

# **KILL FILE**

**CHRISTOPHER  
FARNSWORTH**

ZAFFRE

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Also by Christopher Farnsworth

*Blood Oath*  
*The President's Vampire*  
*Red, White and Blood*  
*The Burning Mem*

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*To Caroline and Daphne,  
my dreams come true*

## [ 1 ]

**I know what you're** thinking. Most of the time, it's not impressive. Trust me.

Dozens of people move around me on the sidewalks in L.A.'s financial district, all of them on autopilot. Plugged into their phones, eyes locked on their screens, half-listening to the person on the other end, sleepwalking as they head for their jobs or their first hits of caffeine. The stuff inside their heads can barely even be called thoughts: slogans and buzzwords; half-remembered songs; the latest domestic cage match with whoever they left at home; dramas and gossip involving people they'll never meet in real life. And sex. Lots and lots of sex.

*<can't believe she tweeted that going to get her ass fired> <meeting at 11:30 lunch at Chaya after> <bastard tell me where to park that's always my spot> <damn those are some tits wonder how she'd look in high heels and bent over> <she woke me up daily don't need no Starbucks> <I know right?> <like it would kill him to do the dishes once just once in his life> <not bad I'd fuck her> <who's got the power the power to read ugggghhh stuck in my head again> <forty bucks just to get my car to pass an emissions test thanks Obama!> <OMG did u see that thing on BuzzFeed LOL>*

*<so that's \$378 with electric and shit shit shit about \$200 in the checking account and Matthew's got that dentist appointment please God don't let him need braces> <Lakers have got to dump Kobe if I was coach I tell you man seriously what are they thinking>*

That's what I live with, constantly, all around me like audible smog.

Most of the time, it's just annoying. But today, it makes it easy to find my targets. They're fully awake, jangling with adrenaline and anxiety. They stand out, hard and bright, a couple of rhinestones glittering in the usual muck.

I cross Fifth Street to the outdoor courtyard where the first guy is waiting at a table, empty Starbucks cup in one hand. I'm supposed to see him.

The one I'm not supposed to see is watching from a half a block over and twenty stories up, on the roof of a nearby building. I can feel him sight me through the rifle scope. I backtrack along his focus on me, reeling it in like a fishing line, until I'm inside his head. He's lying down, the barrel of the gun resting on the edge of the roof, the cool stock against his cheek, grit under his belly. His vision is narrowed to one eye looking through crosshairs, scanning over all the people below him. If I push a little deeper, I can even see the wedge he placed in the access door a dozen feet behind him. He taps his finger on the trigger and goes over his escape route every five seconds or so.

They're both nervous. This is their first kidnapping, after all.

But I'm in kind of a bad mood, so I'm not inclined to make it any easier. I get my coffee first—the line is a wave of pure need, battering impotently against the stoned boredom of the baristas—and then walk back out.

Time to go to work.

I take the open seat across from the guy at the table. I dressed

down for this meeting—black jacket, white oxford, standard khakis, everything fresh from the hangers at Gap so I won't stand out—but I still look like an insurance salesman compared to him. He's wearing a T-shirt and baggy shorts, with earbuds wired into his skull beneath his hoodie. Nobody dresses for business anymore.

"Seat's taken," he says. "I'm meeting someone."

I put down my coffee and tap the screen on my phone. His buzzes in response immediately.

He looks baffled. He doesn't get it. I try not to roll my eyes. In real life, there are no Lex Luthors.

"That's me," I tell him. "I'm your meeting."

*<how the fuck did he know?> <he was supposed to call first> <doesn't matter> <don't let him see it> <stick with the plan> <stick with the plan>*

He covers pretty well. He doesn't ask how I knew him, even as he fumbles to shut down the phone. It's a burner. That headset in his ears? It leads down to his personal phone, keeping a direct line open to his buddy up on the roof. If this conversation doesn't end with them substantially richer, he only has to say one word and his friend will blow my head off my shoulders.

So he still thinks he's got the upper hand in this conversation.

"Fine," he says. "Let's get to it."

"What's your name?" I ask.

"We don't need to get into that." *<Donnie>* "All I need from you is the bank transfer. Then the girl can go back to her rich daddy."

I'm already bored. Donnie here has gotten all his moves from TV and movies. He's an amateur who thought he'd stumbled into his own personal IPO when he met my client's daughter in a club two nights ago.

At least I can see why she went with him. He's got catalog-model good looks and, from what I've learned, a ready supply of drugs that

he sells at all the right places. She probably thought he was no worse than her last two boyfriends.

But as the gulf between the One Percent and everyone else grows wider, kidnapping idle rich kids has become a minor epidemic in L.A.

Guys like Donnie and his partner—can't quite snag his name yet, but he's still there, watching through the scope—lure one of the many Kardashian or Hilton wannabes away from their friends, drug them up, then lock them down until they get a ransom. The parents pay, and the kids usually come home with little more than a bad hangover. The police are almost never involved.

You haven't heard about this because the parents know people who own major chunks of stock in CNN and Fox. They don't want the idea going viral, and they know who to call to kill a story.

But they also know who to call when they want something like this handled.

My client, Armin Sadeghi, is a wealthy man who had to flee Iran as a child when a group of religious madmen took over his country. That sort of thing leaves a mark. He doesn't particularly trust the police or the government, especially when it comes to family.

"We need to make sure she's alive and unharmed," I say, sipping my coffee.

"She's fine," Donnie says. *<drugged out of her head> <Christ, I've seen guys twice her size OD on that>* "But she won't be if you don't give me what I want."

I get a glimpse of Sadeghi's daughter, skirt bunched up over her waist, snoring heavily, facedown on a soiled mattress. Well, at least she's alive.

"So here's how it's going to work," he begins.

I cut him off. "Where is she?"

"What?" The location appears behind his eyes like it's on Google



Maps. A hotel stuck on Skid Row, one of the last pockets of downtown to resist coffee shops and condos.

I lift my phone and start dialing. He looks stunned. “Sorry, this won’t take long.”

“What the hell do you think you’re—”

I hold up a finger to my lips while the call connects to Sadeghi. When he picks up, I tell him, “She’s at a hotel in downtown Los Angeles,” and recite the address from Donnie’s memory. He’s got a group of well-paid and trusted security personnel waiting to retrieve his daughter.

“Hold on a second,” I say as he’s thanking me and God, in that order. “What room?” I ask Donnie.

It pops into his head even as he says, “Fuck you.”

“Room 427,” I say into the phone. “You can go get her now.”

I disconnect the call and look back at Donnie. His confusion has bloomed into bewilderment and anger. “How the hell did you do that?” he demands.

He’s desperately trying to maintain some control here, torn between running to the hotel and doing some violence to me. I can feel his legs twitch and his pulse jumping.

I can sense the same anger, the same need to do harm, coming down from above. The scope is still on me.

“I know your buddy can hear me,” I say, as calmly as I can. “What’s his name?”

“Go fuck yourself,” Donnie says. <Brody>

With that, a jumble of memories sort themselves into a highlight reel of Donnie and Brody, both of their lives coming into sharper focus. Donnie: the club kid, the dealer. Brody: one of the thousands back from the military, no job, no real family, no marketable skills outside of combat training. A partnership forms. Donnie likes having a badass on his side. Brody likes being the badass. They both like the money.

I hope they can both be smarter than they've been up until now.

"All right. Donnie. Brody. You need to recognize that this is over. You can walk away right now, as long as you never get within a thousand yards of the girl or her family again."

I boost the words with as much authority and power as I've got, pushing them into their skulls, trying to make them see it for themselves.

Donnie hunches down. Even if I weren't in his head, I'd see that he's gone from angry to mean. I'm maybe five years older than him, but he's hearing his parents, every teacher, and every cop who ever told him what to do. His anxiety has a sharp and jagged edge now, like a broken bottle in the hand of an angry drunk.

"Yeah?" he says. "And what if we just kill you, instead?"

Not my first choice, admittedly. Out loud, I say, "You spend the rest of your lives running. And you still won't get paid."

I can sense some hesitation from Brody twenty stories up. But he keeps the rifle pointed at my head.

This close up, a little empathy for these morons seeps in around the edges. Neither of them was raised by anybody who gave anything close to a damn. They're scared by my spook show, torn between the need to run and the need to punish. It could go either way. I push harder, trying to steer them onto the right path. I'm working against years of bad habits and ingrained attitude.

But surely they are not stupid enough to try to kill me in the middle of downtown Los Angeles in broad daylight. They just can't be that dumb.

I try to help them make the right decision. *<Go home>* I send to them, as hard as I can. *<Give it up. Be smart. Please.>*

Donnie stands up. "Fuck it," he says.

I relax, just a little.

Then he makes his choice, like a motorcycle veering suddenly down an off-ramp.

“You tell that bitch and her old man we’ll be seeing them,” he says. “Never mind. I’ll tell them myself.”

Triumph spreads through his head like the shit-eating grin on his face. I don’t know exactly what he’s got in store for the Sadeghis. All I see in his mind is a knife and bare flesh.

And blood. Lots of blood.

“Do it,” Donnie says. Talking to his partner, not to me.

I feel Brody begin to squeeze the trigger.

Idiots.

I see it so clearly through Brody’s eyes. The weapon, a Remington 700 Police Special he bought online, comes alive in his hands. There’s a brief flash memory of test-firing it into dunes in the Mojave. He calculates distance and velocity and timing all by reflex. Brody was a good soldier. He breathes out and the rifle bucks slightly as he sends 180 grams of copper-jacketed lead toward my skull, still neatly framed in the crosshairs.

There’s a small explosion of blood and bone and my body pitches forward, dead as a dropped call.

But when Brody looks up from the scope, he notices something off. My body is in the wrong place. He can tell, even from that distance.

He puts his eye back to the scope and sees me there, still alive, coffee still in hand.

Donnie is on the ground, arms and legs splayed out at unnatural angles.

Brody feels something sink inside, like a stone dropping into a pool. He jumps to his feet, rifle in hand, and runs toward the door and the escape route he’d planned.

I can see it as clearly as he does, riding along behind his eyes.

Something strikes his shin just above his foot and he goes flying forward. And instead of pitching face-first into the gravel-topped surface, he finds nothing.

It takes him a moment to realize he's tripped over the edge of the roof. He sees clearly again and realizes he's in midair, hands and legs windmilling uselessly, touching nothing but sky.

He was sure he was running toward the door.

Then he's aimed like a missile at the pavement below and the pure animal terror kicks in. The ground rushes up to meet him at thirty-six meters per second and he screams.

I was far enough into Brody's head to cut and paste his perceptions, editing his vision before it got from his eyes to his brain. I put an image of my own head over Donnie's for the shot. When Brody got up to run, I flipped his vision of the roof, made him think the door was in front of him.

I get out of his mind before he hits the ground, but I can still feel the echo of his fear.

I tamp it down and concentrate on going through Donnie's pockets. A little brain matter and a lot of blood leak from the exit wound. His eyes are empty.

Someone comes up behind me. "Oh my God, what happened to him?"

I hit them with a blast of pure panic and disgust—not too hard at this point—and yell, "Call 911! Get an ambulance!"

They bounce back like they've touched an electric fence.

I find what I'm looking for: Donnie's phone and the hotel room key.

Before anyone else can stop me, I walk away. Not too fast, not too slow.

Around the corner, I have to stop and put my hand on the closest wall to stay upright.

The deaths hit me.

I was too close to both of them. Donnie's last moments weren't too bad: a feeling of victory suddenly cut short, a sharp pain, and then blackness as the bullet tore a gutter through his brain and emptied him of everything he was.

Brody, however, had a good long time to realize that he was going to die. He took a second breath to keep screaming.

I manage to keep my coffee down. I pull myself together and file both deaths away, in the back of my head, for future reference.

Then I call Mr. Sadeghi again. No, he hasn't sent his team to the address yet. They're still getting ready.

"Never mind," I tell him, looking at the hotel room key. "I'm closer. I'll pick her up and have her home within the hour."

I can't read what's going through his head over the phone, but the relief in his voice sounds genuine. Parental bonds are tough to break, or so I'm told.

I hear sirens. The police will be here to collect the bodies soon. My bet is that they'll call it a murder-suicide, a couple of small-time scumbags settling a business dispute.

I wonder if I did this on purpose. If I was just so offended by their arrogance and their casual cruelty that I pressed their buttons and boxed them into this ending.

But it doesn't work like that. My life would be a lot easier if it did. They could have just walked away when I told them. I can push, I can nudge, I can mess with their heads, but despite all my tricks, people still find a way to do what they want. Their endings were written a long time before I ever showed up.

Or maybe that's just what I tell myself.

I get my car and head toward the hotel.

**Three hours in a** private jet turns out to be the perfect antidote for the migraine clawing at the inside of my skull. If I could afford it, I'd do this every time someone tried to kill me.

Ordinarily I would take a little longer between jobs to shake off the hangover that always comes from being too close to a violent death—a kind of feedback that echoes around my brain for at least a day.

But this client was particularly insistent and sent a check for my time, along with a Gulfstream to LAX to pick me up. That overcomes my reluctance pretty fast.

The entire flight is blissfully silent. The plane's interior is polished walnut and butter-soft leather, like a set designer's vision of an English library from some BBC period drama. After getting me a drink, the gorgeous flight attendant retreats to the back of the jet and her thoughts vanish into the celebrity mag she brought with her. The pilot's mind is filled with the white noise of altitude and heading and air-speed. The next closest human being is forty-two thousand feet below.

So I drink my drink and stare out the window and try to keep my head as empty as possible. The meeting is with the client's personal attorney, a man named Lawrence Gaines. The client himself wants to remain anonymous. That's not unusual. I did a preliminary check on

Gaines to make certain I wasn't being set up, but didn't go any deeper. I can live with the mystery for now.

And not to brag, but it's not like it can remain a secret once Gaines and I are in the same room.

I am a little surprised by the relative quiet once we hit the tarmac. Airports are ugly enough for most people, but they're side trips into hell for me. Anxiety and anger and exhaustion and pain and loneliness and boredom, all in one convenient location. Most of the time, my teeth start grinding from a mile away.

Here, the usual jangle is muted. When the Gulfstream's door opens, I find out why. This is the smallest, quietest airport I've ever seen. It looks like a toy play set from the 1950s brought to life.

"Welcome to Sioux Falls," the flight attendant says as she hands me my jacket. I get a brief glimmer of interest from her, mixed with cool appraisal. I've worn a gray Armani two-button over a gleaming white broadcloth shirt and solid blue tie for this meeting. But it's only camouflage. I'll be the first to admit I don't look like I belong in this tax bracket.

She's wondering if I'll be staying at the same hotel she and the pilot use. Now I'm wondering too. I thank her for the drink.

Then I go down the stairs and meet my ride: a driver waiting outside a black town car, parked right on the runway. He's a head taller and maybe seventy pounds heavier than I am.

"You Smith?" he asks, as if he didn't see me get off the plane specifically chartered to bring me here.

I catch a wave of animosity coming off him right away. He's not happy I'm here. I wish I'd brought more luggage just so I could make him carry it. I nod.

"Keith," he grunts, and points his chin at the back door of the car. He gets behind the wheel without waiting for me.

I know Keith, even though I've never seen him before. We'd both say we work in the private security field, but that's just being polite. One of the side effects of spending the last dozen years at war is that it produces a surplus of guys trained in the latest government-approved methods of hurting people. Most of them find a way back into normal life, but there are plenty of opportunities for those who don't. There are fourteen major private military companies in the U.S. alone, and that doesn't include all the corporations in other fields that have decided their options should include lethal response.

The result is guys like Keith: basically a hired thug in a suit.

The same can be said of me, of course, but I like to think I'm a little more specialized. And I wear better suits.

I try to sort out his hostility from the backseat, but it's too wound up in a bunch of other irritations: the mushy handling of the town car, the amount of time it takes for the automatic gate to open, the incompetence of every other driver on the road. Anger is Keith's default setting.

He soothes himself with images and lines from a half dozen action movies. I get flashes of him fighting bad guys, complete with a voice-over reading catchphrases: *<He doesn't need a reason, just an excuse. Go ahead, make his day.>* His internal soundtrack is like something from a video game.

I screen it out as best I can and look out the window for the rest of the ride. There really is not a lot to see in South Dakota. Miles and miles of empty space.

I like it.

THE ATTORNEY, GAINES, aims me at a chair after the briefest of handshakes. He's much younger than I expected, about my age, but with



fresh-scrubbed pale skin and blond hair that makes him look like he just got out of law school. He's gym-toned and decked out in the usual douchebag tuxedo: sport coat over \$500 jeans.

Keith brought me into the building down a hallway lined with offices for firms named WILSON TRUST CO., DALTON FAMILY TRUST, and CARSON GENERATIONAL FUND. Most of the windows were dark. Gaines's office looks part-time, too. The decor includes bull horns on the walls and brands burned into the leather of the chairs. Cowboy rich.

"You like this place?" Gaines asks. "Corporate ghost town. South Dakota state law offers a perpetual trust that exempts money from the estate tax, but you have to have a physical presence here. So you get a bunch of billionaires sheltering their money in empty suites. One other benefit: it also gives us a quiet little spot to meet."

Keith takes up a position by the door, next to another chunk of hired meat who doesn't give his name or speak. *<David>* Only mild curiosity from him. Keith, however, is still on edge, spoiling for a fight.

All I get from Gaines is caution and suspicion. Nothing I haven't felt before.

"John Smith," he says. "Never actually met anyone named that before."

That's what the state tagged me with. I was put in a group home before I was one. I had a blank spot on my records instead of a name. "It could have been worse," I say. "It could have been John Doe."

"Well, Tom Eckert speaks highly of you. He's very grateful for the work you did."

"I'm afraid I can't confirm or deny I've worked for anyone with that name," I say. Client confidentiality is one of the promises I take seriously.

"Oh, don't worry. Tom and my boss go way back. But I appreciate

your discretion. We don't want rumors spreading. Like I bet you don't want to talk about that business in downtown L.A. yesterday."

He's waiting for a reaction. I stay neutral. At this level, people spend a lot of money checking me out. I expect nothing less. It means they're willing to invest even more in me.

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about."

"Right," he says, with a smile that is absolutely fake. "So. You're a psychic."

Here we go. He doesn't believe I can do what I do. It's not the first time I've encountered this, obviously.

"Actually, most people who call themselves psychics are half-bright con artists using hundred-year-old magic tricks to convince people of things they already know."

"But that's not you." The sarcasm drips from his voice.

"For starters, what I do is real."

"Really. You read minds."

I relax and go into my pitch. I've had a lot of practice.

"You like to think you've got one guy behind your eyes, driving your body like a giant robot, making all the decisions. It's actually more like a whole crowd in there, dealing with a few dozen things at once. What we call the mind is actually a metaphor for all the different processes—memories, physical sensations, emotions, thoughts, and reflexes—bouncing around inside three pounds of tofu in our skulls. Most of the time, we're running what we'd call subroutines—things we don't even think about, like breathing or walking or eating. But we also use our minds to direct our activities, to form thoughts and actions, usually before we're aware that we're doing it. My talent is picking up on all those disparate elements as they happen in someone else's brain, and then translating them into a coherent narrative that I can understand, and even influence to some extent."

“Well, here’s the million-dollar question: How do you do it?”

“I wish I could tell you. I’ve always had a talent. Then I went into the military. There was a program that helped me develop it further.”

“Right.” He picks up a tablet and taps at the screen. I can’t see what pops up. “I’ve been looking at your history,” he says. “You enlisted right after 9/11—good for you, by the way. You weren’t even eighteen yet.”

“You can sign up at seventeen with a parent or guardian’s consent. My foster parents agreed.” They were glad to see me go. We’d settled into an uneasy détente by then, but I still frightened them.

“Three tours in Special Forces. Iraq and Afghanistan. Impressive.” He’s not impressed. He’s just being polite. The world is shifting already. The wars are old news to anyone who wasn’t directly involved in them. Pretty soon, they’re going to seem as distant and irrelevant as Vietnam was to me.

“Says here you were discharged,” Gaines continues. “Then there’s a blank spot for seven years.”

“I was with the CIA. First as an employee, then as a contractor.”

“Doing what?”

“That’s classified.”

“Of course it is. And—if you can do what you say—why did they ever let you go?”

“That’s also classified.”

He waits for more. I don’t offer anything. Like I said: I do take some promises seriously.

Gaines taps the screen again and moves on. “So now you’re a private consultant. A very well-paid one.”

Even if I couldn’t read what he’s thinking, I’d hear the tone in his voice.

“I’m worth it.”

“Are you?” *<yeah right>*

"I have a specialized set of skills, in addition to my talent. I was trained to handle problems. And I've learned that some people, particularly those who have more money than most state governments, have bigger problems. There are times they cannot use the standard remedies available to regular citizens. They require specialized solutions. I saw a niche in the market, and I filled it."

"You'll forgive me if I'm still a little skeptical. Can you make me bark like a dog, cluck like a chicken, anything like that?"

I restrain a sigh. Everyone wants the Vegas act.

"Unfortunately, it's a lot more complicated than that. I don't like to use this terminology, but it's as close as I can come: if your mind is a computer, I can hack into it, read your emails, trigger some processes, and even overwrite some files. What you're asking, though, would be like reprogramming the entire operating system from the command line. A person's mind is far too complex for that. You've spent your whole life becoming who you are. I can't change all that in a few minutes, or even a few days. People always return to who they are."

"Now it sounds like you're making excuses. Like most psychics. The energy has to be right. Or you need the right subject. Or the planets are out of alignment. Whatever."

"I'm just being honest. I can't control someone else's mind. Not the way you're thinking."

Gaines laughs. "Honest. Yeah. That's a good one."

"What's your problem?" I can see it in his head, but I want him to say it out loud.

"Well, since we're all being honest: I think you're ten pounds of bullshit in a five-pound bag, Mr. Smith."

"You brought me a long way and paid me a lot of money to say that. A phone call would have been cheaper."

“My employer wanted to see you. He thinks there might actually be something to you. Unfortunately for you, I don’t. And nobody gets to him without going through me first. I think you are a con artist. I think you’ve convinced some rich old men and women that you have superpowers, and you’ve gotten by on luck and—what did you say?—‘hundred-year-old magic tricks’ until now. But I see no reason why I should allow you to waste my boss’s time, or even get in the same room with him.”

His self-satisfaction is practically gleaming through that perfect skin of his.

“You want a demonstration?” I ask. “I could tell you that you’ve got just over sixty-three thousand dollars and change in your checking account, at least as far as you can remember. I can tell you that you forgot to call your wife before I showed up, and now you’re thinking you won’t get another chance until after lunch. You’re still worried about the appraisal on a piece of property in Wyoming that you’re considering for a mini mall. And you’ve got a Glock nine-millimeter in the right-hand drawer of that desk.”

The gleam dims a little. He struggles to get it back.

“That doesn’t prove anything. I’ve heard that you guys can read stuff from body language, that you hire private detectives to do your research. You might even have a camera in this room, for all I know.”

“All true,” I admit. “There are people who do that. But I’m not one of them.”

“Fine. Tell me something you couldn’t learn from a twenty-dollar Internet credit report. Tell me my boss’s name.”

It’s right there in the front of his head, but I deliberately ignore it. “You asked for your employer’s name to remain confidential. I’m going to honor that.”

He beams with triumph. “You mean you don’t know. You couldn’t get that info before the meeting.” *<knew it> <bullshit artist>*

“We’re done,” I say. I stand and button my jacket. “There’s nothing else I can do that will convince you.”

“That’s not exactly true,” Gaines says.

I feel Keith behind me, suddenly interested, an attack dog straining at his leash. David, the other security guy, is on alert too, but without the bloodlust. They step away from their posts at the door.

“I’ve asked Keith and David to beat you stupid and dump you off the highway,” Gaines says.

Keith’s mind is suddenly all sunshine and rainbows. David limbers up, not exactly happy, but willing to follow orders.

Gaines smiles again. “So all you have to do, Mr. Smith, is keep them from crippling you right here on the carpet. Then I’ll be convinced.”

Keith rushes me first. Waves of glee dance all around him. He’s been looking for an excuse to punch someone in the head all day.

He doesn’t care that I haven’t turned to face him. Fighting fair doesn’t get a lot of emphasis in combat training.

David is a step behind. He’s still more ambivalent, but I can see the moves he’s planning. He’s a good, efficient brawler.

Keith’s fist comes up to clobber me. I see the back of my head through his eyes.

*<smart-ass prick> <see how tough you are now>*

All right, then. Here’s the Vegas act.

I hit Keith with the physical memory of double-port chemo nausea from a late-stage cancer patient. His equilibrium shorts out, and his knees buckle. He’s suddenly folded in half on the cowskin rug, retching up the power-protein smoothie he had for breakfast.

I’ll pay for that later, but it’s worth it.

David wasn’t nearly as anxious to slaughter me, so I go a little

easier on him. I only blank the visual input from his eyes to his occipital lobes. He's effectively blind in an instant. He screams as I step aside, and he runs into the wall hard enough to bounce.

They're both out of the game. I turn back to Gaines. I feel a stab of fear inside his mind.

"Now you're trying to remember the last time you fired that Glock at the range," I tell him. "And how many bullets are still loaded. And you're especially curious to find out if you can get it out of the drawer before I do anything else."

I take a step forward. He flinches back in his chair.

"I admit, I'm a little curious myself."

A side door to the office opens. An older man stands there in a white shirt and khakis. I knew he was there. He was listening to my audition the entire time.

"That's enough, Mr. Smith," he says. "I believe Lawrence is convinced now."

I'm looking at Gaines's boss. Who also happens to be the thirteenth richest man in America.

"I'm sorry for the trouble," Everett Sloan says. "By way of apology, I hope you'll allow me to take you to lunch."

MY STEAK IS big enough to fall over the lip of the plate. Which is actually fine by me. Vegetarians can have their clean arteries. Humans are smart because a bunch of primates on the African savannah developed a taste for raw flesh, and the amino acids in their bellies went straight to their heads and built bigger brains. Two million years later, there's me, reading minds and downing megaloads of protein to refuel. Evolution in action.

Sloan sits across from me at the table, drinking coffee. We have an acre of space in the back of the restaurant, all to ourselves. I'm not sure if this is because Sloan wants it this way, or if this is just the standard lunch hour in South Dakota.

Even so, I pick up the angst as the waitress follows an argument between two friends on Facebook, the boredom of the manager, the stoic acceptance of the cook in the back as he adds another burn to the layers of scar tissue on his right hand.

Keith was still dry-heaving when we left, so Sloan drove us here himself. His hands were steady on the wheel. I know he's in his seventies, but he looks at least a couple of decades younger and stands straight and tall. One of the benefits of having a billion dollars is that time doesn't leave the same marks on you as it does other people.

When I decided to go private, I memorized the names and faces of all the people on the Forbes 500. Future clients, I hoped. Sloan stood out. He's not the richest man on the list, but he might well be the smartest. And yes, I'm including Gates. Forget the software geeks who have gotten rich off stock options because they came up with a new way for teenagers to take nude selfies. Sloan is an actual, honest-to-God genius. He was still a college student at Stanford when he was recruited by the NSA to break Soviet codes in the Cold War. He went to grad school after that, supplementing his meager salary as a teaching assistant by playing poker in backroom card games. Then he found that some of his equations could actually predict the movements of the stock market. He took his paycheck to Vegas and won a poker tournament. He used the prize money to start his own investment firm. Within a year, he was a multimillionaire.

Now he manages about \$20 billion in assets, and there are people who'd sell their own daughters for the chance to give him their money.



I've never encountered a mind like his before. Even this close, I couldn't tell you what he's thinking. He's running calculations and modeling outcomes way ahead of anything I can fathom, much faster than I've ever experienced. It's like a wall of ice—cold, flawless, and perfectly smooth. Most of my attempts to read him just slide right off.

"I hope you'll forgive Lawrence," he says. "He tends to be over-protective."

I saw that clearly in the office when Sloan appeared. Gaines's fear wasn't for himself. It was for the old man. He didn't really believe in my talent, but he wanted to protect Sloan just in case he was wrong.

When Sloan and I left, his fear was a bright spark in his head, because now he believes. But Sloan ordered him to stay, so he stayed.

"I've had worse job interviews," I say.

"It didn't appear to be very pleasant for Keith or David either."

"I didn't tell them to attack me."

"No, no, I don't blame you for defending yourself. I'm mainly curious how you were able to do that."

"Have you ever heard of the Kadaitcha?"

He shakes his head. I finish another chunk of steak, then continue. "In some Australian aboriginal tribes, they have a guy who is sort of a cross between a witch doctor and a hit man. That's the Kadaitcha. He's responsible for the tribe's magic, and for enforcing the tribe's laws. There are only a few things a member of the tribe can do to be sentenced to death, but if that happens, then the Kadaitcha carries out the sentence."

Sloan waits patiently for me to get to the point.

"Here's the thing. He doesn't use anything like what we'd consider a weapon. Instead, he carries a sharpened bone. Sometimes from an animal. Usually from a human. A little longer than a pencil. And he points it at the offender. According to the tribe's beliefs, the Kadaitcha

sends a spirit out of the pointing bone—like a spear of thought—into the other person. A couple of days later, a week at the most, the offender drops dead. He believes so completely in the spirit and the power of the bone that he actually loses the will to live. He convinces himself that he's dying. What I do, it's a lot like that."

"But nobody in that room believed you had that ability."

"That's what makes me different. I don't need anyone else to believe in me. I can implant the memory of a trauma directly. Your security men were in pain. They were experiencing a physical reality, based on what their minds were telling them."

"So did you break my bodyguards?"

"They'll be fine," I tell him. "It's like any other bad memory. It passes with time."

"And there are no permanent effects?"

"Hopefully just a strong aversion to picking a fight with me in the future."

He considers that for a moment. "You're fairly open about all of this, considering we only just met."

"It's only a trade secret if someone else can do it." What I don't tell him is what that little trick costs me. I can put the idea of a broken leg or a stab wound into another person, but their response echoes in my head as well—so I always get a percentage of the pain I inflict on anyone else.

"But where does it come from?" Sloan says. He really wants to understand. There's a lot of the true scientist in him. He wants to know.

"Psychosomatic implant, delivered through quantum entanglement of consciousness," I say.

And then I restrain a laugh, because for the first time, I detect a hint of confusion in Sloan's brilliant mind. "What exactly is that supposed to mean?" he asks.

I shrug and smile. "Hell if I know. It's a term I heard someone use

once when he was talking about me. It was his theory. I'm not sure I can explain it."

Sloan frowns, just a little. "You don't have any idea why you can do what you do. And you're satisfied to leave it at that? You've never looked any further?"

After the Vegas act, this is what everyone wants. They want an answer. They want to know why. And I can't help them. I grappled with the question for years, wondered what made me different, what set me apart from everyone else. Until I decided it didn't matter.

"I've lived with it my whole life," I tell Sloan. "Do you wonder why your legs work? Or your eyes? Somebody told you something about your nervous system once, back in school, and you accepted it. But it doesn't change how you walk or see. This is what I am. I can't change it. So I might as well use it."

He considers me for a moment. "Remarkable," he says. "You know, a man with your talents could make a lot more money doing other things."

When one of the richest men in the world wants to give you financial advice, you listen. "Like what?"

"Blackmail, for starters. You could make a fortune."

"Blackmailers end up with a target on their backs. And it's never a good idea to piss off the people in your tax bracket, Mr. Sloan. Just ask your friend Tom Eckert."

"From what I saw, you can defend yourself."

"I'd rather not live like that."

"Well, if you find blackmail distasteful, why don't you just steal? Pick account numbers or insider secrets out of people's skulls, then use what you find to make yourself rich."

"What makes you think I don't?" I say. "You have a lot of valuable information. Why would you let someone like me this close to you?"

He shakes his head. "You're not that sort of person."

"You're sure about that?"

"I am. Forgive me if this sounds arrogant, but I'm in the business of knowing more than other people."

"Your assistant had a few gaps in his knowledge."

"True. But everything Lawrence knows about you is not everything I know about you. I knew how he would react to you. I wanted to find out how you'd react to him."

"Did I pass the test?"

"It confirmed what I already suspected. I've read your file. It shouldn't surprise you to hear that I have contacts in the government, both from my days in the NSA and from the people who depend on me to make them richer. So believe me when I say: I know everything you did while working for the CIA. I know how you came to them. I know why you left too. That's why I don't feel particularly unsafe with you, Mr. Smith. I know you have a conscience. But perhaps more important than that, I know you have a price. And I know that I can meet it."

I don't say anything. I'd forgotten what it feels like to be surprised. It's almost terrifying.

"How are the headaches?" he asks.

Another surprise. And proof that Sloan really has read my file. Or at least part of it. "Good days and bad," I admit.

"I can give you some respite from them. A place you can go without people. A sanctuary of your own. No other thoughts, no other interference. Just quiet."

He takes out his phone and taps the screen. Then he shows me a map of a small chunk of green in the middle of a field of blue.

"This is Ward Island, located in Davis Bay off the coast of Washington. Thirteen acres. Zero population. There's a fully equipped house there. Twelve thousand square feet, three master bedrooms,

wine cellar, wet bar. Solar panels, dedicated broadband cable to the mainland, plus satellite backup if you need it. It's easily accessible by boat. At the moment, it's vacant. I own it."

"You're offering me an island?"

"A ninety-nine-year lease, actually. It would revert to my heirs afterward. Obviously, neither of us would be around to see that happen. But for the rest of your natural life, it would be yours. You can have servants on the island, paid for by me, or, if you prefer, you can simply have supplies dropped off and a cleaning crew on a regular basis. You can come and go as you please for your work, but in between your jobs, complete isolation. A retreat from the world, anytime you want it, with thirty nautical miles between you and the next living human."

I look at the little green shape on the screen for a moment longer. No people. No endless chattering stream of complaints and pains and idiocies.

"That's quite a fee," I say. "I'm listening."

I finally get something concrete from Sloan. A feeling of satisfaction. Once again, it confirms for him that everything has a price. It's not so much that he believes in money as a supreme power above all else, but it restores his faith that everything can be quantified. He lives in a world of absolute limits and measures, and he knows he's found mine: a home of my own, quiet and secure against the constant noise invading my head.

The offer alone is enough to buy my loyalty; he really is a very smart man.

Sloan checks his watch, a vintage 18-karat gold Hamilton Pulsar.

"Then I should probably tell you why I wanted to meet you," he says.

"ELI PRESTON," SLOAN says. "You've heard of him."

"At this point, who hasn't?"

Sloan smiles. “He’s been making a lot of noise, that’s true.”

Eli Preston is not on the Forbes 500 list, but everyone in the financial press says it’s only a matter of time. He’s the founder of OmniVore Technology, a small, privately held company, which is expected to make him a billionaire once it goes public.

Preston is supposed to be the next Zuckerberg, or at least one of the candidates: smart, ambitious, and insanely rich; lives on bullet-proof coffee, energy drinks, and high-protein sushi prepared by a personal chef; lectures about the future at TED one week, then shows up courtside at a Knicks game the next.

He just turned twenty-six. I know this because he rented out the entire Bellagio in Las Vegas for the party. I read about it on Gawker.

I’m not, however, completely clear on what exactly OmniVore does, or why it’s worth so much money. So I ask.

For a brief instant, I get a slight weariness from Sloan. His IQ scrapes the limits of the tests made to measure it. He’s constantly explaining things, stopping his own personal train of thought and waiting for everyone else to catch up. To him, the rest of us move in slow motion, taking forever to understand what is clear to him in an instant. For a moment, I sense how tiring it must be to be so much smarter than everyone else. To know the answers so long before everyone else does. To see clearly while they’re still blindly groping around in the dark.

But he explains anyway.

“OmniVore is what we call a data-miner,” he says. “It sifts through massive amounts of information for its clients. You see, most companies are drowning in facts. Thanks to the Internet and cheap digital storage, they have access to incredible levels of detail now—they can track down to the minute the last time you purchased razor blades at the store, and it goes into a little file that contains every other fact about you. Your

credit-card number. Your birth date. What car you drive. Your sexual preference. Your favorite flavor of ice cream. Everything that might be considered even remotely relevant to extracting another couple of dollars from your wallet. And they have that for everyone. They can track the number of left-handed divorced women who visit their website, or gauge the reaction on Twitter to their latest ad campaign from Denver Broncos fans or vegetarians or even rape victims, if they want to go that far. But it's all too much. They have more raw data than ever, and they actually know less. It's like drinking from a fire hose, as they say. They can't narrow it all down. That's where OmniVore comes in. It applies its software to the data, and it finds out exactly what the companies actually need to know. It identifies problems before they happen. It learns the patterns inherent in a business, and makes predictions for the future. It discovers threats and eliminates them."

"Threats? Like what?"

"It depends. For a tech company, it could be hackers or industrial espionage, someone trying to steal next quarter's product designs. For a retailer, credit-card fraud or employees stealing merchandise. For a bank, embezzlement or tax fraud. Could be anything. The idea is that OmniVore's software is smarter than humans. It's like chaos theory in reverse: we see a hurricane, but they know where and when a butterfly flapped its wings."

He's dumbed it down significantly for me, but it's close enough.

"And that's profitable?"

"God, yes. Eli is turning away the biggest companies in the world. He's got government agencies, automakers, studios, TV networks—everyone you can think of, really—lined up and waiting on him. Unlike Twitter or Facebook, there are people with deep pockets willing to pay a great deal for this service."

"So what's your problem with him?"

“Not many people know this, but Eli used to work for me.”

“That doesn’t seem like something he’d be shy about. I imagine it would look good on his résumé.”

“We didn’t part on the best of terms. I recruited him out of Harvard as an analyst. I thought Eli would be perfect for the job. As it turned out, he got bored very quickly. He didn’t care for sitting in an office and crunching numbers. He wanted to be out in front, playing at the high-stakes tables.”

Right. Where the hookers and free drinks are. It wouldn’t be the first time a young guy thought he could do better than his boss. “You fired him.”

“We came to a mutual understanding. A few months later, he had raised enough capital to start OmniVore. And his success story began.”

“But you don’t think he did it himself.”

“You really must be psychic,” he says, smiling. I hear that joke a lot. I smile along with him anyway. “Yes. He’s built his company—everything he’s done since he left—on the strength of my ideas, my intellectual property.”

Something about the timeline seems off. I interrupt Sloan. “Let me ask you a question here: He hacked your files two years ago, and you’re just finding out now?”

“Do you understand what I do, Mr. Smith?” *<of course you don’t>*

He’s right. I don’t. I’m not ashamed to admit it. “Not even a little.”

“You invest in the stock market?”

“Not really.”

That surprises him. “Where do you keep your money?”

“In my wallet, mostly.” He laughs at that, but it’s true. My fees are high, but so are my expenses. I also don’t trust money I can’t pull out and spend whenever I want. I know it’s not very smart, but old habits die hard.



“Well, if this all works out, maybe we can set you up with a starter portfolio,” he says. At the same time, in his head, he prepares to give me the Fisher-Price explanation of his job, the one he uses for people he meets at parties.

“Stock picking used to be about people making educated guesses based on the companies,” he says. “Profit and loss statements, supply and demand, market conditions—but really, nothing more scientific than throwing darts at a board with names on it. Most investment firms are lucky if they do as well as an index fund—that’s a collection of stocks that simply mirrors the market, goes up when it goes up, goes down when it goes down. What I do is different. Have you ever heard of algorithmic trading?”

You don’t work for rich clients without picking something up. “You use computers to analyze the market and make stock trades for you.”

“Close enough,” he says. “I invented it, more or less. I created an algorithm—that’s a mathematical formula that you enter into a computer—that analyzes data. Essentially, it was a way to look at any set of data and organize it, and even make predictions based on it. It could find the underlying patterns in the numbers, when a human being would see only a mass of random information. This was something I discovered when I was looking into Sienkiewicz-Moore theorems, a subset of Big Number theory, back when I was still in graduate school.”

All I get from that is the ice wall again. He sees he’s lost me and tacks quickly back into simple concepts. “So I take a series of facts, translate them into numbers, plug them into the formula, and it makes a series of educated guesses about the future. What made the algorithm so interesting was that the predictions were almost always right. I could take any facts that could be reduced to mathematical inputs—migration patterns of birds, or tide tables, or annual rainfall in the Gobi Desert, for instance—and I would get a very good idea of how those same

numbers would turn out in the future. Then it occurred to me, what if I entered something a little more concrete than rainfall estimates?”

I’m starting to get it now. “Like, say, stock prices.”

He smiles again, and I sense genuine pride still lingering there. “Exactly. I quickly found the algorithm was a great deal more valuable to me in practice than as a theory published in an academic paper. That’s how I began trading. I’d use the algorithm to predict the rise and fall of the market, and I’d make bets accordingly.”

“And you got very rich.”

Another small burst of pride. “Yes. Other people noticed. They hired their own computer engineers and math professors. Now there’s a whole industry of traders and programmers analyzing market data using algorithms and computers. Each firm has something they call their ‘secret sauce.’ That’s a proprietary algorithm that’s the heart of their trading. It tells their computers how to interact with the markets. I called mine Spike. To find the spikes in the markets.”

He looks at me. I smile, to show him I get it. “Your secret sauce is better.”

“Much, much better. Not to boast, Mr. Smith, but nobody else has come close to understanding what I did when I broke that problem back in graduate school. And we’re constantly refining the process, feeding more data to the algorithms. Spike, like every other piece of trading software, makes millions of decisions every second. Literally billions of dollars every minute, all moved around by computers. That requires incredibly smart people to analyze market trends, to see risks and opportunities and then translate them into the kind of math that machines can understand. Everyone is trying to beat the odds, trying to get their computers to think a little faster, a little smarter. It’s not easy. As I said, most firms are lucky to match the market. The best ones can offer you perhaps a ten percent return over time.”

“What’s your return?” I ask.

“Eighty to ninety percent,” he says. “Even when the economy collapsed, we managed to make a profit. All with Spike. It’s simply smarter than anything anyone else can come up with. Other people will promise you pennies. We double your money, or close to it.”

Bullshit. That’s Ponzi scheme territory. Nobody can guarantee that kind of return. I don’t get any active deception off Sloan, but people have a habit of buying into their own hype. After all, it’s not a lie if you really believe it.

Some of my skepticism must show up on my face, because Sloan smiles and asks, “You don’t believe me?”

I try to be diplomatic. “That’s quite a return,” I say. “Warren Buffett only manages nineteen percent, and he’s supposed to be the most successful stock picker in history.”

Sloan smiles again. “Warren’s a friend. But he’s a very public figure. People follow him. They jump into his stocks when he buys and run away when he sells. We don’t allow that. We keep our trading secret. We’ve got a dedicated dark pool that hides our trades, and we spread them over a variety of market makers. And we control our overall investment. I could have a half a trillion dollars in assets under management if I wanted. I’ve got the clients lined up outside my door. But then we’d be big enough to tip the market. People would see our trades move the prices. We’d have information leakage, and we’d lose our advantage. I don’t need that. That’s why we’ve kept the heart of Spike a secret ever since I invented it.”

“And you think Preston stole it from you.”

Some anger finally slips past the ice wall. *<little bastard>* “He *did* steal it. He’s taken the knowledge I’ve spent fifty years building, and is now getting rich from it.”

“I thought you said he was in data mining. Not stock picking.”

“It’s all numbers,” Sloan says. “The heart of Eli’s business is a piece of software called Cutter. It analyzes the data for him. But the engine that drives Cutter is the same one that drives Spike. The one I built. It can be used on any set of facts, provided you can reduce those facts to computer input. Phone calls, credit-card purchases, social-media posts—my algorithm can find the patterns hidden in all of it. Everything OmniVore does, it’s doing on the back of my work. That’s the genius of my discovery.”

“Again, not to boast or anything.”

Sloan waves that off. He doesn’t have time for false modesty.

“Still doesn’t explain why you’ve waited two years to go after him,” I say.

“If I knew he’d stolen from me, I certainly would have done something about it sooner. I thought my security was adequate. There are no records of any breach. The software behind Spike is located inside secure computers that would have recorded any attempt to hack them. Access is strictly controlled. Every email is monitored. My analysts walk through a scanner and a strong magnetic field on their way into and out of the office, which means I would know if they carried any thumb drives or disks from the office, or they would be wiped clean if I didn’t. Then, about six months ago, I received information from one of Eli’s former employees. Someone upset with his own pay package, of course. He told me that he’d heard Eli bragging to a client that his computer models were better than Spike—that he’d improved them.”

“That doesn’t prove he stole them from you.”

“No. But Eli’s security isn’t as thorough as mine. This informant showed me several blocks of the source code Eli uses for Cutter. With a few changes here and there, it’s the same as Spike. No question.”

He takes a manila folder and places it on the table. He opens it and shows two different printouts. One is marked SPIKE and the other is marked CUTTER. They look identical to me, but only because I can't make sense of either of them. Sloan seems pretty convinced, however.

"So if he didn't download it from you, how was he supposed to steal it? Did he break your security system? Pay off one of your other employees?"

Sloan shakes his head. "No. Again, I would have noticed any breach. I have redundant systems and loyal, well-paid people. He might have been able to corrupt one or two, but not all of them. It would have shown up."

"Then how did he do it?"

"He took my ideas out of here the old-fashioned way—in his brain."

That staggers me for a moment. "Is that even possible?"

Sloan radiates ironclad certainty. There's no doubt in him. "He's smart enough, yes. He read the underlying computer code of Spike, line by line, until he found the algorithm, and then he memorized it. He walked out of here and wrote his own version, and then used it to create Cutter."

I suddenly have a new respect for Preston. He's not just another tech-bro, boy-billionaire douchebag. Smuggling an entire software system out by memorizing it would require both an insane amount of discipline and genius.

"I take it you don't want to go to the authorities," I say.

Sloan makes a face. "Please. They couldn't catch Madoff. You think they'd even understand this?"

Fair point. "So use your own lawyers. Sue him."

“You know that would take years. And it would require exposing all my software to his attorneys as well as the court. What’s worse, my own clients would react badly to news of this sort of a data breach. I rely on their confidence. If they were to find out that I’d had my most valuable trade secret stolen—”

“They might take their money to someone else,” I finish for him.

“Correct,” he says. “Even if I won, years from now, what then? Eli still has my knowledge inside his head. He could simply start over. I’d have to sue him again. The cycle would continue, over and over, and the only people who’d profit are the lawyers. I’m already an old man, Mr. Smith. I don’t have the time or patience for this to play out inside a courtroom. I know he’s stolen from me. I don’t need to be paid for it. Forgive me for sounding Old Testament, but I need him to be punished.”

“If you’re looking for someone to take out his eye, you could send one of your goons. It would probably be cheaper.”

Irritation leaks through Sloan’s cool detachment for a moment. *<thought a psychic would be quicker on the uptake>* Out loud, he says, “I don’t need you to be a hired thug. I want my ideas back. I want you to recover my intellectual property. And then I want you to scrub every trace of it from Eli Preston’s head.”

“I can recover the software,” I tell him. “I could even get inside his mind to find out how he stole it from you. But I can’t wipe out someone’s memories permanently.”

He gives me a long, hard look. “Mr. Smith. Do you think I enjoy repeating myself? I told you: I know more than other people do. Why would I ask if I didn’t already know you were capable of it?”

Another secret. This one I thought was buried deeper than Sloan could dig, honestly.

“Then you must know that’s only ever happened once. And it wasn’t exactly planned.”

Sloan taps his phone. He shows me the island on the screen again. “Well,” he says, “for what I’m offering you, I expect you’ll find a way to repeat that trick.”

I look at the green square surrounded by blue one more time. Peace and quiet and a life of luxury. Everything I’ve ever wanted, right in front of me. It only takes a second for me to decide.

“All right,” I tell Sloan. “I’m in.”