ofsearching, a lab assistant finally spotted the problem. It seemed amoth had landed on one of the computer's circuit boards andshorted it out. From that moment on, computer glitches werereferred to as bugs.

"I don't have time for this," Susan cursed. Finding a bug in a program was a process that could take days.Thousands of lines of programming needed to be searched to find atiny error—it was like inspecting an encyclopedia for a singletypo.

Susan knew she had only one choice—to send her traceragain. She also knew the tracer was almost guaranteed to hit thesame bug and abort all over again. Debugging the tracer would taketime, time she and the commander didn't have.

But as Susan stared at her tracer, wondering what errorshe'd made, she realized something didn't make sense. Shehad used this exact same tracer last month with no problems at all.Why would it develop a glitch all of a sudden?

As she puzzled, a comment Strathmore made earlier echoed in hermind. *Susan, I tried to send the tracer myself, but the data itreturned was nonsensical.*

Susan heard the words again. *The data it returned . ..*

She cocked her head. Was it possible? The data it returned?

If Strathmore had received data back from the tracer, then itobviously was working. His data was nonsensical, Susan assumed,because he had entered the wrong search strings—butnonetheless, the tracer was working.

Susan immediately realized that there was one other possibleexplanation for why her tracer aborted. Internal programming flawswere not the only reasons programs glitched; sometimes there were*external* forces—power surges, dust particles on circuitboards, faulty cabling. Because the hardware in Node 3 was so welltuned, she hadn't even considered it.

Susan stood and strode quickly across Node 3 to a largebookshelf of technical manuals. She grabbed a spiral binder markedSYS-OP and thumbed through. She found what she was looking for,carried the manual back to her terminal, and typed a few commands.Then she waited while the computer raced through a list of commandsexecuted in the past three hours. She hoped the search would turnup some sort of external interrupt—an abort command generatedby a faulty power supply or defective chip.

Moments later Susan's terminal beeped. Her pulse quickened.She held her breath and studied the screen.

ERROR CODE 22

Susan felt a surge of hope. It was good news. The fact that theinquiry had

found an error code meant her tracer was fine. Thetrace had apparently aborted due to an external anomaly that wasunlikely to repeat itself.

error code 22. Susan racked her memory trying to remember whatcode 22 stood for. Hardware failures were so rare in Node 3 thatshe couldn't remember the numerical codings.

Susan flipped through the SYS-OP manual, scanning the list oferror codes.

19: CORRUPT HARD PARTITION

20: DC SPIKE

21: MEDIA FAILURE

When she reached number 22, she stopped and stared a longmoment. Baffled, she double-checked her monitor.

ERROR CODE 22

Susan frowned and returned to the SYS-OP manual. What she sawmade no sense. The explanation simply read:

22: MANUAL ABORT

CHAPTER 35

Becker stared in shock at Rocío. “You *sold* thering?”
The woman nodded, her silky red hair falling around hershoulders.
Becker willed it not to be true. “Pero . . . but . ..”
She shrugged and said in Spanish, “A girl near thepark.”
Becker felt his legs go weak. *This can’t be!*

Rocío smiled coyly and motioned to the German.“Él quería que lo guardara. He wanted to keep it,but I told him no. I’ve got Gitana blood in me, Gypsy blood;we Gitanas, in addition to having red hair, are very superstitious.A ring offered by a dying man is not a good sign.”
“Did you know the girl?” Becker interrogated.
Rocío arched her eyebrows. “Vaya. You really want thisring, don’t you?”
Becker nodded sternly. “Who did you sell it to?”
The enormous German sat bewildered on the bed. His romanticevening was being ruined, and he apparently had no idea why.“Was passiert?” he asked nervously. “What’shappening?”
Becker ignored him.
“I didn’t actually sell it,” Rocío said.“I tried to, but she was just a kid and had no money. I endedup giving it to her. Had I known about your generous offer, I wouldhave saved it for you.”
“Why did you leave the park?” Becker demanded.“Somebody had died. Why didn’t you wait for the police?And give *them* the ring?”
“I solicit many things, Mr. Becker, but *trouble* isnot one of them. Besides, that old man seemed to have things undercontrol.”
“The Canadian?”
“Yes, he called the ambulance. We decided to leave. I sawno reason to involve my date or myself with the police.”
Becker nodded absently. He was still trying to accept this crueltwist of fate. *She gave the damn thing away!*

“I tried to help the dying man,” Rocío explained.“But he didn’t seem to want it. He started with thering—kept pushing it in our faces. He had these three crippledfingers sticking up. He kept pushing his hand at us—like wewere supposed to take the ring. I didn’t want to, but myfriend here finally did. Then the guy died.”
“And you tried CPR?” Becker guessed.

“No. We didn’t touch him. My friend got scared.He’s big, but he’s a wimp.” She smiled seductivelyat Becker. “Don’t worry—he can’t speak a wordof Spanish.”
Becker frowned. He was wondering again about the bruises onTankado’s chest. “Did the paramedics give CPR?”
“I have no idea. As I told you, we left before theyarrived.”

“You mean after you *stole* the ring.” Beckerscowled. Rocío glared at him. “We did not steal the ring. Theman was dying. His intentions were clear. We gave him his lastwish.”
Becker softened. Rocío was right; he probably would havedone the same damn thing. “But then you gave the ring to somegirl?”
“I told you. The ring made me nervous. The girl had lots ofjewelry on. I thought she might like it.”
“And she didn’t think it was strange? That you’djust *give* her a ring?”
“No. I told her I found it in the park. I thought she mightoffer to pay me for it, but she didn’t. I didn’t care. Ijust wanted to get rid of it.”
“When did you give it to her?”
Rocío shrugged. “This afternoon. About an hour after Igot it.”

Becker checked his watch: 11:48 p.m. The trail was eight hoursold. *What the hell am I doing here? I’m supposed to be inthe Smokys.* He sighed and asked the only question he couldthink of. “What did the girl look like?”
“Era un punki,” Rocío replied.
Becker looked up, puzzled. “Un punki?”
“Sí. Punki.”
“A punk?”
“Yes, a punk,” she said in rough English, and thenimmediately switched back to Spanish. “Mucha joyería.Lots of jewelry. A weird pendant in one ear. A skull, Ithink.”
“There are punk rockers in Seville?”
Rocío smiled. “Todo bajo el sol. Everything under thesun.” It was the motto of Seville’s Tourism Bureau.
“Did she give you her name?”
“No.”
“Did she say where she was going?” “No. Her Spanish was poor.”
“She wasn’t Spanish?” Becker asked.
“No. She was English, I think. She had wild hair—red,white, and blue.”
Becker winced at the bizarre image. “Maybe she wasAmerican,” he offered.
“I don’t think so,” Rocío said. “Shewas wearing a T-shirt that looked like the British flag.”
Becker nodded dumbly. “Okay. Red, white, and blue hair, aBritish flag T-shirt,

a skull pendant in her ear. Whatelse?"
"Nothing. Just your average punk."

Average punk? Becker was from a world of collegiatesweatshirts and conservative haircuts—he couldn't evenpicture what the woman was talking about. "Can you think ofanything else at all?" he pressed.
Rocío thought a moment. "No. That's it."

Just then the bed creaked loudly. Rocío's clientshifted his weight uncomfortably. Becker turned to him and spoke influent German. "Noch etwas? Anything else? Anything to help mefind the punk rocker with the ring?"

There was a long silence. It was as if the giant man hadsomething he wanted to say, but he wasn't sure how to say it.His lower lip quivered momentarily, there was a pause, and then hespoke. The four words that came out were definitely English, butthey were barely intelligible beneath his thick German accent."Fock off und die."
Becker gaped in shock. "I beg your pardon?
"Fock off und die," the man repeated, patting his leftpalm against his fleshy right forearm—a crude approximation ofthe Italian gesture for "fuck you."
Becker was too drained to be offended. *Fuck off and die? Whathappened to Das Wimp?* He turned back to Rocío and spoke inSpanish. "Sounds like I've overstayed mywelcome."
"Don't worry about him." She laughed."He's just a little frustrated. He'll getwhat's coming to him." She tossed her hair andwinked.
"Is there anything else?" Becker asked. "Anythingyou can tell me that might help?"
Rocío shook her head. "That's all. Butyou'll never find her. Seville is a big city—it can bevery deceptive."
"I'll do the best I can." *It's a matterof national security . . .*

"If you have no luck," Rocío said, eyeing thebulging envelope in Becker's pocket, "please stop back.My friend will be sleeping, no doubt. Knock quietly. I'll findus an extra room. You'll see a side of Spain you'll neverforget." She pouted lusciously.
Becker forced a polite smile. "I should be going." Heapologized to the German for interrupting his evening.
The giant smiled timidly. "Keine Ursache." Becker headed out the door. *No problem? Whatever happened to"Fuck off and die"?*

CHAPTER 36

“Manual abort?” Susan stared at her screen,mystified.
She knew she hadn’t typed any manual abort command—atleast not intentionally. She wondered if maybe she’d hit thewrong sequence of keys by mistake.

“Impossible,” she muttered. According to the headers,the abort command had been sent less than twenty minutes ago. Susanknew the only thing she’d typed in the last twenty minutes washer privacy code when she’d stepped out to talk to thecommander. It was absurd to think the privacy code could have beenmisinterpreted as an abort command.
Knowing it was a waste of time, Susan pulled up her ScreenLocklog and double-checked that her privacy code had been enteredproperly. Sure enough, it had.
“Then *where,”* she demanded angrily, “wheredid it get a *manual* abort?”

Susan scowled and closed the ScreenLock window. Unexpectedly,however, in the split second as the window blipped away, somethingcaught her eye. She reopened the window and studied the data. Itmade no sense. There was a proper “locking” entry whenshe’d left Node 3, but the timing of the subsequent“unlock” entry seemed strange. The two entries were lessthan one minute apart. Susan was certain she’d been outsidewith the commander for more than one minute.

Susan scrolled down the page. What she saw left her aghast.Registering three minutes later, a *second* set of lock-unlockentries appeared. According to the log, someone had unlocked herterminal while she was gone.

“Not possible!” she choked. The only candidate wasGreg Hale, and Susan was quite certain she’d never given Haleher privacy code. Following good cryptographic procedure, Susan hadchosen her code at random and never written it down; Hale’sguessing the correct five-character alphanumeric was out of thequestion—it was thirty-six to the fifth power, over sixtymillion possibilities.
But the ScreenLock entries were as clear as day. Susan stared atthem in wonder. Hale had somehow been on her terminal while she wasgone. He had sent her tracer a manual abort command.

The questions of *how* quickly gave way to questions of *why?* Hale had no motive to break into her terminal. Hedidn’t even know Susan was running a

tracer. Even if he didknow, Susan thought, why would he object to her tracking some guynamed North Dakota?

The unanswered questions seemed to be multiplying in her head.“First things first,” she said aloud. She would deal withHale in a moment. Focusing on the matter at hand, Susan reloadedher tracer and hit the enter key. Her terminal beeped once.

TRACER SENT

Susan knew the tracer would take hours to return. She cursedHale, wondering how in the world he’d gotten her privacy code,wondering what interest he had in her tracer.

Susan stood up and strode immediately for Hale’s terminal.The screen was black, but she could tell it was not locked—themonitor was glowing faintly around the edges. Cryptographers seldomlocked their terminals except when they left Node 3 for the night.Instead, they simply dimmed the brightness on their monitors—auniversal, honor-code indication that no one should disturb theterminal.

Susan reached for Hale’s terminal. “Screw the honorcode,” she said. “What the hell are you up to?”

Throwing a quick glance out at the deserted Crypto floor, Susanturned up Hale’s brightness controls. The monitor came intofocus, but the screen was entirely empty. Susan frowned at theblank screen. Uncertain how to proceed, she called up a searchengine and typed:

SEARCH FOR: “TRACER”

It was a long shot, but if there were any references toSusan’s tracer in Hale’s computer, this search would findthem. It might shed some light on why Hale had manually aborted herprogram. Seconds later the screen refreshed. NO MATCHES FOUND

Susan sat a moment, unsure what she was even looking for. Shetried again.

SEARCH FOR: “SCREENLOCK”

The monitor refreshed and provided a handful of innocuousreferences—no hint that Hale had any copies of Susan’sprivacy code on his computer.

Susan sighed loudly. *So what programs has he been usingtoday?* She went to Hale’s “recent applications”menu to find the last program he had used. It was his E-mailserver. Susan searched his hard drive and eventually found hisE-mail folder hidden discreetly inside some other directories. Sheopened the folder, and additional folders appeared; it seemed Halehad numerous E-mail identities and accounts. One of them, Susannoticed with little surprise, was an anonymous account. She openedthe folder, clicked one of the old, inbound messages, and readit.

She instantly stopped breathing. The message read:
TO: NDAKOTA@ARA.ANON.ORG
FROM: ET@DOSHISHA.EDU
GREAT PROGRESS! DIGITAL FORTRESS IS ALMOST DONE.
THIS THING WILL SET THE NSA BACK DECADES!
As if in a dream, Susan read the message over and over. Then,trembling, she opened another.
TO: NDAKOTA@ARA.ANON.ORG
FROM: ET@DOSHISHA.EDU
ROTATING CLEARTEXT WORKS! MUTATION STRINGS ARE THE TRICK!

It was unthinkable, and yet there it was. E-mail from EnseiTankado. He had been writing to Greg Hale. They were workingtogether. Susan went numb as the impossible truth stared up at herfrom the terminal.
Greg Hale is NDAKOTA?
Susan's eyes locked on the screen. Her mind searcheddesperately for some other explanation, but there was none. It wasproof—sudden and inescapable: Tankado had used mutationstrings to create a rotating cleartext function, and Hale hadconspired with him to bring down the NSA. "It's . . ." Susan stammered. "It's . .. not possible."
As if to disagree, Hale's voice echoed from the past: *Tankado wrote me a few times . . . Strathmore took a gamble hiringme . . . I'm getting out of here someday.*

Still, Susan could not accept what she was seeing. True, GregHale was obnoxious and arrogant—but he wasn't a traitor.He knew what Digital Fortress would do to the NSA; there was no wayhe was involved in a plot to release it!

And yet, Susan realized, there was nothing to stophim—nothing except honor and decency. She thought of theSkipjack algorithm. Greg Hale had ruined the NSA's plans oncebefore. What would prevent him from trying again?
"But Tankado . . ." Susan puzzled. *Why wouldsomeone as paranoid as Tankado trust someone as unreliable asHale?*

She knew that none of it mattered now. All that mattered wasgetting to Strathmore. By some ironic stroke of fate,Tankado's partner was right there under their noses. Shewondered if Hale knew yet that Ensei Tankado was dead.

She quickly began closing Hale's E-mail files in order toleave the terminal exactly as she had found it. Hale could suspectnothing—not yet. The Digital Fortress pass-key, she realizedin amazement, was probably hidden somewhere inside that verycomputer.

But as Susan closed the last of the files, a shadow passedoutside the Node 3 window. Her gaze shot up, and she saw Greg Haleapproaching. Her adrenaline surged. He was almost to the doors.

“Damn!” she cursed, eyeing the distance back to herseat. She knew she’d never make it. Hale was almost there.

She wheeled desperately, searching Node 3 for options. The doorsbehind her clicked. Then they engaged. Susan felt instinct takeover. Digging her shoes into the carpet, she accelerated in long,reaching strides toward the pantry. As the doors hissed open, Susanslid to a stop in front of the refrigerator and yanked open thedoor. A glass pitcher on top tipped precariously and then rocked toa stop.

“Hungry?” Hale asked, entering Node 3 and walkingtoward her. His voice was calm and flirtatious. “Want to sharesome tofu?”

Susan exhaled and turned to face him. “No thanks,” sheoffered. “I think I’ll just —” But the words gotcaught in her throat. She went white.

Hale eyed her oddly. “What’s wrong?”

Susan bit her lip and locked eyes with him. “Nothing,”she managed. But it was a lie. Across the room, Hale’sterminal glowed brightly. She’d forgotten to dim it.

CHAPTER 37

Downstairs at the Alfonso XIII, Becker wandered tiredly over tothe bar. A dwarf-like bartender lay a napkin in front of him.“Qué bebe Usted? What are you drinking?”
“Nothing, thanks,” Becker replied. “I need toknow if there are any clubs in town for punk rockers?”
The bartender eyed him strangely. “Clubs? Forpunks?”
“Yeah. Is there anyplace in town where they all hangout?”
“No lo sé, señor. I don’t now. But certainlynot here!” He smiled. “How about a drink?”
Becker felt like shaking the guy. Nothing was going quite theway he’d planned.
“¿Quiere Vd. algo?” The bartender repeated.“¿Fino? ¿Jerez?”

Faint strains of classical music were being piped in overhead. *Brandenburg Concertos,* Becker thought. *Number four.*He and Susan had seen the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields playthe Brandenburgs at the university last year. He suddenly wishedshe were with him now. The breeze from an overhead air-conditioningvent reminded Becker what it was like outside. He pictured himselfwalking the sweaty, drugged-out streets of Triana looking for somepunk in a British flag Tshirt. He thought of Susan again.“Zumo de arándano,” he heard himself say.“Cranberry juice.”
The bartender looked baffled. “Solo?” Cranberry juicewas a popular drink in Spain, but drinking it alone was unheardof.
“Sí.” Becker said. “Solo.”
“¿Echo un poco de Smirnoff?” The bartenderpressed. “A splash of vodka?”
“No, gracias.”
“¿Gratis?” he coaxed. “On thehouse?”
Through the pounding in his head, Becker pictured the filthystreets of Triana, the stifling heat, and the long night ahead ofhim. *What the hell.* He nodded. “Sí, échame unpoco de vodka.”
The bartender seemed much relieved and hustled off to make thedrink.
Becker glanced around the ornate bar and wondered if he wasdreaming. Anything would make more sense than the truth. *I’m a university teacher,* he thought, *on a secretmission.*
The bartender returned with a flourish and presentedBecker’s beverage. “A su gusto, señor. Cranberrywith a splash of vodka.”

Becker thanked him. He took a sip and gagged. *That's asplash?*

CHAPTER 38

Hale stopped halfway to the Node 3 pantry and stared at Susan.“What’s wrong, Sue? You look terrible.”
Susan fought her rising fear. Ten feet away, Hale’s monitorglowed brightly. “I’m . . . I’m okay,” shemanaged, her heart pounding.
Hale eyed her with a puzzled look on his face. “You wantsome water?”

Susan could not answer. She cursed herself. *How could Iforget to dim his damn monitor?* Susan knew the moment Halesuspected her of searching his terminal, he’d suspect she knewhis real identity, North Dakota. She feared Hale would do anythingto keep that information inside Node 3.

Susan wondered if she should make a dash for the door. But shenever got the chance. Suddenly there was a pounding at the glasswall. Both Hale and Susan jumped. It was Chartrukian. He wasbanging his sweaty fists against the glass again. He looked likehe’d seen Armageddon.
Hale scowled at the crazed Sys-Sec outside the window, thenturned back to Susan. “I’ll be right back. Get yourself adrink. You look pale.” Hale turned and went outside.
Susan steadied herself and moved quickly to Hale’sterminal. She reached down and adjusted the brightness controls.The monitor went black.

Her head was pounding. She turned and eyed the conversation nowtaking place on the Crypto floor. Apparently, Chartrukian had notgone home, after all. The young Sys-Sec was now in a panic,spilling his guts to Greg Hale. Susan knew it didn’tmatter—Hale knew everything there was to know.
I’ve got to get to Strathmore, she thought. *Andfast.*

CHAPTER 39

Room 301. Rocío Eva Granada stood naked in front of thebathroom mirror. This was the moment she'd been dreading allday. The German was on the bed waiting for her. He was the biggestman she'd ever been with.

Reluctantly, she took an ice cube from the water bucket andrubbed it across her nipples. They quickly hardened. This was hergift—to make men feel wanted. It's what kept them comingback. She ran her hands across her supple, well-tanned body andhoped it would survive another four or five more years until shehad enough to retire. Señor Roldán took most of her pay,but without him she knew she'd be with the rest of the hookerspicking up drunks in Triana. These men at least had money. Theynever beat her, and they were easy to satisfy. She slipped into herlingerie, took a deep breath, and opened the bathroom door.

As Rocío stepped into the room, the German's eyesbulged. She was wearing a black negligee. Her chestnut skinradiated in the soft light, and her nipples stood at attentionbeneath the lacy fabric.

"Komm doch hierher," he said eagerly, shedding hisrobe and rolling onto his back.

Rocío forced a smile and approached the bed. She gazed downat the enormous German. She chuckled in relief. The organ betweenhis legs was tiny.

He grabbed at her and impatiently ripped off her negligee. Hisfat fingers groped at every inch of her body. She fell on top ofhim and moaned and writhed in false ecstasy. As he rolled her overand climbed on top of her, she thought she would be crushed. Shegasped and choked against his puttylike neck. She prayed he wouldbe quick.

"Sí! Sí!" she gasped in between thrusts. Shedug her fingernails into his backside to encourage him.

Random thoughts cascaded through her mind—faces of thecountless men she'd satisfied, ceilings she'd stared atfor hours in the dark, dreams of having children . . .

Suddenly, without warning, the German's body arched,stiffened, and almost immediately collapsed on top of her. *That's all?* she thought, surprised and relieved.

She tried to slide out from under him. "Darling," shewhispered huskily. "Let me get on top." But the man didnot move.

She reached up and pushed at his massive shoulders.“Darling, I . . . I can’t breathe!” She beganfeeling faint. She felt her ribs cracking.“¡Despiértate!” Her fingers instinctivelystarted pulling at his matted hair. *Wake up!*

It was then that she felt the warm sticky liquid. It was mattedin his hair—flowing onto her cheeks, into her mouth. It wassalty. She twisted wildly beneath him. Above her, a strange shaftof light illuminated the German’s contorted face. The bullethole in his temple was gushing blood all over her. She tried toscream, but there was no air left in her lungs. He was crushingher. Delirious, she clawed toward the shaft of light coming fromthe doorway. She saw a hand. A gun with a silencer. A flash oflight. And then nothing.

CHAPTER 40

Outside Node 3, Chartrukian looked desperate. He was trying toconvince Hale that TRANSLTR was in trouble. Susan raced by themwith only one thought in mind—to find Strathmore.

The panicked Sys-Sec grabbed Susan's arm as she passed."Ms. Fletcher! We have a virus! I'm positive! You haveto—"

Susan shook herself free and glared ferociously. "I thoughtthe commander told you to go home." "But the Run-Monitor! It's registeringeighteen—"

"Commander Strathmore told you to go home!"

"FUCK STRATHMORE!" Chartrukian screamed, the wordsresounding throughout the dome.

A deep voice boomed from above. "Mr. Chartrukian?"

The three Crypto employees froze.

High above them, Strathmore stood at the railing outside hisoffice.

For a moment, the only sound inside the dome was the uneven humof the generators below. Susan tried desperately to catchStrathmore's eye. *Commander! Hale is North Dakota!*

But Strathmore was fixated on the young Sys-Sec. He descendedthe stairs without so much as a blink, keeping his eyes trained onChartrukian the whole way down. He made his way across the Cryptofloor and stopped six inches in front of the trembling technician."*What* did you say?"

"Sir," Chartrukian choked, "TRANSLTR's introuble."

"Commander?" Susan interjected. "If Icould—"

Strathmore waved her off. His eyes never left the Sys-Sec.

Phil blurted, "We have an infected file, sir. I'm sureof it!"

Strathmore's complexion turned a deep red. "Mr.Chartrukian, we've been through this. There is *no* fileinfecting TRANSLTR!"

"Yes, there is!" he cried. "And if it makes itsway to the main databank—"

"Where the hell is this infected file?" Strathmorebellowed. "Show it to me!"

Chartrukian hesitated. "I can't."

"Of course you can't! It doesn't exist!"

Susan said, "Commander, I must—"

Again Strathmore silenced her with an angry wave.

Susan eyed Hale nervously. He seemed smug and detached. *Itmakes perfect sense*, she thought. *Hale wouldn't beworried about a virus; he knows what's*

really going on insideTRANSLTR.
Chartrukian was insistent. “The infected file *exists*, sir. But Gauntlet never picked it up.”
“If Gauntlet never picked it up,” Strathmore fumed,“then how the hell do you know it exists?”
Chartrukian suddenly sounded more confident. “Mutationstrings, sir. I ran a full analysis, and the probe turned upmutation strings!”

Susan now understood why the Sys-Sec was so concerned. *Mutation strings*, she mused. She knew mutation strings wereprogramming sequences that corrupted data in extremely complexways. They were very common in computer viruses, particularlyviruses that altered large blocks of data. Of course, Susan alsoknew from Tankado’s E-mail that the mutation stringsChartrukian had seen were harmless—simply part of DigitalFortress.

The Sys-Sec went on. “When I first saw the strings, sir, Ithought Gauntlet’s filters had failed. But then I ran sometests and found out . . .” He paused, looking suddenly uneasy.“I found out that somebody manually *bypassed*Gauntlet.”

The statement met with a sudden hush. Strathmore’s faceturned an even deeper shade of crimson. There was no doubt whomChartrukian was accusing; Strathmore’s terminal was the onlyone in Crypto with clearance to bypass Gauntlet’s filters.

When Strathmore spoke, his voice was like ice. “Mr.Chartrukian, not that it is any concern of yours, but *I*bypassed Gauntlet.” He went on, his temper hovering near theboiling point. “As I told you earlier, I’m running a veryadvanced diagnostic. The mutation strings you see in TRANSLTR arepart of that diagnostic; they are there because *I* put themthere. Gauntlet refused to let me load the file, so I bypassed itsfilters.” Strathmore’s eyes narrowed sharply atChartrukian. “Now, will there be anything else before yougo?”

In a flash, it all clicked for Susan. When Strathmore haddownloaded the encrypted Digital Fortress algorithm from theInternet and tried to run it through TRANSLTR, the mutation stringshad tripped Gauntlet’s filters. Desperate to know whetherDigital Fortress was breakable, Strathmore decided to bypass thefilters.

Normally, bypassing Gauntlet was unthinkable. In this situation,however, there was no danger in sending Digital Fortress directlyinto TRANSLTR; the commander knew exactly what the file was andwhere it came from.
“With all due respect, sir,” Chartrukian pressed,“I’ve never heard of a diagnostic that employsmutation—”
“Commander,” Susan interjected, not able to waitanother moment. “I really

need to—”
This time her words were cut short by the sharp ring ofStrathmore’s cellular phone. The commander snatched up thereceiver. “What is it!” he barked. Then he fell silentand listened to the caller.

Susan forgot about Hale for an instant. She prayed the callerwas David. *Tell me he’s okay*, she thought. *Tell mehe found the ring!* But Strathmore caught her eye and he gaveher a frown. It was not David.

Susan felt her breath grow short. All she wanted to know wasthat the man she loved was safe. Strathmore, Susan knew, wasimpatient for other reasons; if David took much longer, thecommander would have to send backup—NSA field agents. It was agamble he had hoped to avoid.
“Commander?” Chartrukian urged. “I really thinkwe should check—”

“Hold on,” Strathmore said, apologizing to his caller.He covered his mouthpiece and leveled a fiery stare at his youngSys-Sec. “Mr. Chartrukian,” he growled, “thisdiscussion is over. You are to leave Crypto. *Now.*That’s an order.”
Chartrukian stood stunned. “But, sir, mutationstr—”
“NOW!” Strathmore bellowed.
Chartrukian stared a moment, speechless. Then he stormed offtoward the Sys-Sec lab.

Strathmore turned and eyed Hale with a puzzled look. Susanunderstood the commander’s mystification. Hale had beenquiet—too quiet. Hale knew very well there was no such thingas a diagnostic that used mutation strings, much less one thatcould keep TRANSLTR busy eighteen hours. And yet Hale hadn’tsaid a word. He appeared indifferent to the entire commotion.Strathmore was obviously wondering *why.* Susan had theanswer.
“Commander,” she said insistently, “if I couldjust speak—”
“In a minute,” he interjected, still eyeing Halequizzically. “I need to take this call.” With that,Strathmore turned on his heel and headed for his office.

Susan opened her mouth, but the words stalled on the tip of hertongue. *Hale is North Dakota!* She stood rigid, unable tobreathe. She felt Hale staring at her. Susan turned. Hale steppedaside and swung his arm graciously toward the Node 3 door.“After you, Sue.”

CHAPTER 41

In a linen closet on the third floor of the Alfonso XIII, a maidlay unconscious on the floor. The man with wire-rim glasses wasreplacing a hotel master key in her pocket. He had not sensed herscream when he struck her, but he had no way of knowing forsure—he had been deaf since he was twelve.

He reached to the battery pack on his belt with a certain kindof reverence; a gift from a client, the machine had given him newlife. He could now receive his contracts anywhere in the world. Allcommunications arrived instantaneously and untraceably.

He was eager as he touched the switch. His glasses flickered tolife. Once again his fingers carved into the empty air and beganclicking together. As always, he had recorded the names of hisvictims—a simple matter of searching a wallet or purse. Thecontacts on his fingers connected, and the letters appeared in thelens of his glasses like ghosts in the air.

SUBJECT: ROCIO EVA GRANADA—TERMINATED

SUBJECT: HANS HUBER—TERMINATED

Three stories below David Becker paid his tab and wanderedacross the lobby, his half-finished drink in hand. He headed towardthe hotel's open terrace for some fresh air. *In andout*, he mused. Things hadn't panned out quite as heexpected. He had a decision to make. Should he just give up and goback to the airport? *A matter of national security.* He sworeunder his breath. So why the hell had they sent aschoolteacher?

Becker moved out of sight of the bartender and dumped theremaining drink in a potted jasmine. The vodka had made himlight-headed. *Cheapest drunk in history,* Susan often calledhim. After refilling the heavy crystal glass from a water fountain,Becker took a long swallow.

He stretched a few times trying to shake off the light haze thathad settled over him. Then he set down his glass and walked acrossthe lobby.

As he passed the elevator, the doors slid opened. There was aman inside. All Becker saw were thick wire-rim glasses. The manraised a handkerchief to blow his nose. Becker smiled politely andmoved on . . . out into the stifling Sevillian night.

CHAPTER 42

Inside Node 3, Susan caught herself pacing frantically. Shewished she'd exposed Hale when she'd had the chance.

Hale sat at his terminal. "Stress is a killer, Sue.Something you want to get off your chest?"

Susan forced herself to sit. She had thought Strathmore would beoff the phone by now and return to speak to her, but he was nowhereto be seen. Susan tried to keep calm. She gazed at her computerscreen. The tracer was still running—for the second time. Itwas immaterial now. Susan knew whose address it would return:GHALE@crypto.nsa.gov.

Susan gazed up toward Strathmore's workstation and knew shecouldn't wait any longer. It was time to interrupt thecommander's phone call. She stood and headed for the door.

Hale seemed suddenly uneasy, apparently noticing Susan'sodd behavior. He strode quickly across the room and beat her to thedoor. He folded his arms and blocked her exit.

"Tell me what's going on," he demanded."There's something going on here today. What isit?"

"Let me out," Susan said as evenly as possible,feeling a sudden twinge of danger.

"Come on," Hale pressed. "Strathmore practicallyfired Chartrukian for doing his job. What's going on insideTRANSLTR? We don't have any diagnostics that run eighteenhours. That's bullshit, and you know it. Tell me what'sgoing on."

Susan's eyes narrowed. *You know damn well what'sgoing on!* "Back off, Greg," she demanded. "Ineed to use the bathroom."

Hale smirked. He waited a long moment and then stepped aside."Sorry Sue. Just flirting."

Susan pushed by him and left Node 3. As she passed the glasswall, she sensed Hale's eyes boring into her from the otherside.

Reluctantly, she circled toward the bathrooms. She would have tomake a detour before visiting the Commander. Greg Hale couldsuspect nothing.

CHAPTER 43

A jaunty forty-five, Chad Brinkerhoff was well-pressed,well-groomed, and well-informed. His summer-weight suit, like histan skin, showed not a wrinkle or hint of wear. His hair was thick,sandy blond, and most importantly—all his own. His eyes were abrilliant blue—subtly enhanced by the miracle of tintedcontact lenses.

He surveyed the wood-paneled office around him and knew he hadrisen as far as he would rise in the NSA. He was on the ninthfloor—Mahogany Row. Office 9A197. The Directorial Suite.

It was a Saturday night, and Mahogany Row was all but deserted,its executives long gone—off enjoying whatever pastimesinfluential men enjoyed in their leisure. Although Brinkerhoff hadalways dreamed of a "real" post with the agency, he hadsomehow ended up as a "personal aide"—the officialcul de sac of the political rat race. The fact that he worked sideby side with the single most powerful man in American intelligencewas little consolation. Brinkerhoff had graduated with honors fromAndover and Williams, and yet here he was, middle-aged, with noreal power—no real stake. He spent his days arranging someoneelse's calendar.

* * *

There were definite benefits to being the director'spersonal aide—Brinkerhoff had a plush office in thedirectorial suite, full access to all the NSA departments, and acertain level of distinction that came from the company he kept. Heran errands for the highest echelons of power. Deep downBrinkerhoff knew he was born to be a PA—smart enough to takenotes, handsome enough to give press conferences, and lazy enoughto be content with it.

The sticky-sweet chime of his mantel clock accented the end ofanother day of his pathetic existence. *Shit,* he thought. *Five o'clock on a Saturday. What the hell am I doinghere?*

"Chad?" A woman appeared in his doorway.

Brinkerhoff looked up. It was Midge Milken, Fontaine'sinternal security analyst. She was sixty, slightly heavy, and, muchto the puzzlement of Brinkerhoff, quite appealing. A consummateflirt and an ex-wife three times over, Midge prowled the six-roomdirectorial suite with a saucy authority. She was sharp, intuitive,worked ungodly hours, and was rumored to know more about theNSA's inner workings than God himself.

Damn, Brinkerhoff thought, eyeing her in her graycashmere-dress. *Either I'm getting older, or she'slooking younger.*
"Weekly reports." She smiled, waving a fanfold ofpaper. "You need to check the figures."
Brinkerhoff eyed her body. "Figures look good fromhere."
"Really Chad," she laughed. "I'm old enoughto be your mother."
Don't remind me, he thought.

Midge strode in and sidled up to his desk. "I'm on myway out, but the director wants these compiled by the time he getsback from South America. That's Monday, bright andearly." She dropped the printouts in front of him.
"What am I, an accountant?"
"No, hon, you're a cruise director. Thought you knewthat."
"So what am I doing crunching numbers?"
She ruffled his hair. "You wanted more responsibility. Hereit is."
He looked up at her sadly. "Midge . . . I have nolife."
She tapped her finger on the paper. "*This* is yourlife, Chad Brinkerhoff." She looked down at him and softened."Anything I can get you before I go?"
He eyed her pleadingly and rolled his aching neck. "Myshoulders are tight."
Midge didn't bite. "Take an aspirin."
He pouted. "No back rub?"
She shook her head. "*Cosmopolitan* says two-thirds ofbackrubs end in sex."
Brinkerhoff looked indignant. "*Ours* neverdo!"
"Precisely." She winked. "That's theproblem."
"Midge—"
"Night, Chad." She headed for the door.

"You're leaving?" "You know I'd stay," Midge said, pausing in thedoorway, "but I do have *some* pride. I just can'tsee playing second fiddle—particularly to ateenager."
"My wife's *not* a teenager," Brinkerhoffdefended. "She just acts like one."
Midge gave him a surprised look. "I wasn't talkingabout your wife." She battered her eyes innocently. "Iwas talking about *Carmen."* She spoke the name with athick Puerto Rican accent.
Brinkerhoff's voice cracked slightly. "Who?"
"Carmen? In food services?"

Brinkerhoff felt himself flush. Carmen Huerta was atwenty-seven-year-old pastry chef who worked in the NSA commissary.Brinkerhoff had enjoyed a number of presumably secret after-hoursflings with her in the stockroom.
She gave him a wicked wink. "Remember, Chad . . . BigBrother knows all."
Big Brother? Brinkerhoff gulped in disbelief. *BigBrother watches the*

STOCKROOMS too?

Big Brother, or "Brother" as Midge often called it,was a Centrex 333 that sat in a small closetlike space off thesuite's central room. Brother was Midge's whole world. Itreceived data from 148 closed circuit video cameras, 399 electronicdoors, 377 phones taps, and 212 free-standing bugs in the NSAcomplex.

The directors of the NSA had learned the hard way that 26,000employees were not only a great asset but a great liability. Everymajor security breach in the NSA's history had come fromwithin. It was Midge's job as internal security analyst, towatch everything that went on within the walls of the NSA . . .including, apparently, the commissary stockroom.

Brinkerhoff stood to defend himself, but Midge was already onher way out.

"Hands *above* the desk," she called over hershoulder. "No funny stuff after I go. The walls haveeyes."

Brinkerhoff sat and listened to the sound of her heels fadingdown the corridor. At least he knew Midge would never tell. She wasnot without her weaknesses. Midge had indulged in a fewindiscretions of her own—mostly wandering back rubs withBrinkerhoff.

His thoughts turned back to Carmen. He pictured her lissomebody, those dark thighs, that AM radio she played fullblast—hot San Juan salsa. He smiled. *Maybe I'll dropby for a snack when I'm done.*

He opened the first printout. CRYPTO—PRODUCTION/EXPENDITURE

His mood immediately lightened. Midge had given him a freebie;the Crypto report was always a piece of cake. Technically he wassupposed to compile the whole thing, but the only figure thedirector ever asked for was the MCD—the mean cost perdecryption. The MCD represented the estimated amount it costTRANSLTR to break a single code. As long as the figure was below$1,000 per code, Fontaine didn't flinch. *A grand a pop.*Brinkerhoff chuckled. *Our tax dollars at work.*

As he began plowing through the document and checking the dailyMCDs, images of Carmen Huerta smearing herself with honey andconfectioner's sugar began playing in his head. Thirty secondslater he was almost done. The Crypto data was perfect—asalways.

But just before moving on to the next report, something caughthis eye. At the bottom of the sheet, the last MCD was off. Thefigure was so large that it had carried over into the next columnand made a mess of the page. Brinkerhoff stared at the figure inshock.

999,999,999? He gasped. *A billion dollars?* Theimages of Carmen vanished. A *billion*dollar code?

Brinkerhoff sat there a minute, paralyzed. Then in a burst ofpanic, he raced out into the hallway. “Midge! Comeback!”

CHAPTER 44

Phil Chartrukian stood fuming in the Sys-Sec lab.Strathmore's words echoed in his head: *Leave now!That's an order!* He kicked the trash can and swore in theempty lab.

"Diagnostic, my ass! Since when does the deputy directorbypass Gauntlet's filters!?"

The Sys-Secs were well paid to protect the computer systems atthe NSA, and Chartrukian had learned that there were only two jobrequirements: be utterly brilliant and exhaustively paranoid.

Hell, he cursed, *this isn't paranoia! The fuckingRun-Monitor's reading eighteen hours!*

It was a virus. Chartrukian could feel it. There was littledoubt in his mind what was going on: Strathmore had made a mistakeby bypassing Gauntlet's filters, and now he was trying tocover it up with some half-baked story about a diagnostic.

Chartrukian wouldn't have been quite so edgy had TRANSLTRbeen the only concern. But it wasn't. Despite its appearance,the great decoding beast was by no means an island. Although thecryptographers believed Gauntlet was constructed for the solepurpose of protecting their codebreaking masterpiece, the Sys-Secsunderstood the truth. The Gauntlet filters served a much highergod. The NSA's main databank.

The history behind the databank's construction had alwaysfascinated Chartrukian. Despite the efforts of the Department ofDefense to keep the Internet to themselves in the late 1970s, itwas too useful a tool not to attract the public-sector. Eventuallyuniversities pried their way on. Shortly after that came thecommercial servers. The floodgates opened, and the public pouredin. By the early 90's, the government's once-secure"Internet" was a congested wasteland of public E-mail andcyberporn.

Following a number of unpublicized, yet highly damaging computerinfiltrations at the Office of Naval Intelligence, it becameincreasingly clear that government secrets were no longer safe oncomputers connected to the burgeoning Internet. The President, inconjunction with the Department of Defense, passed a classifieddecree that would fund a new, totally secure government network toreplace the tainted Internet and function as a link between U.S.intelligence agencies. To prevent further computer pilfering

ofgovernment secrets, all sensitive data was relocated to one, highlysecure location—the newly constructed NSA databank—theFort Knox of U.S. intelligence data.

Literally millions of the country's most classified photos,tapes, documents, and videos were digitized and transferred to theimmense storage facility and then the hard copies were destroyed.The databank was protected by a triple-layer power relay and atiered digital backup system. It was also 214 feet underground toshield it from magnetic fields and possible explosions. Activitieswithin the control room were designated *Top Secret Umbra* . .. the country's highest level of security.

The secrets of the country had never been safer. Thisimpregnable databank now housed blueprints for advanced weaponry,witness protection lists, aliases of field agents, detailedanalyses and proposals for covert operations. The list was endless.There would be no more black-bag jobs damaging U.S.intelligence.

Of course, the officers of the NSA realized that stored data hadvalue only if it was accessible. The real coup of the databank wasnot getting the classified data off the streets, it was making itaccessible only to the correct people. All stored information had asecurity rating and, depending on the level of secrecy, wasaccessible to government officials on a compartmentalized basis. Asubmarine commander could dial in and check the NSA's mostrecent satellite photos of Russian ports, but he would not haveaccess to the plans for an antidrug mission in South America. CIAanalysts could access histories of known assassins but could notaccess launch codes reserved for the President.

Sys-Secs, of course, had no clearance for the information in thedatabank, but they were responsible for its safety. Like all largedatabanks—from insurance companies to universities—theNSA facility was constantly under attack by computer hackers tryingto sneak a peek at the secrets waiting inside. But the NSA securityprogrammers were the best in the world. No one had ever come closeto infiltrating the NSA databank—and the NSA had no reason tothink anybody ever would.

* * *

Inside the Sys-Sec lab, Chartrukian broke into a sweat trying todecide whether to leave. Trouble in TRANSLTR meant trouble in thedatabank too. Strathmore's lack of concern wasbewildering.

Everyone knew that TRANSLTR and the NSA main databank wereinextricably linked. Each new code, once broken, was fired fromCrypto through 450 yards of fiber-optic cable to the NSA databankfor safe keeping. The sacred storage facility had limited points ofentry—and TRANSLTR was

one of them. Gauntlet was supposed tobe the impregnable threshold guardian. And Strathmore had bypassedit.

Chartrukian could hear his own heart pounding. *TRANSLTR's been stuck eighteen hours!* The thought of acomputer virus entering TRANSLTR and then running wild in thebasement of the NSA proved too much. "I've got to reportthis," he blurted aloud.

In a situation like this, Chartrukian knew there was only oneperson to call: the NSA's senior Sys-Sec officer, theshort-fused, 400-pound computer guru who had built Gauntlet. Hisnickname was Jabba. He was a demigod at the NSA —roaming thehalls, putting out virtual fires, and cursing the feeblemindednessof the inept and the ignorant. Chartrukian knew that as soon asJabba heard Strathmore had bypassed Gauntlet's filters, allhell would break loose. *Too bad*, he thought, *I'vegot a job to do.* He grabbed the phone and dialed Jabba'stwenty-four-hour cellular.

CHAPTER 45

David Becker wandered aimlessly down Avenida del Cid and triedto collect his thoughts. Muted shadows played on the cobblestonesbeneath his feet. The vodka was still with him. Nothing about hislife seemed in focus at the moment. His mind drifted back to Susan,wondering if she'd gotten his phone message yet.

Up ahead, a Seville Transit Bus screeched to a halt in front ofa bus stop. Becker looked up. The bus's doors cranked open,but no one disembarked. The diesel engine roared back to life, butjust as the bus was pulling out, three teenagers appeared out of abar up the street and ran after it, yelling and waving. The engineswound down again, and the kids hurried to catch up.

Thirty yards behind them, Becker stared in utter incredulity.His vision was suddenly focused, but he knew what he was seeing wasimpossible. It was a one-in-a-million chance.

I'm hallucinating.

But as the bus doors opened, the kids crowded around to board.Becker saw it again. This time he was certain. Clearly illuminatedin the haze of the corner streetlight, he'd seen her.

The passengers climbed on, and the bus's engines revved upagain. Becker suddenly found himself at a full sprint, the bizarreimage fixed in his mind—black lipstick, wild eye shadow, andthat hair . . . spiked straight up in three distinctive spires.Red, white, and blue.

As the bus started to move, Becker dashed up the street into awake of carbon monoxide.

"Espera!" he called, running behind the bus.

Becker's cordovan loafers skimmed the pavement. His usualsquash agility was not with him, though; he felt off balance. Hisbrain was having trouble keeping track of his feet. He cursed thebartender and his jet lag.

The bus was one of Seville's older diesels, and fortunatelyfor Becker, first gear was a long, arduous climb. Becker felt thegap closing. He knew he had to reach the bus before itdownshifted.

The twin tailpipes choked out a cloud of thick smoke as thedriver prepared to drop the bus into second gear. Becker strainedfor more speed. As he surged even with the rear bumper, Beckermoved right, racing up beside the bus. He could see the reardoors—and as on all Seville buses, it was propped wide

open:cheap air-conditioning.

Becker fixed his sights on the opening and ignored the burningsensation in his legs. The tires were beside him, shoulder high,humming at a higher and higher pitch every second. He surged towardthe door, missing the handle and almost losing his balance. Hepushed harder. Underneath the bus, the clutch clicked as the driverprepared to change gears.

He's shifting! I won't make it!

But as the engine cogs disengaged to align the larger gears, thebus let up ever so slightly. Becker lunged. The engine reengagedjust as his fingertips curled around the door handle. Becker'sshoulder almost ripped from its socket as the engine dug in,catapulting him up onto the landing.

* * * David Becker lay collapsed just inside the vehicle'sdoorway. The pavement raced by only inches away. He was now sober.His legs and shoulder ached. Wavering, he stood, steadied himself,and climbed into the darkened bus. In the crowd of silhouettes,only a few seats away, were the three distinctive spikes ofhair.

Red, white, and blue! I made it!

Becker's mind filled with images of the ring, the waitingLearjet 60, and at the end of it all, Susan.

As Becker came even with the girl's seat wondering what tosay to her, the bus passed beneath a streetlight. The punk'sface was momentarily illuminated.

Becker stared in horror. The makeup on her face was smearedacross a thick stubble. She was not a girl at all, but a young man.He wore a silver stud in his upper lip, a black leather jacket, andno shirt.

"What the fuck do *you* want?" the hoarse voiceasked. His accent was New York.

With the disorientated nausea of a slow-motion free fall, Beckergazed at the busload of passengers staring back at him. They wereall punks. At least half of them had red, white, and blue hair.

"Siéntate!" the driver yelled.

Becker was too dazed to hear.

"Siéntate!" The driver screamed. *"Sit down!"*

Becker turned vaguely to the angry face in the rearview mirror.But he had waited too long.

Annoyed, the driver slammed down hard on the brakes. Becker felthis weight shift. He reached for a seat back but missed. For aninstant, David Becker was airborne. Then he landed hard on thegritty floor.

On Avenida del Cid, a figure stepped from the shadows. Headjusted his wire-rim glasses and peered after the departing bus.David Becker had escaped, but it would not be for long. Of all thebuses in Seville, Mr. Becker had just

boarded the infamous number27.
Bus 27 had only one destination.

CHAPTER 46

Phil Chartrukian slammed down his receiver. Jabba's linewas busy; Jabba spurned call-waiting as an intrusive gimmick thatwas introduced by AT&T to increase profits by connecting everycall; the simple phrase "I'm on the other line, I'llcall you back" made phone companies millions annually.Jabba's refusal of call-waiting was his own brand of silentobjection to the NSA's requirement that he carry an emergencycellular at all times.

Chartrukian turned and looked out at the deserted Crypto floor.The hum of the generators below sounded louder every minute. Hesensed that time was running out. He knew he was supposed to leave,but from out of the rumble beneath Crypto, the Sys-Sec mantra beganplaying in his head: *Act first, explain later.*

In the high-stakes world of computer security, minutes oftenmeant the difference between saving a system or losing it. Therewas seldom time to justify a defensive procedure before taking it.Sys-Secs were paid for their technical expertise . . . and theirinstinct.

Act first, explain later. Chartrukian knew what he had todo. He also knew that when the dust settled, he would be either anNSA hero or in the unemployment line.

The great decoding computer had a virus—of that, theSys-Sec was certain. There was one responsible course of action.Shut it down.

Chartrukian knew there were only two ways to shut down TRANSLTR.One was the commander's private terminal, which was locked inhis office—out of the question. The other was the manualkillswitch located on one of the sublevels beneath the Cryptofloor.

Chartrukian swallowed hard. He hated the sublevels. He'donly been there once, during training. It

Chartrukian swallowed hard. He hated the sublevels. He'donly been there once, during training. It foot drop to the rumbling power supplies below . . .

It was the last place he felt like going, and Strathmore was thelast person he felt like crossing, but duty was duty. *They'll thank me tomorrow,* he thought, wondering if he wasright.

Taking a deep breath, Chartrukian opened the seniorSys-Sec's metal locker. On a shelf of disassembled computerparts, hidden behind a media concentrator and LAN tester, was aStanford alumni mug. Without touching the rim, he

reached insideand lifted out a single Medeco key.
“It’s amazing,” he grumbled, “whatSystem-Security officers *don’t* know aboutsecurity.”

CHAPTER 47

“A billion-dollar code?” Midge snickered, accompanyingBrinkerhoff back up the hallway. “That’s a goodone.”
“I swear it,” he said.
She eyed him askance. “This better not be some ploy to getme out of this dress.”
“Midge, I would never—” he saidself-righteously.
“I know, Chad. Don’t remind me.”
Thirty seconds later, Midge was sitting in Brinkerhoff’schair and studying the Crypto report.
“See?” he said, leaning over her and pointing to thefigure in question. “This MCD? A billion dollars!”
Midge chuckled. “It *does* appear to be a touch on thehigh side, doesn’t it?”
“Yeah.” He groaned. “Just a touch.”
“Looks like a divide-by-zero.”
“A who?”
“A divide-by-zero,” she said, scanning the rest of thedata. “The MCD’s calculated as a fraction—totalexpense divided by number of decryptions.”
“Of course.” Brinkerhoff nodded blankly and tried notto peer down the front of her dress.
“When the denominator’s zero,” Midge explained,“the quotient goes to infinity. Computers hate infinity, sothey type all nines.” She pointed to a different column.“See this?”
“Yeah.” Brinkerhoff refocused on the paper.
“It’s today’s raw production data. Take a look atthe number of decryptions.” Brinkerhoff dutifully followed her finger down the column.
NUMBER OF DECRYPTIONS = 0
Midge tapped on the figure. “It’s just as I suspected.Divide-by-zero.”
Brinkerhoff arched his eyebrows. “So everything’sokay?”
She shrugged. “Just means we haven’t broken any codestoday. TRANSLTR must be taking a break.”

“A break?” Brinkerhoff looked doubtful. He’d beenwith the director long enough to know that “breaks” werenot part of his preferred modus operandi—particularly withrespect to TRANSLTR. Fontaine had paid $2 billion for thecode-breaking behemoth, and he wanted his money’s worth. Everysecond

TRANSLTR sat idle was money down the toilet.
“Ah . . . Midge?” Brinkerhoff said. “TRANSLTRdoesn’t take any breaks. It runs day and night. You knowthat.”
She shrugged. “Maybe Strathmore didn’t feel likehanging out last night to prepare the weekend run. He probably knewFontaine was away and ducked out early to go fishing.”
“Come on, Midge.” Brinkerhoff gave her disgusted look.“Give the guy a break.”

It was no secret Midge Milken didn’t like TrevorStrathmore. Strathmore had attempted a cunning maneuver rewritingSkipjack, but he’d been caught. Despite Strathmore’s boldintentions, the NSA had paid dearly. The EFF had gained strength,Fontaine had lost credibility with Congress, and worst of all, theagency had lost a lot of its anonymity. There were suddenlyhousewives in Minnesota complaining to America Online and Prodigythat the NSA might be reading their E-mail—like the NSA gave adamn about a secret recipe for candied yams.

Strathmore’s blunder had cost the NSA, and Midge feltresponsible—not that she could have anticipated thecommander’s stunt, but the bottom line was that anunauthorized action had taken place behind Director Fontaine’sback, a back Midge was paid to cover. Fontaine’s hands-offattitude made him susceptible; and it made Midge nervous. But thedirector had learned long ago to stand back and let smart people dotheir jobs; that’s exactly how he handled TrevorStrathmore.
“Midge, you know damn well Strathmore’s notslacking,” Brinkerhoff argued. “He runs TRANSLTR like afiend.”

Midge nodded. Deep down, she knew that accusing Strathmore ofshirking was absurd. The commander was as dedicated as theycame—dedicated to a fault. He bore the evils of the world ashis own personal cross. The NSA’s Skipjack plan had beenStrathmore’s brainchild—a bold attempt to change theworld. Unfortunately, like so many divine quests, this crusadeended in crucifixion. “Okay,” she admitted, “so I’m being a littleharsh.”
“A little?” Brinkerhoff eyes narrowed.“Strathmore’s got a backlog of files a mile long.He’s not about to let TRANSLTR sit idle for a wholeweekend.”

“Okay, okay.” Midge sighed. “My mistake.”She furrowed her brow and puzzled why TRANSLTR hadn’t brokenany codes all day. “Let me double-check something,” shesaid, and began flipping through the report. She located what shewas looking for and scanned the figures. After a moment she nodded.“You’re right, Chad. TRANSLTR’s been running fullforce. Raw consumables are even a little on the high side;we’re at over half a million

kilowatt-hours since midnightlast night."
"So where does that leave us?"
Midge was puzzled. "I'm not sure. It'sodd."
"You want to rerun the data?"
She gave him a disapproving stare. There were two things onenever questioned about Midge Milken. One of them was her data.Brinkerhoff waited while Midge studied the figures.

"Huh." She finally grunted. "Yesterday'sstats look fine: 237 codes broken. MCD, $874. Average time percode, a little over six minutes. Raw consumables, average. Lastcode entering TRANSLTR—" She stopped.
"What is it?"
"That's funny," she said. "Last file onyesterday's queue log ran at 11:37 p.m."
"So?"
"So, TRANSLTR breaks codes every six minutes or so. Thelast file of the day usually runs closer to midnight. It suredoesn't look like—" Midge suddenly stopped short andgasped.
Brinkerhoff jumped. "What!"
Midge was staring at the readout in disbelief. "This file?The one that entered TRANSLTR last night?"
"Yeah?"
"It hasn't broken yet. It's queue time was23:37:08—but it lists *no* decrypt time."
Midgefumbled with the sheets. "Yesterday *or* today!"
Brinkerhoff shrugged. "Maybe those guys are running a toughdiagnostic."
Midge shook her head. "*Eighteen hours tough?"*She paused. "Not likely. Besides, the queue data saysit's an outside file. We should call Strathmore."
"At home?" Brinkerhoff swallowed. "On a Saturdaynight?"

"No," Midge said. "If I know Strathmore,he's on top of this. I'll bet good money he's here.Just a hunch." Midge's hunches were the other thing onenever questioned. "Come on," she said, standing up."Let's see if I'm right."
* * *
Brinkerhoff followed Midge to her office, where she sat down andbegan to work Big Brother's keypads like a virtuoso pipeorganist.
Brinkerhoff gazed up at the array of closed-caption videomonitors on her wall, their screens all freeze frames of the NSAseal. "You're gonna snoop Crypto?" he askednervously.

"Nope," Midge replied. "Wish I could, butCrypto's a sealed deal. It's got no video. No sound. Nonothing. Strathmore's orders. All I've got is approachstats and basic TRANSLTR stuff. We're lucky we've evengot *that*. Strathmore wanted total isolation, but Fontaineinsisted on the basics."

Brinkerhoff looked puzzled. “Crypto hasn’t gotvideo?”
“Why?” she asked, without turning from her monitor.“You and Carmen looking for a little more privacy?”
Brinkerhoff grumbled something inaudible.

Midge typed some more keys. “I’m pullingStrathmore’s elevator log.” She studied her monitor amoment and then rapped her knuckle on the desk. “He’shere,” she said matter-of-factly. “He’s in Cryptoright now. Look at this. Talk about long hours—he went inyesterday morning bright and early, and his elevator hasn’tbudged since. I’m showing no magno-card use for him on themain door. So he’s definitely in there.”
Brinkerhoff breathed a slight sigh of relief. “So, ifStrathmore’s in there, everything’s okay,right?”
Midge thought a moment. “Maybe,” she finallydecided.
“Maybe?”

“We should call him and double-check.” Brinkerhoff groaned. “Midge, he’s the deputy director.I’m sure he has everything under control. Let’s notsecond-guess—”

“Oh, come on, Chad—don’t be such a child.We’re just doing our job. We’ve got a snag in the stats,and we’re following up. Besides,” she added,“I’d like to remind Strathmore that Big Brother’swatching. Make him think twice before planning any more of hishare-brained stunts to save the world.” Midge picked up thephone and began dialing.
Brinkerhoff looked uneasy. “You really think you shouldbother him?” “I’m not bothering him,” Midge said, tossing himthe receiver. “*You* are.”

CHAPTER 48

“What?” Midge sputtered in disbelief. “Strathmoreclaims our data is wrong?”
Brinkerhoff nodded and hung up the phone.
“Strathmore *denied* that TRANSLTR’s been stuckon one file for eighteen hours?”

“He was quite pleasant about the whole thing.”Brinkerhoff beamed, pleased with himself for surviving the phonecall. “He assured me TRANSLTR was working fine. Said it wasbreaking codes every six minutes even as we speak. Thanked me forchecking up on him.”
“He’s lying,” Midge snapped. “I’ve beenrunning these Crypto stats for two years. The data is neverwrong.”
“First time for everything,” he said casually.
She shot him a disapproving look. “I run all data *twice.”*
“Well . . . you know what they say about computers. Whenthey screw up, at least they’re consistent about it.”

Midge spun and faced him. “This isn’t funny, Chad! TheDDO just told a blatant lie to the director’s office. I wantto know why!”
Brinkerhoff suddenly wished he hadn’t called her back in.Strathmore’s phone call had set her off. Ever since Skipjack,whenever Midge had a sense that something suspicious was going on,she made an eerie transition from flirt to fiend. There was nostopping her until she sorted it out.
“Midge, it *is* possible our data is off,”Brinkerhoff said firmly. “I mean, think about it—a filethat ties up TRANSLTR for eighteen hours? It’s unheard of. Gohome. It’s late.”
She gave him a haughty look and tossed the report on thecounter. “I trust the data. Instinct says it’sright.”
Brinkerhoff frowned. Not even the director questioned MidgeMilken’s instincts anymore—she had an uncanny habit ofalways being right.
“Something’s up,” she declared. “And Iintend to find out what it is.”

CHAPTER 49

Becker dragged himself off the floor of the bus and collapsed inan empty seat.
“Nice move, dipshit.” The kid with the three spikessneered. Becker squinted in the stark lighting. It was the kidhe’d chased onto the bus. He glumly surveyed the sea of red,white, and blue coif-fures.
“What’s with the hair?” Becker moaned, motioningto the others. “It’s all . . .”
“Red, white, and blue?” the kid offered.
Becker nodded, trying not to stare at the infected perforationin the kid’s upper lip.
“Judas Taboo,” the kid said matter-of-factly.
Becker looked bewildered.
The punk spit in the aisle, obviously disgusted withBecker’s ignorance. “Judas Taboo? Greatest punk since SidVicious? Blew his head off here a year ago today. It’s hisanniversary.”
Becker nodded vaguely, obviously missing the connection.
“Taboo did his hair this way the day he signed off.”The kid spit again. “Every fan worth his weight in piss hasgot red, white, and blue hair today.”

For a long moment, Becker said nothing. Slowly, as if he hadbeen shot with a tranquilizer, he turned and faced front. Beckersurveyed the group on the bus. Every last one was a punk. Most werestaring at him.
Every fan has red, white, and blue hair today.
Becker reached up and pulled the driver-alert cord on the wall.It was time to get off. He pulled again. Nothing happened. Hepulled a third time, more frantically. Nothing.
“They disconnect ’em on bus 27.” The kid spatagain. “So we don’t fuck with ’em.”
Becker turned. “You mean, I can’t get off?”
The kid laughed. “Not till the end of the line.”
Five minutes later, the bus was barreling along an unlit Spanishcountry road. Becker turned to the kid behind him. “Is thisthing ever going to stop?”
The kid nodded. “Few more miles.”
“Where are we going?”
He broke into a sudden wide grin. “You mean you don’tknow?”
Becker shrugged. The kid started laughing hysterically. “Oh, shit.You’re gonna love it.”

CHAPTER 50

Only yards from TRANSLTR's hull, Phil Chartrukian stoodover a patch of white lettering on the Crypto floor.

CRYPTO SUBLEVELS

AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY

He knew he was definitely *not* authorized personnel. Heshot a quick glance up at Strathmore's office. The curtainswere still pulled. Chartrukian had seen Susan Fletcher go into thebathrooms, so he knew she wasn't a problem. The only otherquestion was Hale. He glanced toward Node 3, wondering if thecryptographer were watching.

"Fuck it," he grumbled.

Below his feet the outline of a recessed trapdoor was barelyvisible in the floor. Chartrukian palmed the key he'd justtaken from the Sys-Sec lab.

He knelt down, inserted the key in the floor, and turned. Thebolt beneath clicked. Then he unscrewed the large externalbutterfly latch and freed the door. Checking once again over hisshoulder, he squatted down and pulled. The panel was small, onlythree feet by three feet, but it was heavy. When it finally opened,the Sys-Sec stumbled back.

A blast of hot air hit him in the face. It carried with it thesharp bite of freon gas. Billows of steam swirled out of theopening, illuminated by the red utility lighting below. The distanthum of the generators became a rumble. Chartrukian stood up andpeered into the opening. It looked more like the gateway to hellthan a service entrance for a computer. A narrow ladder led to aplatform under the floor. Beyond that, there were stairs, but allhe could see was swirling red mist.

* * *

Greg Hale stood behind the one-way glass of Node 3. He watchedas Phil Chartrukian eased himself down the ladder toward thesublevels. From where Hale was standing, the Sys-Sec's headappeared to have been severed from his body and left out on theCrypto floor. Then, slowly, it sank into the swirling mist.

"Gutsy move," Hale muttered. He knew where Chartrukianwas headed. An emergency manual abort of TRANSLTR was a logicalaction if he thought the computer had a virus. Unfortunately, itwas also a sure way to have Crypto crawling with Sys-Secs in aboutten minutes. Emergency actions raised alert

flags at the mainswitchboard. A Sys-Sec investigation of Crypto was something Halecould not afford. Hale left Node 3 and headed for the trapdoor.Chartrukian had to be stopped.

CHAPTER 51

Jabba resembled a giant tadpole. Like the cinematic creature forwhom he was nicknamed, the man was a hairless spheroid. As residentguardian angel of all NSA computer systems, Jabba marched fromdepartment to department, tweaking, soldering, and reaffirming hiscredo that prevention was the best medicine. No NSA computer hadever been infected under Jabba's reign; he intended to keep itthat way.

Jabba's home base was a raised workstation overlooking theNSA's underground, ultra-secret databank. It was there that avirus would do the most damage and there that he spent the majorityof his time. At the moment, however, Jabba was taking a break andenjoying pepperoni calzones in the NSA's all-night commissary.He was about to dig into his third when his cellular phonerang.

"Go," he said, coughing as he swallowed amouthful.

"Jabba," a woman's voice cooed. "It'sMidge."

"Data Queen!" the huge man gushed. He'd alwayshad a soft spot for Midge Milken. She was sharp, and she was alsothe only woman Jabba had ever met who flirted with him. "Howthe hell are you?"

"No complaints."

Jabba wiped his mouth. "You on site?"

"Yup."

"Care to join me for a calzone?"

"Love to Jabba, but I'm watching these hips."

"Really?" He snickered. "Mind if I joinyou?"

"You're bad."

"You have no idea. . . ."

"Glad I caught you in," she said. "I need someadvice."

He took a long swallow of Dr Pepper. "Shoot." "It might be nothing," Midge said, "but my Cryptostats turned up something odd. I was hoping you could shed somelight."

"What ya got?" He took another sip.

"I've got a report saying TRANSLTR's been runningthe same file for eighteen hours and hasn't crackedit."

Jabba sprayed Dr Pepper all over his calzone. "You *what?*"

"Any ideas?"

He dabbed at his calzone with a napkin. “What report isthis?”
“Production report. Basic cost analysis stuff.” Midgequickly explained what she and Brinkerhoff had found.
“Have you called Strathmore?”
“Yes. He said everything’s fine in Crypto. SaidTRANSLTR’s running full speed ahead. Said our data’swrong.”
Jabba furrowed his bulbous forehead. “So what’s theproblem? Your report glitched.” Midge did not respond. Jabbacaught her drift. He frowned. “You don’t think yourreport glitched?”
“Correct.”
“So you think Strathmore’s lying?”
“It’s not that,” Midge said diplomatically,knowing she was on fragile ground. “It’s just that mystats have never been wrong in the past. I thought I’d get asecond opinion.”
“Well,” Jabba said, “I hate to be the one tobreak it to you, but your data’s fried.”
“You think so?”
“I’d bet my job on it.” Jabba took a big bite ofsoggy calzone and spoke with his mouth full. “Longest a filehas ever lasted inside TRANSLTR is three hours. That includesdiagnostics, boundary probes, everything. Only thing that couldlock it down for eighteen hours would have to be viral. Nothingelse could do it.”
“Viral?”
“Yeah, some kind of redundant cycle. Something that gotinto the processors, created a loop, and basically gummed up theworks.”
“Well,” she ventured, “Strathmore’s been inCrypto for about thirty-six hours straight. Any chance he’sfighting a virus?”
Jabba laughed. “Strathmore’s been in there forthirty-six hours? Poor bastard. His wife probably said hecan’t come home. I hear she’s bagging his ass.”
Midge thought a moment. She’d heard that too. She wonderedif maybe she was being paranoid.
“Midge.” Jabba wheezed and took another long drink.“If Strathmore’s toy had a virus, he would have calledme. Strathmore’s sharp, but he doesn’t know shit aboutviruses. TRANSLTR’s all he’s got. First sign of trouble,he would have pressed the panic button—and around here, thatmeans *me*.” Jabba sucked in a long strand of mozzarella.“Besides, there’s no way in hell TRANSLTR has a virus.Gauntlet’s the best set of package filters I’ve everwritten. Nothing gets through.”
After a long silence, Midge sighed. “Any otherthoughts?”

“Yup. Your data’s fried.”
“You already said that.”
“Exactly.”
She frowned. “You haven’t caught wind of anything?Anything at all?”

Jabba laughed harshly. “Midge . . . listen up. Skipjacksucked. Strathmore blew it. But move on—it’s over.”There was a long silence on the line, and Jabba realized he’dgone too far. “Sorry, Midge. I know you took heat over thatwhole mess. Strathmore was wrong. I know how you feel abouthim.”
“This has nothing to do with Skipjack,” she saidfirmly.

Yeah, sure, Jabba thought. “Listen, Midge, Idon’t have feelings for Strathmore one way or another. I mean,the guy’s a cryptographer. They’re basically allself-centered assholes. They need their data yesterday. Every damnfile is the one that could save the world.”
“So what are you saying?”
Jabba sighed. “I’m saying Strathmore’s a psycholike the rest of them. But I’m also saying he loves TRANSLTRmore than his own goddamn wife. If there were a problem, he wouldhave called me.”
Midge was quiet a long time. Finally she let out a reluctantsigh. “So you’re saying my data’s fried?”
Jabba chuckled. “Is there an echo in here?” She laughed.
“Look, Midge. Drop me a work order. I’ll be up onMonday to double-check your machine. In the meantime, get the hellout of here. It’s Saturday night. Go get yourself laid orsomething.” She sighed. “I’m trying, Jabba. Believe me, I’mtrying.”

CHAPTER 52

Club Embrujo—“Warlock” in English—wassituated in the suburbs at the end of the number 27 bus line.Looking more like a fortification than a dance club, it wassurrounded on all sides by high stucco walls into which wereembedded shards of shattered beer bottles—a crude securitysystem preventing anyone from entering illegally without leavingbehind a good portion of flesh.

During the ride, Becker had resolved himself to the fact thathe’d failed. It was time to call Strathmore with the badnews—the search was hopeless. He had done the best he could;now it was time to go home.

But now, gazing out at the mob of patrons pushing their waythrough the club’s entrance, Becker was not so sure hisconscience would allow him to give up the search. He was staring atthe biggest crowd of punks he’d ever seen; there werecoiffures of red, white, and blue everywhere.

Becker sighed, weighing his options. He scanned the crowd andshrugged. *Where else would she be on a Saturday night?*Cursing his good fortune, Becker climbed off the bus.

The access to Club Embrujo was a narrow stone corridor. AsBecker entered he immediately felt himself caught up in the inwardsurge of eager patrons.

“Outta my way, faggot!” A human pincushion pawed pasthim, giving Becker an elbow in the side.

“Nice tie.” Someone gave Becker’s necktie a hardyank.

“Wanna fuck?” A teenage girl stared up at him lookinglike something out of *Dawn of the Dead.*

The darkness of the corridor spilled out into a huge cementchamber that wreaked of alcohol and body odor. The scene wassurreal—a deep mountain grotto in which hundreds of bodiesmoved as one. They surged up and down, hands pressed firmly totheir sides, heads bobbing like lifeless bulbs on top of rigidspines. Crazed souls took running dives off a stage and landed on asea of human limbs. Bodies were passed back and forth like humanbeach balls. Overhead, the pulsating strobes gave the whole thingthe look of an old, silent movie.

On the far wall, speakers the size of minivans shook so deeplythat not even the most dedicated dancers could get closer thanthirty feet from the pounding woofers.

Becker plugged his ears and searched the crowd. Everywhere helooked was another red, white, and blue head. The bodies werepacked so closely together that he couldn't see what they werewearing. He saw no hint of a British flag anywhere. It was obvioushe'd never be able to enter the crowd without gettingtrampled. Someone nearby started vomiting.

Lovely. Becker groaned. He moved off down a spray-paintedhallway.

The hall turned into a narrow mirrored tunnel, which opened toan outdoor patio scattered with tables and chairs. The patio wascrowded with punk rockers, but to Becker it was like the gateway toShangriLa—the summer sky opened up above him and the musicfaded away.

Ignoring the curious stares, Becker walked out into the crowd.He loosened his tie and collapsed into a chair at the nearestunoccupied table. It seemed like a lifetime since Strathmore'searly-morning call.

After clearing the empty beer bottles from his table, Beckerlaid his head in his hands. *Just for a few minutes,* hethought.

* * *

Five miles away, the man in wire-rim glasses sat in the back ofa Fiat taxi as it raced headlong down a country road.

"Embrujo," he grunted, reminding the driver of theirdestination.

The driver nodded, eyeing his curious new fare in the rearviewmirror. "Embrujo," he grumbled to himself. "Weirdercrowd every night."

CHAPTER 53

Tokugen Numataka lay naked on the massage table in his penthouseoffice. His personal masseuse worked out the kinks in his neck. Sheground her palms into the fleshy pockets surrounding his shoulderblades, slowly working her way down to the towel covering hisbackside. Her hands slipped lower . . . beneath his towel. Numatakabarely noticed. His mind was elsewhere. He had been waiting for hisprivate line to ring. It had not.

There was a knock at the door.

"Enter," Numataka grunted.

The masseuse quickly pulled her hands from beneath thetowel.

The switchboard operator entered and bowed. "Honoredchairman?"

"Speak."

The operator bowed a second time. "I spoke to the phoneexchange. The call originated from country code 1—the UnitedStates."

Numataka nodded. This was good news. *The call came from theStates.* He smiled. *It was genuine.*

"Where in the U.S.?" he demanded.

"They're working on it, sir."

"Very well. Tell me when you have more."

The operator bowed again and left. Numataka felt his muscles relax. Country code 1. Good newsindeed.

CHAPTER 54

Susan Fletcher paced impatiently in the Crypto bathroom andcounted slowly to fifty. Her head was throbbing. *Just a littlelonger,* she told herself. *Hale is North Dakota!*

Susan wondered what Hale's plans were. Would he announcethe pass-key? Would he be greedy and try to sell the algorithm?Susan couldn't bear to wait any longer. It was time. She hadto get to Strathmore.

Cautiously she cracked the door and peered out at the reflectivewall on the far side of Crypto. There was no way to know if Halewas still watching. She'd have to move quickly toStrathmore's office. Not too quickly, of course—she couldnot let Hale suspect she was on to him. She reached for the doorand was about to pull it open when she heard something. Voices.Men's voices.

The voices were coming through the ventilation shaft near thefloor. She released the door and moved toward the vent. The wordswere muffled by the dull hum of the generators below. Theconversation sounded like it was coming up from the sublevelcatwalks. One voice was shrill, angry. It sounded like PhilChartrukian.

"You don't believe me?"

The sound of more arguing rose.

"We have a virus!"

Then the sound of harsh yelling.

"We need to call Jabba!"

Then there were sounds of a struggle.

"Let me go!"

The noise that followed was barely human. It was a long wailingcry of horror, like a tortured animal about to die. Susan frozebeside the vent. The noise ended as abruptly as it had begun. Thenthere was a silence.

An instant later, as if choreographed for some cheap horrormatinee, the lights in the bathroom slowly dimmed. Then theyflickered and went out. Susan Fletcher found herself standing intotal blackness.

CHAPTER 55

“You’re in my seat, asshole.”
Becker lifted his head off his arms. *Doesn’t anyonespeak Spanish in this damn country?*
Glaring down at him was a short, pimple-faced teenager with ashaved head. Half of his scalp was red and half was purple. Helooked like an Easter egg. “I said you’re in my seat,asshole.”
“I heard you the first time,” Becker said, standingup. He was in no mood for a fight. It was time to go.
“Where’d you put my bottles?” the kid snarled.There was a safety pin in his nose.
Becker pointed to the beer bottles he’d set on the ground.“They were empty.”
“They were *my* fuckin’ empties!”
“My apologies,” Becker said, and turned to go.
The punk blocked his way. “Pick ’em up!”
Becker blinked, not amused. “You’re kidding,right?” He was a full foot taller and outweighed the kid byabout fifty pounds.
“Do I fuckin’ *look* like I’mkidding?”
Becker said nothing.
“Pick ’em up!” The kid’s voice cracked.
Becker attempted to step around him, but the teenager blockedhis way. “I said, fuckin’ pick ’em up!”
Stoned punks at nearby tables began turning to watch theexcitement.
“You don’t want to do this, kid,” Becker saidquietly.
“I’m warning you!” The kid seethed. “This ismy table! I come here every night. Now *pick ’emup!”*

Becker’s patience ran out. Wasn’t he supposed to be inthe Smokys with Susan? What was he doing in Spain arguing with apsychotic adolescent?
Without warning, Becker caught the kid under the armpits, liftedhim up, and slammed his rear end down on the table. “Look, yourunny-nosed little runt. You’re going to back off right now,or I’m going to rip that safety pin out of your nose and pinyour mouth shut.”
The kid’s face went pale.

Becker held him a moment, then he released his grip. Withouttaking his eyes off the frightened kid, Becker stooped down, pickedup the bottles, and

returned them to the table. “What do yousay?” he asked.
The kid was speechless.
“You’re welcome,” Becker snapped. *Thiskid’s a walking billboard for birth control*.
“Go to hell!” the kid yelled, now aware of his peerslaughing at him. “Ass-wipe!”
Becker didn’t move. Something the kid had said suddenlyregistered. *I come here every night*. Becker wondered ifmaybe the kid could help him. “I’m sorry,” Beckersaid, “I didn’t catch your name.”
“Two-Tone,” he hissed, as if he were giving a deathsentence.
“Two-Tone?” Becker mused. “Let me guess . . .because of your hair?”
“No shit, Sherlock.”
“Catchy name. Make that up yourself?”
“Damn straight,” he said proudly. “I’m gonna*patent* it.”
Becker scowled. “You mean *trademark it?”*
The kid looked confused.
“You’d need a trademark for a name,” Becker said.“Not a patent.”
“Whatever!” the punk screamed in frustration.
The motley assortment of drunken and drugged-out kids at thenearby tables were now in hysterics. Two-Tone stood up and sneeredat Becker. “What the fuck do you want from me?”
Becker thought a moment. *I want you to wash your hair, cleanup your language, and get a job*. Becker figured it was too muchto ask on a first meeting. “I need some information,” hesaid.
“Fuck you.” “I’m looking for someone.”
“I ain’t seen him.”
“*Haven’t* seen him,” Becker corrected as heflagged a passing waitress. He bought two Águila beers andhanded one to Two-Tone. The boy looked shocked. He took a swig ofbeer and eyed Becker warily.
“You hitting on me, mister?”
Becker smiled. “I’m looking for a girl.”
Two-Tone let out a shrill laugh. “You sure as hellain’t gonna get any action dressed like that!”
Becker frowned. “I’m not looking for action. I justneed to talk to her. Maybe you could help me find her.”
Two-Tone set down his beer. “You a cop?”
Becker shook his head.
The kid’s eyes narrowed. “You look like acop.”
“Kid, I’m from Maryland. If I were a cop, I’d bea little out of my jurisdiction,

don’t you think?”
The question seemed to stump him.
“My name’s David Becker.” Becker smiled andoffered his hand across the table.
The punk recoiled in disgust. “Back off, fag boy.”
Becker retracted the hand.
The kid sneered. “I’ll help you, but it’ll costyou.”
Becker played along. “How much?”
“A hundred bucks.”
Becker frowned. “I’ve only got pesetas.”
“Whatever! Make it a hundred *pesetas.*”
Foreign currency exchange was obviously not one ofTwo-Tone’s fortes; a hundred pesetas was about eighty-sevencents. “Deal,” Becker said, rapping his bottle on thetable.
The kid smiled for the first time. “Deal.”
“Okay,” Becker continued in his hushed tone. “Ifigure the girl I’m looking for might hang out here.She’s got red, white, and blue hair.”
Two-Tone snorted. “It’s Judas Taboo’sanniversary. Everybody’s got—”
“She’s also wearing a British flag T-shirt and has askull pendant in one ear.”

A faint look of recognition crossed Two-Tone’s face. Beckersaw it and felt a surge of hope. But a moment later Two-Tone’sexpression turned stern. He slammed his bottle down and grabbedBecker’s shirt.
“She’s Eduardo’s, you asshole! I’d watch it!You touch her, and he’ll kill you!”

CHAPTER 56

Midge Milken prowled angrily into the conference room acrossfrom her office. In addition to the thirty-two foot mahogany tablewith the NSA seal inlaid in black cherry and walnut, the conferenceroom contained three Marion Pike watercolors, a Boston fern, amarble wet bar, and of course, the requisite Sparklett's watercooler. Midge helped herself to a glass of water, hoping it mightcalm her nerves.

As she sipped at the liquid, she gazed across at the window. Themoonlight was filtering through the open venetian blind and playingon the grain of the table. She'd always thought this wouldmake a nicer director's office than Fontaine's currentlocation on the front of the building. Rather than looking out overthe NSA parking lot, the conference room looked out over animpressive array of NSA outbuildings—including the Cryptodome, a high-tech island floating separate from the main buildingon three wooded acres. Purposefully situated behind the naturalcover of a grove of maples, Crypto was difficult to see from mostwindows in the NSA complex, but the view from the directorial suitewas perfect. To Midge the conference room seemed the perfectvantage point for a king to survey his domain. She had suggestedonce that Fontaine move his office, but the director had simplyreplied, "Not on the rear." Fontaine was not a man to befound on the back end of anything. Midge pulled apart the blinds. She stared out at the hills.Sighing ruefully, she let her eyes fall toward the spot whereCrypto stood. Midge had always felt comforted by the sight of theCrypto dome—a glowing beacon regardless of the hour. Buttonight, as she gazed out, there was no comfort. Instead she foundherself staring into a void. As she pressed her face to the glass,she was gripped by a wild, girlish panic. Below her there wasnothing but blackness. Crypto had disappeared!

CHAPTER 57

The Crypto bathrooms had no windows, and the darknesssurrounding Susan Fletcher was absolute. She stood dead still for amoment trying to get her bearings, acutely aware of the growingsense of panic gripping her body. The horrible cry from theventilation shaft seemed to hang all around her. Despite her effortto fight off a rising sense of dread, fear swept across her fleshand took control.

In a flurry of involuntary motion, Susan found herself gropingwildly across stall doors and sinks. Disoriented, she spun throughthe blackness with her hands out in front of her and tried topicture the room. She knocked over a garbage can and found herselfagainst a tiled wall. Following the wall with her hand, shescrambled toward the exit and fumbled for the door handle. Shepulled it open and stumbled out onto the Crypto floor.

There she froze for a second time.

The Crypto floor looked nothing like it had just moments ago.TRANSLTR was a gray silhouette against the faint twilight coming inthrough the dome. All of the overhead lighting was dead. Not eventhe electronic keypads on the doors were glowing.

As Susan's eyes became accustomed to the dark, she saw thatthe only light in Crypto was coming through the opentrapdoor—a faint red glow from the utility lighting below. Shemoved toward it. There was the faint smell of ozone in the air.

When she made it to the trapdoor, she peered into the hole. Thefreon vents were still belching swirling mist through the redness,and from the higher-pitched drone of the generators, Susan knewCrypto was running on backup power. Through the mist she could makeout Strathmore standing on the platform below. He was leaning overthe railing and staring into the depths of TRANSLTR's rumblingshaft.

"Commander!"

There was no response.

Susan eased onto the ladder. The hot air from below rushed inunder her skirt. The rungs were slippery with condensation. She setherself down on the grated landing.

"Commander?"

Strathmore did not turn. He continued staring down with a blanklook of

shock, as if in a trance. Susan followed his gaze over thebanister. For a moment she could see nothing except wisps of steam.Then suddenly she saw it. A figure. Six stories below. It appearedbriefly in the billows of steam. There it was again. A tangled massof twisted limbs. Lying ninety feet below them, Phil Chartrukianwas sprawled across the sharp iron fins of the main generator. Hisbody was darkened and burned. His fall had shorted outCrypto's main power supply.

But the most chilling image of all was not of Chartrukian but ofsomeone else, another body, halfway down the long staircase,crouched, hiding in the shadows. The muscular frame wasunmistakable. It was Greg Hale.

CHAPTER 58

The punk screamed at Becker, “Megan belongs to my friendEduardo! You stay away from her!”
“Where is she?” Becker’s heart was racing out ofcontrol.
“Fuck you!”
“It’s an emergency!” Becker snapped. He grabbedthe kid’s sleeve. “She’s got a ring that belongs tome. I’ll pay her for it! A lot!”
Two-Tone stopped dead and burst into hysterics. “You meanthat ugly, gold piece of shit is yours?”
Becker’s eyes widened. “You’ve seen it?” Two-Tone nodded coyly.
“Where is it?” Becker demanded.
“No clue.” Two-Tone chuckled. “Megan was up heretrying to hock it.”
“She was trying to *sell* it?”
“Don’t worry, man, she didn’t have any luck.You’ve got shitty taste in jewelry.”
“Are you sure nobody bought it?”
“Are you shitting me? For four hundred bucks? I told herI’d give her fifty, but she wanted more. She was trying to buya plane ticket—standby.”
Becker felt the blood drain from his face. “Whereto?”
“Fuckin’ Connecticut,” Two-tone snapped.“Eddie’s bummin’.”
“Connecticut?”
“Shit, yeah. Going back to Mommy and Daddy’s mansionin the burbs. Hated her Spanish homestay family. Three Spicbrothers always hitting on her. No fucking hot water.”
Becker felt a knot rise in his throat. “When is sheleaving?”
Two-Tone looked up. “When?” He laughed.“She’s long gone by now. Went to the airport hours ago.Best spot to hock the ring—rich tourists and shit. Once shegot the cash, she was flying out.”
A dull nausea swept through Becker’s gut. *This is somekind of sick joke, isn’t it?* He stood a long moment.“What’s her last name?”
Two-Tone pondered the question and shrugged.
“What flight was she taking?”
“She said something about the Roach Coach.”
“Roach Coach?”
“Yeah. Weekend red-eye—Seville, Madrid, La Guardia.That’s what they call it. College kids take it ’causeit’s cheap. Guess they sit in back and smokeroaches.”

Great. Becker groaned, running a hand through his hair.“What time did it leave?” “Two a.m. sharp, every Saturday night. She’s somewhereover the Atlantic by now.”
Becker checked his watch. It read 1:45 p.m. He turned toTwo-Tone, confused. “You said it’s a two a.m.flight?”
The punk nodded, laughing. “Looks like you’re fucked,ol’ man.”
Becker pointed angrily to his watch. “But it’s onlyquarter to two!”
Two-Tone eyed the watch, apparently puzzled. “Well,I’ll be damned.” he laughed. “I’m usually notthis buzzed till four a.m.!”
“What’s the fastest way to the airport?” Beckersnapped.
“Taxi stand out front.”
Becker grabbed a 1,000-peseta note from his pocket and stuffedit in Two-Tone’s hand.
“Hey, man, thanks!” the punk called after him.“If you see Megan, tell her I said hi!” But Becker wasalready gone.
Two-Tone sighed and staggered back toward the dance floor. Hewas too drunk to notice the man in wire-rim glasses followinghim.
Outside, Becker scanned the parking lot for a taxi. There wasnone. He ran over to a stocky bouncer. “Taxi!”
The bouncer shook his head. “Demasiado temprano. Tooearly.”
Too early? Becker swore. *It’s two o’clock inthe morning!*
“Pídame uno! Call me one!”
The man pulled out a walkie-talkie. He said a few words and thensigned off. “Veinte minutos,” he offered.
“Twenty minutes?!” Becker demanded. “Y elautobus?”
The bouncer shrugged. “Forty-five minutos.”
Becker threw up his hands. *Perfect!*

The sound of a small engine turned Becker’s head. Itsounded like a chainsaw. A big kid and his chainclad date pulledinto the parking lot on an old Vespa 250 motorcycle. Thegirl’s skirt had blown high on her thighs. She didn’tseem to notice. Becker dashed over. *I can’t believeI’m doing this,* he thought. *I hate motorcycles.* Heyelled to the driver. “I’ll pay you ten thousand pesetasto take me to the airport!”
The kid ignored him and killed the engine.
“Twenty thousand!” Becker blurted. “I need to getto the airport!”
The kid looked up. “Scusi?” He was Italian.
“Aeropórto! Per favore. Sulla Vespa! Venti millepesete!”
The Italian eyed his crummy, little bike and laughed.“Venti mille pesete? La Vespa?”

“Cinquanta mille! Fifty thousand!” Becker offered. Itwas about four hundred dollars.
The Italian laughed doubtfully. “Dov’é la plata?Where’s the cash?”
Becker pulled five 10,000-peseta notes from his pocket and heldthem out. The Italian looked at the money and then at hisgirlfriend. The girl grabbed the cash and stuffed it in herblouse.
“Grazie!” the Italian beamed. He tossed Beckerthe keys to his Vespa. Then he grabbed his girlfriend’s hand,and they ran off laughing into the building.
“Aspetta!” Becker yelled. “Wait! I wanted a *ride!”*

CHAPTER 59

Susan reached for Commander Strathmore's hand as he helpedher up the ladder onto the Crypto floor. The image of PhilChartrukian lying broken on the generators was burned into hermind. The thought of Hale hiding in the bowels of Crypto had lefther dizzy. The truth was inescapable—Hale had pushedChartrukian.

Susan stumbled past the shadow of TRANSLTR back towardCrypto's main exit—the door she'd come through hoursearlier. Her frantic punching on the unlit keypad did nothing tomove the huge portal. She was trapped; Crypto was a prison. Thedome sat like a satellite, 109 yards away from the main NSAstructure, accessible only through the main portal. Since Cryptomade its own power, the switchboard probably didn't even knowthey were in trouble.

"The main power's out," Strathmore said, arrivingbehind her. "We're on aux."

The backup power supply in Crypto was designed so that TRANSLTRand its cooling systems took precedence over all other systems,including lights and doorways. That way an untimely power outagewould not interrupt TRANSLTR during an important run. It also meantTRANSLTR would never run without its freon cooling system; in anuncooled enclosure, the heat generated by three million processorswould rise to treacherous levels—perhaps even igniting thesilicon chips and resulting in a fiery meltdown. It was an image noone dared consider.

Susan fought to get her bearings. Her thoughts were consumed bythe single image of the Sys-Sec on the generators. She stabbed atthe keypad again. Still no response. "Abort the run!" shedemanded. Telling TRANSLTR to stop searching for the DigitalFortress pass-key would shut down its circuits and free up enoughbackup power to get the doors working again.

"Easy, Susan," Strathmore said, putting a steadyinghand on her shoulder.

The commander's reassuring touch lifted Susan from herdaze. She suddenly remembered why she had been going to get him.She wheeled, "Commander! Greg Hale is North Dakota!"

There was a seemingly endless beat of silence in the dark.Finally Strathmore replied. His voice sounded more confused thanshocked. "What are you talking about?"

"Hale . . ." Susan whispered. "He's NorthDakota."

There was more silence as Strathmore pondered Susan'swords. "The tracer?"

He seemed confused. “Itfingered Hale?”
“The tracer isn’t back yet. Hale aborted it!”
Susan went on to explain how Hale had stopped her tracer and howshe’d found E-mail from Tankado in Hale’s account.Another long moment of silence followed. Strathmore shook his headin disbelief.
“There’s no way *Greg Hale* is Tankado’sinsurance! It’s absurd! Tankado would never trustHale.”
“Commander,” she said, “Hale sank us oncebefore—Skipjack. Tankado trusted him.”
Strathmore could not seem to find words.
“Abort TRANSLTR,” Susan begged him. “We’vegot North Dakota. Call building security. Let’s get out ofhere.”
Strathmore held up his hand requesting a moment to think.

Susan looked nervously in the direction of the trapdoor. Theopening was just out of sight behind TRANSLTR, but the reddish glowspilled out over the black tile like fire on ice. *Come on, callSecurity, Commander! Abort TRANSLTR! Get us out of here!*
Suddenly Strathmore sprang to action. “Follow me,” hesaid. He strode toward the trapdoor.
“Commander! Hale is dangerous! He—”

But Strathmore disappeared into the dark. Susan hurried tofollow his silhouette. The commander circled around TRANSLTR andarrived over the opening in the floor. He peered into the swirling,steaming pit. Silently he looked around the darkened Crypto floor.Then he bent down and heaved the heavy trapdoor. It swung in a lowarc. When he let go, it slammed shut with a deadening thud. Cryptowas once again a silent, blackened cave. It appeared North Dakotawas trapped.
Strathmore knelt down. He turned the heavy butterfly lock. Itspun into place. The sublevels were sealed.
Neither he nor Susan heard the faint steps in the direction ofNode 3.

CHAPTER 60

Two-tone headed through the mirrored corridor that led from theoutside patio to the dance floor. As he turned to check his safetypin in the reflection, he sensed a figure looming up behind him. Hespun, but it was too late. A pair of rocklike arms pinned his bodyface-first against the glass.

The punk tried to twist around. “Eduardo? Hey, man, is thatyou?” Two-Tone felt a hand brush over his wallet before thefigure leaned firmly into his back. “Eddie!” the punkcried. “Quit fooling around! Some guy was lookin’ forMegan.”

The figure held him firmly.

“Hey, Eddie, man, cut it out!” But when Two-Tonelooked up into the mirror, he saw the figure pinning him was nothis friend at all.

The face was pockmarked and scarred. Two lifeless eyes staredout like coal from behind wire-rim glasses. The man leaned forward,placing his mouth against Two-Tone’s ear. A strange, voicechoked, *“Adónde fué?* Where’d hego?” The words sounded somehow misshapen.

The punk froze, paralyzed with fear.

“Adónde fué?” the voice repeated.“El Americano.”

“The . . . the airport. Aeropuerto,” Two-Tonestammered.

“Aeropuerto?” the man repeated, his dark eyes watchingTwo-Tone’s lips in the mirror.

The punk nodded.

“Tenía el anillo? Did he have the ring?”

Terrified, Two-Tone shook his head. “No.”

“Viste el anillo? Did you see the ring?”

Two-Tone paused. What was the right answer?

“Viste el anillo?” the muffled voice demanded.

Two-Tone nodded affirmatively, hoping honesty would pay. It didnot. Seconds later he slid to the floor, his neck broken.

CHAPTER 61

Jabba lay on his back lodged halfway inside a dismantledmainframe computer. There was a penlight in his mouth, a solderingiron in his hand, and a large schematic blueprint propped on hisbelly. He had just finished attaching a new set of attenuators to afaulty motherboard when his cellular phone sprang to life.

"Shit," he swore, groping for the receiver through apile of cables. "Jabba here." "Jabba, it's Midge."

He brightened. "Twice in one night? People are gonna starttalking."

"Crypto's got problems." Her voice was tense.

Jabba frowned. "We been through this already.Remember?"

"It's a *power* problem."

"I'm not an electrician. Call Engineering."

"The dome's dark."

"You're seeing things. Go home." He turned backto his schematic.

"Pitch black!" she yelled.

Jabba sighed and set down his penlight. "Midge, first ofall, we've got aux power in there. It would never be *pitch* black. Second, Strathmore's got a slightly betterview of Crypto than I do right now. Why don't you call *him?"*

"Because this has to do with *him.* He's hidingsomething."

Jabba rolled his eyes. "Midge sweetie, I'm up to myarmpits in serial cable here. If you need a date, I'll cutloose. Otherwise, call Engineering."

"Jabba, this is *serious.* I can *feel*it."

She can feel it? It was official, Jabba thought, Midgewas in one of her *moods.*

"If Strathmore's notworried, *I'm* not worried."

"Crypto's pitch black, dammit!"

"So maybe Strathmore's stargazing."

"Jabba! I'm not kidding around here!"

"Okay, okay," he grumbled, propping himself up on anelbow. "Maybe a generator shorted out. As soon as I'mdone here, I'll stop by Crypto and—"

"What about aux power!" Midge demanded. "If agenerator blew, why is there no aux power?"

"I don't know. Maybe Strathmore's got TRANSLTRrunning and aux power is tapped out." "So why doesn't he abort? Maybe it's a virus. Yousaid something earlier about a virus."

“Damn it, Midge!” Jabba exploded. “I told you,there’s *no* virus in Crypto! Stop being so damned *paranoid!”*

There was a long silence on the line.

“Aw, shit, Midge,” Jabba apologized. “Let meexplain.” His voice was tight. “First of all, we’vegot Gauntlet—no virus could possibly get through. Second, ifthere’s a power failure, it’s *hardware*related—viruses don’t kill *power,*they attack software and data. Whatever’s going on in Crypto,it’s *not* a virus.”

Silence.

“Midge? You there?”

Midge’s response was icy. “Jabba, I have a job to do.I don’t expect to be yelled at for doing it. When I call toask why a multi billion-dollar facility is in the dark, I expect aprofessional response.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“A simple yes or no will suffice. Is it possible theproblem in Crypto is virus-related?”

“Midge . . . I told you—”

“Yes or no. Could TRANSLTR have a virus?”

Jabba sighed. “No, Midge. It’s totallyimpossible.”

“Thank you.”

He forced a chuckle and tried to lighten the mood. “Unlessyou think Strathmore wrote one himself and bypassed myfilters.”

There was a stunned silence. When Midge spoke, her voice had aneerie edge. “Strathmore can *bypass* Gauntlet?”

Jabba sighed. “It was a *joke*, Midge.” But heknew it was too late.

CHAPTER 62

The Commander and Susan stood beside the closed trapdoor anddebated what to do next.

"We've got Phil Chartrukian dead down there,"Strathmore argued. "If we call for help, Crypto will turn intoa circus."

"So what do you propose we do?" Susan demanded,wanting only to leave.

Strathmore thought a moment. "Don't ask me how ithappened," he said, glancing down at the locked trapdoor,"but it looks like we've inadvertently located andneutralized North Dakota." He shook his head in disbelief."Damn lucky break if you ask me." He still seemed stunnedby the idea that Hale was involved in Tankado's plan. "Myguess is that Hale's got the pass-key hidden in his terminalsomewhere—maybe he's got a copy at home. Either way,he's trapped."

"So why not call building security and let them cart himaway?"

"Not yet," Strathmore said, "if the Sys-Secsuncover stats of this endless TRANSLTR run, we've got a wholenew set of problems. I want all traces of Digital Fortress deletedbefore we open the doors."

Susan nodded reluctantly. It was a good plan. When Securityfinally pulled Hale from the sublevels and charged him withChartrukian's death, he probably would threaten to tell theworld about Digital Fortress. But the proof would beerased—Strathmore could play dumb. *An endless run? Anunbreakable algorithm? But that's absurd! Hasn't Haleheard of the Bergofsky Principle?*

"Here's what we need to do." Strathmore coollyoutlined his plan. "We erase all of Hale's correspondencewith Tankado. We erase all records of my bypassing Gauntlet, all ofChartrukian's Sys-Sec analysis, the Run-Monitor records,everything. Digital Fortress disappears. It was never here. We buryHale's key and pray to God David finds Tankado'scopy."

David, Susan thought. She forced him from her mind. Sheneeded to stay focused on the matter at hand.

"I'll handle the Sys-Sec lab," Strathmore said."Run-Monitor stats, mutation activity stats, the works. Youhandle Node 3. Delete all of Hale's E-mail. Any records ofcorrespondence with Tankado, anything that mentions DigitalFortress."

"Okay," Susan replied, focusing. "I'll eraseHale's whole drive. Reformat everything."

“No!” Strathmore’s response was stern.“Don’t do that. Hale most likely has a copy of thepass-key in there. I want it.”
Susan gaped in shock. “You want the pass-key? I thought thewhole point was to *destroy* the passkeys!”
“It is. But I want a copy. I want to crack open this damnfile and have a look at Tankado’s program.”

Susan shared Strathmore’s curiosity, but instinct told herunlocking the Digital Fortress algorithm was not wise, regardlessof how interesting it would be. Right now, the deadly program waslocked safely in its encrypted vault—totally harmless. As soonas he decrypted it. . . . “Commander, wouldn’t we bebetter off just to—”
“I want the key,” he replied.

Susan had to admit, ever since hearing about Digital Fortress,she’d felt a certain academic curiosity to know how Tankadohad managed to write it. Its mere existence contradicted the mostfundamental rules of cryptography. Susan eyed the commander.“You’ll delete the algorithm immediately after we seeit?”
“Without a trace.”

Susan frowned. She knew that finding Hale’s key would nothappen instantly. Locating a random passkey on one of the Node 3hard drives was somewhat like trying to find a single sock in abedroom the size of Texas. Computer searches only worked when youknew what you were looking for; this passkey was random.Fortunately, however, because Crypto dealt with so much randommaterial, Susan and some others had developed a complex processknown as a nonconformity search. The search essentially asked thecomputer to study every string of characters on its hard drive,compare each string against an enormous dictionary, and flag anystrings that seemed nonsensical or random. It was tricky work torefine the parameters continually, but it was possible.
Susan knew she was the logical choice to find the pass-key. Shesighed, hoping she wouldn’t regret it. “If all goes well,it will take me about half an hour.”
“Then let’s get to work,” Strathmore said,putting a hand on her shoulder and leading her through the darknesstoward Node 3.
Above them, a star-filled sky had stretched itself across thedome. Susan wondered if David could see the same stars fromSeville.
As they approached the heavy glass doors of Node 3, Strathmoreswore under his breath. The Node 3 keypad was unlit, and the doorswere dead.

“Damn it,” he said. “No power. Iforgot.” Strathmore studied the sliding doors. He placed his palms flatagainst the glass. Then he leaned sideways trying to slide themopen. His hands were sweaty and slipped. He wiped them on

his pantsand tried again. This time the doors slid open a tiny crack.
Susan, sensing progress, got in behind Strathmore and they bothpushed together. The doors slid open about an inch. They held it amoment, but the pressure was too great. The doors sprang shutagain.
“Hold on,” Susan said, repositioning herself in frontof Strathmore. “Okay, now try.”

They heaved. Again the door opened only about an inch. A faintray of blue light appeared from inside Node 3; the terminals werestill on; they were considered critical to TRANSLTR and werereceiving aux power.

Susan dug the toe of her Ferragamo’s into the floor andpushed harder. The door started to move. Strathmore moved to get abetter angle. Centering his palms on the left slider, he pushedstraight back. Susan pushed the right slider in the oppositedirection. Slowly, arduously, the doors began to separate. Theywere now almost a foot apart.
“Don’t let go,” Strathmore said, panting as theypushed harder. “Just a little farther.”
Susan repositioned herself with her shoulder in the crack. Shepushed again, this time with a better angle. The doors fought backagainst her.

Before Strathmore could stop her, Susan squeezed her slenderbody into the opening. Strathmore protested, but she was intent.She wanted out of Crypto, and she knew Strathmore well enough toknow she wasn’t going anywhere until Hale’s pass-key wasfound.

She centered herself in the opening and pushed with all herstrength. The doors seemed to push back. Suddenly Susan lost hergrip. The doors sprang toward her. Strathmore fought to hold themoff, but it was too much. Just as the doors slammed shut, Susansqueezed through and collapsed on the other side.
The commander fought to reopen the door a tiny sliver. He puthis face to the narrow crack. “Jesus, Susan—are youokay?”
Susan stood up and brushed herself off. “Fine.”

She looked around. Node 3 was deserted, lit only by the computermonitors. The bluish shadows gave the place a ghostly ambiance. Sheturned to Strathmore in the crack of the door. His face lookedpallid and sickly in the blue light.
“Susan,” he said. “Give me twenty minutes todelete the files in Sys-Sec. When all traces are gone,

I’ll goup to my terminal and abort TRANSLTR.”
“You *better,”* Susan said, eyeing the heavyglass doors. She knew that until TRANSLTR stopped hoarding auxpower, she was a prisoner in Node 3.
Strathmore let go of the doors, and they snapped shut. Susanwatched through

the glass as the commander disappeared into theCrypto darkness.

CHAPTER 63

Becker's newly purchased Vespa motorcycle struggled up theentry road to Aeropuerto de Sevilla. His knuckles had been whitethe whole way. His watch read just after 2:00 a.m. local time.

As he approached the main terminal, he rode up on the sidewalkand jumped off the bike while it was still moving. It clattered tothe pavement and sputtered to a stop. Becker dashed on rubbery legsthrough the revolving door. *Never again,* he swore tohimself.

The terminal was sterile and starkly lit. Except for a janitorbuffing the floor, the place was deserted. Across the concourse, aticket agent was closing down the Iberia Airlines counter. Beckertook it as a bad sign.

He ran over. "El vuelo a los Estados Unidos?"

The attractive Andalusian woman behind the counter looked up andsmiled apologetically. "Acaba de salir. You just missedit." Her words hung in the air for a long moment.

I missed it. Becker's shoulders slumped. "Wasthere standby room on the flight?"

"Plenty," the woman smiled. "Almost empty. Buttomorrow's eight a.m. also has __"

"I need to know if a friend of mine made that flight. Shewas flying standby."

The woman frowned. "I'm sorry, sir. There were severalstandby passengers tonight, but our privacy clausestates—"

"It's very important," Becker urged. "I justneed to know if she made the flight. That's all." The woman gave a sympathetic nod. "Lovers'quarrel?"

Becker thought a moment. Then he gave her a sheepish grin."It's *that* obvious?"

She gave him a wink. "What's her name?"

"Megan," he replied sadly.

The agent smiled. "Does your lady friend have a lastname?"

Becker exhaled slowly. *Yes, but I don't know it!*"Actually, it's kind of a complicated situation. You saidthe plane was almost empty. Maybe you could __"

"Without a last name I really can't . . ."

"Actually," Becker interrupted, having another idea."Have you been on all night?"

The woman nodded. “Seven to seven.”
“Then maybe you saw her. She’s a young girl. Maybefifteen or sixteen? Her hair was—” Before the words lefthis mouth, Becker realized his mistake.
The agent’s eyes narrowed. “Your lover is fifteenyears old?”
“No!” Becker gasped. “I mean . . .” *Shit*. “If you could just help me, it’s veryimportant.”
“I’m sorry,” the woman said coldly.
“It’s not the way it sounds. If you couldjust—”
“Good night, sir.” The woman yanked the metal gatedown over the counter and disappeared into a back room.

Becker groaned and stared skyward. *Smooth,* David. Verysmooth. He scanned the open concourse. Nothing. *She must havesold the ring and made the flight*. He headed for the custodian.“Has visto a una niña?” he called over the sound ofthe tile buffer. “Have you seen a girl?”
The old man reached down and killed the machine.“Eh?”
“Una niña?” Becker repeated. “Pelo rojo,azul, y blanco. Red white and blue hair.”
The custodian laughed. “Qué fea. Sounds ugly.” Heshook his head and went back to work.

* * * David Becker stood in the middle of the deserted airportconcourse and wondered what to do next. The evening had been acomedy of errors. Strathmore’s words pounded in his head:Don’t call until you have the ring. A profound exhaustionsettled over him. If Megan sold the ring and made the flight, therewas no telling who had the ring now.
Becker closed his eyes and tried to focus. *What’s mynext move?* He decided to consider it in a moment. First, heneeded to make a long-overdue trip to a rest room.

CHAPTER 64

Susan stood alone in the dimly lit silence of Node 3. The taskat hand was simple: Access Hale's terminal, locate his key,and then delete all of his communication with Tankado. There couldbe no hint of Digital Fortress anywhere.

Susan's initial fears of saving the key and unlockingDigital Fortress were nagging at her again. She felt uneasytempting fate; they'd been lucky so far. North Dakota hadmiraculously appeared right under their noses and been trapped. Theonly remaining question was David; he had to find the otherpass-key. Susan hoped he was making progress.

As she made her way deeper into Node 3, Susan tried to clear hermind. It was odd that she felt uneasy in such a familiar space.Everything in Node 3 seemed foreign in the dark. But there wassomething else. Susan felt a momentary hesitation and glanced backat the inoperable doors. There was no escape. *Twentyminutes,* she thought.

As she turned toward Hale's terminal, she noticed astrange, musky odor—it was definitely not a Node 3 smell. Shewondered if maybe the deionizer was malfunctioning. The smell wasvaguely familiar, and with it came an unsettling chill. Shepictured Hale locked below in his enormous steaming cell. *Did heset something on fire?* She looked up at the vents and sniffed.But the odor seemed to be coming from nearby.

Susan glanced toward the latticed doors of the kitchenette. Andin an instant she recognized the smell. It was *cologne . . . andsweat.*

She recoiled instinctively, not prepared for what she saw. Frombehind the lattice slats of the kitchenette, two eyes stared out ather. It only took an instant for the horrifying truth to hit her.Greg Hale was not locked on the sublevels—he was in Node 3!He'd slipped upstairs before Strathmore closed the trapdoor.He'd been strong enough to open the doors all by himself.

Susan had once heard that raw terror was paralyzing—she nowknew that was a myth. In the same instant her brain grasped whatwas happening, she was in motion—stumbling backward throughthe dark with a single thought in mind: escape.

The crash behind her was instantaneous. Hale had been sittingsilently on the stove and extended his legs like two batteringrams. The doors exploded off their hinges. Hale launched himselfinto the room and thundered after her with

powerful strides.
Susan knocked over a lamp behind her, attempting to trip Hale ashe moved toward her. She sensed him vault it effortlessly. Hale wasgaining quickly.
When his right arm circled her waist from behind, it felt likeshe'd hit a steel bar. She gasped in pain as the wind went outof her. His biceps flexed against her rib cage.
Susan resisted and began twisting wildly. Somehow her elbowstruck cartilage. Hale released his grip, his hands clutching hisnose. He fell to his knees, hands cupped over his face.
"Son of a—" He screamed in pain.

Susan dashed onto the door's pressure plates saying afruitless prayer that Strathmore would in that instant restorepower and the doors would spring open. Instead, she found herselfpounding against the glass.

Hale lumbered toward her, his nose covered with blood. In aninstant, his hands were around her again—one of them clampedfirmly on her left breast and the other on her midsection. Heyanked her away from the door.
She screamed, her hand outstretched in futile attempt to stophim.

He pulled her backward, his belt buckle digging into her spine.Susan couldn't believe his strength. He dragged her backacross the carpet, and her shoes came off. In one fluid motion,Hale lifted her and dumped her on the floor next to histerminal.

Susan was suddenly on her back, her skirt bunched high on herhips. The top button of her blouse had released, and her chest washeaving in the bluish light. She stared up in terror as Halestraddled her, pinning her down. She couldn't decipher thelook in his eyes. It looked like fear. Or was it anger? His eyesbore into her body. She felt a new wave of panic.
Hale sat firmly on her midsection, staring down at her with anicy glare. Everything Susan had ever learned about self-defense wassuddenly racing through her mind. She tried to fight, but her bodydid not respond. She was numb. She closed her eyes. *Oh, please, God. No!*

CHAPTER 65

Brinkerhoff paced Midge's office. "*Nobody*bypasses Gauntlet. It's impossible!"
"Wrong," she fired back. "I just talked to Jabba.He said he installed a bypass switch last year."
The PA looked doubtful. "I never heard that."
"Nobody did. It was hush-hush."
"Midge," Brinkerhoff argued, "Jabba'scompulsive about security! He would never put in a switch tobypass—"
"Strathmore made him do it," she interrupted.
Brinkerhoff could almost hear her mind clicking.
"Remember last year," she asked, "when Strathmorewas working on that anti-Semitic terrorist ring inCalifornia?"

Brinkerhoff nodded. It had been one of Strathmore's majorcoups last year. Using TRANSLTR to decrypt an intercepted code, hehad uncovered a plot to bomb a Hebrew school in Los Angeles. Hedecrypted the terrorist's message only twelve minutes beforethe bomb went off, and using some fast phone work, he saved threehundred schoolchildren.
"Get this," Midge said, lowering her voiceunnecessarily. "Jabba said Strathmore intercepted thatterrorist code *six hours* before that bomb wentoff."
Brinkerhoff's jaw dropped. "But . . . then why did hewait—"
"Because he couldn't get TRANSLTR to decrypt the file.He tried, but Gauntlet kept rejecting it. It was encrypted withsome new public key algorithm that the filters hadn't seenyet. It took Jabba almost six hours to adjust them."
Brinkerhoff looked stunned.
"Strathmore was furious. He made Jabba install a bypassswitch in Gauntlet in case it ever happened again."
"Jesus." Brinkerhoff whistled. "I had noidea." Then his eyes narrowed. "So what's yourpoint?"
"I think Strathmore used the switch today . . . to processa file that Gauntlet rejected."
"So? That's what the switch is for, right?"
Midge shook her head. "Not if the file in question is avirus."
Brinkerhoff jumped. "A virus? Who said anything about avirus!"
"It's the only explanation," she said."Jabba said a virus is the only thing that could keep TRANSLTRrunning this long, so—"

“Wait a minute!” Brinkerhoff flashed her the time-outsign. “Strathmore said everything’s fine!”
“He’s lying.”
Brinkerhoff was lost. “You’re saying Strathmore *intentionally* let a virus into TRANSLTR?”
“No,” she snapped. “I don’t think he *knew* it was a virus. I think he was tricked.”
Brinkerhoff was speechless. Midge Milken was definitely losingit.
“It explains a lot,” she insisted. “It explainswhat he’s been doing in there all night.”
“Planting viruses in his own computer?”
“No,” she said, annoyed. “Trying to cover up hismistake! And now he can’t abort TRANSLTR and get aux powerback because the virus has the processors locked down!”
Brinkerhoff rolled his eyes. Midge had gone nuts in the past,but never like this. He tried to calm her. “Jabba doesn’tseem to be too worried.”
“Jabba’s a fool,” she hissed.
Brinkerhoff looked surprised. Nobody had ever called Jabba afool—a pig maybe, but never a fool. “You’re trustingfeminine intuition over Jabba’s advanced degrees inanti-invasive programming?” She eyed him harshly.

Brinkerhoff held up his hands in surrender. “Never mind. Itake it back.” He didn’t need to be reminded ofMidge’s uncanny ability to sense disaster. “Midge,”he begged. “I know you hate Strathmore, but—”
“This has nothing to do with Strathmore!” Midge was inoverdrive. “The first thing we need to do is confirmStrathmore bypassed Gauntlet. Then we call the director.”
“Great.” Brinkerhoff moaned. “I’ll callStrathmore and ask him to send us a signed statement.”
“No,” she replied, ignoring his sarcasm.“Strathmore’s lied to us once already today.” Sheglanced up, her eyes probing his. “Do you have keys toFontaine’s office?
“Of course. I’m his PA.”
“I need them.”
Brinkerhoff stared in disbelief. “Midge, there’s noway in hell I’m letting you into Fontaine’soffice.”

“You have to!” she demanded. Midge turned and startedtyping on Big Brother’s keyboard. “I’m requesting aTRANSLTR queue list. If Strathmore manually bypassed Gauntlet,it’ll show up on the printout.”
“What does that have to do with Fontaine’soffice?”
She spun and glared at him. “The queue list only prints toFontaine’s printer.

You know that!”
“That’s because it’s *classified*,Midge!”
“This is an emergency. I need to see that list.”
Brinkerhoff put his hands on her shoulders. “Midge, pleasesettle down. You know I can’t—”
She huffed loudly and spun back to her keyboard. “I’mprinting a queue list. I’m going to walk in, pick it up, andwalk out. Now give me the key.”
“Midge . . .”

She finished typing and spun back to him. “Chad, the reportprints in thirty seconds. Here’s the deal. You give me thekey. If Strathmore bypassed, we call security. If I’m wrong, Ileave, and you can go smear marmalade all over Carmen Huerta.”She gave him a malicious glare and held out her hands for the keys.“I’m waiting.”
Brinkerhoff groaned, regretting that he had called her back tocheck the Crypto report. He eyed her outstretched hand.“You’re talking about classified information inside thedirector’s private quarters. Do you have any idea what wouldhappen if we got caught?”
“The director is in South America.”
“I’m sorry. I just can’t.” Brinkerhoffcrossed his arms and walked out.
Midge stared after him, her gray eyes smoldering. “Oh, yesyou can,” she whispered. Then she turned back to Big Brotherand called up the video archives.
* * *

Midge’ll get over it, Brinkerhoff told himself as hesettled in at his desk and started going over the rest of hisreports. He couldn’t be expected to hand out thedirector’s keys whenever Midge got paranoid.
He had just begun checking the COMSEC breakdowns when histhoughts were interrupted by the sound of voices coming from theother room. He set down his work and walked to his doorway.
The main suite was dark—all except a dim shaft of grayishlight from Midge’s half-open door. He listened. The voicescontinued. They sounded excited.
“Midge?”
No response.

He strode through the darkness to her workspace. The voices werevaguely familiar. He pushed the door open. The room was empty.Midge’s chair was empty. The sound was coming from overhead.Brinkerhoff looked up at the video monitors and instantly felt ill.The same image was playing on each one of the twelve screens—akind of perversely choreographed ballet. Brinkerhoff steadiedhimself on the back of Midge’s chair and watched inhorror.

“Chad?” The voice was behind him.
He spun and squinted into the darkness. Midge was standingkitty-corner across the main suite’s reception area in frontof the director’s double doors. Her palm was outstretched.“The key, Chad.”

Brinkerhoff flushed. He turned back to the monitors. He tried toblock out the images overhead, but it was no use. He waseverywhere, groaning with pleasure and eagerly fondling CarmenHuerta’s small, honey-covered breasts.

CHAPTER 66

Becker crossed the concourse toward the rest room doors only tofind the door marked CABALLEROS blocked by an orange pylon and acleaning cart filled with detergent and mops. He eyed the otherdoor. DAMAS. He strode over and rapped loudly.

"Hola?" he called, pushing the ladies' room dooropen an inch. "Con permiso?"

Silence.

He went in.

The rest room was typical, Spanish institutional—perfectlysquare, white tile, one incandescent bulb overhead. As usual, therewas one stall and one urinal. Whether the urinals were ever used inthe women's bathrooms was immaterial—adding them savedthe contractors the expense of having to build the extra stall.

Becker peered into the rest room in disgust. It was filthy. Thesink was clogged with murky brown water. Dirty paper towels werestrewn everywhere. The floor was soaked. The old electrichandblower on the wall was smeared with greenish fingerprints.

Becker stepped in front of the mirror and sighed. The eyes thatusually stared back with fierce clarity were not so clear tonight.*How long have I been running around over here?* he wondered.The math escaped him. Out of professorial habit, he shimmied hisnecktie's Windsor knot up on his collar. Then he turned to theurinal behind him.

As he stood there, he found himself wondering if Susan was homeyet. *Where could she have gone? To Stone Manor withoutme?*

"Hey!" a female voice behind him said angrily.

Becker jumped. "I-I'm . . ." he stammered,hurrying to zip up. "I'm sorry . . . I . . ."

Becker turned to face the girl who had just entered. She was ayoung sophisticate, right off the pages of *SeventeenMagazine.* She wore conservative plaid pants and a whitesleeveless blouse. In her hand was a red L.L. Bean duffel. Herblond hair was perfectly blow-dried.

"I'm sorry." Becker fumbled, buckling his belt."The men's room was . . . anyway . . . I'mleaving." "Fuckin' weirdo!"

Becker did a double-take. The profanity seemed inappropriatecoming from

her lips—like sewage flowing from a polisheddecanter. But as Becker studied her, he saw that she was not aspolished as he'd first thought. Her eyes were puffy andbloodshot, and her left forearm was swollen. Underneath the reddishirritation on her arm, the flesh was blue.

Jesus, Becker thought. *Intravenous drugs. Who wouldhave guessed?*

"Get out!" she yelled. "Just get out!"

Becker momentarily forgot all about the ring, the NSA, all ofit. His heart went out to the young girl. Her parents had probablysent her over here with some prep school study program and a VISAcard—and she'd ended up all alone in a bathroom in themiddle of the night doing drugs.

"Are you okay?" he asked, backing toward the door.

"I'm fine." Her voice was haughty. "You canleave now!"

Becker turned to go. He shot her forearm a last sad glance. *There's nothing you can do*, David. *Leave italone.*

"Now!" she hollered. Becker nodded. As he left he gave her a sad smile. "Becareful."

CHAPTER 67

“Susan?” Hale panted, his face in hers.

He was sitting, one leg on either side of her, his full weighton her midsection. His tailbone ground painfully into her pubisthrough the thin fabric of her skirt. His nose was dripping bloodall over her. She tasted vomit in the back of her throat. His handswere at her chest.

She felt nothing. *Is he touching me?* It took a moment forSusan to realize Hale was buttoning her top button and covering herup.

“Susan.” Hale gasped, breathless. “You’vegot to get me out of here.”

Susan was in a daze. Nothing made sense.

“Susan, you’ve got to help me! Strathmore killedChartrukian! I saw it!”

It took a moment for the words to register. *Strathmore killedChartrukian?* Hale obviously had no idea Susan had seen himdownstairs.

“Strathmore knows I saw him!” Hale spat.“He’ll kill me too!”

Had Susan not been breathless with fear, she would have laughedin his face. She recognized the divide-and-conquer mentality of anex-Marine. Invent lies—pit your enemies against eachother.

“It’s true!” he yelled. “We’ve got tocall for help! I think we’re both in danger!”

She did not believe a word he said.

Hale’s muscular legs were cramping, and he rolled up on hishaunches to shift his weight slightly. He opened his mouth tospeak, but he never got the chance.

As Hale’s body rose, Susan felt the circulation surge backinto her legs. Before she knew what had happened, a reflex instinctjerked her left leg back hard into Hale’s crotch. She felt herkneecap crush the soft sac of tissue between his legs.

Hale whimpered in agony and instantly went limp. He rolled ontohis side, clutching himself. Susan twisted out from under his deadweight. She staggered toward the door, knowing she’d never bestrong enough to get out.

Making a split-second decision, Susan positioned herself behindthe long maple meeting table and dug her feet into the carpet.Mercifully the table had casters. She strode with all her mighttoward the arched glass wall, pushing the table before her. Thecasters were good, and the table rolled well. Halfway across Node3, she was at a full sprint.

Five feet from the glass wall, Susan heaved and let go. Sheleapt to one side and covered her eyes. After a sickening crack,the wall exploded in a shower of

glass. The sounds of Crypto rushedinto Node 3 for the first time since its construction.

Susan looked up. Through the jagged hole, she could see thetable. It was still rolling. It spun wide circles out across theCrypto floor and eventually disappeared into the darkness.

Susan rammed her mangled Ferragamo’s back on her feet, shota last glance at the still-writhing Greg Hale, and dashed acrossthe sea of broken glass out onto the Crypto floor.

CHAPTER 68

“Now wasn’t that easy?” Midge said with a sneeras Brinkerhoff handed over the key to Fontaine’s office.
Brinkerhoff looked beaten.
“I’ll erase it before I go,” Midge promised.“Unless you and your wife want it for your privatecollection.”
“Just get the damned printout,” he snapped. “Andthen get out!”
“Sí, señor,” Midge cackled in a thick PuertoRican accent. She winked and headed across the suite toFontaine’s double doors.

Leland Fontaine’s private office looked nothing like therest of the directorial suite. There were no paintings, nooverstuffed chairs, no ficus plants, no antique clocks. His spacewas streamlined for efficiency. His glass-topped desk and blackleather chair sat directly in front of his enormous picture window.Three file cabinets stood in the corner next to a small table witha French press coffeepot. The moon had risen high over Fort Meade,and the soft light filtering through the window accentuated thestarkness of the director’s furnishings.
What the hell am I doing? Brinkerhoff wondered.
Midge strode to the printer and scooped up the queue list. Shesquinted in the darkness. “I can’t read the data,”she complained. “Turn on the lights.”
“You’re reading it *outside.* Now comeon.”
But Midge was apparently having too much fun. She toyed withBrinkerhoff, walking to the window and angling the readout for abetter view.
“Midge . . .”

She kept reading. Brinkerhoff shifted anxiously in the doorway. “Midge . . .come on. These are the director’s private quarters.”
“It’s here somewhere,” she muttered, studying theprintout. “Strathmore bypassed Gauntlet, I know it.” Shemoved closer to the window.
Brinkerhoff began to sweat. Midge kept reading.
After a few moments, she gasped. “I knew it! Strathmore didit! He really did! The idiot!” She held up the paper and shookit. “He bypassed Gauntlet! Have a look!”
Brinkerhoff stared dumbfounded a moment and then raced acrossthe director’s office. He crowded in next to Midge in front ofthe window. She pointed to the end of the readout.

Brinkerhoff read in disbelief. “What the . . . ?”

The printout contained a list of the last thirty-six files thathad entered TRANSLTR. After each file was a four-digit Gauntletclearance code. However, the last file on the sheet had noclearance code—it simply read: manual bypass.

Jesus, Brinkerhoff thought. *Midge strikesagain.*

“The idiot!” Midge sputtered, seething. “Look atthis! Gauntlet rejected the file twice! Mutation strings! And he*still* bypassed! What the hell was he thinking?”

Brinkerhoff felt weak-kneed. He wondered why Midge was alwaysright. Neither of them noticed the reflection that had appeared inthe window beside them. A massive figure was standing inFontaine’s open doorway.

“Jeez,” Brinkerhoff choked. “You think we have avirus?”

Midge sighed. “Nothing else it could be.”

“Could be none of your damn business!” the deep voiceboomed from behind them.

Midge knocked her head against the window. Brinkerhoff tippedover the director’s chair and wheeled toward the voice. Heimmediately knew the silhouette.

“Director!” Brinkerhoff gasped. He strode over andextended his hand. “Welcome home, sir.”

The huge man ignored it.

“I-I thought,” Brinkerhoff stammered, retracting hishand, “I thought you were in South America.” Leland Fontaine glared down at his aide with eyes like bullets.“Yes . . . and now I’m back.”

CHAPTER 69

“Hey, mister!”

Becker had been walking across the concourse toward a bank ofpay phones. He stopped and turned. Coming up behind him was thegirl he’d just surprised in the bathroom. She waved for him towait. “Mister, wait!”

Now what? Becker groaned. *She wants to pressinvasion-of-privacy charges?*

The girl dragged her duffel toward him. When she arrived, shewas now wearing a huge smile. “Sorry to yell at you backthere. You just kind of startled me.”

“No problem,” Becker assured, somewhat puzzled.“I was in the wrong place.”

“This will sound crazy,” she said, batting herbloodshot eyes. “But you wouldn’t happen to have somemoney you can lend me, would you?”

Becker stared at her in disbelief. “Money for what?”he demanded. *I’m not funding your drug habit if that’swhat you’re asking.*

“I’m trying to get back home,” the blonde said.“Can you help?”

“Miss your flight?”

She nodded. “Lost my ticket. They wouldn’t let me geton. Airlines can be such assholes. I don’t have the cash tobuy another.”

“Where are your parents?” Becker asked.

“States.”

“Can you reach them?” “Nope. Already tried. I think they’re weekending onsomebody’s yacht.”

Becker scanned the girl’s expensive clothing. “Youdon’t have a credit card?”

“Yeah, but my dad canceled it. He thinks I’m ondrugs.”

“*Are* you on drugs?” Becker asked, deadpan,eyeing her swollen forearm.

The girl glared, indignant. “Of course not!” She gaveBecker an innocent huff, and he suddenly got the feeling he wasbeing played.

“Come on,” she said. “You look like a rich guy.Can’t you spot me some cash to get home? I could send it toyou later.”

Becker figured any cash he gave this girl would end up in thehands of some drug dealer in Triana. “First of all,” hesaid, “I’m not a rich guy—I’m a teacher. ButI’ll tell you what I’ll do . . .” *I’ll callyour bluff, that’s what I’ll do.*

“Why don’tI *charge* the ticket for you?”

The blonde stared at him in utter shock. “You’d dothat?” she stammered, eyes wide with hope. “You’dbuy me a ticket home? Oh, God, thank you!”

Becker was speechless. He had apparently misjudged themoment.
The girl threw her arms around him. “It’s been ashitty summer,” she choked, almost bursting into tears.“Oh, thank you! I’ve got to get out of here!”
Becker returned her embrace halfheartedly. The girl let go ofhim, and he eyed her forearm again.
She followed his gaze to the bluish rash. “Gross,huh?”
Becker nodded. “I thought you said you weren’t ondrugs.”
The girl laughed. “It’s Magic Marker! I took off halfmy skin trying to scrub it off. The ink smeared.”
Becker looked closer. In the fluorescent light, he could see,blurred beneath the reddish swelling on her arm, the faint outlineof writing—words scrawled on flesh.
“But . . . but your *eyes,”* Becker said, feelingdumb. “They’re all red.”
She laughed. “I was crying. I told you, I missed myflight.”
Becker looked back at the words on her arm.

She frowned, embarrassed. “Oops, you can still kind of readit, can’t you?”
Becker leaned closer. He could read it all right. The messagewas crystal clear.
As he read the four faint words, the last twelvehours flashed before his eyes.
David Becker found himself back in the Alfonso XIII hotel room.The obese German was touching his own forearm and speaking brokenEnglish: Fock off und die.
“You okay?” the girl asked, eyeing the dazedBecker.
Becker did not look up from her arm. He was dizzy. The fourwords smeared across the girl’s flesh carried a very simplemessage: FUCK OFF AND DIE.
The blonde looked down at it, embarrassed. “This friend ofmine wrote it . . . pretty stupid, huh?”

Becker couldn’t speak. *Fock off und die.* Hecouldn’t believe it. The German hadn’t been insultinghim, he’d been trying to help. Becker lifted his gaze to thegirl’s face. In the fluorescent light of the concourse, hecould see faint traces of red and blue in the girl’s blondhair.
“Y-you . . .” Becker stammered, staring at herunpierced ears. “You wouldn’t happen to wear earrings,would you?”
The girl eyed him strangely. She fished a tiny object from herpocket and held it out. Becker gazed at the skull pendant danglingin her hand.
“A clip-on?” he stammered. “Hell, yes,” the girl replied. “I’m scaredshitless of needles.”

CHAPTER 70

David Becker stood in the deserted concourse and felt his legsgo weak. He eyed the girl before him and knew his search was over.She had washed her hair and changed clothes—maybe in hopes ofhaving better luck selling the ring—but she'd neverboarded for New York.

Becker fought to keep his cool. His wild journey was about toend. He scanned her fingers. They were bare. He gazed down at herduffel. *It's in there,* he thought. *It's got tobe!*

He smiled, barely containing his excitement. "This is goingto sound crazy," he said, "but I think you've gotsomething I need."

"Oh?" Megan seemed suddenly uncertain.

Becker reached for his wallet. "Of course I'd be happyto pay you." He looked down and started sorting through thecash in his billfold.

As Megan watched him count out his money, she drew a startledgasp, apparently misunderstanding his intentions. She shot afrightened glance toward the revolving door . . . measuring thedistance. It was fifty yards.

"I can give you enough to buy your ticket homeif—"

"Don't say it," Megan blurted, offering a forcedsmile. "I think I know exactly what you need." She bentdown and started rifling through her duffel.

Becker felt a surge of hope. *She's got it!* he toldhimself. *She's got the ring!* He didn't know howthe hell she knew what it was he wanted, but he was too tired tocare. Every muscle in his body relaxed. He pictured himself handingthe ring to the beaming deputy director of the NSA. Then he andSusan would lie in the big canopy bed at Stone Manor and make upfor lost time.

The girl finally found what she was looking for—herPepperGuard—the environmentally safe alternative to mace, madefrom a potent blend of cayenne and chili peppers. In one swiftmotion, she swung around and fired a direct stream intoBecker's eyes. She grabbed her duffel and dashed for the door.When she looked back, David Becker was on the floor, holding hisface, writhing in agony.

CHAPTER 71

Tokugen Numataka lit his fourth cigar and kept pacing. Hesnatched up his phone and buzzed the main switchboard.

“Any word yet on that phone number?” he demandedbefore the operator could speak. “Nothing yet, sir. It’s taking a bit longer thanexpected—it came from a cellular.”

A cellular, Numataka mused. *Figures.* Fortunatelyfor the Japanese economy, the Americans had an insatiable appetitefor electronic gadgets.

“The boosting station,” the operator added, “isin the 202 area code. But we have no number yet.”

“202? Where’s that?” *Where in the vastAmerican expanse is this mysterious North Dakota hiding?*

“Somewhere near Washington, D.C., sir.” Numataka arched his eyebrows. “Call me as soon as you havea number.”

CHAPTER 72

Susan Fletcher stumbled across the darkened Crypto floor towardStrathmore's catwalk. The commander's office was as farfrom Hale as Susan could get inside the locked complex.

When Susan reached the top of the catwalk stairs, she found thecommander's door hanging loosely, the electronic lock renderedineffective by the power outage. She barged in.

"Commander?" The only light inside was the glow ofStrathmore's computer monitors. "Commander!" shecalled once again. *"Commander!"*

Susan suddenly remembered that the commander was in the Sys-Seclab. She turned circles in his empty office, the panic of herordeal with Hale still in her blood. She had to get out of Crypto.Digital Fortress or no Digital Fortress, it was time toact—time to abort the TRANSLTR run and escape. She eyedStrathmore's glowing monitors then dashed to his desk. Shefumbled with his keypad. *Abort TRANSLTR!* The task was simplenow that she was on an authorized terminal. Susan called up theproper command window and typed:

ABORT RUN

Her finger hovered momentarily over the ENTER key. "Susan!" a voice barked from the doorway. Susanwheeled scared, fearing it was Hale. But it was not, it wasStrathmore. He stood, pale and eerie in the electronic glow, hischest heaving. "What the hell's going on!"

"Com . . . mander!" Susan gasped. "Hale's inNode 3! He just attacked me!"

"What? Impossible! Hale's locked downin—"

"No, he's not! He's loose! We need security inhere now! I'm aborting TRANSLTR!" Susan reached for thekeypad.

"DON'T TOUCH THAT!" Strathmore lunged for theterminal and pulled Susan's hands away.

Susan recoiled, stunned. She stared at the commander and for thesecond time that day did not recognize him. Susan felt suddenlyalone.

* * *

Strathmore saw the blood on Susan's shirt and immediatelyregretted his outburst. "Jesus, Susan. Are you okay?"

She didn't respond.

He wished he hadn't jumped on her unnecessarily. His nerveswere frayed. He was juggling too much. There were things on hismind—things Susan

Fletcher did not know about—things hehad not told her and prayed he'd never have to.
"I'm sorry," he said softly. "Tell me whathappened."
She turned away. "It doesn't matter. The blood'snot mine. Just get me out of here."

"Are you hurt?" Strathmore put a hand on her shoulder.Susan recoiled. He dropped his hand and looked away. When he lookedback at Susan's face, she seemed to be staring over hisshoulder at something on the wall.

There, in the darkness, a small keypad glowed full force.Strathmore followed her gaze and frowned. He'd hoped Susanwouldn't notice the glowing control panel. The illuminatedkeypad controlled his private elevator. Strathmore and hishigh-powered guests used it to come and go from Crypto withoutadvertising the fact to the rest of the staff. The personal liftdropped down fifty feet below the Crypto dome and then movedlaterally 109 yards through a reinforced underground tunnel to thesublevels of the main NSA complex. The elevator connecting Cryptoto the NSA was powered from the main complex; it was on-linedespite Crypto's power outage.

Strathmore had known all along it was on-line, but even as Susanhad been pounding on the main exit downstairs, he hadn'tmentioned it. He could not afford to let Susan out—not yet. Hewondered how much he'd have to tell her to make her want tostay.
Susan pushed past Strathmore and raced to the back wall. Shejabbed furiously at the illuminated buttons.
"Please," she begged. But the door did not open.
"Susan," Strathmore said quietly. "The lift takesa password."

"A password?" she repeated angrily. She glared at thecontrols. Below the main keypad was a second keypad—a smallerone, with tiny buttons. Each button was marked with a letter of thealphabet. Susan wheeled to him. "What is the password!"she demanded.
Strathmore thought a moment and sighed heavily. "Susan,have a seat."
Susan looked as if she could hardly believe her ears.
"Have a seat," the commander repeated, his voicefirm.
"Let me out!" Susan shot an uneasy glance toward thecommander's open office door.

Strathmore eyed the panicked Susan Fletcher. Calmly he moved tohis office door. He stepped out onto the landing and peered intothe darkness. Hale was nowhere to be seen. The commander steppedback inside and pulled the door shut. Then he propped a chair infront to keep it closed, went to his desk, and removed somethingfrom a drawer. In the pale glow of the monitors Susan saw

what hewas holding. Her face went pale. It was a gun.

Strathmore pulled two chairs into the middle of the room. Herotated them to face the closed office door. Then he sat. He liftedthe glittering Beretta semi-automatic and aimed steadily at theslightly open door. After a moment he laid the gun back in hislap.

He spoke solemnly. “Susan, we’re safe here. We need totalk. If Greg Hale comes through that door . . .” He let ithang.

Susan was speechless.

Strathmore gazed at her in the dim light of his office. Hepatted the seat beside him. “Susan, sit. I have something totell you.” She did not move. “When I’m done,”he said, “I’ll give you the password to the elevator. Youcan decide whether to leave or not.”

There was a long silence. In a daze, Susan moved across theoffice and sat next to Strathmore. “Susan,” he began, “I haven’t been entirelyhonest with you.”

CHAPTER 73

David Becker felt as if his face had been doused in turpentineand ignited. He rolled over on the floor and squinted throughbleary tunnel vision at the girl halfway to the revolving doors.She was running in short, terrified bursts, dragging her duffelbehind her across the tile. Becker tried to pull himself to hisfeet, but he could not. He was blinded by red-hot fire. *Shecan't get away!*
He tried to call out, but there was no air in his lungs, only asickening pain. "No!" He coughed. The sound barely lefthis lips.
Becker knew the second she went through the door, she woulddisappear forever. He tried to call out again, but his throat wassearing.

The girl had almost reached the revolving door. Becker staggeredto his feet, gasping for breath. He stumbled after her. The girldashed into the first compartment of the revolving door, draggingher duffel behind her. Twenty yards back, Becker was staggeringblindly toward the door.
"Wait!" He gasped. *"Wait!"*

The girl pushed furiously on the inside of the door. The doorbegan to rotate, but then it jammed. The blonde wheeled in terrorand saw her duffel snagged in the opening. She knelt and pulledfuriously to free it.
Becker fixed his bleary vision on the fabric protruding throughthe door. As he dove, the red corner of nylon protruding from thecrack was all he could see. He flew toward it, armsoutstretched.

As David Becker fell toward the door, his hands only inchesaway, the fabric slipped into the crack and disappeared. Hisfingers clutched empty air as the door lurched into motion. Thegirl and the duffel tumbled into the street outside.

"Megan!" Becker wailed as hit the floor. White-hotneedles shot through the back of his eye sockets. His visiontunneled to nothing, and a new wave of nausea rolled in. His ownvoice echoed in the blackness. *Megan!*
* * *

David Becker wasn't sure how long he'd been lyingthere before he became aware of the hum of fluorescent bulbsoverhead. Everything else was still. Through the silence came avoice. Someone was calling. He tried to lift his head off thefloor. The world was cockeyed, watery. *Again the voice.* Hesquinted down the concourse and saw a figure twenty yards away.
"Mister?"

Becker recognized the voice. It was the girl. She was standingat another entrance farther down the concourse, clutching herduffel to her chest. She looked more frightened now than she hadbefore.
“Mister?” she asked, her voice trembling. “Inever told you my name. How come you know my name?”

CHAPTER 74

Director Leland Fontaine was a mountain of a man, sixty-threeyears old, with a close-cropped military haircut and a rigiddemeanor. His jet-black eyes were like coal when he was irritated,which was almost always. He'd risen through the ranks of theNSA through hard work, good planning, and the well-earned respectof his predecessors. He was the first African American director ofthe National Security Agency, but nobody ever mentioned thedistinction; Fontaine's politics were decidedly colorblind,and his staff wisely followed suit.

Fontaine had kept Midge and Brinkerhoff standing as he wentthrough the silent ritual of making himself a mug of Guatemalanjava. Then he'd settled at his desk, left them standing, andquestioned them like schoolchildren in the principal'soffice.

Midge did the talking—explaining the unusual series ofevents that led them to violate the sanctity of Fontaine'soffice.

"A virus?" the director asked coldly. "You twothink we've got a virus?"

Brinkerhoff winced. "Yes, sir," Midge snapped.

"Because Strathmore bypassed Gauntlet?" Fontaine eyedthe printout in front of him.

"Yes," she said. "And there's a file thathasn't broken in over twenty hours!"

Fontaine frowned. "Or so your data says."

Midge was about to protest, but she held her tongue. Instead shewent for the throat. "There's a blackout inCrypto."

Fontaine looked up, apparently surprised.

Midge confirmed with a curt nod. "All power's down.Jabba thought maybe—"

"You called Jabba?"

"Yes, sir, I—"

"Jabba?" Fontaine stood up, furious. "Why thehell didn't you call Strathmore?"

"We did!" Midge defended. "He said everything wasfine."

Fontaine stood, his chest heaving. "Then we have no reasonto doubt him." There was closure in his voice. He took a sipof coffee. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have work todo."

Midge's jaw dropped. "I beg your pardon?"

Brinkerhoff was already headed for the door, but Midge wascemented in place.

"I said good night, Ms. Milken," Fontaine repeated."You are excused."

“But—but sir,” she stammered, “I . . . Ihave to protest. I think—”
“*You* protest?” the director demanded. He setdown his coffee. “*I* protest! I protest to your presencein my office. I protest to your insinuations that the deputydirector of this agency is lying. I protest—”
“We have a virus, sir! My instincts tell me—”
“Well, your instincts are wrong, Ms. Milken! For once,they’re wrong!”
Midge stood fast. “But, sir! Commander Strathmore bypassedGauntlet!”

Fontaine strode toward her, barely controlling his anger.“That is *his* prerogative! I pay you to watch analystsand service employees—not spy on the deputy director! If itweren’t for him we’d still be breaking codes with penciland paper! Now leave me!” He turned to Brinkerhoff, who stoodin the doorway colorless and trembling. “Both ofyou.”
“With all due respect, sir,” Midge said.“I’d like to recommend we send a Sys-Sec team to Cryptojust to ensure—”
“We will do no such thing!”

After a tense beat, Midge nodded. “Very well. Goodnight.” She turned and left. As she passed, Brinkerhoff couldsee in her eyes that she had no intention of letting thisrest—not until her intuition was satisfied.

Brinkerhoff gazed across the room at his boss, massive andseething behind his desk. This was not the director he knew. Thedirector he knew was a stickler for detail, for neatly tiedpackages. He always encouraged his staff to examine and clarify anyinconsistencies in daily procedure, no matter how minute. And yethere he was, asking them to turn their backs on a very bizarreseries of coincidences.

The director was obviously hiding something, but Brinkerhoff waspaid to assist, not to question. Fontaine had proven over and overthat he had everyone’s best interests at heart; if assistinghim now meant turning a blind eye, then so be it. Unfortunately,Midge was paid to question, and Brinkerhoff feared she was headedfor Crypto to do just that.
Time to get out the résumés, Brinkerhoffthought as he turned to the door.
“Chad!” Fontaine barked, from behind him. Fontaine hadseen the look in Midge’s eyes when she left. “Don’tlet her out of this suite.”
Brinkerhoff nodded and hustled after Midge.
* * *

Fontaine sighed and put his head in his hands. His sable eyeswere heavy. It had been a long, unexpected trip home. The pastmonth had been one of great anticipation for Leland Fontaine. Therewere things happening right now at the NSA that would changehistory, and ironically, Director Fontaine had found out about themonly by chance.

Three months ago, Fontaine had gotten news that CommanderStrathmore's wife was leaving him. He'd also heardreports that Strathmore was working absurd hours and seemed aboutto crack under the pressure. Despite differences of opinion withStrathmore on many issues, Fontaine had always held his deputydirector in the highest esteem; Strathmore was a brilliant man,maybe the best the NSA had. At the same time, ever since theSkipjack fiasco, Strathmore had been under tremendous stress. Itmade Fontaine uneasy; the commander held a lot of keys around theNSA—and Fontaine had an agency to protect.

Fontaine needed someone to keep tabs on the wavering Strathmoreand make sure he was 100 percent—but it was not that simple.Strathmore was a proud and powerful man; Fontaine needed a way tocheck up on the commander without undermining his confidence orauthority.

Fontaine decided, out of respect for Strathmore, to do the jobhimself. He had an invisible tap installed on CommanderStrathmore's Crypto account—his E-mail, his interofficecorrespondence, his brainstorms, all of it. If Strathmore was goingto crack, the director would see warning signs in his work. Butinstead of signs of a breakdown, Fontaine uncovered the groundworkfor one of the most incredible intelligence schemes he'd everencountered. It was no wonder Strathmore was busting his ass; if hecould pull this plan off, it would make up for the Skipjack fiascoa hundred times over.

Fontaine had concluded Strathmore was fine, working at 110percent—as sly, smart, and patriotic as ever. The best thingthe director could do would be to stand clear and watch thecommander work his magic. Strathmore had devised a plan . . . aplan Fontaine had no intention of interrupting.

CHAPTER 75

Strathmore fingered the Berretta in his lap. Even with the rageboiling in his blood, he was programmed to think clearly. The factthat Greg Hale had dared lay a finger on Susan Fletcher sickenedhim, but the fact that it was his own fault made him even sicker;Susan going into Node 3 had been his idea. Strathmore knew enoughto compartmentalize his emotion—it could in no way affect hishandling of Digital Fortress. He was the deputy director of theNational Security Agency. And today his job was more critical thanit had ever been.

Strathmore slowed his breathing. "Susan." His voicewas efficient and unclouded. "Did you delete Hale'sE-mail?"

"No," she said, confused.

"Do you have the pass-key?"

She shook her head. Strathmore frowned, chewing his lip. His mind was racing. He hada dilemma. He could easily enter his elevator password, and Susanwould be gone. But he needed her there. He needed her help to findHale's pass-key. Strathmore hadn't told her yet, butfinding that pass-key was far more than a matter of academicinterest—it was an absolute necessity. Strathmore suspected hecould run Susan's nonconformity search and find the pass-keyhimself, but he'd already encountered problems running hertracer. He was not about to risk it again.

"Susan." He sighed resolutely. "I'd like youto help me find Hale's pass-key."

"What!" Susan stood up, her eyes wild.

Strathmore fought off the urge to stand along with her. He knewa lot about negotiating—the position of power was alwaysseated. He hoped she would follow suit. She did not.

"Susan, sit down."

She ignored him.

"Sit down." It was an order.

Susan remained standing. "Commander, if you've stillgot some burning desire to check out Tankado's algorithm, youcan do it alone. I want out."

Strathmore hung his head and took a deep breath. It was clearshe would need an explanation. *She deserves one,* he thought.Strathmore made his decision—Susan Fletcher would hear it all.He prayed he wasn't making a mistake.

"Susan," he began, "it wasn't supposed tocome to this." He ran his hand

across his scalp. “Thereare some things I haven’t told you. Sometimes a man in myposition . . .” The commander wavered as if making a painfulconfession. “Sometimes a man in my position is forced to lieto the people he loves. Today was one of those days.” He eyedher sadly. “What I’m about to tell you, I never plannedto have to say . . . to you . . . or to anyone.”

Susan felt a chill. The commander had a deadly serious look onhis face. There was obviously some aspect of his agenda to whichshe was not privy. Susan sat down.

There was a long pause as Strathmore stared at the ceiling,gathering his thoughts. “Susan,” he finally said, hisvoice frail. “I have no family.” He returned his gaze toher. “I have no marriage to speak of. My life has been my lovefor this country. My life has been my work here at theNSA.”

Susan listened in silence.

“As you may have guessed,” he continued, “Iplanned to retire soon. But I wanted to retire with pride. I wantedto retire knowing that I’d truly made a difference.”

“But you *have* made a difference,” Susan heardherself say. “You built TRANSLTR.”

Strathmore didn’t seem to hear. “Over the past fewyears, our work here at the NSA has gotten harder and harder.We’ve faced enemies I never imagined would challenge us.I’m talking about our own citizens. The lawyers, the civilrights fanatics, the EFF—they’ve all played a part, butit’s more than that. It’s the *people.* They’velost faith. They’ve become paranoid. They suddenly see *us* as the enemy. People like you and me, people who truly havethe nation’s best interests at heart, we find ourselves havingto fight for our right to serve our country. We’re no longerpeacekeepers. We’re eavesdroppers, peeping Toms, violators ofpeople’s rights.” Strathmore heaved a sigh.“Unfortunately, there are naive people in the world, peoplewho can’t imagine the horrors they’d face if wedidn’t intervene. I truly believe it’s up to us to savethem from their own ignorance.”

Susan waited for his point.

The commander stared wearily at the floor and then looked up.“Susan, hear me out,” he said, smiling tenderly at her.“You’ll want to stop me, but hear me out. I’ve beendecrypting Tankado’s E-mail for about two months now. As youcan imagine, I was shocked when I first read his messages to NorthDakota about an unbreakable algorithm called Digital Fortress. Ididn’t believe it was possible. But every time I intercepted anew message, Tankado sounded more and more convincing. When I readthat he’d used mutation strings to write a rotating key-code,I realized he was light-years ahead of us; it was an approach

noone here had never tried."
"Why *would* we?" Susan asked. "It barelymakes sense."

Strathmore stood up and started pacing, keeping one eye on thedoor. "A few weeks ago, when I heard about the DigitalFortress auction, I finally accepted the fact that Tankado wasserious. I knew if he sold his algorithm to a Japanese softwarecompany, we were sunk, so I tried to think of any way I could stophim. I considered having him killed, but with all the publicitysurrounding the algorithm and all his recent claims about TRANSLTR,we would be prime suspects. That's when it dawned on me."He turned to Susan. "I realized that Digital Fortress should*not* be stopped."

Susan stared at him, apparently lost.

Strathmore went on. "I suddenly saw Digital Fortress as theopportunity of a lifetime. It hit me that with a few changes,Digital Fortress could work *for* us instead of againstus."

Susan had never heard anything so absurd. Digital Fortress wasan unbreakable algorithm; it would destroy them.

"If," Strathmore continued, "if I could just makea small modification in the algorithm . . . before it was released. . ." He gave her a cunning glint of the eye.

It took only an instant.

Strathmore saw the amazement register in Susan's eyes. Heexcitedly explained his plan. "If I could get the pass-key, Icould unlock our copy of Digital Fortress and insert amodification."

"A back door," Susan said, forgetting the Commanderhad ever lied to her. She felt a surge of anticipation. "Justlike Skipjack."

Strathmore nodded. "Then we could replace Tankado'sgive-away file on the Internet with our *altered* version.Because Digital Fortress is a Japanese algorithm, no one will eversuspect the NSA had any part in it. All we have to do is make theswitch."

Susan realized the plan was beyond ingenious. It was pure . . .Strathmore. He planned to facilitate the release of an algorithmthe NSA could break!

"Full access," Strathmore said. "Digital Fortresswill become the encryption standard overnight."

"Overnight?" Susan said. "How do you figure *that?* Even if Digital Fortress becomes available everywhere forfree, most computer users will stick with their old algorithms forconvenience. Why would they switch to Digital Fortress?"

Strathmore smiled. "Simple. We have a security leak. Thewhole world finds out about TRANSLTR."

Susan's jaw dropped.

“Quite simply, Susan, we let the truth hit the street. Wetell the world that the NSA has a computer that can break everyalgorithm except Digital Fortress.”
Susan was amazed. “So everyone jumps ship to DigitalFortress . . . not knowing we can break it!”
Strathmore nodded. “Exactly.” There was a longsilence. “I’m sorry I lied to you. Trying to rewriteDigital Fortress is a pretty big play, I didn’t want youinvolved.”
“I . . . understand,” she replied slowly, stillreeling from the brilliance of it all. “You’re not a badliar.”
Strathmore chuckled. “Years of practice. Lying was the onlyway to keep you out of the loop.”
Susan nodded. “And how big a loop is it?”
“You’re looking at it.”
Susan smiled for the first time in an hour. “I was afraidyou’d say that.”

He shrugged. “Once Digital Fortress is in place, I’llbrief the director.”
Susan was impressed. Strathmore’s plan was a globalintelligence coup the magnitude of which had never before beenimagined. And he’d attempted it single-handedly. It lookedlike he might pull it off too. The pass-key was downstairs. Tankadowas dead. Tankado’s partner had been located.
Susan paused.
Tankado is dead. That seemed very convenient. She thoughtof all the lies that Strathmore had told her and felt a suddenchill. She looked uneasily at the commander. “Did you killEnsei Tankado?”

Strathmore looked surprised. He shook his head. “Of coursenot. There was no need to kill Tankado. In fact, I’d prefer hewere alive. His death could cast suspicion on Digital Fortress. Iwanted this switch to go as smoothly and inconspicuously aspossible. The original plan was to make the switch and let Tankadosell his key.”

Susan had to admit it made sense. Tankado would have no reasonto suspect the algorithm on the Internet was not the original.Nobody had access to it except himself and North Dakota. UnlessTankado went back and studied the programming after it wasreleased, he’d never know about the back door. He’dslaved over Digital Fortress for long enough that he’dprobably never want to see the programming again.

Susan let it all soak in. She suddenly understood thecommander’s need for privacy in Crypto. The task at hand wastime-consuming and delicate—writing a concealed back door in acomplex algorithm and making an undetected Internet switch.Concealment was of paramount importance. The simple suggestion thatDigital Fortress was tainted could ruin the commander’splan.

Only now did she fully grasp why he had decided to let TRANSLTRkeep running. *If Digital Fortress is going to be the NSA'snew baby, Strathmore wanted to be sure it was unbreakable!*

"Still want out?" he asked.

Susan looked up. Somehow sitting there in the dark with thegreat Trevor Strathmore, her fears were swept away. RewritingDigital Fortress was a chance to make history—a chance to doincredible good—and Strathmore could use her help. Susanforced a reluctant smile. "What's our nextmove?"

Strathmore beamed. He reached over and put a hand on hershoulder. "Thanks." He smiled and then got down tobusiness. "We'll go downstairs together." He held uphis Berretta. "You'll search Hale's terminal.I'll cover you."

Susan bristled at the thought of going downstairs."Can't we wait for David to call with Tankado'scopy?"

Strathmore shook his head. "The sooner we make the switch,the better. We have no guarantees that David will even find theother copy. If by some fluke the ring falls into the wrong handsover there, I'd prefer we'd already made the algorithmswitch. That way, whoever ends up with the key will download *our* version of the algorithm." Strathmore fingered his gunand stood. "We need to go for Hale's key."

Susan fell silent. The commander had a point. They neededHale's pass-key. And they needed it now.

When Susan stood, her legs were jittery. She wished she'dhit Hale harder. She eyed Strathmore's weapon and suddenlyfelt queasy. "You'd actually shoot Greg Hale?"

"No." Strathmore frowned, striding to the door."But let's hope *he* doesn't knowthat."

CHAPTER 76

Outside the Seville airport terminal, a taxi sat idle, the meterrunning. The passenger in the wire-rim glasses gazed through theplate-glass windows of the well-lit terminal. He knew he'darrived in time.

He could see a blond girl. She was helping David Becker to achair. Becker was apparently in pain. *He does not yet knowpain,* the passenger thought. The girl pulled a small objectfrom her pocket and held it out. Becker held it up and studied itin the light. Then he slipped it on his finger. He pulled a stackof bills from his pocket and paid the girl. They talked a fewminutes longer, and then the girl hugged him. She waved, shoulderedher duffel, and headed off across the concourse.

At last, the man in the taxi thought. *At last.*

CHAPTER 77

Strathmore stepped out of his office onto the landing with hisgun leveled. Susan trailed close behind, wondering if Hale wasstill in Node 3.

The light from Strathmore's monitor behind them threw eerieshadows of their bodies out across the grated platform. Susaninched closer to the commander.

As they moved away from the door, the light faded, and they wereplunged into darkness. The only light on the Crypto floor came fromthe stars above and the faint haze from behind the shattered Node 3window.

Strathmore inched forward, looking for the place where thenarrow staircase began. Switching the Berretta to his left hand, hegroped for the banister with his right. He figured he was probablyjust as bad a shot with his left, and he needed his right forsupport. Falling down this particular set of stairs could cripplesomeone for life, and Strathmore's dreams for his retirementdid not involve a wheelchair.

Susan, blinded by the blackness of the Crypto dome, descendedwith a hand on Strathmore's shoulder. Even at the distance oftwo feet, she could not see the commander's outline. As shestepped onto each metal tread, she shuffled her toes forwardlooking for the edge.

Susan began having second thoughts about risking a visit to Node3 to get Hale's pass-key. The commander insisted Halewouldn't have the guts to touch them, but Susan wasn't sosure. Hale was desperate. He had two options: Escape Crypto or goto jail.

A voice kept telling Susan they should wait for David'scall and use *his* pass-key, but she knew there was noguarantee he would even find it. She wondered what was taking Davidso long. Susan swallowed her apprehension and kept going.

Strathmore descended silently. There was no need to alert Halethey were coming. As they neared the bottom, Strathmore slowed,feeling for the final step. When he found it, the heel of hisloafer clicked on hard black tile. Susan felt his shoulder tense.They'd entered the danger zone. Hale could be anywhere.

In the distance, now hidden behind TRANSLTR, was theirdestination—Node 3. Susan prayed Hale was still there, lyingon the floor, whimpering in pain like the dog he was.

Strathmore let go of the railing and switched the gun back tohis right hand.

Without a word, he moved out into the darkness.Susan held tight to his shoulder. If she lost him, the only wayshe'd find him again was to speak. Hale might hear them. Asthey moved away from the safety of the stairs, Susan recalledlate-night games of tag as a kid—she'd left home base,she was in the open. She was vulnerable.

TRANSLTR was the only island in the vast black sea. Every fewsteps Strathmore stopped, gun poised, and listened. The only soundwas the faint hum from below. Susan wanted to pull him back, backto safety, back to home base. There seemed to be faces in the darkall around her.

Halfway to TRANSLTR, the silence of Crypto was broken. Somewherein the darkness, seemingly right on top of them, a high-pitchedbeeping pierced the night. Strathmore spun, and Susan lost him.Fearful, Susan shot her arm out, groping for him. But the commanderwas gone. The space where his shoulder had been was now just emptyair. She staggered forward into the emptiness.

The beeping noise continued. It was nearby. Susan wheeled in thedarkness. There was a rustle of clothing, and suddenly the beepingstopped. Susan froze. An instant later, as if from one of her worstchildhood nightmares, a vision appeared. A face materializeddirectly in front of her. It was ghostly and green. It was the faceof a demon, sharp shadows jutting upward across deformed features.She jumped back. She turned to run, but it grabbed her arm.

"Don't move!" it commanded.

For an instant, she thought she saw Hale in those two burningeyes. But the voice was not Hale's. And the touch was toosoft. It was Strathmore. He was lit from beneath by a glowingobject that he'd just pulled from his pocket. Her body saggedwith relief. She felt herself start breathing again. The object inStrathmore's hand had some sort of electronic LED that wasgiving off a greenish glow.

"Damn," Strathmore cursed under his breath. "Mynew pager." He stared in disgust at the SkyPager in his palm.He'd forgotten to engage the silent-ring feature. Ironically,he'd gone to a local electronics store to buy the device.He'd paid cash to keep it anonymous; nobody knew better thanStrathmore how closely the NSA watched their own—and thedigital messages sent and received from this pager were somethingStrathmore definitely needed to keep private.

Susan looked around uneasily. If Hale hadn't known theywere coming, he knew now.

Strathmore pressed a few buttons and read the incoming message.He groaned quietly. It was more bad news from Spain—not fromDavid Becker, but from the *other* party Strathmore had sentto Seville.

* * *

Three thousand miles away, a mobile surveillance van sped alongthe darkened Seville streets. It had been commissioned by the NSAunder “Umbra” secrecy from a military base in Rota. Thetwo men inside were tense. It was not the first time they’dreceived emergency orders from Fort Meade, but the ordersdidn’t usually come from so high up.

The agent at the wheel called over his shoulder. “Any signof our man?”

The eyes of his partner never left the feed from the wide-anglevideo monitor on the roof. “No. Keep driving.”

CHAPTER 78

Underneath the twisting mass of cables, Jabba was sweating. Hewas still on his back with a penlight clenched in his teeth.He'd gotten used to working late on weekends; the less hecticNSA hours were often the only times he could perform hardwaremaintenance. As he maneuvered the red-hot soldering iron throughthe maze of wires above him, he moved with exceptional care;singeing any of the dangling sheathes would be disaster.

Just another few inches, he thought. The job was takingfar longer than he'd imagined.

Just as he brought the tip of the iron against the final threadof raw solder, his cellular phone rang sharply. Jabba startled, hisarm twitched, and a large glob of sizzling, liquefied lead fell onhis arm.

"Shit!" He dropped the iron and practicallyswallowed his penlight. "Shit! Shit! Shit!"

He scrubbed furiously at the drop of cooling solder. It rolledoff, leaving an impressive welt. The chip he was trying to solderin place fell out and hit him in the head.

"Goddamn it!"

Jabba's phone summoned him again. He ignored it.

"Midge," he cursed under his breath. *Damn you!Crypto's fine!* The phone rang on. Jabba went back to workreseating the new chip. A minute later the chip was in place, buthis phone was still ringing. *For Christ's sake, Midge! Giveit up!*

The phone rang another fifteen seconds and finally stopped.Jabba breathed a sigh of relief.

Sixty seconds later the intercom overhead crackled. "Wouldthe chief Sys-Sec please contact the main switchboard for amessage."

Jabba rolled his eyes in disbelief. *She just doesn'tgive up, does she?* He ignored the page.

CHAPTER 79

Strathmore replaced his Skypager in his pocket and peeredthrough the darkness toward Node 3.
He reached for Susan's hand. "Come on."
But their fingers never touched.

There was a long guttural cry from out of the darkness. Athundering figure loomed—a Mack truck bearing down with noheadlights. An instant later, there was a collision and Strathmorewas skidding across the floor.
It was Hale. The pager had given them away.

Susan heard the Berretta fall. For a moment she was planted inplace, unsure where to run, what to do. Her instincts told her toescape, but she didn't have the elevator code. Her heart toldher to help Strathmore, but how? As she spun in desperation, sheexpected to hear the sounds of a life-and-death struggle on thefloor, but there was nothing. Everything was suddenlysilent—as if Hale had hit the commander and then disappearedback into the night.
Susan waited, straining her eyes into the darkness, hopingStrathmore wasn't hurt. After what seemed like an eternity,she whispered, "Commander?"

Even as she said it, she realized her mistake. An instant laterHale's odor welled up behind her. She turned too late. Withoutwarning, she was twisting, gasping for air. She found herselfcrushed in a familiar headlock, her face against Hale'schest.
"My balls are killing me." Hale panted in her ear. Susan's knees buckled. The stars in the dome began to spinabove her.

CHAPTER 80

Hale clamped down on Susan's neck and yelled into thedarkness. "Commander, I've got your sweetheart. I wantout!"
His demands were met with silence.
Hale's grip tightened. "I'll break herneck!"
A gun cocked directly behind them. Strathmore's voice wascalm and even. "Let her go."
Susan winced in pain. "Commander!"
Hale spun Susan's body toward the sound. "You shootand you'll hit your precious Susan. You ready to take thatchance?"
Strathmore's voice moved closer. "Let hergo."
"No way. You'll kill me."
"I'm not going to kill anyone."
"Oh, yeah? Tell that to Chartrukian!"
Strathmore moved closer. "Chartrukian'sdead."
"No shit. You killed him. I saw it!"
"Give it up, Greg," Strathmore said calmly.
Hale clutched at Susan and whispered in her ear,"Strathmore pushed Chartrukian—I swear it!"
"She's not going to fall for your divide-and-conquertechnique," Strathmore said, moving closer. "Let hergo."
Hale hissed into the darkness, "Chartrukian was just a *kid*, for Christ's sake! Why'd you do it? To protectyour little secret?"
Strathmore stayed cool. "And what little secret isthat?"
"You know damn-fucking-well what secret that is! DigitalFortress!" "My, my," Strathmore muttered condescendingly, hisvoice like an iceberg. "So you *do* know about DigitalFortress. I was starting to think you'd deny *that*too."
"Fuck you."
"A witty defense."
"You're a fool," Hale spat. "For yourinformation, TRANSLTR is overheating."
"Really?" Strathmore chuckled. "Let meguess—I should open the doors and call in theSys-Secs?"
"Exactly," Hale fired back. "You'd be anidiot not to."
This time Strathmore laughed out loud. "That's yourbig play? TRANSLTR's

overheating, so open the doors and let usout?"
"It's true, dammit! I've been down to thesublevels! The aux power isn't pulling enough freon!"
"Thanks for the tip," Strathmore said. "ButTRANSLTR's got automatic shutdown; if it's overheating,Digital Fortress will quit all by itself."
Hale sneered. "You're insane. What the fuck do I careif TRANSLTR blows? The damn machine should be outlawedanyway."
Strathmore sighed. "Child psychology only works onchildren, Greg. Let her go."
"So you can shoot me?"
"I won't shoot you. I just want thepass-key."
"What pass-key?"
Strathmore sighed again. "The one Tankado sentyou."
"I have no idea what you're talking about."
"Liar!" Susan managed. "I saw Tankado's mailin your account!"
Hale went rigid. He spun Susan around. "You went in myaccount?"
"And *you* aborted my tracer," she snapped.

Hale felt his blood pressure skyrocket. He thought he'dcovered his tracks; he had no idea Susan knew what he'd done.It was no wonder she wasn't buying a word he said. Hale feltthe walls start to close in. He knew he could never talk his wayout of that one—not in time. He whispered to her indesperation, "Susan . . . Strathmore killedChartrukian!"
"Let her go," the commander said evenly. "Shedoesn't believe you."
"Why *should* she?" Hale fired back. "Youlying bastard! You've got her brainwashed! You only tell herwhat suits your needs! Does she know what you *really* plan todo with Digital Fortress?"
"And what's that?" Strathmore taunted.
Hale knew what he was about to say would either be his ticket tofreedom or his death warrant. He took a deep breath and went forbroke. "You plan to write a back door in DigitalFortress."
The words met with a bewildered silence from the darkness. Haleknew he had hit a bull's-eye.
Apparently Strathmore's unflappable cool was being put tothe test. "Who told you that?" he demanded, his voicerough around the edges.
"I read it," Hale said smugly, trying to capitalize onthe change of momentum. "In one of your brainstorms."
"Impossible. I *never* print my brainstorms."
"I know. I read it directly off your account."
Strathmore seemed doubtful. "You got into myoffice?"

“No. I snooped you from Node 3.” Hale forced aself-assured chuckle. He knew he’d need all the negotiatingskills he’d learned in the marines to get out of Cryptoalive.
Strathmore edged closer, the Berretta leveled in the darkness.“How do you know about my back door?”
“I told you, I snooped your account.”
“Impossible.”
Hale forced a cocky sneer. “One of the problems of hiringthe best, Commander—sometimes they’re better thanyou.”

“Young man,” Strathmore seethed, “I don’tknow where you get your information, but you’re in way overyour head. You will let Ms. Fletcher go right now or I’ll callin Security and have you thrown in jail for life.”
“You won’t do it,” Hale stated matter-of-factly.“Calling Security ruins your plans. I’ll tell themeverything.” Hale paused. “But let me out clean, andI’ll never say a word about Digital Fortress.”
“No deal,” Strathmore fired back. “I want thepass-key.”
“I don’t have any fucking pass-key!”
“Enough lies!” Strathmore bellowed. “Where isit?”
Hale clamped down on Susan’s neck. “Let me out, or shedies!”
* * *

Trevor Strathmore had done enough high-stakes bargaining in hislife to know that Hale was in a very dangerous state of mind. Theyoung cryptographer had painted himself into a corner, and acornered opponent was always the most dangerous kind—desperateand unpredictable. Strathmore knew his next move was a criticalone. Susan’s life depended on it—and so did the future ofDigital Fortress.
Strathmore knew the first thing he had to do was release thetension of the situation. After a long moment, he sighedreluctantly. “Okay, Greg. You win. What do you want me todo?”
Silence. Hale seemed momentarily unsure how to handle thecommander’s cooperative tone. He let up a bit on Susan’sneck.
“W-well . . .” he stammered, his voice waveringsuddenly. “First thing you do is give me your gun. You’reboth coming with me.”
“Hostages?” Strathmore laughed coldly. “Greg,you’ll have to do better than that. There are about a dozenarmed guards between here and the parking lot.”
“I’m not a fool,” Hale snapped. “I’mtaking your elevator. Susan comes with me! *You*stay!”
“I hate to tell you this,” Strathmore replied,“but there’s no power to the elevator.”

“Bullshit!” Hale snapped. “The lift runs on powerfrom the main building! I’ve seen the schematics!”
“We tried it already,” Susan choked, trying to help.“It’s dead.”
“You’re both so full of shit, it’sincredible.” Hale tightened his grip. “If theelevator’s dead, I’ll abort TRANSLTR and restorepower.”
“The elevator takes a password,” Susan managedfeistily. “Big deal.” Hale laughed. “I’m sure thecommander will share. Won’t you, Commander?”
“No chance,” Strathmore hissed.
Hale boiled over. “Now you listen to me, oldman—here’s the deal! You let Susan and me out throughyour elevator, we drive a few hours, and then I let hergo.”
Strathmore felt the stakes rising. He’d gotten Susan intothis, and he needed to get her out. His voice stayed steady as arock. “What about my plans for Digital Fortress?”

Hale laughed. “You can write your back door—Iwon’t say a word.” Then his voice turned ominous.“But the day I think you’re tracking me, I go to thepress with the whole story. I tell them Digital Fortress istainted, and I sink this whole fucking organization!”

Strathmore considered Hale’s offer. It was clean andsimple. Susan lived, and Digital Fortress got its back door. Aslong as Strathmore didn’t chase Hale, the back door stayed asecret. Strathmore knew Hale couldn’t keep his mouth shut forlong. But still . . . the knowledge of Digital Fortress wasHale’s only insurance—maybe he’d be smart. Whateverhappened, Strathmore knew Hale could be removed later ifnecessary.
“Make up your mind, old man!” Hale taunted. “Arewe leaving or not?” Hale’s arms tightened around Susanlike a vice.

Strathmore knew that if he picked up the phone right now andcalled Security, Susan would live. He’d bet his life on it. Hecould see the scenario clearly. The call would take Hale completelyby surprise. He would panic, and in the end, faced with a smallarmy, Hale would be unable to act. After a brief standoff, he wouldgive in. *But if I call Security,* Strathmore thought, *myplan is ruined.*
Hale clamped down again. Susan cried out in pain.
“What’s it gonna be?” Hale yelled. “Do Ikill her?”

Strathmore considered his options. If he let Hale take Susan outof Crypto, there were no guarantees. Hale might drive for a while,park in the woods. He’d have a gun. . . . Strathmore’sstomach turned. There was no telling what would happen before Haleset Susan free . . . *if* he set her free. *I’ve got tocall Security,* Strathmore decided. *What else can I do?*He pictured Hale in court, spilling his

guts about DigitalFortress. *My plan will be ruined. There must be some otherway.*

"Decide!" Hale yelled, dragging Susan toward thestaircase.

Strathmore wasn't listening. If saving Susan meant hisplans were ruined, then so be it—nothing was worth losing her.Susan Fletcher was a price Trevor Strathmore refused to pay.

Hale had Susan's arm twisted behind her back and her neckbent to one side. "This is your last chance, old man! Give methe gun!"

Strathmore's mind continued to race, searching for anotheroption. *There are always other options!* Finally hespoke—quietly, almost sadly. "No, Greg, I'm sorry. Ijust can't let you go."

Hale choked in apparent shock. "What!"

"I'm calling Security."

Susan gasped. "Commander! No!"

Hale tightened his grip. "You call Security, and shedies!"

Strathmore pulled the cellular off his belt and flicked it on."Greg, you're bluffing."

"You'll never do it!" Hale yelled."I'll talk! I'll ruin your plan! You're onlyhours away from your dream! Controlling all the data in the world!No more TRANSLTR. No more limits—just free information.It's a chance of a lifetime! You won't let it slipby!"

Strathmore voice was like steel. "Watch me."

"But—but what about Susan?" Hale stammered."You make that call, and she dies!"

Strathmore held firm. "That's a chance I'm readyto take."

"Bullshit! You've got a bigger hard-on for her thanyou do for Digital Fortress! I know you! You won't riskit!"

Susan began to make an angry rebuttal, but Strathmore beat herto it. "Young man! You *don't* know me! I take risksfor a living. If you're looking to play hardball, let'splay!" He started punching keys on his phone. "Youmisjudged me, son! Nobody threatens the lives of my employees andwalks out!" He raised the phone and barked into the receiver,"Switchboard! Get me Security!"

Hale began to torque Susan's neck. "I-I'll killher. I swear it!"

"You'll do no such thing!" Strathmore proclaimed."Killing Susan will just make things wor—" He brokeoff and rammed the phone against his mouth. "Security! This isCommander Trevor Strathmore. We've got a hostage situation inCrypto! Get some men in here! Yes, *now*, goddamn it! We alsohave a generator failure. I want power routed from all availableexternal sources. I

want all systems on-line in five minutes! GregHale killed one of my junior Sys-Secs. He's holding my seniorcryptographer hostage. You're cleared to use tear gas on allof us if necessary! If Mr. Hale doesn't cooperate, havesnipers shoot him dead. I'll take full responsibility. Do itnow!"

Hale stood motionless—apparently limp in disbelief. Hisgrip on Susan eased.

Strathmore snapped his phone shut and shoved it back onto hisbelt. "Your move, Greg."

CHAPTER 81

Becker stood bleary-eyed beside the telephone booth on theterminal concourse. Despite his burning face and a vague nausea,his spirits were soaring. It was over. Truly over. He was on hisway home. The ring on his finger was the grail he'd beenseeking. He held his hand up in the light and squinted at the goldband. He couldn't focus well enough to read, but theinscription didn't appear to be in English. The first symbolwas either a Q, an O, or a zero, his eyes hurt too much to tell.Becker studied the first few characters. They made no sense. *This was a matter of national security?*

Becker stepped into the phone booth and dialed Strathmore.Before he had finished the international prefix, he got arecording. "Todos los circuitos están ocupados," thevoice said. "Please hang up and try your call later."Becker frowned and hung up. He'd forgotten: Getting aninternational connection from Spain was like roulette, all a matterof timing and luck. He'd have to try again in a fewminutes.

Becker fought to ignore the waning sting of the pepper in hiseyes. Megan had told him rubbing his eyes would only make themworse; he couldn't imagine. Impatient, he tried the phoneagain. Still no circuits. Becker couldn't wait anylonger—his eyes were on fire; he had to flush them with water.Strathmore would have to wait a minute or two. Half blind, Beckermade his way toward the bathrooms.

The blurry image of the cleaning cart was still in front of themen's room, so Becker turned again toward the door markeddamas. He thought he heard sounds inside. He knocked."Hola?"

Silence.

Probably Megan, he thought. She had five hours to killbefore her flight and had said she was going to scrub her arm tillit was clean.

"Megan?" he called. He knocked again. There was noreply. Becker pushed the door open. "Hello?"

He went in.The bathroom appeared empty. He shrugged and walked to thesink.

The sink was still filthy, but the water was cold. Becker felthis pores tighten as he splashed the water in his eyes. The painbegan to ease, and the fog gradually lifted. Becker eyed himself inthe mirror. He looked like he'd been crying for days.

He dried his face on the sleeve of his jacket, and then itsuddenly occurred to him. In all the excitement, he'dforgotten where he was. He was at the airport! Somewhere out thereon the tarmac, in one of the Seville airport's three privatehangars, there was a Learjet 60 waiting to take him home. The pilothad stated very clearly, *I have orders to stay here until youreturn.*

It was hard to believe, Becker thought, that after all this, hehad ended up right back where he'd started. *What am Iwaiting for?* he laughed. *I'm sure the pilot can radio amessage to Strathmore!*

Chuckling to himself, Becker glanced in the mirror andstraightened his tie. He was about to go when the reflection ofsomething behind him caught his eye. He turned. It appeared to beone end of Megan's duffel, protruding from under a partiallyopen stall door.

"Megan?" he called. There was no reply. *"Megan?"*

Becker walked over. He rapped loudly on the side of the stall.No answer. He gently pushed the door. It swung open.

Becker fought back a cry of horror. Megan was on the toilet, hereyes rolled skyward. Dead center of her forehead, a bullet holeoozed bloody liquid down her face.

"Oh, Jesus!" Becker cried in shock.

"Está muerta," a barely human voice croakedbehind him. "She's dead."

It was like a dream. Becker turned.

"Señor Becker?" the eerie voice asked.

Dazed, Becker studied the man stepping into the rest room. Helooked oddly familiar.

"Soy Hulohot," the killer said. "I amHulohot." The misshapen words seemed to emerge from the depthsof his stomach. Hulohot held out his hand. "El anillo. Thering."

Becker stared blankly.

The man reached in his pocket and produced a gun. He raised theweapon and trained it on Becker's head. "Elanillo."

In an instant of clarity, Becker felt a sensation he had neverknown. As if cued by some subconscious survival instinct, everymuscle in his body tensed simultaneously. He flew through the airas the shot spat out. Becker crashed down on top of Megan. A bulletexploded against the wall behind him. "Mierda!" Hulohot seethed. Somehow, at the lastpossible instant, David Becker had dived out of the way. Theassassin advanced.

Becker pulled himself off the lifeless teenager. There wereapproaching footsteps. Breathing. The cock of a weapon.

"Adiós," the man whispered as he lunged like apanther, swinging his weapon

into the stall.

The gun went off. There was a flash of red. But it was notblood. It was something else. An object had materialized as if outof nowhere, sailing out of the stall and hitting the killer in thechest, causing his gun to fire a split second early. It wasMegan's duffel.

Becker exploded from the stall. He buried his shoulder in theman's chest and drove him back into the sink. There was abone-crushing crash. A mirror shattered. The gun fell free. The twomen collapsed to the floor. Becker tore himself away and dashed forthe exit. Hulohot scrambled for his weapon, spun, and fired. Thebullet ripped into the slamming bathroom door.

The empty expanse of the airport concourse loomed before Beckerlike an uncrossable desert. His legs surged beneath him faster thanhe'd ever known they could move.

As he skidded into the revolving door, a shot rang out behindhim. The glass panel in front of him exploded in a shower of glass.Becker pushed his shoulder into the frame and the door rotatedforward. A moment later he stumbled onto the pavement outside.

A taxi stood waiting.

"Déjame entrar!" Becker screamed, pounding on thelocked door. "Let me in!" The driver refused; his farewith the wire-rim glasses had asked him to wait. Becker turned andsaw Hulohot streaking across he concourse, gun in hand. Becker eyedhis little Vespa on the sidewalk. *I'm dead.*

Hulohot blasted through the revolving doors just in time to seeBecker trying in vain to kickstart his Vespa. Hulohot smiled andraised his weapon.

The choke! Becker fumbled with the levers under the gastank. He jumped on the starter again. It coughed and died.

"El anillo. The ring." The voice was close.

Becker looked up. He saw the barrel of a gun. The chamber wasrotating. He rammed his foot on the starter once again.

Hulohot's shot just missed Becker's head as the littlebike sprang to life and lurched forward. Becker hung on for hislife as the motorcycle bounced down a grassy embankment and wobbledaround the corner of the building onto the runway.

Enraged, Hulohot raced toward his waiting taxi. Seconds later,the driver lay stunned on the curb watching his taxi peel out in acloud of dust.

CHAPTER 82

As the implications of the Commander's phone call toSecurity began to settle on the dazed Greg Hale, he found himselfweakened by a wave of panic. *Security is coming!* Susan beganto slip away. Hale recovered, clutching at her midsection, pullingher back.

"Let me go!" she cried, her voice echoing though thedome.

Hale's mind was in overdrive. The commander's call hadtaken him totally by surprise. *Strathmore phoned Security!He's sacrificing his plans for Digital Fortress!*

Not in a million years had Hale imagined the commander would letDigital Fortress slip by. This back door was the chance of alifetime.

As the panic rushed in, Hale's mind seemed to play trickson him. He saw the barrel of Strathmore's Berretta everywherehe looked. He began to spin, holding Susan close, trying to denythe commander a shot. Driven by fear, Hale dragged Susan blindlytoward the stairs. In five minutes the lights would come on, thedoors would open, and a SWAT team would pour in.

"You're hurting me!" Susan choked. She gasped forbreath as she stumbled through Hale's desperatepirouettes.

Hale considered letting her go and making a mad dash forStrathmore's elevator, but it was suicide. He had no password.Besides, once outside the NSA without a hostage, Hale knew he wasas good as dead. Not even his Lotus could outrun a fleet of NSAhelicopters. *Susan is the only thing that will keep Strathmorefrom blowing me off the road!*

"Susan," Hale blurted, dragging her toward the stairs."Come with me! I swear I won't hurt you!" As Susan fought him, Hale realized he had new problems. Even ifhe somehow managed to get Strathmore's elevator open and takeSusan with him, she would undoubtedly fight him all the way out ofthe building. Hale knew full well that Strathmore's elevatormade only one stop: "the Underground Highway," arestricted labyrinth of underground access tunnels through whichNSA powerbrokers moved in secrecy. Hale had no intention of endingup lost in the basement corridors of the NSA with a strugglinghostage. It was a death trap. Even if he got out, he realized, hehad no gun. How would he get Susan across the parking lot? Howwould he drive?

It was the voice of one of Hale's marine, military-strategyprofessors that gave him his answer:

Force a hand, the voice warned, *and it will fight you.But convince a mind to think as you want it to think, and you havean ally.*

"Susan," Hale heard himself saying,"Strathmore's a killer! You're in dangerhere!"

Susan didn't seem to hear. Hale knew it was an absurd angleanyway; Strathmore would never hurt Susan, and she knew it.

Hale strained his eyes into the darkness, wondering where thecommander was hidden. Strathmore had fallen silent suddenly, whichmade Hale even more panicky. He sensed his time was up. Securitywould arrive at any moment.

With a surge of strength, Hale wrapped his arms aroundSusan's waist and pulled her hard up the stairs. She hookedher heels on the first step and pulled back. It was no use, Haleoverpowered her.

Carefully, Hale backed up the stairs with Susan in tow. Pushingher up might have been easier, but the landing at the top wasilluminated from Strathmore's computer monitors. If Susan wentfirst, Strathmore would have a clear shot at Hale's back.Pulling Susan behind him, Hale had a human shield between himselfand the Crypto floor.

About a third of the way up, Hale sensed movement at the bottomof the stairs. *Strathmore's making his move!*"Don't try it, Commander," he hissed."You'll only get her killed."

Hale waited. But there was only silence. He listened closely.Nothing. The bottom of the stairs was still. Was he imaginingthings? It didn't matter. Strathmore would never risk a shotwith Susan in the way.

But as Hale backed up the stairs dragging Susan behind him,something unexpected happened. There was a faint thud on thelanding behind him. Hale stopped, adrenaline surging. HadStrathmore slipped upstairs? Instinct told him Strathmore was atthe *bottom* of the stairs. But then, suddenly, it happenedagain —louder this time. A distinct step on the upperlanding!

In terror, Hale realized his mistake. *Strathmore's onthe landing behind me! He has a clear shot of my back!* Indesperation, he spun Susan back to his uphill side and startedretreating backwards down the steps.

As he reached the bottom step, he stared wildly up at thelanding and yelled, "Back off, Commander! Back off, orI'll break her—"

The butt of a Berretta came slicing through the air at the footof the stairs and crashed down into Hale's skull.

As Susan tore free of the slumping Hale, she wheeled inconfusion. Strathmore grabbed her and reeled her in, cradling hershaking body. "Shhh," he soothed. "It's me.You're okay."

Susan was trembling. "Com . . . mander." She gasped,disoriented. "I thought . . .

I thought you were upstairs . .. I heard . . .”
“Easy now,” he whispered. “You heard me toss myloafers up onto the landing.”

Susan found herself laughing and crying at the same time. Thecommander had just saved her life. Standing there in the darkness,Susan felt an overwhelming sense of relief. It was not, however,without guilt; Security was coming. She had foolishly let Hale grabher, and he had used her against Strathmore. Susan knew thecommander had paid a huge price to save her.
“I’msorry,” she said.
“What for?”
“Your plans for Digital Fortress . . . they’reruined.”
Strathmore shook his head. “Not at all.”
“But . . . but what about Security? They’ll be hereany minute. We won’t have time to—”
“Security’s not coming, Susan. We’ve got all thetime in the world.”
Susan was lost. *Not coming?* “But you phoned . ..” Strathmore chuckled. “Oldest trick in the book. I faked thecall.”

CHAPTER 83

Becker's Vespa was no doubt the smallest vehicle ever totear down the Seville runway. Its top speed, a whining 50 mph,sounded more like a chainsaw than a motorcycle and wasunfortunately well below the necessary power to becomeairborne.

In his side mirror, Becker saw the taxi swing out onto thedarkened runway about four hundred yards back. It immediatelystarted gaining. Becker faced front. In the distance, the contourof the airplane hangars stood framed against the night sky about ahalf mile out. Becker wondered if the taxi would overtake him inthat distance. He knew Susan could do the math in two seconds andcalculate his odds. Becker suddenly felt fear like he had neverknown.

He lowered his head and twisted the throttle as far as it wouldgo. The Vespa was definitely topped out. Becker guessed the taxibehind him was doing almost ninety, twice his speed. He set hissights on the three structures looming in the distance. *Themiddle one. That's where the Learjet is.* A shot rangout.

The bullet buried itself in the runway yards behind him. Beckerlooked back. The assassin was hanging out the window taking aim.Becker swerved and his side mirror exploded in a shower of glass.He could feel the impact of the bullet all the way up thehandlebars. He lay his body flat on the bike. *God help me,I'm not going to make it!*

The tarmac in front of Becker's Vespa was growing brighternow. The taxi was closing, the headlights throwing ghostly shadowsdown the runway. A shot fired. The bullet ricocheted off the hullof the bike.

Becker struggled to keep from going into a swerve. *I'vegot to make the hangar!* He wondered if the Learjet pilot couldsee them coming. *Does he have a weapon? Will he open the cabindoors in time?* But as Becker approached the lit expanse of theopen hangars, he realized the question was moot. The Learjet wasnowhere to be seen. He squinted through blurred vision and prayedhe was hallucinating. He was not. The hangar was bare. *Oh myGod! Where's the plane!*

As the two vehicles rocketed into the empty hangar, Beckerdesperately searched for an escape. There was none. Thebuilding's rear wall, an expansive sheet of corrugated metal,had no doors or windows. The taxi roared up beside him, and Beckerlooked left to see Hulohot raising his gun.

Reflex took over. Becker slammed down on his brakes. He barelyslowed. The hangar floor was slick with oil. The Vespa went into aheadlong skid.

Beside him there was a deafening squeal as the taxi’sbrakes locked and the balding tires hydroplaned on the slipperysurface. The car spun around in a cloud of smoke and burning rubberonly inches to the left of Becker’s skidding Vespa.

Now side by side, the two vehicles skimmed out of control on acollision course with the rear of the hangar. Becker desperatelypumped his brakes, but there was no traction; it was like drivingon ice. In front of him, the metal wall loomed. It was coming fast.As the taxi spiraled wildly beside him, Becker faced the wall andbraced for the impact.

There was an earsplitting crash of steel and corrugated metal.But there was no pain. Becker found himself suddenly in the openair, still on his Vespa, bouncing across a grassy field. It was asif the hangar’s back wall had vanished before him. The taxiwas still beside him, careening across the field. An enormous sheetof corrugated metal from the hangar’s back wall billowed offthe taxi’s hood and sailed over Becker’s head.

Heart racing, Becker gunned the Vespa and took off into thenight.

CHAPTER 84

Jabba let out a contented sigh as he finished the last of hissolder points. He switched off the iron, put down his penlight, andlay a moment in the darkness of the mainframe computer. He wasbeat. His neck hurt. Internal work was always cramped, especiallyfor a man of his size.

And they just keep building them smaller, he mused.

As he closed his eyes for a well-deserved moment of relaxation,someone outside began pulling on his boots.

"Jabba! Get out here!" a woman's voiceyelled.

Midge found me. He groaned.

"Jabba! Get out here!"

Reluctantly he slithered out. "For the love of God, Midge!I told you—" But it was not Midge. Jabba looked up,surprised. "Soshi?"

Soshi Kuta was a ninety-pound live wire. She was Jabba'srighthand assistant, a razor-sharp Sys-Sec techie from MIT. Sheoften worked late with Jabba and was the one member of his staffwho seemed unintimidated by him. She glared at him and demanded,"Why the hell didn't you answer your phone? Or mypage?"

"*Your* page," Jabba repeated. "I thought itwas—"

"Never mind. There's something strange going on in themain databank."

Jabba checked his watch. "Strange?" Now he was growingconcerned. "Can you be any more specific?"

Two minutes later Jabba was dashing down the hall toward thedatabank.

CHAPTER 85

Greg Hale lay curled on the Node 3 floor. Strathmore and Susanhad just dragged him across Crypto and bound his hands and feetwith twelve-gauge printer cable from the Node 3 laser-printers.

Susan couldn't get over the artful maneuver the commanderhad just executed. *He faked the call!* Somehow Strathmore hadcaptured Hale, saved Susan, and bought himself the time needed torewrite Digital Fortress.

Susan eyed the bound cryptographer uneasily. Hale was breathingheavily. Strathmore sat on the couch with the Berretta proppedawkwardly in his lap. Susan returned her attention to Hale'sterminal and continued her random-string search.

Her fourth string search ran its course and came up empty."Still no luck." She sighed. "We may need to waitfor David to find Tankado's copy."

Strathmore gave her a disapproving look. "If David fails,and Tankado's key falls into the wrong hands . . ."

Strathmore didn't need to finish. Susan understood. Untilthe Digital Fortress file on the Internet had been replaced withStrathmore's modified version, Tankado's pass-key wasdangerous.

"After we make the switch," Strathmore added, "Idon't care how many pass-keys are floating around; the morethe merrier." He motioned for her to continue searching."But until then, we're playing beat-the-clock."

Susan opened her mouth to acknowledge, but her words weredrowned out by a sudden deafening blare. The silence of Crypto wasshattered by a warning horn from the sublevels. Susan andStrathmore exchanged startled looks.

"What's *that?"* Susan yelled, timing herquestion between the intermittent bursts.

"TRANSLTR!" Strathmore called back, looking troubled."It's too hot! Maybe Hale was right about the aux powernot pulling enough freon."

"What about the auto-abort?"

Strathmore thought a moment, then yelled, "Something musthave shorted." A yellow siren light spun above the Cryptofloor and swept a pulsating glare across his face.

"You better abort!" Susan called.

Strathmore nodded. There was no telling what would happen ifthree million silicon processors overheated and decided to ignite.Strathmore needed

to get upstairs to his terminal and abort theDigital Fortress run—particularly before anyone outside ofCrypto noticed the trouble and decided to send in the cavalry.

Strathmore shot a glance at the still-unconscious Hale. He laidthe Berretta on a table near Susan and yelled over the sirens,“Be right back!” As he disappeared through the hole inthe Node 3 wall, Strathmore called over his shoulder, “Andfind me that pass-key!”

Susan eyed the results of her unproductive pass-key search andhoped Strathmore would hurry up and abort. The noise and lights inCrypto felt like a missile launch.

On the floor, Hale began to stir. With each blast of the horn,he winced. Susan surprised herself by grabbing the Berretta. Haleopened his eyes to Susan Fletcher standing over him with the gunleveled at his crotch.

“Where’s the pass-key?” Susan demanded.

Hale was having trouble getting his bearings. “Wh-whathappened?”

“You blew it, that’s what happened. Now, where’sthe passkey?”

Hale tried to move his arms but realized he was tied. His facebecame taut with panic. “Let me go!”

“I need the pass-key,” Susan repeated. “I don’t have it! Let me go!” Hale tried to getup. He could barely roll over.

Susan yelled between blasts of the horn. “You’re NorthDakota, and Ensei Tankado gave you a copy of his key. I need itnow!”

“You’re crazy!” Hale gasped. “I’m notNorth Dakota!” He struggled unsuccessfully to freehimself.

Susan charged angrily. “Don’t lie to me. Why the hellis all of North Dakota’s mail in *your*account?”

“I told you before!” Hale pleaded as the horns blaredon. “I snooped Strathmore! That E-mail in my account was mailI copied out of *Strathmore’s* account—E-mail COMINTstole from Tankado!”

“Bull! You could never snoop the commander’saccount!”

“You don’t understand!” Hale yelled. “Therewas *already* a tap on Strathmore’s account!” Haledelivered his words in short bursts between the sirens.“Someone else put the tap there. I think it was DirectorFontaine! I just piggybacked! You’ve got to believe me!That’s how I found out about his plan to rewrite DigitalFortress! I’ve been reading Strathmore’sbrainstorms!”

BrainStorms? Susan paused. Strathmore had undoubtedlyoutlined his plans for Digital Fortress using his BrainStormsoftware. If anyone had snooped the commander’s account, allthe information would have been available . . .

“Rewriting Digital Fortress is *sick!”* Halecried. “You know damn well what

it implies—*total*NSA access!" The sirens blasted, drowning him out, but Halewas possessed. "You think we're ready for thatresponsibility? You think *anyone* is? It's fuckingshortsighted! You say our government has the people's bestinterests at heart? Great! But what happens when some futuregovernment *doesn't* have our best interests at heart!This technology is *forever!"*
Susan could barely hear him; the noise in Crypto wasdeafening.

Hale struggled to get free. He looked Susan in the eye and keptyelling. "How the hell do civilians defend themselves againsta police state when the guy at the top has access to *all*their lines of communication? How do they plan a revolt?"
Susan had heard this argument many times. The future-governmentsargument was a stock EFF complaint.

"Strathmore *had* to be stopped!" Hale screamedas the sirens blasted. "I swore *I'd* do it.That's what I've been doing here all day—watchinghis account, waiting for him to make his move so I could record theswitch in progress. I needed proof—evidence that he'dwritten in a back door. That's why I copied all his E-mailinto my account. It was evidence that he'd been watchingDigital Fortress. I planned to go to the press with theinformation."

Susan's heart skipped. Had she heard correctly? Suddenlythis did sound like Greg Hale. *Was it possible?* If Hale hadknown about Strathmore's plan to release a tainted version ofDigital Fortress, he could wait until the whole world was using itand then drop his bombshell—complete with proof!
Susan imagined the headlines: cryptographer greg hale unveilssecret u.s. plan to control global information!

Was it Skipjack all over? Uncovering an NSA back door againwould make Greg Hale famous beyond his wildest dreams. It wouldalso sink the NSA. She suddenly found herself wondering if maybeHale was telling the truth. *No!* she decided. *Of coursenot!*

Hale continued to plead. "I aborted your tracer because Ithought you were looking for *me!* I thought you suspectedStrathmore was being snooped! I didn't want you to find theleak and trace it back to me!"
It was plausible but unlikely. "Then why'd youkill Chartrukian?" Susan snapped.

"I didn't!" Hale screamed over the noise."Strathmore was the one who pushed him! I saw the whole thingfrom downstairs! Chartrukian was about to call the Sys-Secs andruin Strathmore's plans for the back door!"
Hale's good, Susan thought. *He's got anangle for everything.*
"Let me go!" Hale begged. "I didn't doanything!"

"Didn't *do* anything?" Susan shouted,wondering what was taking

Strathmore so long. “You and Tankadowere holding the NSA hostage. At least until you double-crossedhim. Tell me,” she pressed, “did Tankado really die of aheart attack, or did you have one of your buddies take himout?”
“You’re so blind!” Hale yelled. “Can’tyou see I’m not involved? Untie me! Before Security getshere!”
“Security’s not coming,” she snapped flatly.
Hale turned white. “What?”
“Strathmore faked the phone call.”
Hale’s eyes went wide. He seemed momentarily paralyzed.Then he began writhing fiercely. “Strathmore’ll kill me!I know he will! I know too much!”
“Easy, Greg.” The sirens blared as Hale yelled out, “But I’minnocent!”
“You’re lying! And I have proof!” Susan strodearound the ring of terminals. “Remember that tracer youaborted?” she asked, arriving at her own terminal. “Isent it again! Shall we see if it’s back yet?”

Sure enough, on Susan’s screen, a blinking icon alerted herthat her tracer had returned. She palmed her mouse and opened themessage. *This data will seal Hale’s fate,* she thought.*Hale is North Dakota.* The databox opened. *Haleis —*

Susan stopped. The tracer materialized, and Susan stood instunned silence. There had to be some mistake; the tracer hadfingered someone else—a most unlikely person.

Susan steadied herself on the terminal and reread the databoxbefore her. It was the same information Strathmore said *he’d* received when *he* ran the tracer! Susan hadfigured Strathmore had made a mistake, but she knew she’dconfigured the tracer perfectly.
And yet the information on the screen was unthinkable:
NDAKOTA = ET@DOSHISHA.EDU
“ET?” Susan demanded, her head swimming. “EnseiTankado is North Dakota?”

It was inconceivable. If the data was correct, Tankado and hispartner were the *same* person. Susan’s thoughts weresuddenly disconnected. She wished the blaring horn would stop. *Why doesn’t Strathmore turn that damn thing off?*
Hale twisted on the floor, straining to see Susan. “Whatdoes it say? Tell me!”
Susan blocked out Hale and the chaos around her. *EnseiTankado is North Dakota. . . .*
She reshuffled the pieces trying to make them fit. If Tankadowas North Dakota, then he was sending E-mail to *himself* . .. which meant North Dakota didn’t exist. Tankado’spartner was a hoax.
North Dakota is a ghost, she said to herself. *Smokeand mirrors.*

The ploy was a brilliant one. Apparently Strathmore had beenwatching only one side of a tennis match. Since the ball keptcoming back, he assumed there was someone on the other side of thenet. But Tankado had been playing against a wall. He had beenproclaiming the virtues of Digital Fortress in E-mail he'dsent to himself. He had written letters, sent them to an anonymousremailer, and a few hours later, the remailer had sent them rightback to him.

Now, Susan realized, it was all so obvious. Tankado had *wanted* the commander to snoop him . . . he'd *wanted*him to read the E-mail. Ensei Tankado had created an imaginaryinsurance policy without ever having to trust another soul with hispass-key. Of course, to make the whole farce seem authentic,Tankado had used a secret account . . . just secret enough to allayany suspicions that the whole thing was a setup. Tankado was hisown partner. North Dakota did not exist. Ensei Tankado was aone-man show.

A one-man show.

A terrifying thought gripped Susan. *Tankado could have usedhis fake correspondence to convince Strathmore of just aboutanything.*

She remembered her first reaction when Strathmore told her aboutthe unbreakable algorithm. She'd sworn it was impossible. Theunsettling potential of the situation settled hard in Susan'sstomach. What proof did they actually have that Tankado had *really* created Digital Fortress? Only a lot of hype in hisE-mail. And of course . . . TRANSLTR. The computer had been lockedin an endless loop for almost twenty hours. Susan knew, however,that there were other programs that could keep TRANSLTR busy thatlong, programs far easier to create than an unbreakablealgorithm.

Viruses.

The chill swept across her body.

But how could a virus get into TRANSLTR?

Like a voice from the grave, Phil Chartrukian gave the answer.*Strathmore bypassed Gauntlet!*

In a sickening revelation, Susan grasped the truth. Strathmorehad downloaded Tankado's Digital Fortress file and tried tosend it into TRANSLTR to break it. But Gauntlet had rejected thefile because it contained dangerous mutation strings. NormallyStrathmore would have been concerned, but he had seenTankado's E-mail—*Mutation strings are the trick!*Convinced Digital Fortress was safe to load, Strathmore bypassedGauntlet's filters and sent the file into TRANSLTR.

Susan could barely speak. "There *is* no DigitalFortress," she choked as the sirens blared on. Slowly, weakly,she leaned against her terminal. Tankado had gone fishing for fools. . . and the NSA had taken the bait.

Then, from upstairs, came a long cry of anguish. It wasStrathmore.

CHAPTER 86

Trevor Strathmore was hunched at his desk when Susan arrivedbreathless at his door. His head was down, his sweaty headglistening in the light of his monitor. The horns on the sublevelsblared.

Susan raced over to his desk. “Commander?”

Strathmore didn’t move.

“Commander! We’ve got to shut down TRANSLTR!We’ve got a—”

“He got us,” Strathmore said without looking up.“Tankado fooled us all . . .”

She could tell by the tone of his voice he understood. All ofTankado’s hype about the unbreakable algorithm . . .auctioning off the pass-key—it was all an act, a charade.Tankado had tricked the NSA into snooping his mail, tricked theminto believing he had a partner, and tricked them into downloadinga very dangerous file.

“The mutation strings—” Strathmore faltered.

“I know.”

The commander looked up slowly. “The file I downloaded offthe Internet . . . it was a . . .”

Susan tried to stay calm. All the pieces in the game hadshifted. There had never been any unbreakable algorithm—neverany Digital Fortress. The file Tankado had posted on the Internetwas an encrypted virus, probably sealed with some generic,mass-market encryption algorithm, strong enough to keep everyoneout of harm’s way—everyone except the NSA. TRANSLTR hadcracked the protective seal and released the virus.

“The mutation strings,” the commander croaked.“Tankado said they were just part of the algorithm.”Strathmore collapsed back onto his desk.

Susan understood the commander’s pain. He had beencompletely taken in. Tankado had never intended to let any computercompany buy his algorithm. There *was* no algorithm. The wholething was a charade. Digital Fortress was a ghost, a farce, a pieceof bait created to tempt the NSA. Every move Strathmore had made,Tankado had been behind the scenes, pulling the strings.

“I bypassed Gauntlet.” The commander groaned.

“You didn’t know.” Strathmore pounded his fist on his desk. “I *should*have known! His screen name, for Christ’s sake! NDAKOTA! Lookat it!”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s laughing at us! It’s a goddamnanagram!”

Susan puzzled a moment. *NDAKOTA is an anagram?* Shepictured the letters and began reshuffling them in her mind. *Ndakota . . . Kado-tan . . . Oktadan . . . Tandoka* . . . Herknees went weak. Strathmore was right. It was as plain as day. Howcould they have missed it? North Dakota wasn't a reference tothe U.S. state at all—it was Tankado rubbing salt in thewound! He'd even sent the NSA a warning, a blatant clue thathe himself was NDAKOTA. The letters spelled TANKADO. But the bestcode-breakers in the world had missed it, just as he hadplanned.

"Tankado was mocking us," Strathmore said.

"You've got to abort TRANSLTR," Susandeclared.

Strathmore stared blankly at the wall.

"Commander. Shut it down! God only knows what's goingon in there!"

"I tried," Strathmore whispered, sounding as faint asshe'd ever heard him.

"What do you mean you *tried?"*

Strathmore rotated his screen toward her. His monitor had dimmedto a strange shade of maroon. At the bottom, the dialogue boxshowed numerous attempts to shut down TRANSLTR. They were allfollowed by the same response:

SORRY. UNABLE TO ABORT.
SORRY. UNABLE TO ABORT.
SORRY. UNABLE TO ABORT.

Susan felt a chill. *Unable to abort? But why?* She fearedshe already knew the answer. *So this is Tankado's revenge?Destroying TRANSLTR!* For years Ensei Tankado had wanted theworld to know about TRANSLTR, but no one had believed him. Sohe'd decided to destroy the great beast himself. He'dfought to the death for what he believed—the individual'sright to privacy.

Downstairs the sirens blared. "We've got to kill all power," Susan demanded."Now!"

Susan knew that if they hurried, they could save the greatparallel processing machine. Every computer in the world—fromRadio Shack PCs to NASA's satellite control systems—had abuilt-in fail-safe for situations like this. It wasn't aglamorous fix, but it always worked. It was known as "pullingthe plug."

By shutting off the remaining power in Crypto, they could forceTRANSLTR to shut down. They could remove the virus later. It wouldbe a simple matter of reformatting TRANSLTR's hard drives.Reformatting would completely erase the computer'smemory—data, programming, virus, *everything.* In mostcases, reformatting resulted in the loss of thousands of files,sometimes years of work. But TRANSLTR was different—it couldbe

reformatted with virtually no loss at all. Parallel processingmachines were designed to think, not to remember. Nothing wasactually stored inside TRANSLTR. Once it broke a code, it sent theresults to the NSA's main databank in order to—

Susan froze. In a stark instant of realization, she brought herhand to her mouth and muffled a scream. "The maindatabank!"

Strathmore stared into the darkness, his voice disembodied.He'd apparently already made this realization. "Yes,Susan. The main databank. . . ."

Susan nodded blankly. *Tankado used TRANSLTR to put a virus inour main databank.*

Strathmore motioned sickly to his monitor. Susan returned hergaze to the screen in front of her and looked beneath the dialoguebox. Across the bottom of the screen were the words:

TELL THE WORLD ABOUT TRANSLTR
ONLY THE TRUTH WILL SAVE YOU NOW . . .

Susan felt cold. The nation's most classified informationwas stored at the NSA: military communication protocols, SIGINTconfirmation codes, identities of foreign spies, blueprints foradvanced weaponry, digitized documents, trade agreements—thelist was unending.

"Tankado wouldn't dare!" she declared."Corrupting a country's classified records?" Susancouldn't believe even Ensei Tankado would dare attack the NSAdatabank. She stared at his message.

ONLY THE TRUTH WILL SAVE YOU NOW

"The truth?" she asked. "The truth aboutwhat?"

Strathmore was breathing heavily. "TRANSLTR," hecroaked. "The truth about TRANSLTR."

Susan nodded. It made perfect sense. Tankado was forcing the NSAto tell the world about TRANSLTR. It was blackmail after all. Hewas giving the NSA a choice—either tell the world aboutTRANSLTR or lose your databank. She stared in awe at the textbefore her. At the bottom of the screen, a single line was blinkedmenacingly.

ENTER PASS-KEY

Staring at the pulsating words, Susan understood—the virus,the pass-key, Tankado's ring, the ingenious blackmail plot.The pass-key had nothing to do with unlocking an algorithm; it wasan *antidote.* The pass-key stopped the virus. Susan had reada lot about viruses like this—deadly programs that included abuilt-in cure, a secret key that could be used to deactivate them.*Tankado never planned to destroy the NSA databank—he justwanted us go public with TRANSLTR! Then he would give us thepass-key, so we could stop the virus!*

It was now clear to Susan that Tankado's plan had goneterribly wrong. He had not planned on dying. He'd planned onsitting in a Spanish bar and listening to the CNN press conferenceabout America's top-secret code-breaking computer. Thenhe'd planned on calling Strathmore, reading the pass-key offthe ring, and saving the databank in the nick of time. After a goodlaugh, he'd disappear into oblivion, an EFF hero.

Susan pounded her fist on the desk. "We need that ring!It's the *only* pass-key!" She nowunderstood—there *was* no North Dakota, no secondpass-key. Even if the NSA went public with TRANSLTR, Tankado was nolonger around to save the day.

Strathmore was silent.

The situation was more serious than Susan had ever imagined. Themost shocking thing of all was that Tankado had allowed it to gothis far. He had obviously known what would happen if the NSAdidn't get the ring—and yet, in his final seconds oflife, he'd given the ring away. He had deliberately tried tokeep it from them. Then again, Susan realized, what could she *expect* Tankado to do—save the ring for them, when hethought the NSA had killed him?

Still, Susan couldn't believe that Tankado would haveallowed this to happen. He was a pacifist. He didn't want towreak destruction; all he wanted was to set the record straight.This was about TRANSLTR. This was about everyone's right tokeep a secret. This was about letting the world know that the NSAwas listening. Deleting the NSA's databank was an act ofaggression Susan could not imagine Ensei Tankado committing.

The sirens pulled her back to reality. Susan eyed thedebilitated commander and knew what he was thinking. Not only werehis plans for a back door in Digital Fortress shot, but hiscarelessness had put the NSA on the brink of what could turn out tobe the worst security disaster in U.S. history.

"Commander, this is *not* your fault!" sheinsisted over the blare of the horns. "If Tankado hadn'tdied, we'd have bargaining power—we'd haveoptions!"

But Commander Strathmore heard nothing. His life was over.He'd spent thirty years serving his country. This was supposedto be his moment of glory, his pièce de résistance—aback door in the world encryption standard. But instead, he hadsent a virus into the main databank of the National SecurityAgency. There was no way to stop it—not without killing powerand erasing every last one of the billions of bytes ofirretrievable data. Only the ring could save them, and if Davidhadn't found the ring by now . . .

"I need to shut down TRANSLTR!" Susan took control."I'm going down to the

sublevels to throw the circuitbreaker."
Strathmore turned slowly to face her. He was a broken man."I'll do it," he croaked. He stood up, stumbling ashe tried to slide out from behind his desk.
Susan sat him back down. "No," she barked. "*I'm* going." Her tone left no room fordebate.
Strathmore put his face in his hands. "Okay. Bottom floor.Beside the freon pumps."

Susan spun and headed for the door. Halfway there, she turnedand looked back. "Commander," she yelled. "This is*not* over. We're not beaten yet. If David finds the ringin time, we can save the databank!"
Strathmore said nothing.
"Call the databank!" Susan ordered. "Warn themabout the virus! You're the deputy director of the NSA.You're a survivor!"
In slow motion, Strathmore looked up. Like a man making thedecision of a lifetime, he gave her a tragic nod.
Determined, Susan tore into the darkness.

CHAPTER 87

The Vespa lurched into the slow lane of the Carretera de Huelva.It was almost dawn, but there was plenty of traffic—youngSevillians returning from their all-night beach verbenas. A van ofteenagers laid on its horn and flew by. Becker's motorcyclefelt like a toy out there on the freeway. A quarter of a mile back, a demolished taxi swerved out onto thefreeway in a shower of sparks. As it accelerated, it sideswiped aPeugeot 504 and sent it careening onto the grassy median.

Becker passed a freeway marker: SEVILLA CENTRO—2 KM. If hecould just reach the cover of downtown, he knew he might have achance. His speedometer read 60 kilometers per hour. *Two minutesto the exit.* He knew he didn't have that long. Somewherebehind him, the taxi was gaining. Becker gazed out at the nearinglights of downtown Seville and prayed he would reach themalive.

He was only halfway to the exit when the sound of scraping metalloomed up behind him. He hunched on his bike, wrenching thethrottle as far as it would go. There was a muffled gunshot, and abullet sailed by. Becker cut left, weaving back and forth acrossthe lanes in hopes of buying more time. It was no use. The exitramp was still three hundred yards when the taxi roared to within afew car lengths behind him. Becker knew that in a matter of secondshe would be either shot or run down. He scanned ahead for anypossible escape, but the highway was bounded on both sides by steepgravel slopes. Another shot rang out. Becker made his decision.

In a scream of rubber and sparks, he leaned violently to hisright and swerved off the road. The bike's tires hit thebottom of the embankment. Becker strained to keep his balance asthe Vespa threw up a cloud of gravel and began fish-tailing its wayup the slope. The wheels spun wildly, clawing at the loose earth.The little engine whimpered pathetically as it tried to dig in.Becker urged it on, hoping it wouldn't stall. He didn'tdare look behind him, certain at any moment the taxi would beskidding to a stop, bullets flying.

The bullets never came.

Becker's bike broke over the crest of the hill, and he sawit—the centro. The downtown lights spread out before him likea star-filled sky. He gunned his way through some underbrush andout over the curb. His Vespa suddenly felt faster. The Avenue LuisMontoto seemed to race beneath his tires. The soccer stadium

zippedpast on the left. He was in the clear.

It was then that Becker heard the familiar screech of metal onconcrete. He looked up. A hundred yards ahead of him, the taxi cameroaring up the exit ramp. It skidded out onto Luis Montoto andaccelerated directly toward him.

Becker knew he should have felt a surge of panic. But he didnot. He knew exactly where he was going. He swerved left onMenendez Pelayo and opened the throttle. The bike lurched across asmall park and into the cobblestoned corridor of MateusGago—the narrow one-way street that led to the portal ofBarrio Santa Cruz.

Just a little farther, he thought.

The taxi followed, thundering closer. It trailed Becker throughthe gateway of Santa Cruz, ripping off its side mirror on thenarrow archway. Becker knew he had won. Santa Cruz was the oldestsection of Seville. It had no roads between the buildings, onlymazes of narrow walkways built in Roman times. They were only wideenough for pedestrians and the occasional Moped. Becker had oncebeen lost for hours in the narrow caverns.

As Becker accelerated down the final stretch of Mateus Gago,Seville's eleventh-century Gothic cathedral rose like amountain before him. Directly beside it, the Giralda tower shot 419feet skyward into the breaking dawn. This was Santa Cruz, home tothe second largest cathedral in the world as well as Seville'soldest, most pious Catholic families.

Becker sped across the stone square. There was a single shot,but it was too late. Becker and his motorcycle disappeared down atiny passageway—Callita de la Virgen.

CHAPTER 88

The headlight of Becker's Vespa threw stark shadows on thewalls of the narrow passageways. He struggled with the gear shiftand roared between the whitewashed buildings, giving theinhabitants of Santa Cruz an early wake-up call this Sundaymorning.

It had been less than thirty minutes since Becker's escapefrom the airport. He'd been on the run ever since, his mindgrappling with endless questions: *Who's trying to kill me?What's so special about this ring? Where is the NSA jet?*He thought of Megan dead in the stall, and the nausea creptback.

Becker had hoped to cut directly across the barrio and exit onthe other side, but Santa Cruz was a bewildering labyrinth ofalleyways. It was peppered with false starts and dead ends. Beckerquickly became disoriented. He looked up for the tower of theGiralda to get his bearings, but the surrounding walls were so highhe could see nothing except a thin slit of breaking dawn abovehim.

Becker wondered where the man in wire-rim glasses was; he knewbetter than to think the assailant had given up. The killerprobably was after him on foot. Becker struggled to maneuver hisVespa around tight corners. The sputtering of the engine echoed upand down the alleys. Becker knew he was an easy target in thesilence of Santa Cruz. At this point, all he had in his favor wasspeed. *Got to get to the other side!*

After a long series of turns and straightaways, Becker skiddedinto a three-way intersection marked Esquina de los Reyes. He knewhe was in trouble—he had been there already. As he stoodstraddling the idling bike, trying to decide which way to turn, theengine sputtered to a stop. The gas gauge read vacio. As if on cue,a shadow appeared down an alley on his left.

The human mind is the fastest computer in existence. In the nextfraction of a second, Becker's mind registered the shape ofthe man's glasses, searched his memory for a match, found one,registered danger, and requested a decision. He got one. He droppedthe useless bike and took off at a full sprint.

Unfortunately for Becker, Hulohot was now on solid ground ratherthan in a lurching taxi. He calmly raised his weapon and fired.

The bullet caught Becker in the side just as he stumbled aroundthe corner out of range. He took five or six strides before thesensation began to register. At first it felt like a muscle pull,just above the hip. Then it turned to a warm tingling. When Beckersaw the blood, he knew. There was no pain, no pain

anywhere, just aheadlong race through the winding maze of Santa Cruz.

* * *

Hulohot dashed after his quarry. He had been tempted to hitBecker in the head, but he was a professional; he played the odds.Becker was a moving target, and aiming at his midsection providedthe greatest margin of error both vertically and horizontally. Theodds had paid off. Becker had shifted at the last instant, andrather than missing his head, Hulohot had caught a piece of hisside. Although he knew the bullet had barely grazed Becker andwould do no lasting damage, the shot had served its purpose.Contact had been made. The prey had been touched by death. It was awhole new game.

Becker raced forward blindly. Turning. Winding. Staying out ofthe straightaways. The footsteps behind him seemed relentless.Becker's mind was blank. Blank to everything—where hewas, who was chasing him—all that was left was instinct, selfpreservation, no pain, only fear, and raw energy.

A shot exploded against the azulejo tile behind him. Shards ofglass sprayed across the back of his neck. He stumbled left, intoanother alley. He heard himself call for help, but except for thesound of footsteps and strained breathing, the morning air remaineddeathly still.

Becker's side was burning now. He feared he was leaving acrimson trail on the whitewashed walks. He searched everywhere foran open door, an open gate, any escape from the suffocatingcanyons. Nothing. The walkway narrowed.

"Socorro!" Becker's voice was barely audible."Help!"

The walls grew closer on each side. The walkway curved. Beckersearched for an intersection, a tributary, any way out. Thepassageway narrowed. Locked doors. Narrowing. Locked gates. Thefootsteps were closing. He was in a straightaway, and suddenly thealley began to slope upward. Steeper. Becker felt his legsstraining. He was slowing.

And then he was there.

Like a freeway that had run out of funding, the alley juststopped. There was a high wall, a wooden bench, and nothing else.No escape. Becker looked up three stories to the top of thebuilding and then spun and started back down the long alley, but hehad only taken a few steps before he stopped short.

At the foot of the inclined straightaway, a figure appeared. Theman moved toward Becker with a measured determination. In his hand,a gun glinted in the early morning sun.

Becker felt a sudden lucidity as he backed up toward the wall.The pain in his side suddenly registered. He touched the spot andlooked down. There was blood smeared across his fingers and acrossEnsei Tankado's golden ring. He

felt dizzy. He stared at theengraved band, puzzled. He'd forgotten he was wearing it.He'd forgotten why he had come to Seville. He looked up at thefigure approaching. He looked down at the ring. Was this why Meganhad died? Was this why *he* would die?

The shadow advanced up the inclined passageway. Becker saw wallson all sides—a dead end behind him. A few gated entrywaysbetween them, but it was too late to call for help.

Becker pressed his back against the dead end. Suddenly he couldfeel every piece of grit beneath the soles of his shoes, every bumpin the stucco wall behind him. His mind was reeling backward, hischildhood, his parents . . . Susan.

Oh, God . . . Susan.

For the first time since he was a kid, Becker prayed. He did notpray for deliverance from death; he did not believe in miracles.Instead he prayed that the woman he left behind would findstrength, that she would know without a doubt that she had beenloved. He closed his eyes. The memories came like a torrent. Theywere not memories of department meetings, university business, andthe things that made up 90 percent of his life; they were memoriesof her. Simple memories: teaching her to use chopsticks, sailing onCape Cod. *I love you,* he thought. *Know that . . .forever.*

It was as if every defense, every facade, every insecureexaggeration of his life had been stripped away. He was standingnaked—flesh and bones before God. *I am a man,* hethought. And in a moment of irony he thought, *A man withoutwax.* He stood, eyes closed, as the man in wire-rim glasses drewnearer. Somewhere nearby, a bell began to toll. Becker waited indarkness, for the sound that would end his life.

CHAPTER 89

The morning sun was just breaking over the Seville rooftops andshining down into the canyons below. The bells atop the Giraldacried out for sunrise mass. This was the moment inhabitants had allbeen waiting for. Everywhere in the ancient barrio, gates openedand families poured into the alleyways. Like lifeblood through theveins of old Santa Cruz, they coursed toward the heart of theirpueblo, toward the core of their history, toward their God, theirshrine, their cathedral.

Somewhere in Becker's mind, a bell was tolling. *Am Idead?* Almost reluctantly, he opened his eyes and squinted intothe first rays of sunlight. He knew exactly where he was. Heleveled his gaze and searched the alley for his assailant. But theman in wire-rims was not there. Instead, there were others. Spanishfamilies, in their finest clothes, stepping from their gatedportals into the alleyways, talking, laughing.

* * *

At the bottom of the alley, hidden from Becker's view,Hulohot cursed in frustration. At first there had been only asingle couple separating him from his quarry. Hulohot had beencertain they would leave. But the sound of the bells keptreverberating down the alley, drawing others from their homes. Asecond couple, with children. They greeted each another. Talking,laughing, kissing three times on the cheek. Another group appeared,and Hulohot could no longer see his prey. Now, in a boiling rage,he raced into the quickly growing crowd. He had to get to DavidBecker!

The killer fought his way toward the end of the alley. He foundhimself momentarily lost in a sea of bodies—coats and ties,black dresses, lace mantles over hunched women. They all seemedoblivious to Hulohot's presence; they strolled casually, allin black, shuffling, moving as one, blocking his way. Hulohot dughis way through the crowd and dashed up the alley into the deadend, his weapon raised. Then he let out a muted, inhuman scream.David Becker was gone.

* * *

Becker stumbled and sidestepped his way through the crowd. *Follow the crowd,* he thought. *They know the way out.* Hecut right at the intersection and the alley widened. Everywheregates were opening and people were pouring out. The pealing of thebells grew louder.

Becker’s side was still burning, but he sensed the bleedinghad stopped. He raced on. Somewhere behind him, closing fast, was aman with a gun.
Becker ducked in and out of the groups of churchgoers and triedto keep his head down. It was not much farther. He could sense it.The crowd had thickened. The alley had widened. They were no longerin a little tributary, this was the main river. As he rounded abend, Becker suddenly saw it, rising before them—the cathedraland Giralda tower.

The bells were deafening, the reverberations trapped in thehigh-walled plaza. The crowds converged, everyone in black, pushingacross the square toward the gaping doors of the Seville Cathedral.Becker tried to break away toward Mateus Gago, but he was trapped.He was shoulder to shoulder, heel to toe with the shoving throngs.The Spaniards had always had a different idea of closeness than therest of the world. Becker was wedged between two heavyset women,both with their eyes closed, letting the crowd carry them. Theymumbled prayers to themselves and clutched rosary beads in theirfingers.

As the crowd closed on the enormous stone structure, Beckertried to cut left again, but the current was stronger now. Theanticipation, the pushing and shoving, the blind, mumbled prayers.He turned into the crowd, trying to fight backward against theeager throngs. It was impossible, like swimming upstream in amile-deep river. He turned. The cathedral doors loomed beforehim—like the opening to some dark carnival ride he wished hehadn’t taken. David Becker suddenly realized he was going tochurch.

CHAPTER 90

The Crypto sirens were blaring. Strathmore had no idea how longSusan had been gone. He sat alone in the shadows, the drone ofTRANSLTR calling to him. *You're a survivor . . .you're a survivor. . . .*

Yes, he thought. *I'm a survivor—but survivalis nothing without honor. I'd rather die than live in theshadow of disgrace.*

And disgrace was what was waiting for him. He had keptinformation from the director. He had sent a virus into thenation's most secure computer. There was no doubt he would behung out to dry. His intentions had been patriotic, but nothing hadgone as he'd planned. There had been death and treachery.There would be trials, accusations, public outrage. He had servedhis country with honor and integrity for so many years, hecouldn't allow it to end this way.

I'm a survivor, he thought.

You're a liar, his own thoughts replied.

It was true. He *was* a liar. There were people hehadn't been honest with. Susan Fletcher was one of them. Therewere so many things he hadn't told her—things he was nowdesperately ashamed of. For years she'd been his illusion, hisliving fantasy. He dreamed of her at night; he cried out for her inhis sleep. He couldn't help it. She was as brilliant and asbeautiful as any woman he could imagine. His wife had tried to bepatient, but when she finally met Susan, she immediately lost hope.Bev Strathmore never blamed her husband for his feelings. She triedto endure the pain as long as possible, but recently it had becometoo much. She'd told him their marriage was ending; anotherwoman's shadow was no place to spend the rest of her life.

Gradually the sirens lifted Strathmore from his daze. Hisanalytical powers searched for any way out. His mind reluctantlyconfirmed what his heart had suspected. There was only one trueescape, only one solution.

Strathmore gazed down at the keyboard and began typing. Hedidn't bother to turn the monitor so he could see it. Hisfingers pecked out the words slowly and decisively.

Dearest friends, I am taking my life today . . .

This way, no one would ever wonder. There would be no questions.There would be no accusations. He would spell out for the worldwhat had happened. Many had died . . . but there was still one lifeto take.

CHAPTER 91

In a cathedral, it is always night. The warmth of the day turnsto damp coolness. The traffic is silenced behind thick granitewalls. No number of candelabras can illuminate the vast darknessoverhead. Shadows fall everywhere. There's only the stainedglass, high above, filtering the ugliness of the outside world intorays of muted reds and blues.

The Seville Cathedral, like all great cathedrals of Europe, islaid out in the shape of a cross. The sanctuary and altar arelocated just above the midpoint and open downward onto the mainsanctuary. Wooden pews fill the vertical axis, a staggering 113yards from the altar to the base of the cross. To the left andright of the altar, the transept of the cross houses confessionals,sacred tombs, and additional seating.

Becker found himself wedged in the middle of a long pew abouthalfway back. Overhead, in the dizzying empty space, a silvercenser the size of a refrigerator swung enormous arcs on a frayedrope, leaving a trail of frankincense. The bells of the Giraldakept ringing, sending low rumbling shock waves through the stone.Becker lowered his gaze to the gilded wall behind the altar. He hada lot to be thankful for. He was breathing. He was alive. It was amiracle.

As the priest prepared to give the opening prayer, Beckerchecked his side. There was a red stain on his shirt, but thebleeding had stopped. The wound was small, more of a lacerationthan a puncture. Becker tucked his shirt back in and craned hisneck. Behind him, the doors were cranking shut. He knew ifhe'd been followed, he was now trapped. The Seville Cathedralhad a single functional entrance, a design popularized in the dayswhen churches were used as fortresses, a safe haven against Moorishinvasion. With a single entrance, there was only one door tobarricade. Now the single entrance had another function—itensured all tourists entering the cathedral had purchased aticket.

The twenty-two-foot-high, gilded doors slammed with a decisivecrash. Becker was sealed in the house of God. He closed his eyesand slid low in his pew. He was the only one in the building notdressed in black. Somewhere voices began to chant.

* * *

Toward the back of the church, a figure moved slowly up the sideaisle, keeping to the shadows. He had slipped in just before thedoors closed. He

smiled to himself. The hunt was gettinginteresting. *Becker is here . . . I can feel it*. He movedmethodically, one row at a time. Overhead the frankincense decanterswung its long, lazy arcs. *A fine place to die,* Hulohotthought. *I hope I do as well*.

* * *

Becker knelt on the cold cathedral floor and ducked his head outof sight. The man seated next to him glared down—it was mostirregular behavior in the house of God.

"Enfermo," Becker apologized. "Sick."

Becker knew he had to stay low. He had glimpsed a familiarsilhouette moving up the side aisle. *It's him! He'shere!*

Despite being in the middle of an enormous congregation, Beckerfeared he was an easy target—his khaki blazer was like aroadside flare in the crowd of black. He considered removing it,but the white oxford shirt underneath was no better. Instead hehuddled lower.

The man beside him frowned. "Turista." He grunted.Then he whispered, half sarcastically, "Llamo un médico?Shall I call a doctor?"

Becker looked up at the old man's mole-ridden face."No, gracias. Estoy bien."

The man gave him an angry look. "Pues siéntate! Thensit down!" There were scattered shushes around them, and theold man bit his tongue and faced front.

Becker closed his eyes and huddled lower, wondering how long theservice would last. Becker, raised Protestant, had always had theimpression Catholics were long-winded. He prayed it wastrue—as soon as the service ended, he would be forced to standand let the others out. In khaki he was dead.

Becker knew he had no choice at the moment. He simply kneltthere on the cold stone floor of the great cathedral. Eventually,the old man lost interest. The congregation was standing now,singing a hymn. Becker stayed down. His legs were starting tocramp. There was no room to stretch them. *Patience,* hethought. *Patience*. He closed his eyes and took a deepbreath.

It felt like only minutes later that Becker felt someone kickinghim. He looked up. The mole-faced man was standing to his right,waiting impatiently to leave the pew.

Becker panicked. *He wants to leave already? I'll have tostand up!* Becker motioned for the man to step over him. The mancould barely control his anger. He grabbed the tails of his blackblazer, pulled them down in a huff, and leaned back to reveal theentire row of people waiting to leave. Becker looked left and sawthat the woman who had been seated there was gone. The length ofpew to his left was empty all the way to the center aisle.

The service can't be over! It's impossible! We justgot here!

But when Becker saw the altar boy at the end of the row and thetwo single-file lines moving up the center aisle toward the altar,he knew what was happening. *Communion.* He groaned. *The damn Spaniards do itfirst!*

CHAPTER 92

Susan climbed down the ladder into the sublevels. Thick steamwas now boiling up around TRANSLTR's hull. The catwalks werewet with condensation. She almost fell, her flats providing verylittle traction. She wondered how much longer TRANSLTR wouldsurvive. The sirens continued their intermittent warning. Theemergency lights spun in two-second intervals. Three stories below,the aux generators shook in a taxed whine. Susan knew somewhere atthe bottom in the foggy dimness there was a circuit breaker. Shesensed time was running out.

* * *

Upstairs, Strathmore held the Beretta in his hand. He reread hisnote and laid it on the floor of the room where he was standing.What he was about to do was a cowardly act, there was no doubt. *I'm a survivor,* he thought. He thought of the virus in theNSA databank, he thought of David Becker in Spain, he thought ofhis plans for a back door. He had told so many lies. He was guiltyof so much. He knew this was the only way to avoid accountability .. . the only way to avoid the shame. Carefully he aimed the gun.Then he closed his eyes and pulled the trigger.

* * *

Susan had only descended six flights when she heard the muffledshot. It was far off, barely audible over the generators. She hadnever heard a gunshot except on television, but she had no doubtwhat it was.

She stopped short, the sound resounding in her ears. In a waveof horror, she feared the worst. She pictured the commander'sdreams—the back door in Digital Fortress, the incredible coupit would have been. She pictured the virus in the databank, hisfailing marriage, that eerie nod he had given her. Her footingfaltered. She spun on the landing, grappling for the banister. *Commander! No!*

Susan was momentarily frozen, her mind blank. The echo of thegunshot seemed to drown out the chaos around her. Her mind told herto keep on going, but her legs refused. *Commander!* Aninstant later she found herself stumbling back up the stairs,entirely forgetting the danger around her.

She ran blindly, slipping on the slick metal. Above her thehumidity fell like rain. When she reached the ladder and beganclimbing, she felt herself lifted from below by a tremendous surgeof steam that practically jettisoned her

through the trapdoor. Sherolled onto the Crypto floor and felt the cool air wash over her.Her white blouse clung to her body, soaked through.

It was dark. Susan paused, trying to get her bearings. The soundof the gunshot was on endless loop in her head. Hot steam billowedup through the trapdoor like gases from a volcano about toexplode.

Susan cursed herself for leaving the Beretta with Strathmore.She *had* left it with him, hadn't she? *Or was it inNode 3?* As her eyes adjusted to the dark, she glanced towardthe gaping hole in the Node 3 wall. The glow from the monitors wasfaint, but in the distance she could see Hale lying motionless onthe floor where she'd left him. There was no sign ofStrathmore. Terrified of what she'd find, she turned towardthe commander's office.

But as she began to move, something registered as strange. Shebackpedaled a few steps and peered into Node 3 again. In the softlight she could see Hale's arm. It was not at his side. He wasno longer tied like a mummy. His arm was up over his head. He wassprawled backward on the floor. Had he gotten free? There was nomovement. Hale was deathly still.

Susan gazed up at Strathmore's workstation perched high onthe wall. "Commander?"

Silence.

Tentatively she moved toward Node 3. There was an object inHale's hand. It glimmered in the light of the monitors. Susanmoved closer . . . closer. Suddenly she could see what Hale washolding. It was the Beretta.

Susan gasped. Following the arch of Hale's arm, her eyesmoved to his face. What she saw was grotesque. Half of GregHale's head was soaked in blood. The dark stain had spread outacross the carpet.

Oh my God! Susan staggered backward. It wasn't thecommander's shot she'd heard, it was *Hale's!*

As if in a trance, Susan moved toward the body. Apparently, Halehad managed to free himself. The printer cables were piled on thefloor beside him. *I must have left the gun on the couch,* shethought. The blood flowing through the hole in his skull lookedblack in the bluish light.

On the floor beside Hale was a piece of paper. Susan went overunsteadily, and picked it up. It was a letter.

Dearest friends, I am taking my life today in penance for thefollowing sins . . .

In utter disbelief, Susan stared at the suicide note in herhand. She read slowly. It was surreal—so unlike Hale—alaundry list of crimes. He was admitting toeverything—figuring out that NDAKOTA was a hoax, hiring amercenary to kill Ensei Tankado and take the ring, pushing PhilChartrukian, planning to sell Digital Fortress.

Susan reached the final line. She was not prepared for what sheread. The letter's final words delivered a numbing blow.

Above all, I'm truly sorry about David Becker. Forgiveme, I was blinded by ambition.

As Susan stood trembling over Hale's body, the sound ofrunning footsteps approached behind her. In slow motion, sheturned.

Strathmore appeared in the broken window, pale and out ofbreath. He stared down at Hale's body in apparent shock.

"Oh my God!" he said. "What happened?"

CHAPTER 93

Communion.

Hulohot spotted Becker immediately. The khaki blazer wasimpossible to miss, particularly with the small bloodstain on oneside. The jacket was moving up the center aisle in a sea of black.*He must not know I'm here.* Hulohot smiled. *He'sa dead man.*

He fanned the tiny metal contacts on his fingertips, eager totell his American contact the good news. *Soon,* he thought,*very soon.*

Like a predator moving downwind, Hulohot moved to the back ofthe church. Then he began his approach—straight up the centeraisle. Hulohot was in no mood to track Becker through the crowdsleaving the church. His quarry was trapped, a fortunate turn ofevents. Hulohot just needed a way to eliminate him quietly. Hissilencer, the best money could buy, emitted no more than a tinyspitting cough. That would be fine.

As Hulohot closed on the khaki blazer, he was unaware of thequiet murmurs coming from those he was passing. The congregationcould understand this man's excitement to receive the blessingof God, but nevertheless, there were strict rules ofprotocol—two lines, single file.

Hulohot kept moving. He was closing quickly. He thumbed therevolver in his jacket pocket. The moment had arrived. David Beckerhad been exceptionally fortunate so far; there was no need to temptfortune any further.

The khaki blazer was only ten people ahead, facing front, headdown. Hulohot rehearsed the kill in his mind. The image wasclear—cutting in behind Becker, keeping the gun low and out ofsight, firing two shots into Becker's back, Becker slumping,Hulohot catching him and helping him into a pew like a concernedfriend. Then Hulohot would move quickly to the back of the churchas if going for help. In the confusion, he would disappear beforeanyone knew what had happened.

Five people. Four. Three.

Hulohot fingered the gun in his pocket, keeping it low. He wouldfire from hip level upward into Becker's spine. That way thebullet would hit either the spine or a lung before finding theheart. Even if the bullet missed the heart, Becker would die. Apunctured lung was fatal, maybe not in more medically advancedparts of the world, but in *Spain,* it was fatal.

Two people . . . one. And then Hulohot was there. Like adancer performing

a well-rehearsed move, he turned to his right. Helaid his hand on the shoulder of the khaki blazer, aimed the gun,and . . . fired. Two muffled spats.

Instantly the body was rigid. Then it was falling. Hulohotcaught his victim under the armpits. In a single motion, he swungthe body into a pew before any bloodstains spread across his back.Nearby, people turned. Hulohot paid no heed—he would be gonein an instant.

He groped the man's lifeless fingers for the ring. Nothing.He felt again. The fingers were bare. Hulohot spun the man aroundangrily. The horror was instantaneous. The face was not DavidBecker's.

Rafael de la Maza, a banker from the suburbs of Seville, haddied almost instantly. He was still clutching the 50,000 pesetasthe strange American had paid him for a cheap black blazer.

CHAPTER 94

Midge Milken stood fuming at the water cooler near the entranceto the conference room. *What the hell is Fontaine doing?* Shecrumpled her paper cup and threw it forcefully into the trash can.*There's something happening in Crypto! I can feel it!*Midge knew there was only one way to prove herself right.She'd go check out Crypto herself—track down Jabba ifneed be. She spun on her heel and headed for the door.

Brinkerhoff appeared out of nowhere, blocking her way."Where are you headed?"

"Home!" Midge lied.

Brinkerhoff refused to let her pass.

Midge glared. "Fontaine told you not to let me out,didn't he?" Brinkerhoff looked away.

"Chad, I'm telling you, there's somethinghappening in Crypto—something big. I don't know whyFontaine's playing dumb, but TRANSLTR's in trouble.Something is not right down there tonight!"

"Midge," he soothed, walking past her toward thecurtained conference room windows, "let's let thedirector handle it."

Midge's gaze sharpened. "Do you have any idea whathappens to TRANSLTR if the cooling system fails?"

Brinkerhoff shrugged and approached the window."Power's probably back on-line by now anyway." Hepulled apart the curtains and looked.

"Still dark?" Midge asked.

But Brinkerhoff did not reply. He was spellbound. The scenebelow in the Crypto dome was unimaginable. The entire glass cupolawas filled with spinning lights, flashing strobes, and swirlingsteam. Brinkerhoff stood transfixed, teetering light-headed againstthe glass. Then, in a frenzy of panic, he raced out."Director! *Director!"*

CHAPTER 95

The blood of Christ . . . the cup of salvation . . .

People gathered around the slumped body in the pew. Overhead,the frankincense swung its peaceful arcs. Hulohot wheeled wildly inthe center aisle and scanned the church. *He's got to behere!* He spun back toward the altar.

Thirty rows ahead, holy communion was proceeding uninterrupted.Padre Gustaphes Herrera, the head chalice bearer, glanced curiouslyat the quiet commotion in one of the center pews; he was notconcerned. Sometimes some of the older folks were overcome by theholy spirit and passed out. A little air usually did the trick.

Meanwhile, Hulohot was searching frantically. Becker was nowherein sight. A hundred or so people were kneeling at the long altarreceiving communion. Hulohot wondered if Becker was one of them. Hescanned their backs. He was prepared to shoot from fifty yards awayand make a dash for it.

* * *

El cuerpo de Jesus, el pan del cielo.

The young priest serving Becker communion gave him adisapproving stare. He could understand the stranger'seagerness to receive communion, but it was no excuse to cut inline.

Becker bowed his head and chewed the wafer as best he could. Hesensed something was happening behind him, some sort ofdisturbance. He thought of the man from whom he'd bought thejacket and hoped he had listened to his warning and not takenBecker's in exchange. He started to turn and look, but hefeared the wire-rim glasses would be staring back. He crouched inhopes his black jacket was covering the back of his khaki pants. Itwas not.

The chalice was coming quickly from his right. People werealready swallowing their wine, crossing themselves, and standing toleave. *Slow down!* Becker was in no hurry to leave the altar.But with two thousand people waiting for communion and only eightpriests serving, it was considered bad form to linger over a sip ofwine.

* * *

The chalice was just to the right of Becker when Hulohot spottedthe mismatched khaki pants. "Estás ya muerto," hehissed softly. "You're already dead." Hulohot movedup the center aisle. The time for subtlety had passed. Two shots inthe back, and he would grab the ring and run. The biggest

taxistand in Seville was half a block away on Mateus Gago. He reachedfor his weapon.

Adiós, Señor Becker . . .

* * *

La sangre de Cristo, la copa de la salvación.

The thick scent of red wine filled Becker's nostrils asPadre Herrera lowered the hand-polished, silver chalice. *Littleearly for drinking*, Becker thought as he leaned forward. But asthe silver goblet dropped past eye level, there was a blur ofmovement. A figure, coming fast, his shape warped in the reflectionof the cup.

Becker saw a flash of metal, a weapon being drawn. Instantly,unconsciously, like a runner from a starting block at the sound ofa gun, Becker was vaulting forward. The priest fell back in horroras the chalice sailed through the air, and red wine rained down onwhite marble. Priests and altar boys went scattering as Becker doveover the communion rail. A silencer coughed out a single shot.Becker landed hard, and the shot exploded in the marble floorbeside him. An instant later he was tumbling down three granitestairs into the valle, a narrow passageway through which the clergyentered, allowing them to rise onto the altar as if by divinegrace.

At the bottom of the steps, he stumbled and dove. Becker felthimself sliding out of control across the slick polished stone. Adagger of pain shot though his gut as he landed on his side. Amoment later he was stumbling through a curtained entryway and downa set of wooden stairs.

Pain. Becker was running, through a dressing room. It was dark.There were screams from the altar. Loud footsteps in pursuit.Becker burst through a set of double doors and stumbled into somesort of study. It was dark, furnished with rich Orientals andpolished mahogany. On the far wall was a lifesize crucifix. Beckerstaggered to a stop. Dead end. He was at the tip of the cross. Hecould hear Hulohot closing fast. Becker stared at the crucifix andcursed his bad luck.

"Goddamn it!" he screamed.

There was the sudden sound of breaking glass to Becker'sleft. He wheeled. A man in red robes gasped and turned to eyeBecker in horror. Like a cat caught with a canary, the holy manwiped his mouth and tried to hide the broken bottle of holycommunion wine at his feet.

"Salida!" Becker demanded. "Salida!"Let me out!

Cardinal Guerra reacted on instinct. A demon had entered hissacred chambers screaming for deliverance from the house of God.Guerra would grant him that wish—immediately. The demon hadentered at a most inopportune moment.

Pale, the cardinal pointed to a curtain on the wall to his left.Hidden behind the curtain was a door. He’d installed it threeyears ago. It led directly to the courtyard outside. The cardinalhad grown tired of exiting the church through the front door like acommon sinner.

CHAPTER 96

Susan was wet and shivering, huddled on the Node 3 couch.Strathmore draped his suit coat over her shoulders. Hale'sbody lay a few yards away. The sirens blared. Like ice thawing on afrozen pond, TRANSLTR's hull let out a sharp crack.

"I'm going down to kill power," Strathmore said,laying a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "I'll be rightback."

Susan stared absently after the commander as he dashed acrossthe Crypto floor. He was no longer the catatonic man she'dseen ten minutes before. Commander Trevor Strathmore wasback—logical, controlled, doing whatever was necessary to getthe job done.

The final words of Hale's suicide note ran through her mindlike a train out of control: *Above all, I'm truly sorryabout David Becker. Forgive me, I was blinded by ambition.*

Susan Fletcher's nightmare had just been confirmed. Davidwas in danger . . . or worse. Maybe it was already too late. *I'm truly sorry about David Becker.*

She stared at the note. Hale hadn't even signedit—he'd just typed his name at the bottom: *GregHale.* He'd poured out his guts, pressed print, and thenshot himself—just like that. Hale had sworn he'd never goback to prison; he'd kept his vow—he'd chosen deathinstead.

"David . . ." She sobbed. *David!*

* * *

At that moment, ten feet below the Crypto floor, CommanderStrathmore stepped off the ladder onto the first landing. It hadbeen a day of fiascoes. What had started out as a patriotic missionhad swerved wildly out of control. The commander had been forced tomake impossible decisions, commit horrific acts—acts he'dnever imagined himself capable of.

It was a solution! It was the only *damnsolution!*

There was duty to think of: country and honor. Strathmore knewthere was still time. He could shut down TRANSLTR. He could use thering to save the country's most valuable databank. *Yes,*he thought, *there was still time.*

Strathmore looked out over the disaster around him. The overheadsprinklers were on. TRANSLTR was groaning. The sirens blared. Thespinning lights looked like helicopters closing in through densefog.With every step, all he could see was Greg Hale—the youngcryptographer gazing

up, his eyes pleading, and then, the shot.Hale's death was for country . . . for honor. The NSA couldnot afford another scandal. Strathmore needed a scapegoat. Besides,Greg Hale was a disaster waiting to happen.

* * * Strathmore's thoughts were jarred free by the sound of hiscellular. It was barely audible over the sirens and hissing fumes.He snatched it off his belt without breaking stride.

"Speak."

"Where's my pass-key?" a familiar voicedemanded.

"Who is this?" Strathmore yelled over the din.

"It's Numataka!" the angry voice bellowed back."You promised me a pass-key!"

Strathmore kept moving.

"I want Digital Fortress!" Numataka hissed.

"There *is* no Digital Fortress!" Strathmore shotback.

"What?"

"There is no unbreakable algorithm!"

"Of course there is! I've seen it on the Internet! Mypeople have been trying to unlock it for days!"

"It's an encrypted virus, you fool—andyou're damn lucky you can't open it!"

"But—"

"The deal is off!" Strathmore yelled. "I'mnot North Dakota. There *is* no North Dakota! Forget I evermentioned it!" He clamped the cellular shut, turned off theringer, and rammed it back on his belt. There would be no moreinterruptions.

* * *

Twelve thousand miles away, Tokugen Numataka stood stunned athis plate-glass window. His Umami cigar hung limply in his mouth.The deal of his lifetime had just disintegrated before hiseyes.

* * *

Strathmore kept descending. *The deal is off.* NumatechCorp. would never get the unbreakable algorithm . . . and the NSAwould never get its back door.

Strathmore's dream had been a long time in theplanning—he'd chosen Numatech carefully. Numatech waswealthy, a likely winner of the pass-key auction. No one wouldthink twice if it ended up with the key. Conveniently there was nocompany less likely to be suspected of consorting with the U.S.government. Tokugen Numataka was old-world Japan—death beforedishonor. He hated Americans. He hated their food, he hated theircustoms, and most of all, he hated their grip on the world'ssoftware market.

* * *

Strathmore's vision had been bold—a world encryptionstandard with a back door for the NSA. He'd longed to sharehis dream with Susan, to carry it out with her by his side, but heknew he could not. Even though Ensei Tankado's death wouldsave thousands of lives in the future, Susan would never haveagreed; she was a pacifist. *I'm a pacifist too,* thoughtStrathmore, *I just don't have the luxury of acting likeone.*

There had never been any doubt in the commander's mind whowould kill Tankado. Tankado was in Spain—and Spain meantHulohot. The forty-two-year-old Portuguese mercenary was one of thecommander's favorite pros. He'd been working for the NSAfor years. Born and raised in Lisbon, Hulohot had done work for theNSA all over Europe. Never once had his kills been traced back toFort Meade. The only catch was that Hulohot was deaf; telephonecommunication was impossible. Recently Strathmore had arranged forHulohot to receive the NSA's newest toy, the Monocle computer.Strathmore bought himself a SkyPager and programmed it to the samefrequency. From that moment on, his communication with Hulohot wasnot only instantaneous but also entirely untraceable.

The first message Strathmore had sent Hulohot left little roomfor misunderstanding. They had already discussed it. Kill EnseiTankado. Obtain pass-key.

Strathmore never asked how Hulohot worked his magic, but somehowhe had done it again. Ensei Tankado was dead, and the authoritieswere convinced it was a heart attack. A textbook kill—exceptfor one thing. Hulohot had misjudged the location. ApparentlyTankado dying in a public place was a necessary part of theillusion. But unexpectedly, the public had appeared too soon.Hulohot was forced into hiding before he could search the body forthe pass-key. When the dust settled, Tankado's body was in thehands of Seville's coroner.

Strathmore was furious. Hulohot had blown a mission for thefirst time ever—and he'd picked an inauspicious time todo it. Getting Tankado's pass-key was critical, but Strathmoreknew that sending a deaf assassin into the Seville morgue was asuicide mission. He had pondered his other options. A second schemebegan to materialize. Strathmore suddenly saw a chance to win ontwo fronts—a chance to realize two dreams instead of just one.At six-thirty that morning, he had called David Becker.

CHAPTER 97

Fontaine burst into the conference room at a full sprint.Brinkerhoff and Midge were close at his heels.

“Look!” Midge choked, motioning frantically to thewindow.

Fontaine looked out the window at the strobes in the Cryptodome. His eyes went wide. This was definitely *not* part ofthe plan.

Brinkerhoff sputtered. “It’s a goddamn disco downthere!”

Fontaine stared out, trying to make sense of it. In the fewyears TRANSLTR had been operational, it had never done this. *It’s overheating,* he thought. He wondered why the hellStrathmore hadn’t shut it down. It took Fontaine only aninstant to make up his mind.

He snatched an interoffice phone off the conference table andpunched the extension for Crypto. The receiver began beeping as ifthe extension were out of order.

Fontaine slammed down the receiver. “Damn it!” Heimmediately picked up again and dialed Strathmore’s privatecellular line. This time the line began to ring.

Six rings went by.

Brinkerhoff and Midge watched as Fontaine paced the length ofhis phone cable like a tiger on a chain. After a full minute,Fontaine was crimson with rage.

He slammed down the receiver again. “Unbelievable!” hebellowed. “Crypto’s about to blow, and Strathmorewon’t answer his goddamn phone!”

CHAPTER 98

Hulohot burst out of Cardinal Guerra's chambers into theblinding morning sun. He shielded his eyes and cursed. He wasstanding outside the cathedral in a small patio, bordered by a highstone wall, the west face of the Giralda tower, and twowrought-iron fences. The gate was open. Outside the gate was thesquare. It was empty. The walls of Santa Cruz were in the distance.There was no way Becker could have made it so far so quickly.Hulohot turned and scanned the patio. *He's in here. He mustbe!*

The patio, Jardin de los Naranjos, was famous in Seville for itstwenty blossoming orange trees. The trees were renowned in Sevilleas the birthplace of English marmalade. An eighteenth-centuryEnglish trader had purchased three dozen bushels of oranges fromthe Seville church and taken them back to London only to find thefruit inedibly bitter. He tried to make jam from the rinds andended up having to add pounds of sugar just to make it palatable.Orange marmalade had been born.

Hulohot moved forward through the grove, gun leveled. The treeswere old, and the foliage had moved high on their trunks. Theirlowest branches were unreachable, and the thin bases provided nocover. Hulohot quickly saw the patio was empty. He looked straightup. The Giralda.

The entrance to the Giralda's spiral staircase was cordonedoff by a rope and small wooden sign. The rope hung motionless.Hulohot's eyes climbed the 419-foot tower and immediately knewit was a ridiculous thought. There was no way Becker would havebeen that stupid. The single staircase wound straight up to asquare stone cubicle. There were narrow slits in the wall forviewing, but there was no way out.

* * *

David Becker climbed the last of the steep stairs and staggeredbreathless into a tiny stone cubicle. There were high walls allaround him and narrow slits in the perimeter. No exit.

Fate had done Becker no favors this morning. As he'd dashedfrom the cathedral into the open courtyard, his jacket had caughton the door. The fabric had stopped him midstride and swung himhard left before tearing. Becker was suddenly stumbling off balanceinto the blinding sun. When he'd looked up, he was headingstraight for a staircase. He'd jumped over the rope and dashedup. By the time he realized where it led, it was too late.

Now he stood in the confined cell and caught his breath. Hisside burned. Narrow slats of morning sun streamed through theopenings in the wall. He looked out. The man in the wire-rimglasses was far below, his back to Becker, staring out at theplaza. Becker shifted his body in front of the crack for a betterview. *Cross the plaza,* he willed him.

* * *

The shadow of the Giralda lay across the square like a giantfelled sequoia. Hulohot stared the length of it. At the far end,three slits of light cut through the tower's viewing aperturesand fell in crisp rectangles on the cobblestone below. One of thoserectangles had just been blotted out by the shadow of a man.Without so much as a glance toward the top of the tower, Hulohotspun and dashed toward the Giralda stairs.

CHAPTER 99

Fontaine pounded his fist into his hand. he paced the conferenceroom and stared out at the spinning Crypto lights. “Abort!Goddamn it! Abort!”
Midge appeared in the doorway waving a fresh readout.“Director! Strathmore *can’t* abort!”
“What!” Brinkerhoff and Fontaine gasped in unison.
“He tried, sir!” Midge held up the report. “Fourtimes already! TRANSLTR’s locked in some sort of endlessloop.”
Fontaine spun and stared back out the window. “JesusChrist!”
The conference room phone rang sharply. The director threw uphis arms. “It’s got to be Strathmore! About goddamntime!”
Brinkerhoff scooped up the phone. “Director’soffice.”
Fontaine held out his hand for the receiver.
Brinkerhoff looked uneasy and turned to Midge. “It’sJabba. He wants *you.”*
The director swung his gaze over to Midge, who was alreadycrossing the room. She activated the speaker phone. “Go ahead,Jabba.”
Jabba’s metallic voice boomed into the room. “Midge,I’m in the main databank. We’re showing some strangestuff down here. I was wondering if—”
“Dammit, Jabba!” Midge came unglued. “That’swhat I’ve been trying to tell you!”

“It could be nothing,” Jabba hedged,“but—” “Stop saying that! It’s *not* nothing!Whatever’s going on down there, take it seriously, *very*seriously. My data isn’t fried—never has been, neverwill.” She started to hang up and then added, “Oh, andJabba? Just so there aren’t any surprises . . . Strathmorebypassed Gauntlet.”

CHAPTER 100

Hulohot took the Giralda stairs three at a time. The only lightin the spiral passage was from small open-air windows every 180degrees. *He's trapped! David Becker will die!* Hulohotcircled upward, gun drawn. He kept to the outside wall in caseBecker decided to attack from above. The iron candle poles on eachlanding would make good weapons if Becker decided to use one. Butby staying wide, Hulohot would be able to spot him in time.Hulohot's gun had a range significantly longer than afivefoot candle pole.

Hulohot moved quickly but carefully. The stairs were steep;tourists had died here. This was not America—no safety signs,no handrails, no insurance disclaimers. This was Spain. If you werestupid enough to fall, it was your own damn fault, regardless ofwho built the stairs.

Hulohot paused at one of the shoulder-high openings and glancedout. He was on the north face and, from the looks of things, abouthalfway up.

The opening to the viewing platform was visible around thecorner. The staircase to the top was empty. David Becker had notchallenged him. Hulohot realized maybe Becker had not seen himenter the tower. That meant the element of surprise was onHulohot's side as well—not that he'd need it.Hulohot held all the cards. Even the layout of the tower was in hisfavor; the staircase met the viewing platform in the southwestcorner—Hulohot would have a clear line of fire to every pointof the cell with no possibility that Becker could get behind him.And to top things off, Hulohot would be moving out of the dark intothe light. *A killing box,* he mused.

Hulohot measured the distance to the doorway. Seven steps. Hepracticed the kill in his mind. If he stayed right as he approachedthe opening, he would be able to see the leftmost corner of theplatform before he reached it. If Becker was there, Hulohot wouldfire. If not, he would shift inside and enter moving east, facingthe right corner, the only place remaining that Becker could be. Hesmiled.

SUBJECT: DAVID BECKER—TERMINATED The time had come. He checked his weapon.

With a violent surge, Hulohot dashed up. The platform swung intoview. The left corner was empty. As rehearsed, Hulohot shiftedinside and burst through the opening facing right. He fired intothe corner. The bullet ricocheted back off the bare wall and barelymissed him. Hulohot wheeled wildly and let

out a muted scream.There was no one there. David Becker had vanished.

* * *

Three flights below, suspended 325 feet over the Jardin de losNaranjos, David Becker hung on the outside of the Giralda like aman doing chin-ups on a window ledge. As Hulohot had been racing upthe staircase, Becker had descended three flights and loweredhimself out one of the openings. He'd dropped out of sightjust in time. The killer had run right by him. He'd been intoo much of a hurry to notice the white knuckles grasping thewindow ledge.

Hanging outside the window, Becker thanked God that his dailysquash routine involved twenty minutes on the Nautilus machine todevelop his biceps for a harder overhead serve. Unfortunately,despite his strong arms, Becker was now having trouble pullinghimself back in. His shoulders burned. His side felt as if it weretearing open. The rough-cut stone ledge provided little grip,grating into his fingertips like broken glass.

Becker knew it was only a matter of seconds before his assailantwould come running down from above. From the higher ground, thekiller would undoubtedly see Becker's fingers on theledge.

Becker closed his eyes and pulled. He knew he would need amiracle to escape death. His fingers were losing their leverage. Heglanced down, past his dangling legs. The drop was the length of afootball field to the orange trees below. Unsurvivable. The pain inhis side was getting worse. Footsteps now thundered above him, loudleaping footsteps rushing down the stairs. Becker closed his eyes.It was now or never. He gritted his teeth and pulled.

The stone tore against the skin on his wrists as he yankedhimself upward. The footsteps were coming fast. Becker grappled atthe inside of the opening, trying to secure his hold. He kicked hisfeet. His body felt like lead, as if someone had a rope tied to hislegs and were pulling him down. He fought it. He surged up onto hiselbows. He was in plain view now, his head half through the windowlike a man in a guillotine. He wriggled his legs, kicking himselfinto the opening. He was halfway through. His torso now hung intothe stairwell. The footsteps were close. Becker grabbed the sidesof the opening and in a single motion launched his body through. Hehit the staircase hard.

* * *

Hulohot sensed Becker's body hit the floor just below him.He leapt forward, gun leveled. A window spun into view. *This isit!* Hulohot moved to the outside wall and aimed down thestaircase. Becker's legs dashed out of sight just around thecurve. Hulohot fired in frustration. The bullet ricocheted down thestairwell.

As Hulohot dashed down the stairs after his prey, he kept to theoutside wall

for the widest angle view. As the staircase revolvedinto view before him, it seemed Becker was always 180 degrees aheadof him, just out of sight. Becker had taken the inside track,cutting off the angle and leaping four or five stairs at a time.Hulohot stayed with him. It would take only a single shot. Hulohotwas gaining. He knew that even if Becker made the bottom, there wasnowhere to run; Hulohot could shoot him in the back as he crossedthe open patio. The desperate race spiraled downward.

Hulohot moved inside to the faster track. He sensed he wasgaining. He could see Becker's shadow every time they passedan opening. Down. Down. Spiraling. It seemed that Becker was alwaysjust around the corner. Hulohot kept one eye on his shadow and oneeye on the stairs.

Suddenly it appeared to Hulohot that Becker's shadow hadstumbled. It made an erratic lurch left and then seemed to spin inmidair and sail back toward the center of the stairwell. Hulohotleapt forward. *I've got him!*

On the stairs in front of Hulohot, there was a flash of steel.It jabbed into the air from around the corner. It thrust forwardlike a fencer's foil at ankle level. Hulohot tried to shiftleft, but it was too late. The object was between his ankles. Hisback foot came forward, caught it hard, and the post slammed acrosshis shin. Hulohot's arms went out for support but found onlyempty air. He was abruptly airborne, turning on his side. AsHulohot sailed downward, he passed over David Becker, prone on hisstomach, arms outstretched. The candle pole in his hands was nowcaught up in Hulohot's legs as he spun downward.

Hulohot crashed into the outside wall before he hit thestaircase. When he finally found the floor, he was tumbling. Hisgun clattered to the floor. Hulohot's body kept going, headover heels. He spiraled five complete 360-degree rotations beforehe rolled to a stop. Twelve more steps, and he would have tumbledout onto the patio.

CHAPTER 101

David Becker had never held a gun, but he was holding one now.Hulohot's body was twisted and mangled in the darkness of theGiralda staircase. Becker pressed the barrel of the gun against hisassailant's temple and carefully knelt down. One twitch andBecker would fire. But there was no twitch. Hulohot was dead.

Becker dropped the gun and collapsed on the stairs. For thefirst time in ages he felt tears well up. He fought them. He knewthere would be time for emotion later; now it was time to go home.Becker tried to stand, but he was too tired to move. He sat a longwhile, exhausted, on the stone staircase.

Absently, he studied the twisted body before him. Thekiller's eyes began to glaze over, gazing out at nothing inparticular. Somehow, his glasses were still intact. They were oddglasses, Becker thought, with a wire protruding from behind theearpiece and leading to a pack of some sort on his belt. Becker wastoo exhausted to be curious.

As he sat alone in the staircase and collected his thoughts,Becker shifted his gaze to the ring on his finger. His vision hadcleared somewhat, and he could finally read the inscription. As hehad suspected, it was not English. He stared at the engraving along moment and then frowned. *This is worth killing for?*

* * *

The morning sun was blinding when Becker finally stepped out ofthe Giralda onto the patio. The pain in his side had subsided, andhis vision was returning to normal. He stood a moment, in a daze,enjoying the fragrance of the orange blossoms. Then he began movingslowly across the patio.

As Becker strode away from the tower, a van skidded to a stopnearby. Two men jumped out. They were young and dressed in militaryfatigues. They advanced on Becker with the stiff precision ofwelltuned machines.

"David Becker?" one demanded.

Becker stopped short, amazed they knew his name. "Who . . .who are you?"

"Come with us, please. Right away."

There was something unreal about the encounter—somethingthat made Becker's nerve endings start to tingle again. Hefound himself backing away from them.

The shorter man gave Becker an icy stare. "This way, Mr.Becker. *Right now."*

Becker turned to run. But he only took one step. One of the mendrew a weapon.

There was a shot.

A searing lance of pain erupted in Becker's chest. Itrocketed to his skull. His fingers went stiff, and Becker fell. Aninstant later, there was nothing but blackness.

CHAPTER 102

Strathmore reached the TRANSLTR floor and stepped off thecatwalk into an inch of water. The giant computer shuddered besidehim. Huge droplets of water fell like rain through the swirlingmist. The warning horns sounded like thunder.

The commander looked across at the failed main generators. PhilChartrukian was there, his charred remains splayed across a set ofcoolant fins. The scene looked like some sort of perverse Halloweendisplay.

Although Strathmore regretted the man's death, there was nodoubt it had been "a warranted casualty." PhilChartrukian had left Strathmore no choice. When the Sys-Sec cameracing up from the depths, screaming about a virus, Strathmore methim on the landing and tried to talk sense to him. But Chartrukianwas beyond reason. *We've got a virus! I'm callingJabba!* When he tried to push past, the commander blocked hisway. The landing was narrow. They struggled. The railing was low.It was ironic, Strathmore thought, that Chartrukian had been rightabout the virus all along.

The man's plunge had been chilling—a momentary howl ofterror and then silence. But it was not half as chilling as thenext thing Commander Strathmore saw. Greg Hale was staring up athim from the shadows below, a look of utter horror on his face. Itwas then that Strathmore knew Greg Hale would die.

TRANSLTR crackled, and Strathmore turned his attention back tothe task at hand. Kill power. The circuit breaker was on the otherside of the freon pumps to the left of the body. Strathmore couldsee it clearly. All he had to do was pull a lever and the remainingpower in Crypto would die. Then, after a few seconds, he couldrestart the main generators; all doorways and functions would comeback online; the freon would start flowing again, and TRANSLTRwould be safe.

But as Strathmore slogged toward the breaker, he realized therewas one final obstacle: Chartrukian's body was still on themain generator's cooling fins. Killing and then restarting themain generator would only cause another power failure. The body hadto be moved.

Strathmore eyed the grotesque remains and made his way over.Reaching up, he grabbed a wrist. The flesh was like Styrofoam. Thetissue had been fried. The whole body was devoid of moisture. Thecommander closed his eyes, tightened his grip around the wrist, andpulled. The body slid an inch or two.

Strathmore pulled harder. Thebody slid again. The commander braced himself and pulled with allhis might. Suddenly he was tumbling backward. He landed hard on hisbackside up against a power casement. Struggling to sit up in therising water, Strathmore stared down in horror at the object in hisfist. It was Chartrukian's forearm. It had broken off at theelbow.

* * *

Upstairs, Susan continued her wait. She sat on the Node 3 couchfeeling paralyzed. Hale lay at her feet. She couldn't imaginewhat was taking the commander so long. Minutes passed. She tried topush David from her thoughts, but it was no use. With every blastof the horns, Hale's words echoed inside her head: *I'mtruly sorry about David Becker.* Susan thought she would loseher mind.

She was about to jump up and race onto the Crypto floor whenfinally it happened. Strathmore had thrown the switch and killedall power.

The silence that engulfed Crypto was instantaneous. The hornschoked off midblare, and the Node 3 monitors flickered to black.Greg Hale's corpse disappeared into the darkness, and Susaninstinctively yanked her legs up onto the couch. She wrappedStrathmore's suitcoat around her.

Darkness.

Silence.

She had never heard such quiet in Crypto. There'd alwaysbeen the low hum of the generators. But now there was nothing, onlythe great beast heaving and sighing in relief. Crackling, hissing,slowly cooling down.

Susan closed her eyes and prayed for David. Her prayer was asimple one—that God protect the man she loved.

Not being a religious woman, Susan had never expected to hear aresponse to her prayer. But when there was a sudden shudderingagainst her chest, she jolted upright. She clutched her chest. Amoment later she understood. The vibrations she felt were not thehand of God at all—they were coming from the commander'sjacket pocket. He had set the vibrating silent-ring feature on hisSkyPager. Someone was sending Commander Strathmore a message.

* * *

Six stories below, Strathmore stood at the circuit breaker. Thesublevels of Crypto were now as dark as the deepest night. He stooda moment enjoying the blackness. The water poured down from above.It was a midnight storm. Strathmore tilted his head back and letthe warm droplets wash away his guilt. *I'm a survivor.*He knelt and washed the last of Chartrukian's flesh from hishands.

His dreams for Digital Fortress had failed. He could acceptthat. Susan was

all that mattered now. For the first time indecades, he truly understood that there was more to life thancountry and honor. *I sacrificed the best years of my life forcountry and honor. But what about love?* He had deprivedhimself for far too long. *And for what?* To watch some youngprofessor steal away his dreams? Strathmore had nurtured Susan. Hehad protected her. He had *earned* her. And now, at last, hewould have her. Susan would seek shelter in his arms when there wasnowhere else to turn. She would come to him helpless, wounded byloss, and in time, he would show her that love heals all.

Honor. Country. Love. David Becker was about to die forall three.

CHAPTER 103

The Commander rose through the trapdoor like Lazarus back fromthe dead. Despite his soggy clothes, his step was light. He strodetoward Node 3—toward Susan. Toward his future.

The Crypto floor was again bathed in light. Freon was flowingdownward through the smoldering TRANSLTR like oxygenated blood.Strathmore knew it would take a few minutes for the coolant toreach the bottom of the hull and prevent the lowest processors fromigniting, but he was certain he'd acted in time. He exhaled invictory, never suspecting the truth—that it was already toolate.

I'm a survivor, he thought. Ignoring the gaping holein the Node 3 wall, he strode to the electronic doors. They hissedopen. He stepped inside.

Susan was standing before him, damp and tousled in his blazer.She looked like a freshman coed who'd been caught in the rain.He felt like the senior who'd lent her his varsity sweater.For the first time in years, he felt young. His dream was comingtrue.

But as Strathmore moved closer, he felt he was staring into theeyes of a woman he did not recognize. Her gaze was like ice. Thesoftness was gone. Susan Fletcher stood rigid, like an immovablestatue. The only perceptible motion were the tears welling in hereyes.

"Susan?"

A single tear rolled down her quivering cheek.

"What is it?" the commander pleaded. The puddle of blood beneath Hale's body had spread acrossthe carpet like an oil spill. Strathmore glanced uneasily at thecorpse, then back at Susan. *Could she possibly know?* Therewas no way. Strathmore knew he had covered every base.

"Susan?" he said, stepping closer. "What isit?"

Susan did not move.

"Are you worried about David?"

There was a slight quiver in her upper lip.

Strathmore stepped closer. He was going to reach for her, but hehesitated. The sound of David's name had apparently crackedthe dam of grief. Slowly at first—a quiver, a tremble. Andthen a thundering wave of misery seemed to course through herveins. Barely able to control her shuddering lips, Susan opened hermouth to speak. Nothing came.

Without ever breaking the icy gaze she'd locked onStrathmore, she took her hand from the pocket of his blazer. In herhand was an object. She held it out, shaking.

Strathmore half expected to look down and see the Berettaleveled at his gut. But the gun was still on the floor, proppedsafely in Hale's hand. The object Susan was holding wassmaller. Strathmore stared down at it, and an instant later, heunderstood.

As Strathmore stared, reality warped, and time slowed to acrawl. He could hear the sound of his own heart. The man who hadtriumphed over giants for so many years had been outdone in aninstant. Slain by love—by his own foolishness. In a simple actof chivalry, he had given Susan his jacket. And with it, hisSkyPager.

Now it was Strathmore who went rigid. Susan's hand wasshaking. The pager fell at Hale's feet. With a look ofastonishment and betrayal that Strathmore would never forget, SusanFletcher raced past him out of Node 3.
The commander let her go. In slow motion, he bent and retrievedthe pager. There were no new messages—Susan had read them all.Strathmore scrolled desperately through the list.
SUBJECT: ENSEI TANKADO—TERMINATED
SUBJECT: PIERRE CLOUCHARDE—TERMINATED
SUBJECT: HANS HUBER—TERMINATED

SUBJECT: ROCÍO EVA GRANADA—TERMINATED .. . The list went on. Strathmore felt a wave of horror. *I canexplain!* She *will understand! Honor! Country!* But therewas one message he had not yet seen—one message he could neverexplain. Trembling, he scrolled to the final transmission.
SUBJECT: DAVID BECKER—TERMINATED Strathmore hung his head. His dream was over.

CHAPTER 104

Susan staggered out of Node 3.
SUBJECT: DAVID BECKER—TERMINATED
As if in a dream, she moved toward Crypto's main exit. GregHale's voice echoed in her mind: *Susan, Strathmore'sgoing to kill me! Susan, the commander's in love withyou!*

Susan reached the enormous circular portal and began stabbingdesperately at the keypad. The door did not move. She tried again,but the enormous slab refused to rotate. Susan let out a mutedscream—apparently the power outage had deleted the exit codes.She was still trapped.

Without warning, two arms closed around her from behind,grasping her half-numb body. The touch was familiar yet repulsive.It lacked the brute strength of Greg Hale, but there was adesperate roughness to it, an inner determination like steel.
Susan turned. The man restraining her was desolate, frightened.It was a face she had never seen.
"Susan," Strathmore begged, holding her. "I canexplain."
She tried to pull away.
The commander held fast.
Susan tried to scream, but she had no voice. She tried to run,but strong hands restrained her, pulling her backward.
"I love you," the voice was whispering."I've loved you forever."
Susan's stomach turned over and over.
"Stay with me."

Susan's mind whirled with grisly images—David'sbright-green eyes, slowly closing for the last time; GregHale's corpse seeping blood onto the carpet; PhilChartrukian's burned and broken on the generators.
"The pain will pass," the voice said."You'll love again."
Susan heard nothing.
"Stay with me," the voice pleaded. "I'llheal your wounds."
She struggled, helpless.
"I did it for us. We're made for each other. Susan, Ilove you." The words flowed as if he had waited a decade tospeak them. "I love you! *I love you!"*

In that instant, thirty yards away, as if rebuttingStrathmore's vile confession, TRANSLTR let out a savage,pitiless hiss. The sound was an

entirely new one—a distant,ominous sizzling that seemed to grow like a serpent in the depthsof the silo. The freon, it appeared, had not reached its mark intime.

The commander let go of Susan and turned toward the $2 billioncomputer. His eyes went wide with dread. “No!” He grabbedhis head. “No!”

The six-story rocket began to tremble. Strathmore staggered afaltering step toward the thundering hull. Then he fell to hisknees, a sinner before an angry god. It was no use. At the base ofthe silo, TRANSLTR’s titanium-strontium processors had justignited.

CHAPTER 105

A fireball racing upward through three million silicon chipsmakes a unique sound. The crackling of a forest fire, the howlingof a tornado, the steaming gush of a geyser . . . all trappedwithin a reverberant hull. It was the devil's breath, pouringthrough a sealed cavern, looking for escape. Strathmore knelttransfixed by the horrific noise rising toward them. Theworld's most expensive computer was about to become aneight-story inferno.

* * *

In slow motion, Strathmore turned back toward Susan. She stoodparalyzed beside the Crypto door. Strathmore stared at hertear-streaked face. She seemed to shimmer in the fluorescent light.*She's an angel*, he thought. He searched her eyes forheaven, but all he could see was death. It was the death of trust.Love and honor were gone. The fantasy that had kept him going allthese years was dead. He would never have Susan Fletcher. Never.The sudden emptiness that gripped him was overwhelming.

Susan gazed vaguely toward TRANSLTR. She knew that trappedwithin the ceramic shell, a fireball was racing toward them. Shesensed it rising faster and faster, feeding on the oxygen releasedby the burning chips. In moments the Crypto dome would be a blazinginferno.

Susan's mind told her to run, but David's dead weightpressed down all around her. She thought she heard his voicecalling to her, telling her to escape, but there was nowhere to go.Crypto was a sealed tomb. It didn't matter; the thought ofdeath did not frighten her. Death would stop the pain. She would bewith David.

The Crypto floor began to tremble, as if below it an angry seamonster were rising out of the depths. David's voice seemed tobe calling. *Run, Susan! Run!*

Strathmore was moving toward her now, his face a distant memory.His cool gray eyes were lifeless. The patriot who had lived in hermind a hero had died—a murderer. His arms were suddenly aroundher again, clutching desperately. He kissed her cheeks."Forgive me," he begged. Susan tried to pull away, butStrathmore held on.

TRANSLTR began vibrating like a missile preparing to launch. TheCrypto floor began to shake. Strathmore held tighter. "Holdme, Susan. I need you."

A violent surge of fury filled Susan's limbs. David'svoice called out again. *I love you! Escape!* In a suddenburst of energy, Susan tore free. The roar from

TRANSLTR becamedeafening. The fire was at the silo’s peak. TRANSLTR groaned,straining at its seams.

David’s voice seemed to lift Susan, guide her. She dashedacross the Crypto floor and started up Strathmore’s catwalkstairs. Behind her, TRANSLTR let out a deafening roar.

As the last of the silicon chips disintegrated, a tremendousupdraft of heat tore through the upper casing of the silo and sentshards of ceramic thirty feet into the air. Instantly theoxygen-rich air of Crypto rushed in to fill the enormousvacuum.

Susan reached the upper landing and grabbed the banister whenthe tremendous rush of wind ripped at her body. It spun her aroundin time to see the deputy director of operations, far below,staring up at her from beside TRANSLTR. There was a storm ragingall around him, and yet there was peace in his eyes. His lipsparted, and he mouthed his final word. “Susan.”

The air rushing into TRANSLTR ignited on contact. In a brilliantflash of light, Commander Trevor Strathmore passed from man, tosilhouette, to legend.

When the blast hit Susan, it blew her back fifteen feet intoStrathmore’s office. All she remembered was a searingheat.

CHAPTER 106

In the window of the Director’s conference room, high abovethe Crypto dome, three faces appeared, breathless. The explosionhad shaken the entire NSA complex. Leland Fontaine, ChadBrinkerhoff, and Midge Milken all stared out in silent horror.

Seventy feet below, the Crypto dome was blazing. Thepolycarbonate roof was still intact, but beneath the transparentshell, a fire raged. Black smoke swirled like fog inside thedome.

The three stared down without a word. The spectacle had an eeriegrandeur to it. Fontaine stood a long moment. He finally spoke, his voice faintbut unwavering. “Midge, get a crew down there . . .now.”

Across the suite, Fontaine’s phone began to ring. It was Jabba.

CHAPTER 107

Susan had no idea how much time had passed. A burning in herthroat pulled her to her senses. Disoriented, she studied hersurroundings. She was on a carpet behind a desk. The only light inthe room was a strange orange flickering. The air smelled ofburning plastic. The room she was standing in was not really a roomat all; it was a devastated shell. The curtains were on fire, andthe Plexiglas walls were smoldering.

Then she remembered it all.

David.

In a rising panic, she pulled herself to her feet. The air feltcaustic in her windpipe. She stumbled to the doorway looking for away out. As she crossed the threshold, her leg swung out over anabyss; she grabbed the door frame just in time. The catwalk haddisappeared. Fifty feet below was a twisted collapse of steamingmetal. Susan scanned the Crypto floor in horror. It was a sea offire. The melted remains of three million silicon chips had eruptedfrom TRANSLTR like lava. Thick, acrid smoke billowed upward. Susanknew the smell. Silicon smoke. Deadly poison.

Retreating into the remains of Strathmore's office, shebegan to feel faint. Her throat burned. The entire place was filledwith a fiery light. Crypto was dying. *So will I,* shethought.

For a moment, she considered the only possibleexit—Strathmore's elevator. But she knew it was useless;the electronics never would have survived the blast.

But as Susan made her way through the thickening smoke, sherecalled Hale's words. *The elevator runs on power from themain building! I've seen the schematics!* Susan knew thatwas true. She also knew the entire shaft was encased in reinforcedconcrete.

The fumes swirled all around her. She stumbled through the smoketoward the elevator door. But when she got there, she saw that theelevator's call button was dark. Susan jabbed fruitlessly atthe darkened panel, then she fell to her knees and pounded on thedoor.

She stopped almost instantly. Something was whirring behind thedoors. Startled, she looked up. It sounded like the carriage wasright there! Susan stabbed at the button again. Again, a whirringbehind the doors.

Suddenly she saw it.

The call button was not dead—it had just been covered withblack soot. It now

glowed faintly beneath her smudgedfingerprints.
There's power!

With a surge of hope, she punched at the button. Over and over,something behind the doors engaged. She could hear the ventilationfan in the elevator car. *The carriage is here! Why won'tthe damn doors open?*
Through the smoke she spied the tiny secondarykeypad—lettered buttons, A through Z. In a wave of despair,Susan remembered. The password.

The smoke was starting to curl in through the melted windowframes. Again she banged on the elevator doors. They refused toopen. *The password!* she thought. *Strathmore never told methe password!* Silicon smoke was now filling the office.Choking, Susan fell against the elevator in defeat. The ventilationfan was running just a few feet away. She lay there, dazed, gulpingfor air.

She closed her eyes, but again David's voice woke her. *Escape, Susan! Open the door! Escape!* She opened her eyesexpecting to see his face, those wild green eyes, that playfulsmile. But the letters A–Z came into focus. *The password .. .* Susan stared at the letters on the keypad. She could barelykeep them in focus. On the LED below the keypad, five empty spotsawaited entry. *A fivecharacter password,* she thought. Sheinstantly knew the odds: twenty-six to the fifth power; 11,881,376possible choices. At one guess every second, it would take nineteenweeks . . .
As Susan Fletcher lay choking on the floor beneath the keypad,the commander's pathetic voice came to her. He was calling toher again. *I love you Susan! I've always loved you! Susan!Susan! Susan . . .*
She knew he was dead, and yet his voice was relentless. Sheheard her name over and over.
Susan . . . Susan . . .
Then, in a moment of chilling clarity, she knew.
Trembling weakly, she reached up to the keypad and typed thepassword.
S . . . U . . . S . . . A . . . N An instant later, the doors slid open.

CHAPTER 108

Strathmore's elevator dropped fast. Inside the carriage,Susan sucked deep breaths of fresh air into her lungs. Dazed, shesteadied herself against the wall as the car slowed to a stop. Amoment later some gears clicked, and the conveyor began movingagain, this time horizontally. Susan felt the carriage accelerateas it began rumbling toward the main NSA complex. Finally itwhirred to a stop, and the doors opened.

Coughing, Susan Fletcher stumbled into a darkened cementcorridor. She found herself in a tunnel—low-ceilinged andnarrow. A double yellow line stretched out before her. The linedisappeared into an empty, dark hollow.

The Underground Highway . . .

She staggered toward the tunnel, holding the wall for guidance.Behind her, the elevator door slid shut. Once again Susan Fletcherwas plunged into darkness.

Silence.

Nothing except a faint humming in the walls.

A humming that grew louder.

Suddenly it was as if dawn were breaking. The blackness thinnedto a hazy gray. The walls of the tunnel began to take shape. All atonce, a small vehicle whipped around the corner, its headlightblinding her. Susan stumbled back against the wall and shielded hereyes. There was a gust of air, and the transport whipped past.

An instant later there was a deafening squeal of rubber oncement. The hum approached once again, this time in reverse.Seconds later the vehicle came to a stop beside her.

"Ms. Fletcher!" an astonished voice exclaimed.

Susan gazed at a vaguely familiar shape in the driver'sseat of an electric golf cart.

"Jesus." The man gasped. "Are you okay? Wethought you were dead!"

Susan stared blankly.

"Chad Brinkerhoff," he sputtered, studying theshellshocked cryptographer. "Directorial PA."

Susan could only manage a dazed whimper. "TRANSLTR . .." Brinkerhoff nodded. "Forget it. Get on!"

* * *

The beam of the golf cart's headlights whipped across thecement walls.

“There’s a virus in the main databank,”Brinkerhoff blurted.
“I know,” Susan heard herself whisper.
“We need you to help us.”
Susan was fighting back the tears. “Strathmore . . . he . ..”
“We know,” Brinkerhoff said. “He bypassedGauntlet.”
“Yes . . . and . . .” The words got stuck in herthroat. *He killed David!*
Brinkerhoff put a hand on her shoulder. “Almost there, Ms.Fletcher. Just hold on.”
* * *
The high-speed Kensington golf cart rounded a corner and skiddedto a stop. Beside them, branching off perpendicular to the tunnel,was a hallway, dimly lit by red floor lighting.
“Come on,” Brinkerhoff said, helping her out.

He guided her into the corridor. Susan drifted behind him in afog. The tiled passageway sloped downward at a steep incline. Susangrabbed the handrail and followed Brinkerhoff down. The air beganto grow cooler. They continued their descent.

As they dropped deeper into the earth, the tunnel narrowed. Fromsomewhere behind them came the echo of footsteps—a strong,purposeful gait. The footsteps grew louder. Both Brinkerhoff andSusan stopped and turned.
Striding toward them was an enormous black man. Susan had neverseen him before. As he approached, he fixed her with a penetratingstare.
“Who’s this?” he demanded.
“Susan Fletcher,” Brinkerhoff replied.
The enormous man arched his eyebrows. Even sooty and soaked,Susan Fletcher was more striking than he had imagined. “Andthe commander?” he demanded.
Brinkerhoff shook his head.
The man said nothing. He stared off a moment. Then he turnedback to Susan. “Leland Fontaine,” he said, offering herhis hand. “Glad you’re okay.”
Susan stared. She’d always known she’d meet thedirector someday, but this was not the introduction she’denvisioned.
“Come along, Ms. Fletcher,” Fontaine said, leading theway. “We’ll need all the help we can get.”
* * *

Looming in the reddish haze at the bottom of the tunnel, a steelwall blocked their way. Fontaine approached and typed an entry codeinto a recessed cipher box. He then placed his right hand against asmall glass panel. A strobe flashed.

A moment later the massivewall thundered left.
There was only one NSA chamber more sacred than Crypto, andSusan Fletcher sensed she was about to enter it.

CHAPTER 109

The command center for the NSA's main databank looked likea scaled-down NASA mission control. A dozen computer workstationsfaced the thirty-foot by forty-foot video wall at the far end ofthe room. On the screen, numbers and diagrams flashed in rapidsuccession, appearing and disappearing as if someone were channelsurfing. A handful of technicians raced wildly from station tostation trailing long sheets of printout paper and yellingcommands. It was chaos.

Susan stared at the dazzling facility. She vaguely rememberedthat 250 metric tons of earth had been excavated to create it. Thechamber was located 214 feet below ground, where it would betotally impervious to flux bombs and nuclear blasts.

On a raised workstation in the center of the room stood Jabba.He bellowed orders from his platform like a king to his subjects.Illuminated on the screen directly behind him was a message. Themessage was all too familiar to Susan. The billboard-size text hungominously over Jabba's head: ONLY THE TRUTH WILL SAVE YOU NOW
ENTER PASS-KEY _____
As if trapped in some surreal nightmare, Susan followed Fontainetoward the podium. Her world was a slow-motion blur.
Jabba saw them coming and wheeled like an enraged bull. "Ibuilt Gauntlet for a reason!"
"Gauntlet's gone," Fontaine replied evenly.
"Old news, Director," Jabba spat. "The shock waveknocked me on my ass! Where's Strathmore?"
"Commander Strathmore is dead."
"Poetic fucking justice."
"Cool it, Jabba," the director ordered. "Bring usup to speed. How bad is this virus?"

Jabba stared at the director a long moment, and then withoutwarning, he burst out laughing. "A *virus?"* Hisharsh guffaw resonated through the underground chamber. "Isthat what you think this is?"

Fontaine kept his cool. Jabba's insolence was way out ofline, but Fontaine knew this was not the time or place to handleit. Down here, Jabba outranked God himself. Computer problems had away of ignoring the normal chain of

command.
“It’s *not* a virus?” Brinkerhoff exclaimedhopefully.
Jabba snorted in disgust. “*Viruses* have replicationstrings, pretty boy! *This* doesn’t!”
Susan hovered nearby, unable to focus.
“Then what’s going on?” Fontaine demanded.“I thought we had a virus.”

Jabba sucked in a long breath and lowered his voice.“Viruses . . .” he said, wiping sweat from his face.“Viruses reproduce. They create clones. They’re vain andstupid—binary egomaniacs. They pump out babies faster thanrabbits. That’s their weakness—you can cross-breed theminto oblivion if you know what you’re doing. Unfortunately,this program has no ego, no need to reproduce. It’sclearheaded and focused. In fact, when it’s accomplished itsobjective here, it will probably commit digital suicide.”Jabba held out his arms reverently to the projected havoc on theenormous screen. “Ladies and gentlemen.” He sighed.“Meet the kamikaze of computer invaders . . . the *worm.”*

“Worm?” Brinkerhoff groaned. It seemed like amundane term to describe the insidious intruder. “Worm.” Jabba smoldered. “No complex structures,just instinct—eat, shit, crawl. That’s it. Simplicity.Deadly simplicity. It does what it’s programmed to do and thenchecks out.”
Fontaine eyed Jabba sternly. “And what is this wormprogrammed to do?”

“No clue,” Jabba replied. “Right now, it’sspreading out and attaching itself to all our classified data.After that, it could do anything. It might decide to delete all thefiles, or it might just decide to print smiley faces on certainWhite House transcripts.”
Fontaine’s voice remained cool and collected. “Can youstop it?”

Jabba let out a long sigh and faced the screen. “I have noidea. It all depends on how pissed off the author is.” Hepointed to the message on the wall. “Anybody want to tell mewhat the hell *that* means?”
ONLY THE TRUTH WILL SAVE YOU NOW
ENTER PASS-KEY _____
Jabba waited for a response and got none. “Looks likesomeone’s messing with us, Director. Blackmail. This is aransom note if I ever saw one.”
Susan’s voice was a whisper, empty and hollow.“It’s . . . Ensei Tankado.”
Jabba turned to her. He stared a moment, wide-eyed. *“Tankado?”*
Susan nodded weakly. “He wanted our confession . . . aboutTRANSLTR . . . but it cost him his—”
“Confession?” Brinkerhoff interrupted, lookingstunned. “Tankado wants us to confess we have TRANSLTR?I’d say it’s a bit late for *that!*”

Susan opened her mouth to speak, but Jabba took over.“Looks like Tankado’s got a kill-code,” he said,gazing up at the message on the screen.
Everyone turned.
“Kill code?” Brinkerhoff demanded.
Jabba nodded. “Yeah. A pass-key that stops the worm. Simplyput, if we admit we have TRANSLTR, Tankado gives us a kill-code. Wetype it in and save the databank. Welcome to digitalextortion.”
Fontaine stood like rock, unwavering. “How long have wegot?” “About an hour,” Jabba said. “Just time enough tocall a press conference and spill our guts.
“Recommendation,” Fontaine demanded. “What do youpropose we do?”
“A *recommendation?”* Jabba blurted in disbelief.“You want a recommendation? I’ll give you arecommendation! You quit fucking around, *that’s* whatyou do!”
“Easy,” the director warned.

“Director,” Jabba sputtered. “Right now, EnseiTankado *owns* this databank! Give him *whatever* hewants. If he wants the world to know about TRANSLTR, call CNN, anddrop your shorts. TRANSLTR’s a hole in the ground nowanyway —what the hell do *you* care?”
There was a silence. Fontaine seemed to be considering hisoptions. Susan began to speak, but Jabba beat her to it.
“What are you waiting for, Director! Get Tankado on thephone! Tell him you’ll play ball! We need that kill-code, orthis whole place is going down!”
Nobody moved.

“Are you all insane?” Jabba screamed. “CallTankado! Tell him we fold! Get me that kill-code! NOW!” Jabbawhipped out his cellular phone and switched it on. “Nevermind! Get me his number! I’ll call the little prick *myself!”*
“Don’t bother,” Susan said in a whisper.“Tankado’s dead.”
After a moment of confused astonishment, the implications hitJabba like a bullet to the gut. The huge Sys-Sec looked like he wasabout to crumble. *“Dead?* But then . . . that means . .. we can’t . . .”
“That means we’ll need a new plan,” Fontaine saidmatter-of-factly.
Jabba’s eyes were still glazed with shock when someone inthe back of the room began shouting wildly.
“Jabba! Jabba!”
It was Soshi Kuta, his head techie. She came running toward thepodium trailing a long printout. She looked terrified.

“Jabba!” She gasped. “The worm . . . I just foundout what it’s programmed to do!” Soshi thrust the paperinto Jabba’s hands. “I pulled this from thesystem-

activity probe! We isolated the worm's executecommands—have a look at the programming! Look what it'splanning to do!" Dazed, the chief Sys-Sec read the printout. Then he grabbed thehandrail for support.
"Oh, Jesus," Jabba gasped. "Tankado . . . you *bastard!"*

CHAPTER 110

Jabba stared blankly at the printout Soshi had just handed him.Pale, he wiped his forehead on his sleeve. “Director, we haveno choice. We’ve got to kill power to the databank.”
“Unacceptable,” Fontaine replied. “The resultswould be devastating.”

Jabba knew the director was right. There were over threethousand ISDN connections tying into the NSA databank from all overthe world. Every day military commanders accessed up-to-theinstantsatellite photos of enemy movement. Lockheed engineers downloadedcompartmentalized blueprints of new weaponry. Field operativesaccessed mission updates. The NSA databank was the backbone ofthousands of U.S. government operations. Shutting it down withoutwarning would cause life-and-death intelligence blackouts all overthe globe.
“I’m aware of the implications, sir,” Jabba said,“but we have no choice.”
“Explain yourself,” Fontaine ordered. He shot a quickglance at Susan standing beside him on the podium. She seemed milesaway.
Jabba took a deep breath and wiped his brow again. From the lookon his face, it was clear to the group on the podium that they werenot going to like what he had to say.
“This worm,” Jabba began. “This worm is not anordinary degenerative cycle. It’s a *selective* cycle. Inother words, it’s a worm with *taste.”*
Brinkerhoff opened his mouth to speak, but Fontaine waved himoff.
“Most destructive applications wipe a databank clean,”Jabba continued, “but this one is more complex. It deletesonly those files that fall within certain parameters.”
“You mean it won’t attack the *whole*databank?” Brinkerhoff asked hopefully. “That’s *good,* right?” “No!” Jabba exploded. “It’s bad! It’s*very* fucking *bad!”*
“Cool it!” Fontaine ordered. “What parameters isthis worm looking for? Military? Covert ops?”

Jabba shook his head. He eyed Susan, who was still distant, andthen Jabba’s eyes rose to meet the director’s. “Sir,as you know, anyone who wants to tie into this databank from theoutside has to pass a series of security gates before they’readmitted.”

Fontaine nodded. The databank’s access hierarchies werebrilliantly conceived; authorized personnel could dial in via theInternet and World Wide

Web. Depending on their authorizationsequence, they were permitted access to their own compartmentalizedzones.

"Because we're tied to the global Internet,"Jabba explained, "hackers, foreign governments, and EFF sharkscircle this databank twenty-four hours a day and try to breakin."

"Yes," Fontaine said, "and twenty-four hours aday, our security filters keep them out. What's yourpoint?"

Jabba gazed down at the printout. "My point is this.Tankado's worm is not targeting our *data."* Hecleared his throat. "It's targeting our *securityfilters."*

Fontaine blanched. Apparently he understood theimplications—this worm was targeting the filters that kept theNSA databank confidential. Without filters, all of the informationin the databank would become accessible to everyone on theoutside.

"We need to shut down," Jabba repeated. "In aboutan hour, every third grader with a modem is going to have top U.S.security clearance."

Fontaine stood a long moment without saying a word.

Jabba waited impatiently and finally turned to Soshi."Soshi! VR! NOW!"

Soshi dashed off.

Jabba relied on VR often. In most computer circles, VR meant"virtual reality," but at the NSA it meant *vis-rep*—visual representation. In a world full oftechnicians and politicians all having different levels oftechnical understanding, a graphic representation was often theonly way to make a point; a single plummeting graph usually arousedten times the reaction inspired by volumes of spreadsheets. Jabbaknew a VR of the current crisis would make its point instantly.

"VR!" Soshi yelled from a terminal at the back of theroom.

A computer-generated diagram flashed to life on the wall beforethem. Susan gazed up absently, detached from the madness aroundher. Everyone in the room followed Jabba's gaze to thescreen. The diagram before them resembled a bull's-eye. In thecenter was a red circle marked data. Around the center were fiveconcentric circles of differing thickness and color. The outermostcircle was faded, almost transparent.

"We've got a five-tier level of defense," Jabbaexplained. "A primary Bastion Host, two sets of packet filtersfor FTP and X-eleven, a tunnel block, and finally a PEM-basedauthorization window right off the Truffle project. The outsideshield that's disappearing represents the exposed host.It's practically gone. Within the hour, all five shields willfollow. After that, the world pours in. Every byte of NSA databecomes public domain."

Fontaine studied the VR, his eyes smoldering.

Brinkerhoff let out a weak whimper. “This worm can open ourdatabank to the world?”
“Child’s play for Tankado,” Jabba snapped.“Gauntlet was our fail-safe. Strathmore blew it.”
“It’s an act of war,” Fontaine whispered, an edgein his voice.
Jabba shook his head. “I really doubt Tankado ever meantfor it to go this far. I suspect he intended to be around to stopit.”
Fontaine gazed up at the screen and watched the first of thefive walls disappear entirely.
“Bastion Host is toast!” a technician yelled from theback of the room. “Second shield’s exposed!”
“We’ve got to start shutting down,” Jabba urged.“From the looks of the VR, we’ve got about fortyfiveminutes. Shutdown is a complex process.”

It was true. The NSA databank had been constructed in such a wayas to ensure it would never lose power—accidentally or ifattacked. Multiple fail-safes for phone and power were buried inreinforced steel canisters deep underground, and in addition to thefeeds from within the NSA complex, there were multiple backups offmain public grids. Shutting down involved a complex series ofconfirmations and protocols—significantly more complicatedthan the average nuclear submarine missile launch.
“We have time,” Jabba said, “if we hurry. Manualshutdown should take about thirty minutes.”
Fontaine continued staring up at the VR, apparently ponderinghis options.

“Director!” Jabba exploded. “When these firewallsfall, every user on the planet will be issued topsecurityclearance! And I’m talking *upper level!* Records ofcovert ops! Overseas agents! Names and locations of everyone in thefederal witness protection program! Launch code confirmations! Wemust shut down! Now!”
The director seemed unmoved. “There must be some otherway.”
“Yes,” Jabba spat, “there is! The kill-code! Butthe only guy who knows it happens to be dead!”
“How about brute force?” Brinkerhoff blurted.“Can we guess the kill-code?”
Jabba threw up his arms. “For Christ sake! Kill-codes arelike encryption keys—random! Impossible to guess! If you thinkyou can type 600 trillion entries in the next forty-five minutes,be my guest!”
“The kill-code’s in Spain,” Susan offeredweakly.
Everyone on the podium turned. It was the first thing she hadsaid in a long time.
Susan looked up, bleary-eyed. “Tankado gave it away when hedied.”

Everyone looked lost.
“The pass-key . . .” Susan shivered as she spoke.“Commander Strathmore sent someone to find it.”
“And?” Jabba demanded. “Did Strathmore’s man*find* it?” Susan tried to fight it, but the tears began to flow.“Yes,” she choked. “I think so.”

CHAPTER 111

An earsplitting yell cut through the control room. *“Sharks!”* It was Soshi.
Jabba spun toward the VR. Two thin lines had appeared outsidethe concentric circles. They looked like sperm trying to breach areluctant egg.

“Blood’s in the water, folks!” Jabba turned backto the director. “I need a decision. Either we start shuttingdown, or we’ll never make it. As soon as these two intruderssee the Bastion Host is down, they’ll send up a warcry.”
Fontaine did not respond. He was deep in thought. SusanFletcher’s news of the pass-key in Spain seemed promising tohim. He shot a glance toward Susan in the back of the room. Sheappeared to be in her own world, collapsed in a chair, her headburied in her hands. Fontaine was unsure exactly what had triggeredthe reaction, but whatever it was, he had no time for it now.
“I need a decision!” Jabba demanded.“Now!”
Fontaine looked up. He spoke calmly. “Okay, you’ve gotone. We are *not* shutting down. We’re going towait.”
Jabba’s jaw dropped. “*What?* Butthat’s—”
“A gamble,” Fontaine interrupted. “A gamble wejust might win.” He took Jabba’s cellular and punched afew keys. “Midge,” he said. “It’s LelandFontaine. Listen carefully. . . .”

Chapter 112

“You better know what the hell you’re doing,Director,” Jabba hissed. “We’re about to loseshut-down capability.”
Fontaine did not respond.
As if on cue, the door at the back of the control room opened,and Midge came dashing in. She arrived breathless at the podium.“Director! The switchboard is patching it through rightnow!”
Fontaine turned expectantly toward the screen on the front wall.Fifteen seconds later the screen crackled to life.

The image on screen was snowy and stilted at first, andgradually grew sharper. It was a QuickTime digitaltransmission—only five frames per second. The image revealedtwo men. One was pale with a buzz cut, the other a blondall-American. They were seated facing the camera like twonewscasters waiting to go on the air.
“What the hell is this?” Jabba demanded. “Sit tight,” Fontaine ordered.
The men appeared to be inside a van of some sort. Electroniccabling hung all around them. The audio connection crackled tolife. Suddenly there was background noise.
“Inbound audio,” a technician called from behind them.“Five seconds till two-way.”
“Who are they?” Brinkerhoff asked, uneasily.

“Eye in the sky,” Fontaine replied, gazing up at thetwo men he had sent to Spain. It had been a necessary precaution.Fontaine had believed in almost every aspect of Strathmore’splan—the regrettable but necessary removal of Ensei Tankado,rewriting Digital Fortress—it was all solid. But there was onething that made Fontaine nervous: the use of Hulohot. Hulohot wasskilled, but he was a mercenary. Was he trustworthy? Would he takethe pass-key for himself? Fontaine wanted Hulohot covered, just incase, and he had taken the requisite measures.

CHAPTER 113

“Absolutely not!” The man with the buzz cut yelledinto the camera. “We have orders! We report to Director LelandFontaine and Leland Fontaine only!”
Fontaine looked mildly amused. “You don’t know who Iam, do you?”
“Doesn’t matter, does it?” the blond firedhotly.
“Let me explain,” Fontaine interjected. “Let meexplain something right now.”
Seconds later, the two men were red-faced, spilling their gutsto the director of the National Security Agency.“D-director,” the blond stammered, “I’m AgentColiander. This is Agent Smith.”
“Fine,” Fontaine said. “Just brief us.”
* * *
At the back of the room, Susan Fletcher sat and fought thesuffocating loneliness that pressed down around her. Eyes closed,and ears ringing, she wept. Her body had gone numb. The mayhem inthe control room faded to a dull murmur. The gathering on the podium listened, restless, as Agent Smithbegan his briefing.
“On your orders, Director,” Smith began,“we’ve been here in Seville for two days, trailing Mr.Ensei Tankado.”
“Tell me about the kill,” Fontaine saidimpatiently.

Smith nodded. “We observed from inside the van at aboutfifty meters. The kill was smooth. Hulohot was obviously a pro. Butafterward his directive went awry. Company arrived. Hulohot nevergot the item.”
Fontaine nodded. The agents had contacted him in South Americawith news that something had gone wrong, so Fontaine had cut histrip short.
Coliander took over. “We stayed with Hulohot as youordered. But he never made a move for the morgue. Instead, hepicked up the trail of some other guy. Looked private. Coat andtie.”
“Private?” Fontaine mused. It sounded like aStrathmore play—wisely keeping the NSA out of it.
“FTP filters failing!” a technician called out.
“We need the item,” Fontaine pressed. “Where isHulohot now?”
Smith looked over his shoulder. “Well . . . he’s withus, sir.”
Fontaine exhaled. “Where?” It was the best newshe’d heard all day.

Smith reached toward the lens to make an adjustment. The cameraswept across the inside of the van to reveal two limp bodiespropped against the back

wall. Both were motionless. One was alarge man with twisted wire-rim glasses. The other was young with ashock of dark hair and a bloody shirt.
“Hulohot’s the one on the left,” Smithoffered.
“Hulohot’s dead?” the director demanded.
“Yes, sir.”
Fontaine knew there would be time for explanations later. Heglanced up at the thinning shields. “Agent Smith,” hesaid slowly and clearly. “The item. I need it.”
Smith looked sheepish. “Sir, we still have no idea *what* the item is. We’re on a need-to-know.”

CHAPTER 114

“Then look again!” Fontaine declared.
The director watched in dismay as the stilted image of theagents searched the two limp bodies in the van for a list of randomnumbers and letters.
Jabba was pale. “Oh my God, they can’t find it.We’re dead!”
“Losing FTP filters!” a voice yelled. “Thirdshield’s exposed!” There was a new flurry ofactivity.

On the front screen, the agent with the buzz cut held out hisarms in defeat. “Sir, the pass-key isn’t here. We’vesearched both men. Pockets. Clothing. Wallets. No sign at all.Hulohot was wearing a Monocle computer, and we’ve checked thattoo. It doesn’t look like he ever transmitted anythingremotely resembling random characters—only a list ofkills.”
“Dammit!” Fontaine seethed, suddenly losing hiscool. “It’s got to be there! Keep looking!”

Jabba had apparently seen enough—Fontaine had gambled andlost. Jabba took over. The huge SysSec descended from his pulpitlike a storm off a mountain. He swept through his army ofprogrammers calling out commands. “Access auxiliary kills!Start shutting it down! Do it now!”
“We’ll never make it!” Soshi yelled. “Weneed a half hour! By the time we shut down, it will be toolate!”
Jabba opened his mouth to reply, but he was cut short by ascream of agony from the back of the room.

Everyone turned. Like an apparition, Susan Fletcher rose fromher crouched position in the rear of the chamber. Her face waswhite, her eyes transfixed on the freeze-frame of David Becker,motionless and bloody, propped up on the floor of the van.
“You killed him!” she screamed. *“You killedhim!”* She stumbled toward the image and reached out.“David . . .”
Everyone looked up in confusion. Susan advanced, still calling,her eyes never leaving the projection of David’s body.“David.” She gasped, staggering forward. “Oh, David. . . how could they—”
Fontaine seemed lost. “You know this man?”
Susan swayed unsteadily as she passed the podium. She stopped afew feet in front of the enormous projection and stared up,bewildered and numb, calling over and over to the man sheloved.

CHAPTER 115

The emptiness in David Becker's mind was absolute. I amdead. And yet there was a sound. A distant voice . . .
"David."

There was a dizzying burning beneath his arm. His blood wasfilled with fire. *My body is not my own.* And yet there was avoice, calling to him. It was thin, distant. But it was part ofhim. There were other voices too—unfamiliar, unimportant.Calling out. He fought to block them out. There was only one voicethat mattered. It faded in and out.
"David . . . I'm sorry . . ."
There was a mottled light. Faint at first, a single slit ofgrayness. Growing. Becker tried to move. Pain. He tried to speak.Silence. The voice kept calling.

Someone was near him, lifting him. Becker moved toward thevoice. Or was he being moved? It was calling. He gazed absently atthe illuminated image. He could see her on a small screen. It was awoman, staring up at him from another world. *Is she watching medie?*
"David . . ."
The voice was familiar. She was an angel. She had come for him.The angel spoke. "David, I love you."
Suddenly he knew.

* * * Susan reached out toward the screen, crying, laughing, lost in atorrent of emotions. She wiped fiercely at her tears. "David,I—I thought . . ."
Field Agent Smith eased David Becker into the seat facing themonitor. "He's a little woozy, ma'am. Give him asecond."
"B-but," Susan was stammering, "I saw atransmission. It said . . ."
Smith nodded. "We saw it too. Hulohot counted his chickensa little early."
"But the blood . . ."
"Flesh wound," Smith replied. "We slapped a gauzeon it."
Susan couldn't speak.
Agent Coliander piped in from off camera. "We hit him withthe new J23—long-acting stun gun. Probably hurt like hell, butwe got him off the street."
"Don't worry, ma'am," Smith assured."He'll be fine."

David Becker stared at the TV monitor in front of him. He wasdisoriented, light-headed. The image on the screen was of aroom—a room filled with chaos. Susan was there. She wasstanding on an open patch of floor, gazing up

at him.
She was crying and laughing. “David. Thank God! I thought Ihad lost you!”
He rubbed his temple. He moved in front of the screen and pulledthe gooseneck microphone toward his mouth. “Susan?”
Susan gazed up in wonder. David’s rugged features nowfilled the entire wall before her. His voice boomed.
“Susan, I need to ask you something.” The resonanceand volume of Becker’s voice seemed to momentarily suspend theaction in the databank. Everyone stopped midstride and turned.
“Susan Fletcher,” the voice resonated, “will youmarry me?”

A hush spread across the room. A clipboard clattered to thefloor along with a mug of pencils. No one bent to pick them up.There was only the faint hum of the terminal fans and the sound ofDavid Becker’s steady breathing in his microphone.
“D-David . . .” Susan stammered, unaware thatthirty-seven people stood riveted behind her. “You alreadyasked me, remember? Five months ago. I said yes.”
“I know.” He smiled. “But this time”—heextended his left hand into the camera and displayed a golden bandon his fourth finger—“this time I have a ring.”

CHAPTER 116

“Read it, Mr. Becker!” Fontaine ordered.
Jabba sat sweating, hands poised over his keyboard.“Yes,” he said, “read the blessedinscription!”

Susan Fletcher stood with them, weak-kneed and aglow. Everyonein the room had stopped what they were doing and stared up at theenormous projection of David Becker. The professor twisted the ringin his fingers and studied the engraving.
“And read *carefully!”* Jabba commanded.“One typo, and we’re *screwed!”*

Fontaine gave Jabba a harsh look. If there was one thing thedirector of the NSA knew about, it was pressure situations;creating additional tension was never wise. “Relax, Mr.Becker. If we make a mistake, we’ll reenter the code till weget it right.”

“Bad advice, Mr. Becker,” Jabba snapped. “Get itright the first time. Kill-codes usually have a penaltyclause—to prevent trial-and-error guessing. Make an incorrectentry, and the cycle will probably accelerate. Make *two*incorrect entries, and it will lock us out permanently. Gameover.”
The director frowned and turned back to the screen. “Mr.Becker? My mistake. Read carefully—read *extremely*carefully.”
Becker nodded and studied the ring for a moment. Then he calmlybegan reciting the inscription. “Q . . . U . . . I . . . S . .. space. . . C. . .”
Jabba and Susan interrupted in unison. *“Space?”*Jabba stopped typing. “There’s a *space?”*
Becker shrugged, checking the ring. “Yeah. There’s abunch of them.”
“Am I missing something?” Fontaine demanded.“What are we waiting for?”
“Sir,” Susan said, apparently puzzled. “It’s. . . it’s just . . .”
“I agree,” Jabba said. “It’s strange.Passwords *never* have spaces.”
Brinkerhoff swallowed hard. “So, what are yousaying?”
“He’s saying,” Susan interjected, “that thismay not be a kill-code.”
Brinkerhoff cried out, “Of course it’s the kill-code!What else could it be? Why else would Tankado give it away? Who thehell inscribes a bunch of random letters on a ring?”
Fontaine silenced Brinkerhoff with a sharp glare.
“Ah . . . folks?” Becker interjected, appearinghesitant to get involved. “You keep mentioning *random*letters. I think I should let you know . . . the letters on

thisring *aren't* random."
Everyone on the podium blurted in unison. "What!"

Becker looked uneasy. "Sorry, but there are definitelywords here. I'll admit they're inscribed pretty closetogether; at first glance it appears random, but if you lookclosely you'll see the inscription is actually . . . well . .. it's *Latin."*
Jabba gaped. "You're shitting me!"
Becker shook his head. "No. It reads, *'Quiscustodiet ipsos custodes.'* It translates roughlyto—"
"Who will guard the guards!" Susan interrupted,finishing David's sentence.
Becker did a double-take. "Susan, I didn't know youcould—"
"It's from *Satires* of Juvenal," sheexclaimed. "Who will guard the guards? Who will guard the NSAwhile we guard the world? It was Tankado's favoritesaying!"
"So," Midge demanded, "is it the pass-key, ornot?"
"It *must* be the pass-key," Brinkerhoffdeclared.
Fontaine stood silent, apparently processing theinformation.
"I don't know if it's the key," Jabba said."It seems unlikely to me that Tankado would use a nonrandomconstruction."
"Just omit the spaces," Brinkerhoff cried, "andtype the damn code!" Fontaine turned to Susan. "What's *your* take,Ms. Fletcher?"

She thought a moment. She couldn't quite put her finger onit, but something didn't feel right. Susan knew Tankado wellenough to know he thrived on simplicity. His proofs and programmingwere always crystalline and absolute. The fact that the spacesneeded to be removed seemed odd. It was a minor detail, but it wasa flaw, definitely not *clean*—not what Susan would haveexpected as Ensei Tankado's crowning blow.
"It doesn't feel right," Susan finally said."I don't think it's the key."

Fontaine sucked in a long breath, his dark eyes probing hers."Ms. Fletcher, in your mind, if this is not the key, why wouldEnsei Tankado have given it away? If he knew we'd murderedhim—don't you assume he'd want to punish us bymaking the ring disappear?"
A new voice interrupted the dialogue. "Ah . . .Director?"

All eyes turned to the screen. It was Agent Coliander inSeville. He was leaning over Becker's shoulder and speakinginto the mic. "For whatever it's worth, I'm not sosure Mr. Tankado *knew* he was being murdered."
"I beg your pardon?" Fontaine demanded.
"Hulohot was a pro, sir. We saw the kill—only fiftymeters away. All evidence suggests Tankado was unaware."
"Evidence?" Brinkerhoff demanded. "*What*evidence? Tankado gave away this

ring. That's proofenough!"
"Agent Smith," Fontaine interrupted. "What makesyou think Ensei Tankado was unaware he was being killed?"

Smith cleared his throat. "Hulohot killed him with anNTB—a noninvasive trauma bullet. It's a rubber pod thatstrikes the chest and spreads out. Silent. Very clean. Mr. Tankadowould only have felt a sharp thump before going into cardiacarrest."
"A trauma bullet," Becker mused to himself. "Thatexplains the bruising."
"It's doubtful," Smith added, "that Tankadoassociated the sensation with a gunman."
"And yet he gave away his ring," Fontaine stated.
"True, sir. But he never looked for his assailant. A victim*always* looks for his assailant when he's been shot.It's instinct."
Fontaine puzzled. "And you're saying Tankadodidn't look for Hulohot?"
"No, sir. We have it on film if you'dlike—"
"X-eleven filter's going!" a technician yelled."The worm's halfway there!"
"Forget the film," Brinkerhoff declared. "Type inthe damn kill-code and finish this!"
Jabba sighed, suddenly the cool one. "Director, if we enterthe wrong code . . ."
"Yes," Susan interrupted, "if Tankado didn'tsuspect we killed him, we've got some questions toanswer."
"What's our time frame, Jabba?" Fontainedemanded.
Jabba looked up at the VR. "About twenty minutes. I suggestwe use the time wisely." Fontaine was silent a long moment. Then sighed heavily."All right. Run the film."

CHAPTER 117

“Transmitting video in ten seconds,” AgentSmith’s voice crackled. “We’re dropping every otherframe as well as audio—we’ll run as close to real time aspossible.”

Everyone on the podium stood silent, watching, waiting. Jabbatyped a few keys and rearranged the video wall. Tankado’smessage appeared on the far left:

ONLY THE TRUTH WILL SAVE YOU NOW

On the right of the wall was the static interior shot of the vanwith Becker and the two agents huddled around the camera. In thecenter, a fuzzy frame appeared. It dissolved into static and theninto a black and white image of a park.

“Transmitting,” Agent Smith announced. The shot looked like an old movie. It was stilted andjerky—a by-product of frame-dropping, a process that halvedthe amount of information sent and enabled faster transmission.

The shot panned out across an enormous concourse enclosed on oneend by a semicircular facade—the Seville Ayuntamiento. Therewere trees in the foreground. The park was empty.

“X-eleven’s are down!” a technician called out.“This bad boy’s hungry!”

Smith began to narrate. His commentary had the detachment of aseasoned agent. “This is shot from the van,” he said,“about fifty meters from the kill zone. Tankado is approachingfrom the right. Hulohot’s in the trees to the left.”

“We’ve got a time crunch here,” Fontaine pressed.“Let’s get to the meat of it.”

Agent Coliander touched a few buttons, and the frame speedincreased.

Everyone on the podium watched in anticipation as their formerassociate, Ensei Tankado, came into the frame. The acceleratedvideo made the whole image seem comic. Tankado shuffled jerkily outonto the concourse, apparently taking in the scenery. He shieldedhis eyes and gazed up at the spires of the huge facade.

“This is it,” Smith warned. “Hulohot’s apro. He took his first open shot.”

Smith was right. There was a flash of light from behind thetrees on the left of the screen. An instant later Tankado clutchedhis chest. He staggered momentarily. The camera zoomed in on him,unstable—in and out of focus.

As the footage rolled in high speed, Smith coldly continued hisnarration. “As you can see, Tankado is instantly in cardiacarrest.”

Susan felt ill watching the images. Tankado clutched at hischest with crippled

hands, a confused look of terror on hisface.
“You’ll notice,” Smith added, “his eyes arefocused downward, at himself. Not once does he lookaround.”
“And that’s important?” Jabba half stated, halfinquired.
“Very,” Smith said. “If Tankado suspected foulplay of any kind, he would instinctively search the area. But asyou can see, he does not.”

On the screen, Tankado dropped to his knees, still clutching hischest. He never once looked up. Ensei Tankado was a man alone,dying a private, natural death.
“It’s odd,” Smith said, puzzled. “Traumapods usually won’t kill this quickly. Sometimes, if thetarget’s big enough, they don’t kill at all.”
“Bad heart,” Fontaine said flatly.
Smith arched his eyebrows, impressed. “Fine choice ofweapon, then.”

Susan watched as Tankado toppled from his knees to his side andfinally onto his back. He lay, staring upward, grabbing at hischest. Suddenly the camera wheeled away from him back toward thegrove of trees. A man appeared. He was wearing wire-rim glasses andcarrying an oversize briefcase. As he approached the concourse andthe writhing Tankado, his fingers began tapping in a strange silentdance on a mechanism attached to his hand.

“He’s working his Monocle,” Smith announced.“Sending a message that Tankado is terminated.” Smithturned to Becker and chuckled. “Looks like Hulohot had a badhabit of transmitting kills before his victim actuallyexpired.”

Coliander sped the film up some more, and the camera followedHulohot as he began moving toward his victim. Suddenly an elderlyman rushed out of a nearby courtyard, ran over to Tankado, andknelt beside him. Hulohot slowed his approach. A moment later twomore people appeared from the courtyard—an obese man and ared-haired woman. They also came to Tankado’s side.
“Unfortunate choice of kill zone,” Smith said.“Hulohot thought he had the victim isolated.”
On the screen, Hulohot watched for a moment and then shrank backinto the trees, apparently to wait.
“Here comes the handoff,” Smith prompted. “Wedidn’t notice it the first time around.”

Susan gazed up at the sickening image on the screen. Tankado wasgasping for breath, apparently trying communicate something to theSamaritans kneeling beside him. Then, in desperation, he thrust hisleft hand above him, almost hitting the old man in the face. Heheld the crippled appendage outward before the old man’s eyes.The camera tightened on Tankado’s three deformed fingers, andon one of them, clearly glistening in the Spanish sun, was

thegolden ring. Tankado thrust it out again. The old man recoiled.Tankado turned to the woman. He held his three deformed fingersdirectly in front of her face, as if begging her to understand. Thering glinted in the sun. The woman looked away. Tankado, nowchoking, unable to make a sound, turned to the obese man and triedone last time.

The elderly man suddenly stood and dashed off, presumably to gethelp. Tankado seemed to be weakening, but he was still holding thering in the fat man's face. The fat man reached out and heldthe dying man's wrist, supporting it. Tankado seemed to gazeupward at his own fingers, at his own ring, and then to theman's eyes. As a final plea before death, Ensei Tankado gavethe man an almost imperceptible nod, as if to say *yes.*

Then Tankado fell limp.

"Jesus." Jabba moaned.

Suddenly the camera swept to where Hulohot had been hiding. Theassassin was gone. A police motorcycle appeared, tearing up AvenidaFirelli. The camera wheeled back to where Tankado was lying. Thewoman kneeling beside him apparently heard the police sirens; sheglanced around nervously and then began pulling at her obesecompanion, begging him to leave. The two hurried off.

The camera tightened on Tankado, his hands folded on hislifeless chest. The ring on his finger was gone.

CHAPTER 118

“It’s proof,” Fontaine said decidedly.“Tankado dumped the ring. He wanted it as far from himself aspossible—so we’d never find it.”
“But, Director,” Susan argued, “it doesn’tmake sense. If Tankado was unaware he’d been murdered, *why* would he give away the kill code?”
“I agree,” Jabba said. “The kid’s a rebel,but he’s a rebel with a conscience. Getting us to admit toTRANSLTR is one thing; revealing our classified databank isanother.”
Fontaine stared, disbelieving. “You think Tankado *wanted* to stop this worm? You think his dying thoughts were forthe poor NSA?”
“Tunnel-block corroding!” a technician yelled.“Full vulnerability in fifteen minutes, maximum!”

“I’ll tell you what,” the director declared,taking control. “In fifteen minutes, every Third World countryon the planet will learn how to build an intercontinental ballisticmissile. If someone in this room thinks he’s got a bettercandidate for a kill code than this ring, I’m all ears.”The director waited. No one spoke. He returned his gaze to Jabbaand locked eyes. “Tankado dumped that ring for a reason,Jabba. Whether he was trying to bury it, or whether he thought thefat guy would run to a pay phone and call us with the information,I really don’t care. But I’ve made the decision.We’re entering that quote. Now.”
Jabba took a long breath. He knew Fontaine was right—therewas no better option. They were running out of time. Jabba sat.“Okay . . . let’s do it.” He pulled himself to thekeyboard. “Mr. Becker? The inscription, please. Nice andeasy.”
David Becker read the inscription, and Jabba typed. When theywere done, they double-checked the spelling and omitted all thespaces. On the center panel of the view wall, near the top, werethe letters:
QUISCUSTODIETIPSOSCUSTODES
“I don’t like it,” Susan muttered softly.“It’s not clean.”
Jabba hesitated, hovering over the ENTER key.
“Do it,” Fontaine commanded. Jabba hit the key. Seconds later the whole room knew it was amistake.

CHAPTER 119

“It’s accelerating!” Soshi yelled from the backof the room. “It’s the wrong code!”
Everyone stood in silent horror.
On the screen before them was the error message:
ILLEGAL ENTRY. NUMERIC FIELD ONLY.
“Damn it!” Jabba screamed. “Numeric *only!*We’re looking for a goddamn number! We’re fucked! Thisring is shit!”
“Worm’s at double speed!” Soshi shouted.“Penalty round!”

On the center screen, right beneath the error message, the VRpainted a terrifying image. As the third firewall gave way, thehalf-dozen or so black lines representing marauding hackers surgedforward, advancing relentlessly toward the core. With each passingmoment, a new line appeared. Then another.
“They’re swarming!” Soshi yelled.
“Confirming overseas tie-ins!” cried anothertechnician. “Word’s out!”

Susan averted her gaze from the image of the collapsingfirewalls and turned to the side screen. The footage of EnseiTankado’s kill was on endless loop. It was the same everytime—Tankado clutching his chest, falling, and with a look ofdesperate panic, forcing his ring on a group of unsuspectingtourists. *It makes no sense,* she thought. *If hedidn’t know we’d killed him . . .* Susan drew a totalblank. It was too late. *We’ve missed something.*

On the VR, the number of hackers pounding at the gates haddoubled in the last few minutes. From now on, the number wouldincrease exponentially. Hackers, like hyenas, were one big family,always eager to spread the word of a new kill.
Leland Fontaine had apparently seen enough. “Shut itdown,” he declared. “Shut the damn thing down.”
Jabba stared straight ahead like the captain of a sinking ship.“Too late, sir. We’re going down.”

CHAPTER 120

The four-hundred-pound Sys-Sec stood motionless, hands restingatop his head in a freeze-frame of disbelief. He'd ordered apower shutdown, but it would be a good twenty minutes too late.Sharks with high-speed modems would be able to download staggeringquantities of classified information in that window.

Jabba was awakened from his nightmare by Soshi rushing to thepodium with a new printout. "I've found something,sir!" she said excitedly. "Orphans in the source! Alphagroupings. All over the place!"

Jabba was unmoved. "We're looking for a numeric,dammit! Not an alpha! The kill-code is a *number!"*

"But we've got orphans! Tankado's too good toleave orphans—especially this many!"

The term "orphans" referred to extra lines ofprogramming that didn't serve the program's objective inany way. They fed nothing, referred to nothing, led nowhere, andwere usually removed as part of the final debugging and compilingprocess.

Jabba took the printout and studied it.

Fontaine stood silent.

Susan peered over Jabba's shoulder at the printout."We're being attacked by a *rough draft* ofTankado's worm?"

"Polished or not," Jabba retorted, "it'skicking our ass."

"I don't buy it," Susan argued. "Tankado wasa perfectionist. You know that. There's no way he left bugs inhis program."

"There are lots of them!" Soshi cried. She grabbed theprintout from Jabba and pushed it in front of Susan."Look!"

Susan nodded. Sure enough, after every twenty or so lines ofprogramming, there were four freefloating characters. Susanscanned them.

PFEE

SESN

RETM

"Four-bit alpha groupings," she puzzled."They're definitely not part of theprogramming."

"Forget it," Jabba growled. "You're grabbingat straws."

"Maybe not," Susan said. "A lot of encryptionuses four-bit groupings. This

could be a code."
"Yeah." Jabba groaned. "It says—'Ha,ha. You're fucked.' " He looked up at the VR."In about nine minutes."
Susan ignored Jabba and locked in on Soshi. "How manyorphans are there?"
Soshi shrugged. She commandeered Jabba's terminal and typedall the groupings. When she was done, she pushed back from theterminal. The room looked up at the screen.
PFEE SESN RETM MFHA IRWE OOIG MEEN NRMA
ENET SHAS DCNS IIAA IEER BRNK FBLE LODI
Susan was the only one smiling. "Sure looks familiar,"she said. "Blocks of four—just like Enigma."
The director nodded. Enigma was history's most famouscode-writing machine—the Nazis' twelveton encryptionbeast. It had encrypted in blocks of four.
"Great." He moaned. "You wouldn't happen tohave one lying around, would you?"
"That's not the point!" Susan said, suddenlycoming to life. This was her specialty. "The point is thatthis is a code. Tankado left us a clue! He's taunting us,daring us to figure out the pass-key in time. He's layinghints just out of our reach!"
"Absurd," Jabba snapped. "Tankado gave us onlyone out—revealing TRANSLTR. That was it. That was our escape.We blew it."
"I have to agree with him," Fontaine said. "Idoubt there's any way Tankado would risk letting us off thehook by hinting at his kill-code."
Susan nodded vaguely, but she recalled how Tankado had giventhem NDAKOTA. She stared up at the letters wondering if he wereplaying another one of his games.
"Tunnel block half gone!" a technician called.
On the VR, the mass of black tie-in lines surged deeper into thetwo remaining shields.
David had been sitting quietly, watching the drama unfold on themonitor before them. "Susan?" he offered. "I have anidea. Is that text in sixteen groupings of four?"
"Oh, for Christ's sake," Jabba said under hisbreath. "Now everyone wants to play?"
Susan ignored Jabba and counted the groupings. "Yes.Sixteen."
"Take out the spaces," Becker said firmly.
"David," Susan replied, slightly embarrassed. "Idon't think you understand. The groupings of fourare—"
"Take out the spaces," he repeated.

Susan hesitated a moment and then nodded to Soshi. Soshi quicklyremoved the spaces. The result was no more enlightening.

PFEESENRETMMFHAIRWEOOIGMEENRMAENETSHASDCSIIAAUEERBR

Jabba exploded. “ENOUGH! Playtime’s over! Thisthing’s on double-speed! We’ve got about eight minuteshere! We’re looking for a *number*, not a bunch ofhalf-baked letters!”

“Four by sixteen,” David said calmly. “Do themath, Susan.”

Susan eyed David’s image on the screen. *Do the math?He’s terrible at math!* She knew David could memorize verbconjugations and vocabulary like a Xerox machine, but math? . ..

“Multiplication tables,” Becker said.

Multiplication tables, Susan wondered. *What is hetalking about?*

“Four by sixteen,” the professor repeated. “I hadto memorize multiplication tables in fourth grade.”

Susan pictured the standard grade school multiplication table.*Four by sixteen.*

“Sixty-four,” she said blankly.“So what?”

David leaned toward the camera. His face filled the frame.“Sixty-four letters . . .”

Susan nodded. “Yes, but they’re—” Susanfroze.

“Sixty-four letters,” David repeated. Susan gasped. “Oh my God! David, you’re agenius!”

CHAPTER 121

“Seven minutes!” a technician called out.
“Eight rows of eight!” Susan shouted, excited.
Soshi typed. Fontaine looked on silently. The second to lastshield was growing thin. “Sixty-four letters!” Susan was in control.“It’s a perfect square!”
“Perfect square?” Jabba demanded. “So *what?”*

Ten seconds later Soshi had rearranged the seemingly randomletters on the screen. They were now in eight rows of eight. Jabbastudied the letters and threw up his hands in despair. The newlayout was no more revealing than the original.

P F E E S E S N
R E T M P F H A
I R W E O O I G
M E E N N R M A
E N E T S H A S
D C N S I I A A
I E E R B R N K
F B L E L O D I

“Clear as shit.” Jabba groaned.
“Ms. Fletcher,” Fontaine demanded, “explainyourself.” All eyes turned to Susan.
Susan was staring up at the block of text. Gradually she begannodding, then broke into a wide smile. “David, I’ll bedamned!”
Everyone on the podium exchanged baffled looks.
David winked at the tiny image of Susan Fletcher on the screenbefore him. “Sixty-four letters. Julius Caesar strikesagain.”
Midge looked lost. “What are you talking about?” “Caesar box.” Susan beamed. “Read top to bottom.Tankado’s sending us a message.”

CHAPTER 122

“Six minutes!” a technician called out.
Susan shouted orders. “Retype top to bottom! Read down, notacross!”
Soshi furiously moved down the columns, retyping the text.
“Julius Caesar sent codes this way!” Susan blurted.“His letter count was always a perfect square!”
“Done!” Soshi yelled.
Everyone looked up at the newly arranged, single line of text onthe wall-screen.
“Still garbage,” Jabba scoffed in disgust. “Lookat it. It’s totally random bits of —” The wordslodged in his throat. His eyes widened to saucers. “Oh . . .oh my . . .”
Fontaine had seen it too. He arched his eyebrows, obviouslyimpressed.
Midge and Brinkerhoff both cooed in unison. “Holy . . .shit.”
The sixty-four letters now read:
PRIMEDIFFERENCEBETWEENELEMENTSRESPONSIBLEFORHIROSHIMA
“Put in the spaces,” Susan ordered. “We’vegot a puzzle to solve.”

CHAPTER 123

An ashen technician ran to the podium. “Tunnel block’sabout to go!”
Jabba turned to the VR onscreen. The attackers surged forward,only a whisker away from their assault on the fifth and final wall.The databank was running out of time.
Susan blocked out the chaos around her. She read Tankado’sbizarre message over and over.
PRIME DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ELEMENTS RESPONSIBLE FORHIROSHIMA AND NAGASAKI
“It’s not even a question!” Brinkerhoff cried.“How can it have an answer?”
“We need a number,” Jabba reminded. “Thekill-code is *numeric*.”
“Silence,” Fontaine said evenly. He turned andaddressed Susan. “Ms. Fletcher, you’ve gotten us thisfar. I need your best guess.”

Susan took a deep breath. “The kill-code entry fieldaccepts numerics *only*. My guess is that this is some sort ofclue as to the correct number. The text mentions Hiroshima andNagasaki—the two cities that were hit by atomic bombs. Maybethe kill-code is related to the number of casualties, the estimateddollars of damage . . .” She paused a moment, rereading theclue. “The word ‘difference’ seems important. Theprime *difference* between Nagasaki and Hiroshima. ApparentlyTankado felt the two incidents differed somehow.”

Fontaine’s expression did not change. Nonetheless, hope wasfading fast. It seemed the political backdrops surrounding the twomost devastating blasts in history needed to be analyzed, compared,and translated into some magic number . . . and all within the nextfive minutes.

CHAPTER 124

“Final shield under attack!”
On the VR, the PEM authorization programming was now beingconsumed. Black, penetrating lines engulfed the final protectiveshield and began forcing their way toward its core.

Prowling hackers were now appearing from all over the world. Thenumber was doubling almost every minute. Before long, anyone with acomputer—foreign spies, radicals, terrorists—would haveaccess to all of the U.S. government’s classifiedinformation.
As technicians tried vainly to sever power, the assembly on thepodium studied the message. Even David and the two NSA agents weretrying to crack the code from their van in Spain.
PRIME DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ELEMENTS RESPONSIBLE FORHIROSHIMA AND NAGASAKI
Soshi thought aloud. “The elements responsible forHiroshima and Nagasaki . . . Pearl Harbor? Hirohito’s refusalto . . .”
“We need a *number,”* Jabba repeated, “notpolitical theories. We’re talking *mathematics*—nothistory!”
Soshi fell silent.
“How about payloads?” Brinkerhoff offered.“Casualties? Dollars damage?”
“We’re looking for an *exact* figure,” Susanreminded. “Damage estimates vary.” She stared up at themessage. “The elements responsible . . .”
Three thousand miles away, David Becker’s eyes flew open.“Elements!” he declared. “We’re talking math,not history!”
All heads turned toward the satellite screen.
“Tankado’s playing word games!” Becker spouted.“The word ‘elements’ has multiplemeanings!”
“Spit it out, Mr. Becker,” Fontaine snapped.
“He’s talking about *chemical* elements—notsociopolitical ones!”
Becker’s announcement met blank looks.

“Elements!” he prompted. “The periodic table! *Chemical* elements! Didn’t any of you see the movie *FatMan and Little Boy*—about the Manhattan Project? The twoatomic bombs were different. They used differentfuel—different *elements!*”
Soshi clapped her hands. “Yes! He’s right! I readthat! The two bombs used

different fuels! One used uranium and oneused plutonium! Two *different* elements!”

A hush swept across the room.

“Uranium and plutonium!” Jabba exclaimed, suddenlyhopeful. “The clue asks for the *difference* between thetwo elements!” He spun to his army of workers. “Thedifference between uranium and plutonium! Who knows what itis?”

Blank stares all around.

“Come on!” Jabba said. “Didn’t you kids goto college? Somebody! Anybody! I need the difference betweenplutonium and uranium!”

No response.

Susan turned to Soshi. “I need access to the Web. Is therea browser here?”

Soshi nodded. “Netscape’s sweetest.” Susan grabbed her hand. “Come on. We’re goingsurfing.”

CHAPTER 125

“How much time?” Jabba demanded from the podium.
There was no response from the technicians in the back. Theystood riveted, staring up at the VR. The final shield was gettingdangerously thin.
Nearby, Susan and Soshi pored over the results of theirWebsearch. “Outlaw Labs?” Susan asked. “Who arethey?”
Soshi shrugged. “You want me to open it?”
“Damn right,” she said. “Six hundred forty-seventext references to uranium, plutonium, and atomic bombs. Soundslike our best bet.”
Soshi opened the link. A disclaimer appeared.
The information contained in this file is strictly foracademic use only. Any layperson attempting to construct any of thedevices described runs the risk of radiation poisoning and/orself-explosion.
“Self-explosion?” Soshi said. “Jesus.” “Search it,” Fontaine snapped over his shoulder.“Let’s see what we’ve got.”
Soshi plowed into the document. She scrolled past a recipe forurea nitrate, an explosive ten times more powerful than dynamite.The information rolled by like a recipe for butterscotchbrownies.
“Plutonium and uranium,” Jabba repeated.“Let’s focus.”
“Go back,” Susan ordered. “The document’stoo big. Find the table of contents.”
Soshi scrolled backward until she found it.
I. Mechanism of an Atomic Bomb
A) Altimeter
B) Air Pressure Detonator
C) Detonating Heads
D) Explosive Charges
E) Neutron Deflector
F) Uranium & Plutonium
G) Lead Shield
H) Fuses
II. Nuclear Fission/Nuclear Fusion
A) Fission (A-Bomb) & Fusion (H-Bomb)
B) U-235, U-238, and Plutonium
III. History of the Atomic Weapons
A) Development (The Manhattan Project)

B) Detonation
1) Hiroshima
2) Nagasaki 3) By-products of Atomic Detonations
4) Blast Zones
“Section two!” Susan cried. “Uranium andplutonium! Go!”

Everyone waited while Soshi found the right section. “Thisis it,” she said. “Hold on.” She quickly scanned thedata. “There’s a lot of information here. A whole chart.How do we know which difference we’re looking for? One occursnaturally, one is man-made. Plutonium was first discoveredby—”
“A *number,”* Jabba reminded. “We need a *number.”*

Susan reread Tankado’s message. *The prime differencebetween the elements . . . the difference between . . . we need anumber* . . . “Wait!” she said. “The word‘difference’ has multiple meanings. We need a *number*—so we’re talking *math.* It’sanother of Tankado’s word
games—‘difference’means *subtraction.”*
“Yes!” Becker agreed from the screen overhead.“Maybe the elements have different numbers of protons orsomething? If you subtract—”
“He’s right!” Jabba said, turning to Soshi.“Are there any *numbers* on that chart? Proton counts?Halflives? Anything we can subtract?”
“Three minutes!” a technician called.
“How about supercritical mass?” Soshi ventured.“It says the supercritical mass for plutonium is 35.2pounds.”
“Yes!” Jabba said. “Check uranium! What’sthe supercritical mass of uranium?”
Soshi searched. “Um . . . 110 pounds.”
“One hundred ten?” Jabba looked suddenly hopeful.“What’s 35.2 from 110?”
“Seventy-four point eight,” Susan snapped. “But Idon’t think—”
“Out of my way,” Jabba commanded, plowing toward thekeyboard. “That’s got to be the kill-code! The differencebetween their critical masses! Seventy-four point eight!”

“Hold on,” Susan said, peering over Soshi’sshoulder. “There’s more here. Atomic weights. Neutroncounts. Extraction techniques.” She skimmed the chart.“Uranium splits into barium and krypton; plutonium doessomething else. Uranium has 92 protons and 146 neutrons,but—” “We need the most *obvious* difference,” Midgechimed in. “The clue reads ‘the *primary* differencebetween the elements.’ ”
“Jesus Christ!” Jabba swore. “How do we know whatTankado considered the *primary* difference?”
David interrupted. “Actually, the clue reads *prime*,not *primary.”*
The word hit Susan right between the eyes. *“Prime!”* she exclaimed. *“Prime!”*

Shespun to Jabba. “The kill-code is a *prime* number! Thinkabout it! It makes perfect sense!”

Jabba instantly knew Susan was right. Ensei Tankado had builthis career on prime numbers. Primes were the fundamental buildingblocks of all encryption algorithms—unique values that had nofactors other than one and themselves. Primes worked well in codewriting because they were impossible for computers to guess usingtypical number-tree factoring.

Soshi jumped in. “Yes! It’s perfect! Primes areessential to Japanese culture! Haiku uses primes. *Three*lines and syllable counts of *five, seven, five.* All primes.The temples of Kyoto all have—”

“Enough!” Jabba said. “Even if thekill-code *is* a prime, so what! There are endlesspossibilities!”

Susan knew Jabba was right. Because the number line wasinfinite, one could always look a little farther and find anotherprime number. Between zero and a million, there were over 70,000choices. It all depended on how large a prime Tankado decided touse. The bigger it was, the harder it was to guess.

“It’ll be huge.” Jabba groaned. “Whateverprime Tankado chose is sure to be a monster.”

A call went up from the rear of the room. *“Two-minutewarning!”*

Jabba gazed up at the VR in defeat. The final shield wasstarting to crumble. Technicians were rushing everywhere.

Something in Susan told her they were close. “We can dothis!” she declared, taking control. “Of all thedifferences between uranium and plutonium, I bet only one can berepresented as a *prime* number! That’s our final clue.The number we’re looking for is prime!”

Jabba eyed the uranium/plutonium chart on the monitor and threwup his arms. “There must be a hundred entries here!There’s no way we can subtract them all and check forprimes.”

“A lot of the entries are *nonnumeric,”* Susanencouraged. “We can ignore them. Uranium’s natural,plutonium’s man-made. Uranium uses a gun barrel detonator,plutonium uses implosion. They’re not numbers, so they’reirrelevant!”

“Do it,” Fontaine ordered. On the VR, the final wallwas eggshell thin. Jabba mopped his brow. “All right, here goes nothing. Startsubtracting. I’ll take the top quarter. Susan, you’ve gotthe middle. Everybody else split up the rest. We’re lookingfor a prime difference.”

Within seconds, it was clear they’d never make it. Thenumbers were enormous, and in many cases the units didn’tmatch up.

“It’s apples and goddamn oranges,” Jabba said.“We’ve got gamma rays against

electromagnetic pulse.Fissionable against unfissionable. Some is pure. Some ispercentage. It's a mess!"
"It's got to be here," Susan said firmly."We've got to think. There's some difference betweenplutonium and uranium that we're missing! Somethingsimple!"
"Ah . . . guys?" Soshi said. She'd created asecond document window and was perusing the rest of the Outlaw Labsdocument.
"What is it?" Fontaine demanded. "Findsomething?"
"Um, sort of." She sounded uneasy. "You know howI told you the Nagasaki bomb was a plutonium bomb?"
"Yeah," they all replied in unison.
"Well . . ." Soshi took a deep breath. "Lookslike I made a mistake."
"What!" Jabba choked. "We've been lookingfor the wrong thing?"
Soshi pointed to the screen. They huddled around and read thetext:
. . . the common misconception that the Nagasaki bomb was aplutonium bomb. In fact, the device employed uranium, like itssister bomb in Hiroshima.
* * *
"But—" Susan gasped. "If both elements wereuranium, how are we supposed to find the difference between thetwo?"
"Maybe Tankado made a mistake," Fontaine ventured."Maybe he didn't know the bombs were the same."
"No." Susan sighed. "He was a cripple because ofthose bombs. He'd know the facts cold."

CHAPTER 126

“One minute!”
Jabba eyed the VR. “PEM authorization’s going fast.Last line of defense. And there’s a crowd at thedoor.”
“Focus!” Fontaine commanded.
Soshi sat in front of the Web browser and read aloud.
. . . Nagasaki bomb did not use plutonium but rather anartificially manufactured, neutron-saturated isotope of uranium238.”
“Damn!” Brinkerhoff swore. “Both bombs useduranium. The elements responsible for Hiroshima and Nagasaki wereboth uranium. There *is* no difference!”
“We’re dead,” Midge moaned.
“Wait,” Susan said. “Read that last partagain!”
Soshi repeated the text. “. . . artificially manufactured,neutron-saturated isotope of uranium 238.”
“238?” Susan exclaimed. “Didn’t we just seesomething that said Hiroshima’s bomb used some other isotopeof uranium?”
They all exchanged puzzled glances. Soshi frantically scrolledbackward and found the spot. “*Yes!* It says here thatthe Hiroshima bomb used a different isotope of uranium!”
Midge gasped in amazement. “They’re bothuranium—but they’re different kinds!”
“Both uranium?” Jabba muscled in and stared at theterminal. “Apples and apples! Perfect!”
“How are the two isotopes different?” Fontainedemanded. “It’s got to be something basic.” Soshi scrolled through the document. “Hold on . . . looking. . . okay . . .”
“Forty-five seconds!” a voice called out.
Susan looked up. The final shield was almost invisible now.
“Here it is!” Soshi exclaimed.
“Read it!” Jabba was sweating. “What’s thedifference! There must be some difference between thetwo!”
“Yes!” Soshi pointed to her monitor.“Look!”
They all read the text:

> . . . two bombs employed two different fuels . . . preciselyidentical chemical

characteristics. No ordinary chemical extractioncan separate the two isotopes. They are, with the exception ofminute differences in weight, perfectly identical.
“Atomic weight!” Jabba said, excitedly.“That’s it! The only difference is their *weights!*That’s the key! Give me their weights! We’ll subtractthem!”
“Hold on,” Soshi said, scrolling ahead. “Almostthere! *Yes!”* Everyone scanned the text.
. . . difference in weight very slight . . .
. . . gaseous diffusion to separate them . . .
. . . 10,032498X10ˆ134 as compared to19,39484X10ˆ23.**
“There they are!” Jabba screamed. “That’sit! Those are the weights!”
“Thirty seconds!”
“Go,” Fontaine whispered. “Subtract them.Quickly.” Jabba palmed his calculator and started entering numbers.
“What’s the asterisk?” Susan demanded.“There’s an asterisk after the figures!”
Jabba ignored her. He was already working his calculator keysfuriously.
“Careful!” Soshi urged. “We need an *exact*figure.”
“The asterisk,” Susan repeated. “There’s afootnote.”
Soshi clicked to the bottom of the paragraph.
Susan read the asterisked footnote. She went white. “Oh . .. dear God.”
Jabba looked up. “What?”
They all leaned in, and there was a communal sigh of defeat. Thetiny footnote read: **12% margin of error. Published figures vary from lab tolab.

CHAPTER 127

There was a sudden and reverent silence among the group on thepodium. It was as if they were watching an eclipse or volcaniceruption—an incredible chain of events over which they had nocontrol. Time seemed to slow to a crawl.

"We're losing it!" a technician cried."Tie-ins! All lines!"

On the far-left screen, David and Agents Smith and Colianderstared blankly into their camera. On the VR, the final fire wallwas only a sliver. A mass of blackness surrounded it, hundreds oflines waiting to tie in. To the right of that was Tankado. Thestilted clips of his final moments ran by in an endless loop. Thelook of desperation—fingers stretched outward, the ringglistening in the sun.

Susan watched the clip as it went in and out of focus. Shestared at Tankado's eyes—they seemed filled with regret.*He never wanted it to go this far,* she told herself. *Hewanted to save us.* And yet, over and over, Tankado held hisfingers outward, forcing the ring in front of people's eyes.He was trying to speak but could not. He just kept thrusting hisfingers forward.

In Seville, Becker's mind still turned it over and over. Hemumbled to himself, "What did they say those two isotopeswere? U238 and U . . .?" He sighed heavily—it didn'tmatter. He was a language teacher, not a physicist.

"Incoming lines preparing to authenticate!"

"Jesus!" Jabba bellowed in frustration. "How dothe damn isotopes *differ?* Nobody knows how the hellthey're different?!" There was no response. The room fullof technicians stood helplessly watching the VR. Jabba spun back tothe monitor and threw up his arms. "Where's a nuclearfucking physicist when you need one!"

* * *

Susan stared up at the QuickTime clip on the wall screen andknew it was over. In slow motion, she watched Tankado dying overand over. He was trying to speak, choking on his words, holding outhis deformed hand . . . trying to communicate something. *He wastrying to save the databank,* Susan told herself. *Butwe'll never know how.*

"Company at the door!"

Jabba stared at the screen. "Here we go!" Sweat poureddown his face.

On the center screen, the final wisp of the last firewall hadall but

disappeared. The black mass of lines surrounding the corewas opaque and pulsating. Midge turned away. Fontaine stood rigid,eyes front. Brinkerhoff looked like he was about to get sick.

"Ten seconds!"

Susan's eyes never left Tankado's image. Thedesperation. The regret. His hand reached out, over and over, ringglistening, deformed fingers arched crookedly in stranger'sfaces. *He's telling them something. What is it?*

On the screen overhead, David looked deep in thought."Difference," he kept muttering to himself."Difference between U238 and U235. It's got to besomething simple."

A technician began the countdown. "*Five! Four!Three!"*

The word made it to Spain in just under a tenth of a second. *Three . . . three.*

It was as if David Becker had been hit by the stun gun all overagain. His world slowed to stop. *Three . . . three . . . three.238 minus 235! The difference is* three! In slow motion, hereached for the microphone . . .

At that very instant, Susan was staring at Tankado'soutstretched hand. Suddenly, she saw past the ring . . . past theengraved gold to the flesh beneath . . . to his fingers. *Three* fingers. It was not the ring at all. It was the flesh.Tankado was not telling them, he was showing them. He was tellinghis secret, revealing the kill-code—begging someone tounderstand . . . praying his secret would find its way to the NSAin time.

"Three," Susan whispered, stunned.

"Three!" Becker yelled from Spain.

But in the chaos, no one seemed to hear.

"We're down!" a technician yelled.

The VR began flashing wildly as the core succumbed to a deluge.Sirens erupted overhead.

"Outbound data!"

"High-speed tie-ins in all sectors!"

Susan moved as if through a dream. She spun toward Jabba'skeyboard. As she turned, her gaze fixed on her fiancé, DavidBecker. Again his voice exploded overhead.

"Three! The difference between 235 and 238 isthree!"

Everyone in the room looked up.

"Three!" Susan shouted over the deafeningcacophony of sirens and technicians. She pointed to the screen. Alleyes followed, to Tankado's hand, outstretched, three fingerswaving desperately in the Sevillian sun.

Jabba went rigid. "Oh my God!" He suddenly realizedthe crippled genius had been giving them the answer all thetime.

“Three’s prime!” Soshi blurted.“Three’s a *prime* number!”
Fontaine looked dazed. “Can it be that simple?”
“Outbound data!” a technician cried. *“It’s going fast!”*
Everyone on the podium dove for the terminal at the sameinstant—a mass of outstretched hands. But through the crowd,Susan, like a shortstop stabbing a line drive, connected with hertarget. She typed the number 3. Everyone wheeled to the wallscreen.Above the chaos, it simply read. ENTER PASS-KEY? 3
“Yes!” Fontaine commanded. “Do it now!”
Susan held her breath and lowered her finger on the ENTER key.The computer beeped once.
Nobody moved.
Three agonizing seconds later, nothing had happened.
The sirens kept going. Five seconds. Six seconds.
“Outbound data!”
“No change!”
Suddenly Midge began pointing wildly to the screen above.“Look!”
On it, a message had materialized.
KILL CODE CONFIRMED.
“Upload the firewalls!” Jabba ordered.
But Soshi was a step ahead of him. She had already sent thecommand.
“Outbound interrupt!” a technician yelled.
“Tie-ins severed!”
On the VR overhead, the first of the five firewalls beganreappearing. The black lines attacking the core were instantlysevered.
“Reinstating!” Jabba cried. “The damnthing’s reinstating!”

There was a moment of tentative disbelief, as if at any instant,everything would fall apart. But then the second firewall beganreappearing . . . and then the third. Moments later the entireseries of filters reappeared. The databank was secure.
The room erupted. Pandemonium. Technicians hugged, tossingcomputer printouts in the air in celebration. Sirens wound down.Brinkerhoff grabbed Midge and held on. Soshi burst into tears. “Jabba,” Fontaine demanded. “How much did theyget?”
“Very little,” Jabba said, studying his monitor.“Very little. And nothing complete.”

Fontaine nodded slowly, a wry smile forming in the corner of hismouth. He looked around for Susan Fletcher, but she was alreadywalking toward the front of the room. On the wall before her, DavidBecker’s face filled the screen.

“David?”
“Hey, gorgeous.” He smiled.
“Come home,” she said. “Come home, rightnow.”
“Meet you at Stone Manor?” he asked.
She nodded, the tears welling. “Deal.”
“Agent Smith?” Fontaine called.
Smith appeared onscreen behind Becker. “Yes, sir?”
“It appears Mr. Becker has a date. Could you see that hegets home immediately?”
Smith nodded. “Our jet’s in Málaga.” Hepatted Becker on the back. “You’re in for a treat,Professor. Ever flown in a Learjet 60?”
Becker chuckled. “Not since yesterday.”

CHAPTER 128

When Susan awoke, the sun was shining. the soft rays siftedthrough the curtains and filtered across her goosedown feather bed.She reached for David. *Am I dreaming?* Her body remainedmotionless, spent, still dizzy from the night before.

"David?" She moaned. There was no reply. She opened her eyes, her skin stilltingling. The mattress on the other side of the bed was cold. Davidwas gone.

I'm dreaming, Susan thought. She sat up. The roomwas Victorian, all lace and antiques—Stone Manor's finestsuite. Her overnight bag was in the middle of the hardwood floor .. . her lingerie on a Queen Anne chair beside the bed.

Had David really arrived? She had memories—his body againsthers, his waking her with soft kisses. Had she dreamed it all? Sheturned to the bedside table. There was an empty bottle ofchampagne, two glasses . . . and a note.
Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, Susan drew the comforter aroundher naked body and read the message.
Dearest Susan,
I love you.
Without wax, David.
She beamed and pulled the note to her chest. It was David, allright. *Without wax* . . . it was the one code she had yet tobreak.

Something stirred in the corner, and Susan looked up. On a plushdivan, basking in the morning sun, wrapped in thick bathrobe, DavidBecker sat quietly watching her. She reached out, beckoning him tocome to her.
"Without wax?" she cooed, taking him in her arms.
"Without wax." He smiled.
She kissed him deeply. "Tell me what it means."
"No chance." He laughed. "A couple needssecrets—it keeps things interesting."
Susan smiled coyly. "Any more interesting than last nightand I'll never walk again."
David took her in his arms. He felt weightless. He had almostdied yesterday, and yet here he was, as alive as he had ever feltin his life.

Susan lay with her head on his chest, listening to the beat ofhis heart. She couldn't believe that she had thought he wasgone forever.
"David." She sighed, eyeing the note beside the table."Tell me about 'without

wax.’ You know I hate codesI can’t break.”
David was silent.
“Tell me.” Susan pouted. “Or you’ll neverhave me again.”
“Liar.”
Susan hit him with a pillow. “Tell me! Now!”

But David knew he would never tell. The secret behind“without wax” was too sweet. Its origins were ancient.During the Renaissance, Spanish sculptors who made mistakes whilecarving expensive marble often patched their flaws with *cera*—“wax.” A statue that had no flaws andrequired no patching was hailed as a “sculpture *sincera”* or a “sculpture without wax.” The phraseeventually came to mean anything honest or true. The English word“sincere” evolved from the Spanish *sincera*—“without wax.” David’s secret code wasno great mystery—he was simply signing his letters“Sincerely.” Somehow he suspected Susan would not beamused.
“You’ll be pleased to know,” David said,attempting to change the subject, “that during the flighthome, I called the president of the university.”
Susan looked up, hopeful. “Tell me you resigned asdepartment chair.”
David nodded. “I’ll be back in the classroom nextsemester.”
She sighed in relief. “Right where you belonged in thefirst place.”
David smiled softly. “Yeah, I guess Spain reminded mewhat’s important.”
“Back to breaking coeds’ hearts?” Susan kissedhis cheek. “Well, at least you’ll have time to help meedit my manuscript.”
“Manuscript?”
“Yes. I’ve decided to publish.”
“Publish?” David looked doubtful. “Publish *what?*”
“Some ideas I have on variant filter protocols andquadratic residues.”
He groaned. “Sounds like a real best-seller.”

She laughed. “You’d be surprised.” David fished inside the pocket of his bathrobe and pulled out asmall object. “Close your eyes. I have something foryou.”
Susan closed her eyes. “Let me guess—a gaudy gold ringwith Latin all over it?”
“No.” David chuckled. “I had Fontaine return thatto Ensei Tankado’s estate.” He took Susan’s hand andslipped something onto her finger.
“Liar.” Susan laughed, opening her eyes. “Iknew—”
But Susan stopped short. The ring on her finger was notTankado’s at all. It was a platinum setting that held aglittering diamond solitaire.
Susan gasped.
David looked her in the eye. “Will you marry me?”

Susan's breath caught in her throat. She looked at him andthen back to the ring. Her eyes suddenly welled up. "Oh, David. . . I don't know what to say."
"Say yes."
Susan turned away and didn't say a word.
David waited. "Susan Fletcher, I love you. Marryme."
Susan lifted her head. Her eyes were filled with tears."I'm sorry, David," she whispered. "I . . . Ican't."
David stared in shock. He searched her eyes for the playfulglimmer he'd come to expect from her. It wasn't there."S-Susan," he stammered. "I—I don'tunderstand."
"I can't," she repeated. "I can't marryyou." She turned away. Her shoulders started trembling. Shecovered her face with her hands.

David was bewildered. "But, Susan . . . I thought . .." He held her trembling shoulders and turned her body towardhim. It was then that he understood. Susan Fletcher was not cryingat all; she was in hysterics.
"I won't marry you!" She laughed, attacking againwith the pillow. "Not until you explain 'withoutwax'! You're driving me *crazy!"*

Epilogue

They say in death, all things become clear. Tokugen Numataka nowknew it was true. Standing over the casket in the Osaka customsoffice, he felt a bitter clarity he had never known. His religionspoke of circles, of the interconnectedness of life, but Numatakahad never had time for religion.

The customs officials had given him an envelope of adoptionpapers and birth records. “You are this boy’s only livingrelative,” they had said. “We had a hard time findingyou.”

Numataka’s mind reeled back thirty-two years to thatrain-soaked night, to the hospital ward where he had deserted hisdeformed child and dying wife. He had done it in the name ofmenboku—honor—an empty shadow now.

There was a golden ring enclosed with the papers. It wasengraved with words Numataka did not understand. It made nodifference; words had no meaning for Numataka anymore. He hadforsaken his only son. And now, the cruelest of fates had reunitedthem.