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In Amsterdam, a visionary scientist is laying the groundwork for a cybernetic life-extension project that will transfer individual consciousness to a personalized avatar. Halfway around the world, his brilliant grandson is secretly planning to use the same technology to infiltrate the world's most secure networks. But the scientific advances necessary to perfect the brain-to-computer interface are slow in coming, too slow for the aging founder of the Everlast foundation—who may die before realizing his dream of immortality—and too slow for his ruthless grandson, who will stop at nothing to attain the recognition that is his birthright.

Caught in the middle are Jake Bronson and his seven-year-old son, Alex, whose combined mental gifts might provide the key to leapfrogging the impasse.

When Jake's family and closest friends are simultaneously abducted in a globally coordinated kidnapping scheme, he races across two continents in his search for them, unaware his hostage son and teenage siblings have crash-landed in the jungles of South China, where they must find every ounce of their courage and wits to survive the wilds and escape the ruthless drug lord who is hot on their heels. Can a seven-year-old boy learn to kill to save his family?

Everlast
A Jake Bronson Thriller
(Book One of the Everlast Duology)

Richard Bard

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Dedication

For my daughter, Alex, whom I didn't meet until after her 28th birthday. Here's what she wrote:

*I saw you first...
In my head, a thousand times before
You walked into an embrace
Craved by lost days*

*Your eyes floated down on me like
Wind-thrown lace curtains
Laughing, tickled by the sun
Familiar in their warmth*

*My amazement reflected in your face
As we danced through tales we spun
Without one another
And because of one another*

*How to tell you who I am?
When I was never sure
Until the night we finally met
With pride, I know I'm yours*

*all my love
alex*

PART 1

A single warrior fighting for his home and family is deadlier than a hundred fighting for a warlord.

Chapter 1

Veterans Administration Medical Center Santa Monica, California

JAKE BRONSON THOUGHT his life had finally returned to normal. He couldn't have been more wrong.

Sure, he'd married the woman of his dreams, his three children meant the world to him, and he was blessed with a cadre of friends who had stood shoulder to shoulder with him in the face of unthinkable dangers. He was even back in the air as an acrobatic instructor pilot. Life was perfect. That is, until a few seconds ago, when the sixty-seven-year-old scientist beside him had given him the news.

"Someone's coming after you," Doc had said, grimacing behind his frameless spectacles. His usual blue-eyed twinkle had vanished. The former head of the Obsidian Project—the top-secret US government division tasked with dealing with “the Grid” of alien pyramids that had threatened Earth a year and a half ago—now led a clandestine arm of The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA). He looked tired after his rushed trip from his underground offices in the mountains of northern Nevada, jokingly nicknamed Area 52 by those who worked there. Doc's shoulders slumped beneath the waves of silver hair that spilled over his collar.

"About a month ago our monitoring system decrypted bits and pieces of some disturbing chatter about you. It was scattered at first, popping up between servers in Europe and Southeast Asia. We didn't think much of it at the time, figuring it was more conspiracy conjecture about the Grid. But in the last few days it expanded to a point that it captured our attention."

"They mentioned me by name?"

"Not specifically. But they're looking for the Brainman."

Jake cringed. He'd done everything possible to maintain a low profile regarding his connection with the Grid event—when more than a thousand small alien pyramids had awakened from a twenty-five-thousand-year-old sleep, erupting from beneath the earth to circle the globe, counting down to the point when every human on the planet would be eliminated. Doc and the government had worked to divert attention from Jake, agreeing to keep his involvement—and that of his friends and family—a secret. But information had leaked out, and though Jake's name had not been mentioned, a Swiss newspaper had run a story about the mysterious man it called “the Brainman,” crediting him with averting the world cataclysm. There had been a global outcry for more information; the population wanted—*needed*—a hero to thank. But Jake hadn't wanted any part of it. Eventually, the topic had faded from the headlines as inquiries continued to be met with tight lips and false trails, and the media refocused on the knowledge that man was no longer the only sentient life form in the universe.

Jake blew out a long breath as Doc's warning sank in. What he'd heard so far was worrisome but not alarming. They stood in the corner of the physical therapy room of the Advanced Prosthetics Technology Center, located in the basement of the main hospital on the 388-acre Veterans Affairs Medical Center campus. Therapists were assisting several patients in

the large room as they performed exercises and tests designed to acclimate them to their new robotic appendages.

Jake turned his back to them and lowered his voice. “There’s more, isn’t there?” Doc wouldn’t have tracked him down to this obscure location otherwise.

Doc sighed. “I’m afraid so—”

Gasps coming from behind Jake coincided so perfectly with Doc’s comment that he thought someone had overheard. Instead, he turned to see five wide-eyed therapists and their patients all focused on his seven-year-old son.

Alex was helping the US Army veteran called Mississippi Mike take his first step in over six months. The weathered man had lost both his legs to an improvised explosive device during his last tour of duty.

The replacement limbs reminded Jake of the robots from the *Terminator* films. Alex stood in front of the vet, his small hands grasping Mike’s, their eyes fixed on each another. Mike’s brow furrowed in concentration as he commanded his brain to send the signal to the nerves that would articulate his legs. He took another tentative step, and then another, small beads of sweat forming on his brow.

“I knew you could do it,” Alex said. He didn’t speak often, but when he did it usually had an impact.

The corner of Mike’s lips lifted. It was the first time Jake had seen him smile since they’d met two weeks ago. The battle trauma had taken more than just Mike’s body parts. According to the lead therapist who had called for Jake’s help, the soldier—who had previously been known for his boisterous personality—had sunken into a suicidal depression. Jake had been happy to assist. His ability to transmit thoughts into the minds of others was limited in most cases, especially with strangers, but at least he’d developed a knack for projecting a calming influence and mental clarity on subjects. It had proven to be a helpful talent with patients who needed to train their brains to control the latest evolution of thought-controlled artificial limbs. Jake had helped out with several patients over the past year. Today was his third visit with Mike, but progress had been slow in coming. Until a few moments ago, when Jake had interrupted his session to speak with Doc and Alex had unexpectedly stepped in.

The department head stood in the doorway, his mouth agape. “That’s incredible!” he said, moving toward Alex.

Jake’s senses were already on alert based on the unsettling news from Doc, but the developing situation before him sent his tension into afterburner as he recognized the risk to his son. He moved forward with a feigned casualness, sliding between Mike and Alex. Jake supported the soldier with a firm grip on his shoulders while projecting a calm aura with his thoughts, guiding Mike back to his chair.

Jake patted the man’s shoulders. “I’m proud of you, Mike. Like I told you earlier, sometimes all it takes is a little distraction to let your brain figure it out on its own.”

The department head moved forward, his focus trained on Alex, who sidled shyly to Jake’s opposite side. The man opened his mouth to speak, but Jake cut him off as he continued with Mike. “And you did it! The neural pathways have been triggered. It’s all downhill from here, pal. Congratulations.”

Mike’s glance shifted from Jake to Alex and back again. His eyes narrowed and Jake sensed the man’s awareness of the situation. It was as if the mental connection he’d had with Jake over the past few sessions—as well as the one he’d just experienced with Alex—had provided him with unique insight about father and son. He shook Jake’s hand with a firm grip. “I couldn’t have

done it without you, Mr. B,” he said with a deep Southern drawl, offering Alex a wink in the process. “I’m in your debt and I won’t forget it. Now, didn’t you say you were late for an appointment or something?”

“Yep,” Jake said gratefully, squeezing the man’s hand. “We should’ve been gone twenty minutes ago. Keep up the good work, Mike. I’ll be back to see you when I can.”

Jake turned and ushered Alex toward the door, where Doc was already waiting.

“But Mr. Bronson—” the department head called out behind him.

“It’ll have to wait,” Jake said over his shoulder. “Like Mike said, I’m already late.”

The trio hurried down the hallway.

It had been a mistake to bring Alex along today, Jake thought as they turned down another corridor. When Francesca had received a phone call this morning with an unusual last-minute request to attend a Saturday meeting at her school—and Sarafina and Ahmed had already gone to grab breakfast burritos at the cafe down the street from the house—he’d figured there’d be no harm in letting Alex tag along.

He should have known his son’s empathetic nature would tug at him under the circumstances. When Alex saw a problem he could fix, he went for it, which was fine when they were in the privacy of their home, but not in a public situation that could draw undue attention to the boy’s gifts. Jake and Francesca had drilled the warnings into Alex ever since they’d returned to the US, and for the most part their son had complied. But in the case of Mississippi Mike, where a quick connection on Alex’s part might not only help the man walk again, but also alleviate some of his emotional pain, the temptation to reach out had been irresistible.

Jake wasn’t angry. He was proud of his son and admired the boy’s instincts. After all, it was that same aptitude that prevented nothing less than the apocalypse, a fact Jake was desperate to keep secret.

If the truth ever got out...

“You know better, son,” Jake said, squeezing his hand.

Alex didn’t say anything. It wasn’t necessary. Jake’s physical connection with him was all he needed to feel his son’s remorse, as well as his pride for what he’d accomplished. Jake picked up the pace. He wanted Alex out of the building. Only then could he take the time to finish his discussion with Doc.

They were three steps into the lobby when Alex came to a sudden stop. He let go of Jake’s hand and spun on his heels.

“There you are!” Francesca said as she emerged from a separate corridor. Jake’s wife wore sandals and a flowing white peasant dress that accented her thin waist. Her thick mane of auburn hair was pulled back, and Jake smiled at the sight of her.

“Doc?” she exclaimed, rushing to give the man a hug. As she pulled away, she patted the chest of his herringbone sport coat. “I see you’re still armed,” she said with too much exuberance. Jake’s brow furrowed.

Doc was flustered a moment and then smiled, reaching inside his jacket and pulling out his meerschaum pipe. It had a hand-carved face of the wizard Gandalf from *The Lord of the Rings*. “Don’t leave home without it!”

“You’re half an hour early,” Jake said, trying to put his finger on what was different about his wife.

She averted her gaze, pulling Alex toward her. “The meeting ended sooner than I expected.” She turned back to Doc. “I didn’t know you were in town,” she said, her Italian accent coloring her words. “Are you here for a while? Will you join us for dinner?”

“I-I flew down for a symposium at UCLA,” Doc said. “It’s just across the freeway. But I’m only here for the day.”

Jake knew from Francesca’s expression that she’d sensed the lie in Doc’s words. But she didn’t call him on it and that’s when Jake knew something was wrong. He stepped forward and captured her gaze. “Are you okay?”

“Of course. Why shouldn’t I be?”

“It’s just that—”

“Oh, don’t be silly,” she said, pulling away. “Why don’t we all go to lunch, yes?”

Jake let it slide. Right now there were more pressing issues. He took her hand and gave it a squeeze. “Something’s up.” He motioned subtly toward Alex. “Doc and I need a little time alone to talk about it.”

Francesca’s jaw tightened. The mask she’d worn a moment earlier vanished, replaced by a look of concern. Her nod was barely perceptible as she took Alex’s hand. “Will you be long?”

“Nah,” Jake said casually, knowing full well the facade he wore wasn’t likely to play any better than hers had—not to their gifted son. “I’ll be home before you know it.”

Chapter 2

Redondo Beach, California

I'D USED 547 WORDS in the past week—19 more than the week before and 47 more than the previous week—but I could have gotten by with only four: *I love you, too*. Those are feel-good words. It's what I'd say when Mom and Dad tucked me in and told me they loved me. Other words were a waste of time—for the most part, anyway. What's the sense in having a conversation with someone when their words are intended to hide the truth? You're better off watching.

Sensing.

Mom was behind the wheel. The smell of the ocean slipped through the slit at the top of her window. Houses and palm trees blew past as we made our way through the neighborhoods of South Redondo Beach. One more turn and we'd be on our street in the Avenues, just two blocks from the sand. She was worried about something. It was a big worry, bigger than anything I'd sensed from her in a long time.

"Mom, is everything okay?"

She glanced my way, the smile coming a bit too late to be convincing. "Of course, honey. I was just going over a list of things I need to pick up at the store."

Yeah, right. Sometimes I swear she forgot I was her son, that I shared her empathetic gift...and then some. I guess the fact I was only seven made it hard for her to remember. Especially when I had a thirteen-year-old sister who happened to be a musical savant, and an eighteen-year-old brother with a brain implant that sometimes made him talk too much.

Earlier at the VA hospital, it had been the same between Mom and Dad—and even Uncle Doc. He wasn't really my uncle but we called him that anyway. Dad said anyone who saves your life should be treated like family. Anyway, there had been a whole lot going on beneath the surface of their words this morning, and they weren't just trying to hide something from me, even though that's what they tried to make one another think with their fake nods and expressions. They were hiding stuff from each other.

A person's eyes hold more truth than a thousand words.

At least that's the way I see it.

Of course there was also Mississippi Mike. Now *that* had been a conversation. When I took his hands, I felt his pain. It wasn't physical. It was a sense of hopelessness that seemed to crowd out everything else in his consciousness.

Mike was more interested in dying than living.

I'd felt his surprise when I connected with his thoughts. His eyes had bugged out and his grip had tightened to the point it had begun to hurt. But he'd realized it right away because of our bond so he'd eased off. From there it had been easy to change his focus to what he *could* do rather than what he couldn't. When he'd stood up and taken his first step, I knew he'd be okay. I can't explain how I did it. My dad called it letting my brain go on autopilot, same as what he did. Beyond that, all I'd done was imagine myself inside Mike's brain and body, connecting his

desire to walk with the electrodes that linked spare nerves in his chest to his new robotic legs. He'd done the rest.

Mom kept the motor running after she pulled the Fiat into the driveway. "I'm going to run to the store," she said. "I'll be back in about fifteen minutes. Tell Sara and Ahmed to stick around. I want to speak to all three of you when I return."

I didn't ask what it was about. Why bother? I grabbed my backpack, jumped out of the car, and walked up the steps to the porch. The front door swung open before I could grab the handle, and Ahmed stepped out and nearly speared me with the end of his short board.

"Whoa!" he said, twisting to one side. "Sorry about that. Hey, I'm headed to the beach. Would you like to go?"

"Mom says we have to stay here."

"Huh?" Ahmed leaped down the steps as the Fiat backed down the drive. "Mom, wait!"

It was no use. She waved a finger to indicate she was in a hurry and then drove away. Ahmed's mouth stayed open longer than necessary, the palm of his free hand jutted into the air as if to ask what had just happened.

Beyond him, a car with blacked-out windows pulled away from the curb and followed Mom around the corner.

Veterans Administration Medical Center

Jake and Doc had found a quiet booth in the hospital cafeteria. Jake waited for the other shoe to drop.

"Late last night two more servers got involved in the chatter," Doc said. "Timmy tracked them to San Francisco and San Diego." Timmy was Doc's lead science engineer at Area 52. The young whiz kid had saved Jake's life by hiding him in Italy after Jake had awakened from his six-year coma.

"Crap," Jake muttered, his nerves bristling.

"That's not the worst of it. Timmy's pretty sure one of the sources is a Chinese triad."

"No way."

Doc nodded. "These guys are bad news, one of the oldest criminal organizations ever known, with connections everywhere." He hesitated before adding, "They're known for being among the top black-market arms dealers in the world, specializing in advanced weaponry. Unearthing the Grid tech would be a dream come true for them."

Jake stood abruptly and exited the booth.

"Don't panic," Doc said, rushing to catch up. "Timmy's team has fended off hundreds of similar searches since the Grid. Dead ends and phony death certificates—that's all anyone's ever uncovered."

Jake stopped to face him. "Then why are you here in person? Why not just call?"

"Because yesterday Timmy discovered a tap in our phone system at Area 52. We're not even using our cell phones for sensitive information."

"Jeez, Doc," Jake said, double-timing it toward the lobby. "You couldn't have led with that info?"

Doc kept pace. "But that part of it probably has nothing to do with you!"

“Probably?” Jake said, pulling his smartphone from his pocket. “Probably isn’t good enough when we’re talking about my family’s safety.” He speed-dialed Francesca’s number.

Redondo Beach

Francesca knew Jake and Alex had sensed something was wrong. She’d been hiding it pretty well until today. But after the meeting she’d had with Alex’s doctor this morning, the situation had gotten the better of her.

“We’re not sure what’s going on,” the doctor had said, “but the activity in his brain is all over the map. I’m afraid it’s affecting his entire system.”

When he’d explained what that meant, the news had shattered her.

She pulled into the Walgreens parking lot and made her way to the counter. The doctor said the pills would help get her through the day. She hoped so.

“Name?” the pharmacist asked.

“Francesca Bronson.” Saying her married name out loud usually brought a smile to her face. Not today.

The pharmacist checked the computer. “Your doctor phoned in the prescription and we’re preparing it now. It’ll be ready in just a few minutes.”

She sighed and took a seat in the small waiting area, dreading the thought of telling Jake. He’d blame himself, even though it wasn’t his fault. That’s the way he was—he shouldered responsibility and guilt for any repercussions that occurred in the wake of the accident that had enhanced his brain, saved his life, and ultimately changed the world. They’d argued about it more than once, and while he agreed with her intellectually, she knew he harbored a deep-seated belief that everyone would have been better off if he’d simply died eight years ago from his brain tumor.

Now, Alex’s health issues would reopen old wounds, since their root cause had likely been his contact with the alien Grid. But she had to tell Jake. Keeping secrets in their family wasn’t easy, not with her empathic abilities and his uncanny brain. She’d let her guard down this morning when she saw him with Doc at the VA hospital. Doc’s unexpected visit couldn’t have come at a worse time.

They’d have much to discuss this evening.

Her phone sounded. The ringtone was Andrea Bocelli singing “*Vivo per Lei*”—“I Live for Her.” Jake had installed the song as his ringtone. Her husband was an unabashed romantic and she loved him for it. Nevertheless she let the call drift to voice mail.

She needed to steel herself before they next spoke.

Chapter 3

Redondo Beach

I WAS SUPPOSED TO BE some sort of genius, but I got confused just as easily as the next kid. Even more so, since my brain never seemed to slow down. It gobbled up information day in and day out—cataloguing, memorizing, analyzing. A part of me realized it came naturally to me, but another part wondered how long I'd be able to keep it up. *What happens when my brain gets overstuffed?*

My dad had the same gift, if you want to call it that, though he wasn't nearly as good with computers as I was, and Dad's abilities seemed to be coming and going lately, like something was changing in him. I catalogued that in the Worried About Dad drawer.

I'd have to start a drawer on Mom, too, after the way she was acting this morning.

The drawer system worked pretty well for me. I kept the bad drawers closed so that the uncomfortable feelings they gave me didn't distract me from the important stuff, like online gaming. There's nothing like diving into a role-playing game, where you control the character's choices and actions, or a first-person shooter where quick reflexes mean the difference between life and death. Living inside a good game pushed away the constant flow of data that bombarded me all the time in real life. In a game, the world is...*finite*. I liked that word, even though most seven-year-olds would screw up their face if I used it. But my vocabulary was pretty much only limited by whether or not I'd been exposed to a word. Between books, TV, and the Internet—not to mention my brother's occasional bouts of jabbering—I'd learned lots of words. And I *never* forgot them. My brain stuffed them into drawers and I could recall them whenever I wanted. It's the same with videos, pictures, people, and places. You name it, I remember it. And math and numbers? Don't even get me started on that.

I had lots of drawers.

It's pretty cool, I guess, but when most everyone around me had trouble even remembering what they ate for breakfast that morning, it kind of made me stand out. People look at you funny when you're different. That's why I didn't play with kids my age.

They didn't get me.

But my family did, and like my dad said, *In the end, family is all that matters*.

I was hungry but I figured I could wait a while. Mom should be home soon, and I was hoping she'd bring something good for lunch. I climbed up on the bar stool and scooped it up to the kitchen counter. I liked to sit on the end that butted up against the wall. My dad's Snoopy helmet hung there on a peg. He liked to wear it when he flew acrobatics in one of the old planes at his work. Sometimes he put it on my head when he told me stories about his Air Force days. It smelled like old leather...and Dad.

Sarafina and Ahmed were at the kitchen table. She wore shorts and a cut-off tee shirt that Dad would say showed too much for a thirteen-year-old, and if Mom noticed the touch of makeup my sister had on, she'd be in trouble. I don't know why she bothered with face paint, especially around her eyes. They were her best feature, big and friendly. As usual, she was texting someone on her iPhone. That's what she did if she wasn't playing music on her keyboard.

Ahmed was still in his board shorts and tank top. His right knee bounced up and down so I could tell he was anxious to go to the beach like he planned. He didn't have many friends but he loved surfing at the beach down the street from our home. He said his Afghan skin was built for the sun, and oceans were among Allah's greatest gifts. Right now, he was focused on his laptop, which was connected to two external speakers. He tapped a key and a loud karate *kiai* made me flinch.

Sarafina looked up and crinkled her brow. "You're kidding, right?" she said. "Pleeease use your headset. Those screeches are enough to give a person a headache." She should know since she had perfect pitch, and the ability to compose amazing songs in her head and play them with her eyes closed on a piano or keyboard. I loved listening to her play. We all had coping mechanisms. Hers was music.

"Uh-huh," Ahmed said, without looking up from the screen—or putting on his headset.

He was studying a recording of his last sparring event, playing it over and over. When he focused on something, it could be hard to break him loose. I'd learned it was best to let him be when he got into that mode. Even though the brain implant he received years ago had done wonders to eliminate most of the adverse affects of his autism, he still suffered from bouts of paranoia. When that happened, he couldn't stop talking. It could be annoying and he knew it. So over the last year or so, he'd been trying to channel that energy toward karate classes.

The video ended, and I cringed when he tapped the screen to start it all over again. Another loud *kiai* sounded. Sharper this time. I flinched again.

"Really?" my sister said, glaring at him. Ahmed didn't notice, so she huffed and plugged in her own earphones, turning her back on him as she texted.

I pulled my tablet from my backpack and propped it up on the counter. Then I donned my neuro-headset, which was about the coolest thing ever invented. The wireless device was a human-to-computer interface that allowed me to control online games using nothing but my thoughts. Talk about hands-free! The game developer named it the Spider because of the way its eight legs draped around your scalp and forehead. If it had been up to me, I would've named it the Octopus, since each of the legs was embedded with rows of circular probes that reminded me of tiny suction cups. Either way, it was the latest device of its kind, way better than anything else out there. The headset was still in beta testing, but a bunch of them had been distributed to select gamers around the world—the best of the best—each user getting a unit registered exclusively for his or her use, no exceptions. It was no surprise that Uncle Marshall—who wasn't my real uncle, either—was invited to join the beta testing group. He'd been a gamer elite for ages, same as many of his friends, and was probably on top of the distribution list.

But he'd been swamped lately with government contracts for his cyber-security consulting business, and right now he was in Rome visiting his wife, Lacey. She was an actress and she was on location for a film. So he'd let me test it out for him on the sly. I was supposed to pretend I was him whenever I used it online. He'd even added his own twist to the software so that when the server at game headquarters pinged for a location address, it was rerouted to wherever Uncle Marshall's laptop was.

I slipped the Spider onto my head, activating the noise-canceling feature to tune out the world. It felt like home. The instant I switched it on, the application on my tablet responded with an audible cue. "*Good morning, Marshall. Are you ready to play?*"

Oh, yeah! I thought, and the screen automatically drew me into the online game in progress.

As usual, while I played, I blocked out the endless stream of underlying images, words, and numbers that accompanied the data stream, figuring it was some sort of subliminal advertising

gimmick the game makers were testing out. As I dodged explosions and returned fire with all sorts of cool weapons, my mind drifted on autopilot, exploring the network of other players, connecting to their emotions and thoughts in a way that didn't allow them to notice the intrusion. I could tell the exact moment when each of them recognized Uncle Marshall's TurboHacker call sign—by their emotional groans. That's because I didn't lose very often, and when I did it was usually because Mom interrupted my play. But none of the other players ever gave up. In fact, they seemed more determined than ever to beat me.

My favorite weapon was the robotic swarm. It became available after you used conventional weapons to kill twelve players without dying yourself. The swarm consisted of twenty-four dart-sized drones that hovered and zipped around like hummingbirds. The player could switch his screen view to any one of them, and a single strike from a drone's needle-tipped nose spelled instant death. The key to my success with them was multitasking. Players tended to maneuver a swarm as a single unit. A few of the better players had learned to split their drones into two groups and they had a far higher kill rate than everyone else—other than me, of course. I used an entirely different strategy, my brain separating the drones into twenty individual units so they could either move with the swarm or operate independently. It came naturally to me, so I guess it wasn't very fair to the other players, but heck, war isn't fair, right? Besides, the better I got, the more the other players teamed up against me to even the odds.

I loved it!

Chapter 4

Hong Kong
4:00 a.m.

JIAOLONG MOVED WITH PURPOSE but he wasn't rushed.

Everything is in place.

Lin glided beside him, a hint of her jasmine perfume spurring a familiar yearning.

Heads turned as the couple made their way between rows of computer stations that filled the vast space on the twenty-fourth floor of a converted high-rise factory in Kowloon. Though many bowed their heads in deference to Jiaolong's position, and his mixed heritage elicited admiring glances, he knew most eyes were on Lin. Her beauty was mesmerizing. She had dark almond eyes, porcelain skin, and cherry-blossom lips. Her jet-black hair was pulled back from her face, the bulk held in a bun by elastic rows of baby pearls while the remainder flowed over her Western-style dress to the middle of her back.

There were nearly one hundred and fifty employees on the floor and they operated with unparalleled efficiency. Each had been handpicked, plucked from the scores of state-sponsored cyber training schools scattered throughout China's interior, where most of the employees had begun their indoctrination before their fifth birthday. The average age of the men and women on the floor was nineteen. In America they'd be called "geeks."

In China they were workers.

They lived in lavish dormitories on two of the lower floors, where they enjoyed professionally prepared food, a fully stocked gymnasium, an evening lounge that featured live entertainment, and a computer-game room that Jiaolong suspected rivaled any other in the world. There was even a plush movie theater. Jiaolong's employees wanted for nothing—except the freedom to leave the building.

"He's on," the lead engineer reported as Jiaolong and Lin arrived at a row of padded reclining chairs facing a series of large wall-mounted LED displays. Four techs sat back in the chairs, immersed in the action on their respective screens, their Spider headsets in place as they guided their avatars through intense first-person battles. Other techs sat at consoles behind them, recording and analyzing the data streams generated within the game. One of the players cursed softly as his avatar went down. Another squeezed his fists in frustration when the same happened to him.

Jiaolong shook his head as he watched the action on the screens. The player doing all the killing was known as TurboHacker, and the speed with which he moved through the game was far superior to that of the other players. Even on occasions when Jiaolong participated, he'd been unable to keep up with the man, a fact that he—creator of the game—*still* had trouble accepting. Even more disconcerting was the fact that TurboHacker was the only player impervious to the Spider's subliminal programs. The techs had had zero success bleeding information from him. Worse yet, there had been subtle hints that TurboHacker had penetrated their firewalls, though Jiaolong's best programmers couldn't figure out how or prove it had happened at all. It was something that had to be fully investigated before the system could be launched.

TurboHacker's real name was Marshall Erickson. Because of his status as a security consultant for some of the top corporations and government facilities in America, he had been selected by Zhin—one of Lin's triplet sisters—as a primary target. But it was Erickson's connection to “the Brainman,” aka Jake Bronson, that had stirred the demons in Jiaolong's gut, making Erickson a key player in an entirely different game, one that was about to unfold.

As the game play intensified, Jiaolong allowed his mind to drift, considering the lifelong string of events that had brought him to this point.

His Christian name was Daniel de Vries but he preferred Jiaolong, the nickname his mother had given him. It was derived from a mythological creature called the *chiao* that was capable of changing into many forms. It was usually regarded as a kind of *lung*, or dragon. Sometimes it was manlike, and sometimes it was a reptile or fish, and all of its manifestations were interchangeable.

It suited him.

Children at school used to spit the nickname as an insult because of his mixed heritage. They'd called him other names as well, like chonky and rice cracker. He had memories of tearful nights despairing over that which could not be changed.

That's when his love for video games had become an obsession, not only because they provided him with a world without criticism, but because he'd discovered he was an exceptional player. His mind seemed to be wired differently than other people's and game play came naturally to him. It wasn't long before he rose to the top of the standings on some of the most popular games on the market. That had gotten him noticed by game designers, and before his seventh birthday he'd become a paid consultant to the largest game maker in the world, providing them with valuable input on how to improve the next generation of games. By the time he turned twelve he was programming his own game applications. His online persona found “friends” he could never find in the real world, and it gave him purpose. But he'd still kept the two worlds separated, never using his real name online, and refusing to share his notoriety with his schoolmates for fear they would find a way to ruin it for him.

Then the triplets had arrived at school—Lin, Min, and Zhin. Even as teens their beauty had been historic. Boys got tongue-tied and girls seemed unable to peel their eyes away. Though the triplets had been a year older than Jiaolong, they'd been drawn to him like groupies to a rock star, marveling at the same mix of features others had teased him about. After that, everyone had wanted to be his friend, and his eyes finally opened to life's possibilities.

Encouraged by the examples set by his Chinese mother and Dutch father, he'd learned to embrace the fact that he'd inherited far more than mixed blood and a lavish lifestyle from his parents. From his father, he'd come to understand the nature of international politics and business, the soft lines between right and wrong when pursuing a goal, the importance of surrounding yourself with people whose skill sets were beyond your own, and risking whatever resources necessary to stay ahead of the competition. From his mother he'd learned patience, calculation, and the ancient Chinese game of Go. Her father had been a champion, like his father and grandfather before him—and the rich strategies learned from its mastery had guided Jiaolong's mother's family for generations.

Pursuing seemingly opposing objectives simultaneously is the key to victory.

Lin placed a hand on his arm, interrupting his reverie. “It is time,” she whispered.

He nodded. The game he played now had begun long ago when Jake Bronson and his allies killed his parents. Though he would have preferred to wait until the entire Passcode network was fully in place before making the move that would hint at his true purpose, his grandfather's

declining health dictated otherwise. He pulled out his smartphone, tapped an icon that dialed the control room on the secure floor above, and issued the order.

Chapter 5

Veterans Administration Medical Center

1:00 p.m.

FRANCESCA DIDN'T ANSWER so Jake left a quick voice mail telling her to call him ASAP. He and Doc had just exited the main entrance of the hospital. The summer sun brightened the day but not his mood. A group of wheelchair-bound vets smoked cigarettes beneath a sprawling shade tree.

"Slow down, my boy," Doc pleaded as they hurried down the walkway. "There's no immediate danger."

"Yeah, that's what you said about the pyramids, Doc," he said, referring to the government's assessment that Earth's ancient alien visitors couldn't return for at least forty years. "Remember how that had turned out?" He picked up his pace, opening a text window on his phone as he made his way toward the parking lot. He was about to thumb in a message for Francesca when someone called out from the other side of the street.

"Doctor Finnegan!" The stout woman waved frantically. She looked fiftyish, her hair in a bun, and she was wearing a khaki hunting vest over slacks and sneakers. The silver-haired man beside her was dressed like a college professor. Jake recognized the couple as he and Doc hurried toward them.

Professor Thompson was a physicist and the woman, Eloise, was a brilliant biologist. Jake had met them on the island sanctuary that was meant to become the birthplace of a new world, the one location on the planet that was supposed to have been spared from an alien-induced Armageddon. The path to humanity's extinction had been triggered by a group known as the Order. Eloise and the professor had been unwitting but devout followers—until Jake had infiltrated their midst and revealed the horrendous truth beneath their leader's plan. With their help, Jake and his allies had rescued scores of children from the volcanic eruption that destroyed their underground enclave. Afterward, the couple had been instrumental in helping Doc's team manage the relocation and rehabilitation of the children, most of whom had been orphaned by the cataclysm. Eloise and her husband had also provided a wealth of information about the Order, which had been critically helpful in weeding out many of the leftover factions. Add to that their unique scientific skill sets and it hadn't taken long for Doc to bring them into the fold at Area 52.

"What are you doing here?" Doc asked. "How did you even know I was here?"

"No time for that now," Eloise said breathlessly. Her cherub cheeks were flushed, beads of sweat had formed on her brow. "Timmy's been taken." She turned to Jake. "And you're next."

"This way," the professor said. He took Doc's arm and urged the group down the line of cars. "We don't have much time."

This was it—the threat Jake and his family and friends had been preparing for ever since their narrow escape from the island. Instead of following the others, he stopped to compose the group text that would change their lives forever.

A shot rang out.

The bullet split the air beside his cheek. It impacted the professor between the shoulder blades, launching the man forward with the force of a charging bull. The professor crashed to the ground between rows of cars and Doc toppled beside him. Eloise screamed, both hands to her mouth, her eyes wide. Jake raced toward her and pulled her roughly down with the others.

More shots rang out, hitting the opposite side of the car like hammer blows. The professor lay motionless, the underside of his clothing soggy from an expanding pool of blood. Doc placed his finger on the man's neck and grimaced. "My God, he's dead!"

"Noooo!" cried Eloise, draping herself on her husband's limp form, her body hitching with sobs.

"There's no time for that," Jake said, grabbing her arm. He pulled her to her knees, gripped her shoulders, and trapped her gaze. "Your death will not honor him, Eloise," he growled. "Find your strength and trust me." Two more slugs slammed into the car, her eyes widening further with each blow. She trembled but nodded rapidly and rose to a crouch.

"Attagirl," Jake said, focusing his thoughts and wrapping her in a mantle of determination.

He pulled out the keys to his Jeep. "Stay low but move fast. My car is three rows over." He took off in a crouched run, zigzagging between the first row of cars. Doc and Eloise were close behind. More shots sounded, but the impacts were behind them. For the moment, they were hidden from their pursuers.

Then a man's voice shouted from dead ahead, "Fan out!"

Jake skidded to a stop.

They'd never make it to his Jeep before this new group reached that same row. "Where's your car?" he asked Doc.

"Two rows over. Follow me!" Doc hurried to their left, moving quickly despite his age. Eloise was right behind him.

Jake hesitated, holding his key fob just above the tops of the cars as he pressed the lock button. His Jeep's horn chirped.

"There!" a voice shouted.

The ruse would buy Jake and his friends a few seconds while the assassins converged on the wrong car.

He caught up to Doc and Eloise as Doc was cracking open the door on his Ford Mustang GT rental car. "I'll drive," Jake whispered, taking the keys. "You two get in the back. Heads down. Don't slam your doors."

Once inside, he spotted four armed Asian men moving toward his Jeep, one with a rifle, the others with pistols. They slowed, glancing around, apparently unsure whether or not their prey was in the vehicle. Jake held his Jeep key out the window and pushed the remote-start button. Even from two rows away, he heard the deep-throated rumble of the Hemi V8 come to life. All four men turned in unison toward the Jeep, moving quickly.

"Hang on!" Jake cranked the engine on the Mustang, backed out of the space, and floored it, thankful for the GT model's extra horsepower. The tires squealed, the car leaped forward, and Eloise whimpered from the rear seat.

He avoided the single paved exit of the large lot, veering instead toward a short rise and stand of trees dead ahead. The car lurched hard over the curb, fishtailing as it climbed the soft dirt. In the rearview mirror he saw three of the men racing toward a black SUV. The fourth stood his ground and raised the rifle to his shoulder. The muzzle flashed and two slugs hit the trunk with heavy thunks. Jake jinked the Mustang from side to side, sliding through a narrow gap in

the trees, bounding down the opposite side of the embankment, and bouncing onto the road that bisected the VA campus.

As he sped toward the freeway, he dug his phone from his pocket and handed it over the seat to Doc. "Take this," he shouted. "I need you to send a group text."

Chapter 6

Redondo Beach, California

FRANCESCA SAGGED INTO the stiff chair beside the pharmacy window. She missed her father. It had been four months since she and Jake and the children had last visited him in Venice. He'd been thrilled to see them, his gondolier spirit hearty and strong as ever. It had been a tearful good-bye when they'd left a week later.

It was difficult for her and her father to be apart after thirty years of living together. He'd raised her as a single parent for most of her life; she'd been nine when her mother died. But her father never regretted his daughter building a new life in California. To the contrary, he'd encouraged it, insisting she followed her heart. It was her childhood dream come true—loving someone with the same depth her mama had loved her papa. Francesca had found her man in Jake, one like no other—in so many ways.

This morning's news from the doctors had changed everything. The moment she told her husband the truth, the dream would end.

She choked back her sadness, recalling Jake's guarded behavior with Doc. Was trouble brewing on that front as well? The nagging concern wormed its way around her belly and reminded her he'd left a voice mail. As she reached into her purse for her phone, the pharmacist poked his head over the counter and said, "All set."

Rising, her eyes went to the slanted mirror running along the top of the back wall. It allowed an unobstructed view of the store's interior, discouraging shoplifters. Three smartly dressed Asian men wearing tinted glasses had just walked in. That in itself wasn't odd, but when two of the men remained stationed at the front entrance while the third walked a quick track across the front of the store, systematically glancing down one aisle after the next, it put her senses on alert. She turned her back on the hunter, keeping an eye on his movements with the mirror.

"Restroom?" she asked the waiting pharmacist. Her grimace and hand on her abdomen sent the silent message that she needed a quick reply.

He pointed down the small hallway to his right. "Through there, ma'am," he said. He held up her prescription bag. "Whenever you're ready."

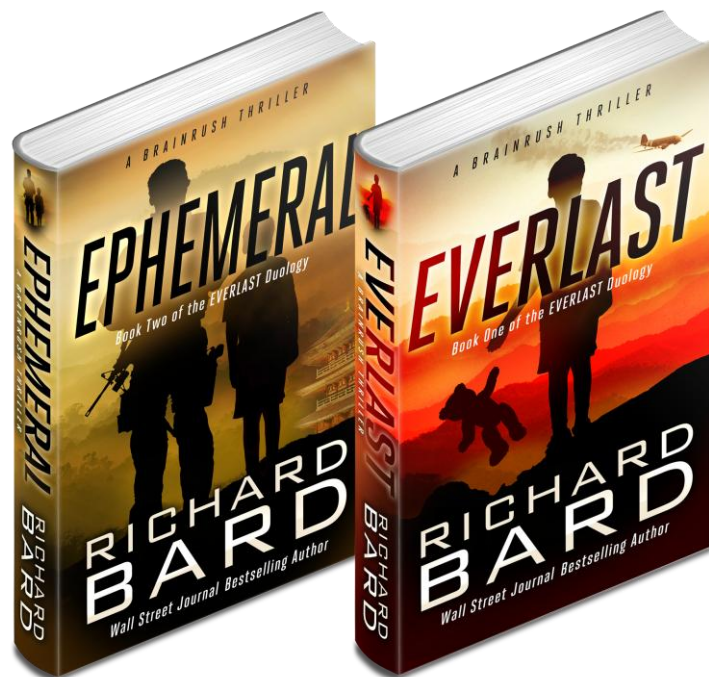
She nodded appreciatively, hesitating a moment as if waiting for a cramp to pass, all the while tracking the movements in the mirror. She knew she was in trouble when her pursuer stopped abruptly as he reached the aisle that provided a view of her position. He stared in her direction for only a brief moment before nodding to the two men at the door. One of them ambled toward the checkout counter to stand behind the only other customer in the store, while the other placed a phone to his ear and exited toward the parking lot. The hunter assumed a casual stance, scanning items on the shelf as he maintained his sight line to her. Whatever they wanted from her, it appeared as if the trap would be sprung when she left through the front door. She doubled over slightly and moved toward the bathroom.

The moment she turned the corner down the hallway she heard quick footsteps behind her. The hunter wasn't taking any chances. It had finally arrived—the moment she'd prayed would never happen. Fear for her children and Jake sent her muscles into overdrive. She kicked off her

heels and ran, moving past the restroom and pushing through a swinging door labeled EMPLOYEES ONLY. The small warehouse space consisted of two short rows of partially filled pallet racks. The roll-up door at the opposite end was closed. The pedestrian door beside it had a push bar labeled EMERGENCY EXIT. She sprinted to it and shoved it open.

Any doubt she'd had about the validity of the threat was washed away when the third man stepped into view to block her path. His mocking expression dared her to try to get past him, but she yanked the door closed and pulled out the only weapon she had—her cell phone. She ignored the first man as he burst into the space from the hallway, her focus on the group text message she composed.

She hit SEND just before he grabbed her arm and ripped the phone from her grasp.



*A gifted boy forced to grow up
too fast...*

*A father who will do anything to
protect him...*

*A madman bent on destroying
them both.*