

The Five

Thomas Roberts

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**To Sandy, my extremely tolerant and lovely wife.
Also to Bobby Cox, Dawn and Bryan,
Trish, Robby and Lisa
and my five grandchildren:
Morgun, Colton, Hunter,
Lexi and Laney**

Chapter 1 Project Five

“The future is not a result of choices among alternative paths offered by the present, but a place that is created--created first in the mind and will, created next in activity. The future is not some place we are going to, but one we are creating.”

John Schaar

Friday June 5, 2020

It's late afternoon and the sun is reflecting crimson and purple hues off the tops of the jagged mountain peaks. Far below, echoing sounds of men scampering and vehicles racing. Above, an eagle cries out against the coming nightfall. The soothing sounds of rushing water from a surging creek or waterfall. The soft sound of wind caressing the tall elegant pine trees as they sway with the wind's rhythm.

Kneeling on a precipitous rock ledge, high up a sheer cliff that sloped downward at a sharp angle, Zane could not see the activity of the men and vehicles below. The height allowed a view of the canyon's immense pine forest that stretched for miles, rendering a feeling of being inconsequential.

The two men climbing behind Abby are gaining ground.

Zane stretched his arm downward, nervously wiggling the fingers of his gloved hand.

“Hurry up, come on, damn it Abby, hurry,” said Zane.

“I'm trying, here give me your hand,” said Abby.

Tiny beads of sweat glistened on her upper lip as she stretched her hand out to Zane. Just as their fingers touched, he saw his wife jerked violently downwards by one of the bounty hunters who grabbed her by the ankle and pulled. Her chin struck the granite ledge as she careened backwards. She screamed “Zane” and then fell to the rocks, sixty feet below. Zane leaned over and saw her body. Arranged in a contorted mass, he saw Abby's arms and legs posed in an impossible and sickening configuration. A picture clicked in Zane's mind, a picture that would be the source of many nightmares for years to come. Zane stepped back a few feet, out of sight of the bounty hunters. The sight of Abby brought him into a combined state of shock and anger.

The bounty hunter grunted and smiled as he scrambled upwards towards Zane. Zane stepped forward and waited until he was staring into the man's dark dead eyes. When the bounty hunter started to crest the top of the ledge, Zane took another step forward and shot his foot out, side kicking the man in the face. The fury of the kick snapped the man's head back. He slid down a few feet but then, like an automaton; he continued to struggle back up the rock face. Zane stepped back, out of sight again and waited.

“Daddy, yelled Jimmy, he's coming!”

“Stay back Jimmy,” Zane yelled as he pushed the boy backwards against the large rock wall behind them. The feral look on his father's face frightened Jimmy as he backed even farther away.

This time, the man climbed to the top of the ledge and stood up. He attempted a smile of bravado, however with blood curling down the man's chin, and with his mouth missing several front teeth from Zane's kick, the smile failed at its desired effect. The man reached for the holstered pistol and found that during his scrambling and climbing, the holster had swivelled towards the center of his back. As he looked down in search of the handgun, a low growl arose from Zane; he gritted his teeth, took two quick steps forward, and using the bottom of his boot,

punch kicked the man in the chest. The man fell backwards, landing on the bounty hunter behind him.

Zane watched as both men, in fierce competition, tried to find handhold on the surface of the irregularly shaped rock they balanced on.

“Shit,” screeched the man Zane had kicked, as he lost his grip and fell the way of Abby. A heavy wet sound, as his body violently struck bottom.

Zane reached down and picked up two rocks, each the size of softballs. He drew back his arm and with careful aim, he threw the first. The rock struck the second bounty hunter directly in the face. A splatter of blood and tissue sprayed outward, covering the rock surface. Zane could see that the rock had crushed the man’s nose and ripped a small tear into his left cheek. As Zane drew back his arm to throw the second rock, the man yelled “no,” and in a defensive effort, he turned his face and body away from the impending impact. Zane watched as the man lost his grip on the rock that had served to hold him in place. He attempted to grab the rock where his hand had been previously, but his hands found only a bloody wet and slippery rock surface. This time there was a bone crunching sound, like dry kindling wood breaking, as the man hit a ledge, bounced off, and continued downward.

Zane turned and knelt down, as Jimmy ran to him. He clutched his son and they began to weep together for the loss of a mother and wife.

Zane heard men’s echoing voices far below, and saw the rocks above them dimly painted with light from flashlights.

“We got one of them, someone yelled. Whew man, would you look at that shit, the bitch popped like a fucking grape.”

“Don’t matter, said another voice, we get paid the same, dead or alive.”

“Where the hell is that chopper?” someone yelled.

“They’re twenty minutes out,” someone yelled back.

Zane grabbed Jimmy up in his arms and began around a large boulder to their right. There had been lights shining on the boulder seconds before. It was almost completely dark now and Zane knew he had to get Jimmy out of there fast.

Why did he have to go up the cliff first? She could probably have made it, and if she had, she would not be dead now. Not the time, he chastised himself, as the worm of self-doubt tried to eat its way to the core of his brain.

He set Jimmy down and looked at him. The boy was in a daze; he said nothing, staring straight ahead.

“Jimmy,” he said in a hushed voice.

The boy did not answer.

“Jimmy, look at me.”

The boy still did not respond.

“Jimmy, I’ve got to leave you here for a minute.”

Jimmy jerked, and turned his eyes towards Zane.

“No, don’t leave me, please, daddy, don’t leave me.”

“Ok, he said to the boy. Ok, but I have to try and find a way to get us over the top; we’re running out of time.”

“Ok, but please don’t leave me daddy,” the terrified boy cried.

It had been over a year since Jimmy had called him daddy. He was “dad” to his son ever since he had turned nine years old.

“Shhhhh,” he whispered, as he wrapped his arms around the boy.

“Shhhhh,”

Jimmy began to cry into his father’s chest. Trembling, he clutched at Zane trying to wrap his arms around him.

“Listen, we’ve got to get out of here, do you understand? They have a helicopter coming. We have to leave before it gets here, do you understand?” he said with a more stern and demanding tone.

“Yes,” the boy said, nodding his head.

Zane removed his backpack and pulled out a coil of thin nylon rope. Then, he removed his knife from its scabbard. He cut off a ten-foot length of the rope, replacing the coil to the backpack and his knife to its scabbard. Zane tied one end of the rope around Jimmy’s left hand, making sure the knot was not too tight. The other end he tied around his waist.

“How’s this, will this be better?”

Jimmy nodded his head.

“Good,” he whispered.

Zane put on his backpack and in a stoop, he walked forward, followed by Jimmy. Within fifteen minutes, they had reached the top of the dark mountain peak. Zane heard a thunderous whomp-whomp-whomp sound, turned and looked back at the helicopter below them, shining its powerful spotlight at the face of the mountain where they had been just moments before. Moving cautiously, he led Jimmy down into the darkness below them, not risking the use of his flashlight. A fingernail moon and bright stars faintly lighted the path. Within an hour, they no longer heard the sound of the helicopter. They had reached the tree line twenty minutes before and were now having difficulty due to the darkness under the canopy of the trees. Zane sought out a place to rest and found shelter under a ledge of a rocky outcropping. He placed his hand over the lens of his flashlight, and turned it on. Zane let out only enough light to see what was under the ledge. He sat Jimmy down on a soft grassy area and sat next to him.

“You have to get some sleep Jimmy.”

“I don’t feel much like sleeping. Jimmy paused. Dad”

“Yeah Jimmy.”

“Why didn’t one of us stay behind and let mom go up first?”

Zane paused and thought about the question.

“I didn’t think she could have made it up by herself, he said to Jimmy as well as to himself. Also, one of us had to stay behind to help you get to the top of that ledge. Jimmy it is not us that you want to blame, or find fault. It is The Five and those bounty hunters. They are the ones responsible for your mother’s death, not us.”

“Yeah but...”

“There are no buts about it. Get those thoughts out of your mind.”

“Who are the bounty hunters and why did they kill mom?”

“I don’t know for sure who they are. Your mom and I started calling them bounty hunters because they do not look like the FBI or police officers. They just look like, bounty hunters or bad guys.”

“Well, why are the FBI and the police chasing us?”

“I think The Five have a way to control them, or at least some of them,” said Zane.

A few minutes of silence passed and Zane reached into his backpack and pulled out a couple granola bars and two bottles of water. They ate in silence. After Jimmy finished his granola bar, he took a long drink from the bottle of water and replaced the cap. He lay down next to where Zane was sitting and within a few minutes, fell asleep.

Saturday March 17, 2001 St. Patrick's Day

As Zane replaced the keys into his pocket and turned the knob on the front door, he jerked from the sharp pain in his right elbow, an injury he received from a kick during a sparring session at the gym. The kick had hit a nerve and Zane smiled as he thought about what kind of person would make up a term "Funny Bone." Zane pushed the door open and found Abby standing in the center of the small foyer; she had her hands behind her back and her face had a look that said, "I know something you don't know."

Zane could smell something good emanating from the kitchen.

"What's up," he said with a suspicious smile.

"Oh, nothing," she said, tickling his curiosity even more.

"Come on Abby, I know that look. What have you been up to?"

"Oh, I've just been on the phone, and then I had to run out and get groceries for dinner."

"We were going out with Josh and Susan weren't we?"

"Yea, but I got this phone call and had to make a change of plans."

"Ok, I give up, who called?"

"Oh, just someone that wanted to talk about a job. Let me see, what was his name?" Abby placed her left index to her temple; eyes closed and chin up, as if in deep thought.

"Let me see, his name was, she paused, oh yea! Devon, Devon Aldine!"

"Are you sure?" asked Zane?

"Yep, he even invited himself to dinner. The audacity of this man," said Abby with a broad grin.

"Devon Aldine?" asked Zane incredulously.

"The one and only," replied Abby.

"The Neuraidine, Devon Aldine?"

"Zane, he's going to be here in about one hour. Fortunately, he gave me enough notice to run out and get something for dinner."

Zane and Abby had made plans with friends the week before to have dinner at O'Reilly's Irish Pub. Abby called their friends and explained why they could not make it.

Devon Aldine was the Founder and CEO of Neuraidine. Devon was a pioneer in the field of Artificial Neural Networks, "ANN." Most people refer to ANN as "Artificial Intelligence." Devon Aldine hosted a series of PBS Special Programs on Artificial Intelligence. Using computer graphics, he described his innovations by explaining how the human brain worked. He explained that much is still unknown about how the brain trains itself to process information. There have been so many different theories; as he started to get a better understanding, he found himself confronted with a lot of confusion and contradiction. Devon stated that he did a lot of research into who was the best authority and decided that Dr. Joseph Rothschild of Harvard University was that authority. Rothschild was a prominent leader in the neurological field. He was the authority Devon would subsequently rely on to gain understanding of how the brain processed information, not just decision making and memory, but all of the neurological processes. Devon learned that in the human brain, a typical neuron collects signals from others through a host of fine structures called dendrites. The neuron sends out spikes of electrical activity through a long, thin strand known as an axon, which splits into thousands of branches.

At the end of each branch, a structure called a synapse converts the activity from the axon into electrical effects that inhibit or excite activity in the connected neurons. When a neuron receives excitatory input that is sufficiently large compared with its inhibitory input, it sends a spike of electrical activity down its axon. Learning occurs by changing the effectiveness of the synapses so that the influence of one neuron on another changes. The key words here are “excite and inhibit.”

A basic artificial neuron has many inputs and one output. The neuron has two modes of operation, the training mode and the using mode. In the training mode, the neuron is taught to fire (or not), for specific input patterns. In the using mode, when the neuron detects a taught input pattern at the input, its associated output becomes the current output. If the input pattern does not belong in the taught list of input patterns, the neuron uses the firing rule to determine whether to fire or not. The firing rule is an important concept in neural networks and accounts for their high flexibility. A firing rule determines how one calculates whether a neuron should fire for any input pattern. It relates to all the input patterns, not only the ones on which the node was trained. Devon provided a simple firing rule called the Hamming distance technique as an example. The rule goes as follows: Take a collection of training patterns for a node, some of which cause it to fire (the 1-taught set of patterns) and others which prevent it from doing so (the 0-taught set). Then the patterns not in the collection cause the node to fire. If on comparison, they have more input elements in common with the nearest pattern in the 1-taught set than with the 'nearest' pattern in the 0-taught set. If there is a tie, then the pattern remains in the undefined state. There were more sophisticated rules, but what Devon was struggling to understand was clustering. The other part of the science of neural networks revolves around the myriad of ways these individual neurons cluster together. This clustering occurs in the human brain in such a way that information is processed in a dynamic, interactive, and self-organizing way.

Biologically, neural networks construct in a three-dimensional world from microscopic components. These neurons seem capable of nearly unrestricted interconnections. That was not the case for existing, man-made networks. Integrated circuits, using ANN technology at that time, were two-dimensional devices with a limited number of layers for interconnection. This physical reality restrained implementation of the types, and scope, of artificial neural networks, especially those implemented in silicon. Devon changed this reality by creating the first Artificial Neural Network that acted as if it were three-dimensional. Not mentioned in the PBS special, was that Devon went to work for the Intellichip Corporation in their R&D Department. Intellichip accused him of stealing some of their technology. Intellichip also accused Devon of spending time working on his own 3D Hybrid Poly-Si chip while receiving payment from Intellichip to do the research for them. Nevertheless, this was just half of the story because the 3D Chip was only functional if he could manipulate and reorganize the neuron clusters. Devon achieved this with a piggyback chip that he named “The Boss.” The Boss Chip programmatically re-dopes the neuron in-vitro via ultraviolet light. Then the Boss reorganizes the neurons into desired clusters. This was a new and different paradigm for ANN. This new revolutionary concept changed an entire industry, and gave birth to The Neuraldine Corporation. Then, Devon developed the “Lifetime Operating System.” This new type of operating system used Neuraldine’s ANN software. The longer the user operated his computer with this system; the better the system operated for the user because the computer had logical memory and could make decisions based on the knowledge of the user. The benefits were numerous and security problems became nonexistent. When you bought a new computer, you transferred your personalized operating system to the new computer. Computers became a more personal

necessity rather than just a tool. Devon also created a new method of marketing this system. Rather than charge a large upfront cost, he charged a small monthly fee. At first, his critics thought that this marketing scheme would fail. However, within a year, Neuraidine's market share was ahead of the third largest of the three companies offering operating systems. Within three years, Neuraidine had captured most of the personal computer operating system market and Devon was on his way to being the richest man in the world.

"You need to start getting ready, said Abby. Go take a shower and put on a clean shirt, and wear your herringbone sports coat with that red tie. You know the one, the dark red power tie."

"Oh, yeah" said Zane as if in a hypnotic state.

"Come on, snap out of it," yelled Abby.

"Yeah, right, I forgot, what is it you wanted me to do?" asked Zane.

Abby laughed.

"Go take a shower."

"Right, right, go take a shower, I've got to go and take a shower," said Zane.

Abby, laughingly grabbed Zane by the arm and started pulling him towards the bathroom.

Against their parent's wishes and advice, Zane and Abby had decided to get married in their sophomore year at MIT. Abby was the one that really pushed for it, saying that as partners, they could help each other through the perils and dangers of acquiring a University Degree. Zane was reluctant at first, but the more he thought about it, well, the idea had its good points. Zane fell in love with Abigail Lee Shriver the first time he laid eyes on her at the University's Annual Odyssey Ball. His roommate, Josh Courtney, knew Abby's roommate, Susan Birmingham. When Josh introduced Zane to Abby, a vague sensuous light passed between them. They spent the remainder of the evening together. Abby was declining dance offers about every five minutes, so they decided to walk outside to the green, a grassy area that separated the MIT Chapel and the Kresge Oval. They sat on a concrete bench and talked for hours. Zane found that Abby was a bright, spontaneous, and determined woman. She had no problem sharing her innermost thoughts. Abby's black hair was shining in the moonlight; she had a small genial mouth and sparkling blue eyes. Her skin was almost too perfect, like peach tinted cream. She had a slim wild beauty, and this was repeatedly causing Zane's pulse to quicken.

Abby suspected that Zane bordered on introversion, unaccustomed to speaking to women and even a bit shy. His light hair was in stark contrast to his deep tan. His wide shouldered rangy body and the way he moved left her of no doubt of his athletic abilities. Despite his shyness, he carried himself with a physical air of confidence that she was acutely conscious of and found herself watching him with intensity. They were almost complete opposites. Abby later told Zane that it was sometime during their conversations, that she decided she was going to marry him. Years later, Zane could remember every word spoken between them.

Abby's parents offered a modest wedding, and they married during summer break of their sophomore year. Zane's grades could not have improved because he was already at the top of his class with a four point zero grade average in Computer Sciences. However, it did improve his lifestyle. Zane was happier than he thought possible. Abby, on the other hand, saw her grade point average go up one-half point. Abby's major was in Psychology. Abby was also as happy as she had ever been. That was two years ago.

Zane was drying off when it dawned on him that "The" Devon Aldine was going to offer him a position at Neuraidine. Then in a few seconds of doubt, he thought, maybe he was just going to offer him something from one of his many small subsidiaries. No, he thought, he would not be coming here in person to offer anything but a position with Neuraidine.

“Right,” he said aloud.

The odor was unmistakable, Abby was making her famous “Corned Beef and Cabbage” with boiled potatoes and her Irish pub salad. Zane was leaning over tying his shoes when the doorbell rang. He jumped up from the bedroom chair as Abby ran into the bedroom.

“It’s him,” she squeaked.

“I think I will go and get the door,” he said in a feigned attempt at normalcy.

Zane stiffly approached the door as the doorbell rang a second time causing him to jump. He looked back, and Abby held up both hands with fingers crossed. She had the most beautiful smile, he thought. Zane opened the door and before he could say anything, Devon Aldine walked in and grabbed Zane’s right hand and began shaking it.

“Hi, I’m Devon”, he said.

“Hi,” responded Zane, I’m Zane.”

“I knew that,” said Devon.

“You did?”

“Of course I did, you didn’t think I would fly out here from Colorado, if I didn’t know everything there was to know about you, did you?”

“Well, I guess not,” said Zane. Abby walked over and taking Zane’s arm said,

“Hi. I am Abby, Zane’s wife.

“I knew that,” replied Devon

“You did?”

There was a pause, and then they all started laughing.

“Sorry, said Zane, you’re a bit of a celebrity around here, and I think we are both a little star struck.”

“You can say that again,” said Abby.

Devon Aldine was a tall lean man in his early forties. His features offered nothing you could call distinguished, except for his smile. Devon’s smile was big, sincere, and contagious. He was dressed in a modest pair of gray slacks and a peach colored golf shirt. Devon’s sculptured, brown and slightly sun-bleached hair gave him a youthful appearance. His skin tone displayed a healthy tan bestowing him with an athletic look.

“Please, said Devon, can we just sit down and chat for a few minutes. I am sure I can convince you that I breathe the same air and eat the same food as you folks do. In fact, I smell something that I do not get to smell very often and that’s home cooking. Zane, you must be a wonderful cook.”

Zane looked at Abby, then back at Devon, and saw just a hint of a smile. Zane laughed.

“I wish.”

“Speaking of smells, I had better go and turn down the Corned Beef, I would just die if I burnt dinner,” said Abby.

“Why don’t we join Abby in the kitchen, they say that the kitchen is the heart of the home,” said Devon.

“Ok, after you,” said Zane, giving a maitre d’ like underhanded wave in the direction of the kitchen. Devon and Zane sat at the table while Abby went to the stove and checked on the corned beef and potatoes. Satisfied that nothing was burning, Abby sat next to Zane.

“How would you both feel about living in Aspen Colorado?” asked Devon. Abby looked at Zane with a big grin. Zane paused.

“I’ve never been to Colorado, but I hear it’s a nice place.”

Abby nudged her foot against his leg under the table.

“I think I, or should I say we, would love to live in Aspen.”

“Well, said Devon, not exactly Aspen, but are you familiar with the Neurdine facilities outside of Aspen?”

“Yeah, who’s not,” said Zane.

“Well, we have a large number of employees working at those facilities, so Neurdine, that is to say, I have built Condominiums to accommodate this large community. We have our own private schools, an Infirmary that is better equipped than most hospitals, and we even have a small grocery store on the compound. I have had my eye on both of you for quite some time and to be frank, I think you both would be a real asset to Neurdine. What do you think?”

“Did you say both of us?” inquired Abby with excitement.

“Yes, I did say both of you. We have a particular project that is in desperate need of Zane’s knowledge and background in Artificial Neural Networks, and as it happens, we need a Psychologist for this same project. I would have been here to talk with both of you even if you had not been married to each other. In other words, you both have what I want, based on your own individual merits.”

“Wow,” said Abby.

Zane said nothing but smiled at Abby.

“I don’t need your answers tonight, but I would like to fly you both, to our Neurdine facilities, next weekend. What do you say?”

Abby nudged Zane under the table again.

“When would you like to pick us up?”

Small talk consumed the rest of the evening. Devon had asked Zane how he thought the Red-Sox were going to finish this year, and Zane asked “The Red Who?” They laughed and as the evening wore on, both Zane and Abby found themselves really starting to like Devon.

The following Saturday, Abby and Zane, after disembarking the Neurdine Jet at the Aspen/Pitkin County Airport, a large well dressed man approached them and identified himself as John. He announced that he would be their chauffeur. John opened the rear door to the Neurdine Limousine and held out his hand to assist Abby into the luxurious car. Zane climbed in after Abby and John closed the limo’s door. John drove them through the town of Aspen; they were both expecting to see a much larger town. John told them the town was a lot larger than it appeared and what they were seeing was just the tourist section of the town. The town had a rustic western flavor, and the large snow covered mountains surrounding it made the town seem surreal. Parked cars and people packed the streets. John turned on Hunter Street and showed them the ski lift and Gondola Plaza. He drove out of the city towards a mountain range to the west of Aspen. After about fifteen minutes, John pointed to some huge mountainous peaks.

“Those are the Maroon Bells.”

“What are Maroon Balls?” asked Abby.

“Maroon Bells,” corrected John with a smile.

“The Maroon Bells are those mountain peaks west of us; they are quite a tourist attraction. There is a lake at the base called the Maroon Lake and people like to take pictures and hike around that area. Devon purchased the Neurdine property west of the base of the Maroon Bells. There was a big fight with the Forest Service because he found an area just outside of the Federal Reserve that fell under some old land grant his attorneys dug up. He made sure that the Neurdine property was not visible and did not interfere with the tourist trade. The property sits in a valley and the only way you can see it is if you fly a helicopter over it. The road we are on now is the Maroon Lake Road. The entrance road to Neurdine is coming up on the right.”

As he said this, John turned onto a paved road that was not much wider than the Limousine. John spoke into a radio handset that neither Zane nor Abby had noticed before.

“I have to make sure there are no vehicles coming down the mountain. As you can see, this is a one way street,” said John.

Twenty minutes later, they approached a small scenic lake, fed by a creek that came from the base of the Maroon Bells.

“Devon built this lake to duplicate the aesthetic scenery of Maroon Lake. Although it is much smaller, I believe he achieved the effect.”

Zane saw they were coming up to a brick building with a barbed wire fence that ran on both sides and extended as far as he could see. A candy cane colored wooden or plastic swing arm extended across the road. A man dressed in a security guard uniform and wearing a holstered pistol approached John with a clipboard.

“Hey John,” said the guard.

“What do you know?” responded John.

“Another day and another dollar,” said the guard while handing John the clipboard.

John wrote something on the clipboard and handed it back. At the same time, he lowered the limos rear window. The guard looked through the open window at Zane and Abby. He glanced down at the clipboard then tapped the limo’s roof.

“You’re good to go.”

The guard walked over to the security building and pushed a red button mounted to the side of the door. The candy-cane security arm raised and John drove the limo up the tree lined entrance road. Two hundred feet later, the road veered right. Zane and Abby gasped in unison. The enormous building was a dark glass and anodized aluminium pyramid. Two years previous, Zane had attended a wedding in Las Vegas, and he stayed at the Pyramid shaped Luxor Hotel. The Neurdine building was every bit as large and imposing as the Luxor Hotel. There was an immense fountain outside the building’s entrance, shooting a stream of water a hundred feet into the air. Lush blooming foliage, interspersed with wooden benches and sculptured shrubbery surrounded the fountain.

“Wow,” said Abby.

“That is the usual reaction, said John. Although I must admit I’ve heard a few other explicative words a little stronger than Wow, and not generally used in the presence of a lady.”

“Ok then, how about Holy Shit!”

Zane shook his head and laughed along with John. When John quit laughing, he pointed to an area to the right of and behind the Neurdine Building. What they saw surpassed their expectations. They were looking at a small town that had a similar rustic architectural style as what they had seen in Aspen. As John drove them closer, they could see a general store; a clothing store; and what appeared to be a small school with a flagpole and a flag in front of the main building. There were kids milling about outside one of the other buildings. John pointed out the general store and gave them a brief summary of what the store offered. Next to the store was a small café.

“Their eggs benedict are fabulous,” said John.

Farther down the street was a more fashionable restaurant that bore a sign with the words “Fresh Seafood and Steaks” under the restaurant’s name, which was simply “Tom’s Place.” There was even a small Credit Union building.

“The Neurdine Credit Union serves as the local bank,” said John.

“We have a bus; actually, we have two busses that run into Aspen twice a day.”

“How many people live here?” asked Abby.

“Neuraldine employs over two thousand people at this facility,” said John.

“There is a lot more to show you, but Devon is expecting you in about five minutes, I’m sure he will show you the rest,” said John as he turned the limousine around and headed towards the Neuraldine Building.

Saturday June 6, 2020 4:55 A.M.

Zane started to fall forward and jerked awake. There was a far off sound of a helicopter. The overcast sky and the sun had given birth to beautiful mango and alabaster clouds. It was light enough for Zane to see Jimmy. The boy was lying on top of his sleeping bag, a picture of youthful innocence. Zane had to wonder what long-term effects the events of the last three weeks were to going have on this ten-year-old boy. Then it hit him, he would never see or be with Abby again. “How can this be, he asked himself. The last several years had been like some kind of far out science fiction novel. The Five, he thought, how could they not have seen what was happening with The Five? Abby was the first to issue a warning.

“They’re not psychotic, she said, they are something we know nothing about.”

Well, he thought, she was right; they are something we know nothing about. They were miscreants of doom, the bringers of John’s apocalyptic vision. Even though he, David Morris and Sid Bloomfield had written the programs that provided the high-tech education for The Five, they had no idea about what was really going on inside their minds. We just kept pumping it in and pumping it in, all the knowledge their minds could absorb. Abby warned us, she tried to tell us! However, her warning was years ago, and it was for the sake of the five children, not for the sake of humanity. Moreover, now, these five children had grown up. Now, they were “The Five.” Now, the warning Abby had last issued was for humankind. Was she too late? Were they all too late? Jimmy let out a soft but distressful groan and Zane returned to the present. God how I wish I could use my GPS, he thought as he took the map and compass from his backpack. They had decided against using anything electronic because they were not sure just what The Five capabilities were. Why had David and Sid chosen Sedona, Arizona? What could there be in Sedona? Getting out of Colorado had turned out to be a nightmare.

They were looking at three days before they would get to Dolores, a small country town of less than one thousand people. They would have to get supplies in Dolores, and then they were going to have to travel on flat ground, with very little cover. I wish I had my Land Rover, thought Zane. He thought back to Thursday when they had just passed the small town of Rico, a Delores County Sheriff tried to pull them over. Zane did not go crazy and try to out run the Deputy. Instead, he drove at the speed limit, ignoring the lights and siren. Abby was looking at the map, trying to find a route that might be too difficult for the Deputy’s Crown Victoria. She told him to turn right on the next path, and when he started into the turn, the Deputy rammed his Land Rover. Jimmy saw it coming and yelled, “Dad” just as the Ford hit and they all jerked to the side. The collision pushed in the right rear quarter panel and bumper far enough in for it to rub against the tire. Zane took off down the small trail with the Deputy following. The big, bulky Crown Victoria was no match for the Land Rover and in less than a mile; the Deputy drove off a small embankment and rolled over once before landing back on its wheels. When Zane looked back, all he could see was a cloud of dust reflecting the red and blue colors from the Crown Victoria’s emergency lights. Forty-five minutes later, Zane noticed smoke coming from the rear of his vehicle. When he pulled over and stopped the Rover, he saw the flames.

“Get out, he yelled, the Rover’s on fire”

Jimmy was smart enough to start throwing their backpacks and bedrolls out of the door before he jumped out. Zane ran over to Jimmy’s side of the Rover and saw the backpacks and bedrolls on the ground, he started picking them up and tossing them far away from the burning Rover.

“Run, Zane yelled, get far away from the Rover, run!”

The right rear tire had caught fire from the friction caused by the metal and plastic quarter panel rubbing against it. Zane knew the gas tank sat between the two rear wheels and was afraid it would blow. He was almost right. The gas tank did not explode but a fuel line did, spraying gasoline further up the frame towards the front of the Rover. Within seconds, flames engulfed the entire vehicle.

“Well, I guess we’re on foot,” said Zane.

That was only two days ago, and it seemed like a lifetime thought Zane. Maybe when they got to Dolores, he could buy a cheap car, he still had more than two thousand dollars cash. Surely, he could pick up something for under a grand. From Dolores they would travel to Cortez. After Cortez, they would go to Tawaoc. Sid had told him that after he had traveled along State Highway 491 for about thirty miles, he would come to a fork. He was to take the Highway 160 at the fork. The Arizona State line was about forty miles from the 160 junction. Five miles prior to arriving at the Arizona Border, he would pass over a river. Just past the river, there was a small dirt trail. Sid said to take this trail to avoid any Boarder Inspections. The trail ended up in Teec Nos Pos, a small Navaho Indian town just across the border. He heard the helicopter again, but this time it sounded a lot closer. Zane nudged Jimmy awake. Jimmy had slept for at least eight hours. Breakfast consisted of beef jerky and apple juice in small cardboard containers. With the helicopter flying so close, they could not chance a cook fire.

“When are we going to get there?” asked Jimmy.

“Hey, do you remember when we used to hike in the mountains, you know, down by Woodland Park?”

“Yeah, said Jimmy, but when are we going to get to where ever we are going?”

“Well, remember how much fun we had on our hikes?” said Zane.

“Yeah, there was a momentary hesitation, but mom was with us on those hikes,” said Jimmy and his eyes started to tear up.

“Jimmy, remember when your mother and I had that talk with you about death and dying. Remember, it was right after NaNa Shriver passed away?”

“Yeah,” Jimmy muttered.

“Do you remember what your mother told you? Your spirit or your soul is a form of energy. Remember, the soul, like energy, can change into something else, but it never goes away.”

“Yeah, but what has mom changed into and where has she gone. Why can’t whatever she changed into be with us now?”

“Where your mom is now, is a much better place than here,” said Zane.

“You mean she is somewhere where there is no Five?”

“Yeah, and she is someplace where you are not allowed to be sad or unhappy, they just won’t allow it, said Zane. She can look down at us, and she knows that one-day, we will join her in this happy place. That makes her very happy.”

“Dad, was mom scared, do you think it hurt very bad when she died?”

Zane looked at Jimmy and paused.

“No Jimmy, it all happened so fast, she didn’t know it was going to happen. She didn’t feel any pain at all.”

“How do you know?”

“Because, I saw what happened, and you’ve got to believe what I am telling you. Your mom did not feel anything at all. It was as if someone turned off a light. That’s how fast it was.” The clouds were slowly turning a dark charcoal gray, threatening inauspicious thunderings of what the future could possibly be.

Monday November 5, 2001 10:35 A.M.

“You mean the parents just gave their kids away,” said Abby?

“No, Neuraudine told them how important this program was to the future of mankind. In addition, how their children were going to help other children all over the world. Of course, they received enormous remunerations, said Louise, Abby’s Department Manager, and immediate Supervisor.

“You mean Neuraudine bought them off,” said Abby with disdain.

“Look, Abby, what we are trying to accomplish will revolutionize how we learn. Think about it. A child, any child, will be able to learn what now takes twelve years to teach in less than three years. The child’s intellect will not matter because we are using a ‘Hard Wire’ method of getting information into the brain; we are setting up patterns that were not there before. It will be like breathing, nobody taught you how to breathe, did they? Well, learning will be like breathing, effortless!”

“So what you are saying is that the ends justify the means,” said Abby.

“Yes, there have been occasions in history where men and women have made sacrifices and volunteered for something risky that would ultimately benefit mankind,” said Louise.

“You mean like the Tuskegee Experiments?” asked Abby.

“No, said Louise, this is nothing like that at all and I resent your making that kind of comparison.”

“I’m sorry, said Abby, in a softer tone. This just does not seem right to me. I mean, these are babies; no one is asking them if they want to take part.

“Look, said Louise, there are more than six million kids out there requiring Special Education. There is Autism, Attention Deficit Disorder, Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, Dysgraphia and many other learning disabilities. Our educational system is not equipped to handle these disabilities. They are choosing to medicate, not educate. What we are doing at Neuraudine is non-invasive. We are addressing that part of the brain that will not affect personality, the id, the ego and super-ego. Abby laughed.

“I wasn’t much on Freud’s structural model, but I’m getting your point.”

“Think about this, let’s take an inner city child, and let’s call him Freddy. Freddy is in the third grade. The school he attends is substandard. The teaching staff has limited resources due to the low tax base. These schools do not attract the best teachers, and minorities frequently become labeled ED, Emotionally Disturbed, rather than one of the many learning disability labels that should apply. Now, these five babies will have a chance to end all of this. If we are successful, every child in the world will have an effortless and superior education. These babies will know how to add, subtract, and multiply.

They will be knowledgeable of history, the arts, and the sciences. All of this by the time they are five or six years old, when a normal child is still struggling with his or her communication skills,

these children will have the equivalent of a high school education. With the Neuraldine method, there is no such thing as a learning disability.”

“What I don’t understand, said Abby, is why the parents can’t get involved. I mean, why couldn’t they have weekend visits or something?”

“Project Five is just the first of our students, Dr. Rothschild requires total familial isolation for the first five so that we can evaluate educational progress and look for any psychological side-effects,” said Louise.

“Psychological side-effects, I thought this method would not affect the, how did you put it; the id, ego or superego?”

“What I said was, we are not dealing with that area of the brain, and there should be no side-effects. However, Dr. Rothschild, like any good researcher is covering all of his bases. When he publishes his paper for peer review, there will be questions about the psychological effects of his process. Dr. Rothschild will have to address this in the Neuraldine Patent.”

“Neuraldine is going to patent this?”

“Well of course, Neuraldine is a business, and business makes money on what they produce. If everything goes as expected, Neuraldine’s Neural Net software will be a small part of Neuraldine. Abby, your responsibilities will be to document, not to treat. Your documentation will be a very important part of Dr. Rothschild’s program. I understand your husband, what is his name?”

“Zane,” responded Abby.

“Yes, Zane, I understand he will be an important part of the programming team. He will be working with David Morris and Sid Bloomfield. I have heard good things about both of them from Dr. Rothschild. Shall I introduce you to The Five now?”

“The Five?” asked Abby.

“Yes, that’s what we call the babies, The Five. Dr. Rothschild came up with that label at same time he decided to name the program, Project Five.”

“Yes, said Abby, I would like to meet the babies.”

Later that afternoon Louise introduced Abby to a rotund and gregarious Dr. Rothschild. He was not at all, what Abby had expected. He ended every sentence with a smile or a short laugh. However, when he spoke of The Five Project, he turned very serious. Dr. Joseph Rothschild started out as a medical doctor. He slowly, because of his innate abilities, gravitated to the research side of his profession. He was at home in the University environment and was a master at gaining grants to further his research. Devon lured him away from Harvard with the promise that he could continue his current research without the financial limitations of grant money. Rothschild had presented a paper to the “Science Now” magazine that postulated his “Theory of Memory Mapping and Neurological Data Input.” There was a good deal of criticism from the science community, but when Devon read the article, he saw the potential immediately. Rothschild was recruited and Neuraldine’s Project Five was born.

“So, how was your day,” asked Zane as he sat down to a plate of spaghetti?

“My day, my day was quite intriguing,” answered Abby.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, what I mean is, my Brain and Cognitive Sciences Education at MIT forgot to teach me the fundamentals of Infant Psychology. They just skipped right over that and went directly to Child Psychology.”

Zane laughed.

“I see you met The Five.”

“Yeah, I guess you could say that,” said Abby.

“Well, what did you think?”

“I’m not really sure about how I feel about all of this, said

Abby, I think when I know a lot more about Rothschild’s process; I might feel a little better. Can you tell me anything about it?”

Zane thought for a moment.

“You have heard me use the word Binary in conjunction with programming, right?”

“Yeah,” said Abby.

“Ok Binary is all ones and zeros. If I wanted to write the capital letter ‘A’ in binary it would go like this: Zero, One, Zero, Zero, Zero, Zero, Zero, One. Rothschild’s theory is that we can encode data directly into the human brain via an external stimulus, using the code that we are currently developing in my department.”

“What do you mean by External Stimulus,” asked Abby?

“Ok, using Binary as an example again, if I attach a six-volt electrode to your middle finger on your right hand, and I give you a shock, we call it a Tap because it sounds better and you barely feel it. That single Tap represents a Zero. Now if I attach an eight-volt electrode to your index finger on your right hand and give you a Tap, this Tap represents a one. Therefore, to communicate the letter A, we would give your middle finger one Tap, and then we would give your index finger one Tap followed by five taps to your middle finger then one Tap to your index finger.”

“That sounds a lot more complicated than just saying ‘A,’ why two different voltages and why the right hand?” asked Abby.

Zane took a drink of wine from his glass.

“Hold your hands up, point your two index fingers at each other, now bring them real close and let them touch. The electrical stimulus that occurred, the instant they touched, traveled to your brain at a speed of approximately two hundred feet per second. Your fingers are the most sensitive part of your body. That is because the fingers have special nerve endings that are much more sensitive than the ends of the nerves elsewhere in the body. These nerve endings in the fingertips allow us to feel things that practically no other nerves can feel. The reason we use the right hand, is that it contributes to a relatively better perception by the left cerebral hemisphere. The left side of the brain deals with logic. It is more analytical, rational and objective. The reason for two different voltages is to prevent ‘Sensitivity Confusion’. Sensitivity Confusion occurs when you feed data at faster rates, so by using two different voltages, the brain can discern between the two fingers.”

“This sounds like it is going to take longer than just sitting down and teaching them the alphabet and their numbers,” said Abby.

“It sounds like a long process when I explain it, I mean, Zero, One, Zero, Zero, Zero, Zero, Zero, One. Just keep in mind that our goal is eight hundred kilobytes per minute. That is over forty-eight million bytes per hour. In twenty-one hours, we can feed a gigabyte of data directly to

the brain. Now, take a second and let those numbers sink in, said Zane. These numbers are just estimations and they are on the low side. It is possible that we will feed three or four times that much data.

“You mean, you only have to feed these taps into the fingers, and Walla, the six month old baby knows the alphabet?”

“No, I’ve over simplified the process so you could get a grasp of how it works. Dr. Rothschild has shown that in order to comprehend the continuous stream of cacophonies and visual stimulation that battle for our attention, humans will breakdown activities into smaller, more digestible chunks, a phenomenon that you psychologists describe as ‘Event Structure Perception.’ Event Structure Perception was originally believed to be confined to our visual system, but Rothschild’s research has shown that a similar process occur with all our system senses. Therefore, with this in mind, you can see why the isolation of The Five is critical. When we start out, it is imperative that we keep outside stimulus kept low so that the chunks of data can be large. Once we have established our neural network, we will eliminate Event Structure Perception, because we have taught the brain how to focus and shut out outside stimuli. Initially, we will support the electronic stimulus with audiovisual input, teaching the alphanumeric system. There is three years of pre-training, teaching the code, which is the equivalent of teaching them to talk. Once we have achieved this, the basic memory patterns have been permanently imprinted. Then we use ANN coding to build a matrix of memory patterns. We actually start training the brain how to think and solve problems. Dave, Sid, and I have been working on a compiler, which interprets bitwise data before transferring it to The Five. Dr. Rothschild has a five-year plan, which if successful, will provide The Five with knowledge comparable to a high school education. Abby paused and lifted her wine glass, pedantically looking at the purity of the red fluid. She took a drink.

“What about communication and social skills?”

“There is a department that deals with walking, talking and all the normal things a child is exposed to as it grows,” said Zane.

“Do you hear yourself? You just referred to a child as an ‘it.’ You and everyone else around here are talking about these children as if they were some new breed of lab rat. Where is the humanity in all of this?” asked Abby.

She stood up, picked up her half eaten plate of spaghetti, and started for the kitchen. Zane stood and followed her. While she was at the kitchen sink, scraping the uneaten spaghetti off her plate, Zane came up and put his hands around her waist.

“This just doesn’t feel right to me,” said Abby.

“Let’s not talk about it anymore,” said Zane as Abby turned on the water and then switched on the garbage disposal.

“Yeah, it’s been kind of a long day. Honestly Zane, I am having a hard time getting my head around this new concept,”

Saturday June 6, 2020 9:00 A.M.

President Harry S. Brooks sat behind his desk in the Oval Office, awaiting his Secretary of State, Harold Chambers, and the Vice President, Maxwell Duran. Mary Wilson, the President’s

secretary, knocked lightly and then opened the office door, announcing the arrival of Duran and Chambers.

“Gentlemen, come on in,” said President Brooks.

“Good morning Mr. President,” said Harold Chambers as he and Duran sat on the Sofa in front of the President’s desk.

“I’m not sure that it is, said President Brooks. We should all be out on the golf course, instead of here.”

Duran and Chambers gave a brief nod and polite smile of acknowledgment.

“Ok, let's get down to business, what in the hell is going on with Pakistan?”

“Anwar is simply going back on his word, said Chambers. He called me last night and said he was under too much pressure by the Pakistani Senate, particularly that ass hole Aziz. Remember, I told you he was going to be a pain in the ass when they elected him as the Senate Leader.”

“We need to bring him to our side of the table,” said Duran.

“And Max, just how do you propose we do that?” asked President Brooks.

“LISTEN TO WHAT WE HAVE TO SAY”

“What..., what..., what was that?” asked President Brooks.

“LISTEN TO WHAT WE HAVE TO SAY”

The voice inside President Brook’s head had a metallic echoing effect, sounding like multiple people speaking in unison.

Chambers and Duran looked at each other and then back at the President. President Brooks had a tormented look on his face as he said, “What in the hell is going on, did you guys hear that?”

“Hear what?” said Duran with concern.

The President paused and looked upwards, and then he shifted his eyes around the room as if to find where the voice had come from.

“You guys didn’t hear that?”

“Are you Ok Mr. President?” asked Chambers.

“Yeah, Yeah... Where were we,” he asked, hoping to find some kind of explanation later, wondering if he was having some kind of health crisis.

“Well,” said Duran.

“WE WILL LEAD THE NATION. YOU WILL FOLLOW AND DO WHAT WE TELL YOU TO DO.”

This time both Chambers and Duran heard the same voice inside their heads.

“What the fuck is going on here?” said Maxwell Duran.

“YOU WILL FOLLOW AND DO WHAT WE TELL YOU TO DO.”

The President stood, and pushed his intercom button.

“Mary,” get Jackson in here.

Ed Jackson was the Secret Service Special Agent in Charge (SAIC) for President Brooks.

Jackson, a twenty-year veteran of the Secret Service, was tall at six foot three inches. He was the

first African-American to be the POTUS SAIC. His close-cropped hair was greying at the temples, but his physical conditioning and training were apparent. Jackson and two other agents rushed into the Oval office. Jackson was speaking into a microphone attached to the sleeve of his suit jacket. Jackson approached the President.

“Sir?” said Jackson with a questioning look on his face.

“REMOVE EVERYONE FROM THE ROOM EXCEPT YOU AND THE VICE PRESIDENT.”

This time only the President and the Vice President heard the voice.

“Who the fuck are you?” asked Duran, speaking into the air while facing the President. Jackson immediately saw this as a threat to the President and stepped towards the Vice President ready to intervene.

“REMOVE EVERYONE FROM THE ROOM EXCEPT YOU AND THE VICE PRESIDENT”

“I want everyone out of the room, except you Max,” ordered the President.

“Mr. President, I don’t know what’s going on here but I don’t think it’s a good idea for me to leave the room,” said Jackson as he glanced at the VP with suspicious concern.

“I’m fine, said Brooks. Just do as I ask, please,” said President Brooks.

The three Secret Service Agents followed Chambers out of the Oval Office. Mary Wilson gave President Brooks a concerned look and slowly closed the door. President Brooks returned to his desk and sat down. Duran remained standing to the side of the President’s desk and searched the room with his eyes, seeking some kind of explanation that made sense.

“MAXWELL DURAN”

“Yes,” acknowledged Duran.

“What?” asked President Brooks.

“They... or it, or he, whatever it is; it just said my name,” replied Duran to the President’s question.

“WE ARE THE FIVE, AND YOU WILL DO WHAT WE TELL YOU TO DO.”

“WE ARE THE FIVE, AND YOU WILL DO WHAT WE COMMAND YOU TO DO.”

“The fuck you say,” responded Duran in an angry tone.

“THE PRESIDENT IS NOW DEAD.”

“What?” asked Duran.

“THE PRESIDENT IS NOW DEAD.”

Duran heard a hollow thump sound and looked down at the President. President Brook's head was on the desk, his eyes were open and there was a trickle of blood coming out of the corner of his left eye.

"Help, someone, help me, get in here," Duran screamed.

The door to the Oval Office crashed open, and the three Secret Service Agents entered in a manner that appeared well thought out and predetermined. All three had their Sig Sauer semi-automatic pistols out. Two of the agents were fanning the room looking for targets. Jackson had his pistol aimed at the Vice President.

"Get help, get medical help now," ordered Duran.

Jackson, without removing the VP from his gun sights, spoke into his transmitter,

"Cherokee Nation," the code phrase for POTUS down.

Monday June 8, 2020 9:30 A.M.

"I need you to stay here; they will be looking for a man and a boy."

"But, dad, I'm afraid. What happens if someone sees me?"

"No one is going to see you! If you stay hidden in this culvert, no one will see you. I have to get us a vehicle, do you understand? I have to. We can't survive on foot."

"But dad..."

"Stop-it! Toughen up for Christ sake! You have got to stay here, do you understand?" said Zane with a terseness Jimmy had never heard before.

"Yeah, Ok, but you won't be gone long will you?"

"I will be gone as long as it takes to find us some transportation. Look Jimmy, everything beyond Cortez is going to be flat desert. There will be no place to hide from the helicopters; we will be sitting ducks. We have to get a car or a truck."

Delores was a small sleepy town of less than a thousand people. Ponderosa pines adorned the streets, and the homes were all of the 1940's Bungalow era, with gabled roofs that extended outwards to cover the large front porches. All the homes were sitting atop rock foundations and constructed of brick or wood siding. Every home had a mailbox placed in front, next to the street. Zane noticed that many of the homes had small-outstretched flagpoles flying the American flag at half-mast. There was a slight breeze whispering through the pine needles. Zane saw a small boy peddling a bicycle from the driveway of a house into the street, and then back again. There were two dogs barking, whether they were communicating their displeasure to each other or at each other, Zane could not discern. He turned to walk in the direction of the town's small business area. There was a gas station, a bank, a general store, and a small café. As he approached the general store, Zane noticed a huge set of moose antlers hanging below the store's sign declaring the name of the store, "Moose's General Store." The store was a log cabin style building. Zane looked up at the bleached out skeletal moose ornament and wondered about whether there were really moose in southern Colorado. As he opened the door, the tinkle of a brass bell announced his entering the store, the man behind the counter greeted him with a "howdy". The man was a giant, at six foot five inches tall. The man had to weigh over three hundred and fifty pounds, thought Zane. He appeared to be in his early fifties and was wearing a nametag that said, "Moose."

"Hi, said Zane, do you have a bulletin board that people tack cards on to sell things?"

"Sure do, right next to the door you just walked through."

Zane turned around and started for the cork bulletin board when the man said, “What are you looking to buy, maybe I can help?”

“I’m looking for a used car or truck, mine broke down in Rico, and the mechanic was out of town. I have a business meeting in Albuquerque that I can’t miss.”

“How much are you looking to spend?”

“I would like to keep it under fifteen-hundred,” said Zane, immediately wishing he had said a thousand.

“Jacob Hansen,”

“What?”

“Jacob Hansen has an old ford one fifty pick-up, said Moose, only problem is, the bank is closed because of the, well, you know, because of the President dying. You won’t be able to write a check.”

“What are you talking about, the President of the United States, died?”

“You haven’t heard?”

“I haven’t been around any TV or radios. That is why everyone is flying flags at half-mast, said Zane as much to himself as to Moose.”

“Yeah, people around here are pretty upset; President Brooks was a good man.”

“How did he die?” asked Zane.

“Their saying it was some kind of aneurysm of something like that.”

“Wow,” said Zane, thinking “The Five” in the back of his mind.

“Hey, let me give Jacob a call, if you are still interested that is?” said Moose.

“Yeah, I’m still interested.”

Moose picked up the 1960s rotary style telephone and dialed a number.

“Hey Jacob, why don’t you bring that beat up old truck of yours down here. There is a guy here that might be crazy enough to buy it. He winked at Zane. Yeah, how long, Ok, I’ll tell him, hey you’re going to pay me a commission for this, right?” Moose laughed and hung up the phone.

“He said he would be just a few minutes.”

“Thanks, I need to do a little grocery shopping anyway.” Zane spent the next ten minutes listening to Moose tell the history of Delores Colorado while he picked up various items of food and ten bottles of water. He sat everything on the counter and walked back down an aisle searching for a few more items. Zane heard the brass tinkle of the store’s front door bell, and when he turned, he saw a man he thought had to be Jacob Hansen. Jacob was a man in his mid-seventies with gray hair pushing out of the sides of his sweat stained cowboy hat. Jacob was wearing denim trousers and cowboy boots. The armpits of the blue cotton work shirt were soaked with sweat.

“Well, it’s about time, what took you so long?” said Moose.

“Awe shut-up Moose,” said Jacob. When he looked at Zane, he stopped and paused with a strange look on his face.

“You must be the crazy guy Moose told me about.”

“That’s him, said Moose, I warned him about you, and how you thought your truck was worth more than anyone around here was willing to pay.”

“And you wanted me to pay you a commission?” said Jacob.

Zane stuck out his hand.

“Hi, I’m Zane Knight. Jacob grabbed his hand in a firm grip and shook it.

“Come on outside and I’ll show you what I got.”

Zane followed Jacob out the front door, and they approached a 2010 Ford F-150, parked in front of the store. The truck was a faded light blue and had numerous dents and rust spots. The windshield had a crack that started at the top of the passenger side and ended at the middle of dash. Bird droppings peppered the cab of the truck and there was a small pine branch stuck in the mirror frame on the driver's side.

"Aint much to look at, but she runs good," said Jacob.

"Good enough to get me to Albuquerque?"

"Good enough to get you to where ever you want to go," said Jacob.

"What are you asking for it?"

"Well she bluebooks for about twenty five hundred. But seeing as she has so many dents and dings, I was thinking I would let her go for about fifteen hundred."

"Any chance I could get you down to about twelve hundred?"

"There is a chance you might get me down to about thirteen hundred, but I won't go any lower than that, said Jacob. Problem is the bank's closed because of the President dying."

"I can pay you cash," offered Zane.

"Then we got us a deal, said Jacob. You can test-drive her on the way to my place, I need a ride and the Title is at my home."

Zane entered the store and paid Moose for the groceries.

"I'll bring that dollar by after I finish up with this gentleman," said Jacob to Moose.

"What dollar?" asked Moose.

"Your commission," said Jacob as he chuckled and walked out the store's front door.

Zane followed Jacob's directions to his house and he found it strange that they were going back to where he had started out.

"You want to pull up and pick up your little boy?" Jacob said pointing in the direction of the culvert Jimmy was hiding in.

"What... How..."

"I saw you and your boy this morning. My place is right next to where that culvert is, said Jacob. Now, I don't want you to get all excited but I figure I had better tell you, I am wearing my service revolver. And until I get some answers that make any sense, you had better move very slowly and not do anything I might construe as a threat. Are we clear about that?"

"Yes, we are, said Zane. But can we just leave my son out of this for the time being?"

"We could but I hate to see that boy hiding in a culvert. This has been a bad year for rattlesnakes. Why don't we just go ahead and pick him up."

Zane pulled up alongside the culvert.

"Can I get out and get him?" asked Zane.

"You can get out and call him over to the truck, responded Jacob. Remember, no suspicious moves."

"Ok." said Zane, as he opened the truck door and called for Jimmy.

"Dad, is that you?" came Jimmy's voice from the culvert.

"Yeah, grab our backpacks and come get in the truck," shouted Zane.

Jimmy poked his head out of the culvert and looked in the direction of Zane and Jacob. A few seconds later, he was running to the pickup with a big smile on his face.

"You bought a truck," he said.

Zane feigned a smile.

"Sure did. Jimmy, this is Mr. Hansen. We need to go to his house and get the paperwork for this truck."

“Nice to meet you Mr. Hansen, thanks for selling my Dad this cool truck.”

“Well, you’re very welcome Jimmy. And you’re right, this is a cool truck.”

Zane drove the truck about two hundred feet to enter the driveway to Jacob’s house.

“Is this a ranch, Mr. Hansen?”

“Well Jimmy, when my dad lived here it was a ranch, a horse ranch. But, when he passed a way, I came here and because I’m retired, I really didn’t want do all the work required to run a ranch. So, I just keep a couple of horses, raise a few chickens and hogs, and try not to work so hard.”

“Did you retire from ranching?” asked Jimmy.

“No, I’m a retired a police officer, I used to work for the Colorado Springs Police Department,” said Jacob.

Zane looked at Jacob. Jacob gave him a knowing wink.

“Here we are, let’s go in and get something cold to drink. Jimmy, are you hungry?” asked Jacob.

“Yeah, I’m starved,” said Jimmy and then he looked at Zane to see if he had said the wrong thing. Zane nodded at him. When they entered, Zane noticed a sofa table with several picture frames. One photograph showed a young Jacob in a police uniform standing with several other police officers. In another, Jacob stood with his arm around a very attractive middle-aged woman. Jacob walked them into the kitchen and requested Zane sit at the kitchen table.

“How about you go out and feed my pigs this bucket of slop, while I fix us some lunch,” said Jacob as he handed a pail containing questionable contents inside. Jimmy looked inside and was relieved to see what appeared to be table scraps.

“Can I?”

“Yeah, go ahead, but be careful,” said Zane.

Jacob opened the kitchen door and pointed at the backside of his barn.

“See the pig pen?” he asked Jimmy.

“Yeah, cool. Jimmy started out the door then hesitated. Mr. Hansen, do pigs bite?”

“Not my pigs.”

After Jimmy left, Jacob sat across from Zane.

“You seem to be in a lot of trouble. Tell me why I should not call the Sheriff and have you arrested?”

Zane took in a deep breath; he slowly let it out.

“This is a very long story. It goes back about twenty years. So, I will try to give you an abridged version.

In 2001, my wife and I graduated from MIT and were hired by the Neuraldine Corporation to work on a special education project called Project Five. Project Five involved a new method of teaching children. It involved feeding digital data directly to the brain. My wife, Abby was the Project Psychologist; I was one of the ANN Programmers.”

“What is ANN?” asked Jacob.

“Artificial Neural Networks, you would be more familiar with the term, Artificial Intelligence. The project started with five, six-month-old babies. Three were males and two were females. They were labeled “The Five” and each one was assigned and called by a designated number.”

“You mean their names were numbers like One, Two and Three?”

“Yeah, the project was started by Dr. Joseph Rothschild, and this was one of the project requirements. Dr. Rothschild theorized that with the first set of children, it was necessary to isolate them and keep them from forming any kind of self-identification. Rothschild believed he

could not get accurate results if this unless isolation was implemented as part of the first project. Devon Aldine, the CEO of Neuraldine, and Dr. Rothschild were counting on Abby to help them re-form or develop identities when the project was completed. Abby fought him on this. She told him that this was going to have long-term psychological effects, but he would not change. Within five years, these children had absorbed the knowledge equivalent to a sophomore in college. The program far exceeded the original projections. It seemed that the more data we pumped into them, the faster they absorbed it, and the more they wanted it. By the time The Five were ten years old, Abby started to notice some strange occurrences. When she asked a question of one of The Five, one of the others would answer. She said it was as if she was speaking to all of them instead of just one. She told me, that one time, she asked Two a question and they all five answered the question at the same time. By this time, we had pumped in over a petabyte of data; we were running out of data.”

“What is a petabyte?”

“Well do you know what a gigabyte is?”

“I think so, isn’t it a thousand times a million?”

“Close but not quite, said Zane, a gigabyte is $1000 \times 1024 \times 1024$, and a terabyte is $1000 \times 1000 \times 1024 \times 1024$. A petabyte is a quadrillion bytes. That is the number one followed by twenty-four zeros, or 1,000 terabytes. Keep in mind, the data that we were feeding The Five had to be compiled. Someone had to feed normal digital data into the compiler before it could go to The Five. Our data entry staff grew from ten at first, then to twenty, then to eighty. It kept growing to feed The Five the knowledge they were now starting to demand. We ended up with over two hundred data entry personnel. It was 2010, the year Jimmy was born, and that is when David Morris and I created a search engine. This engine accumulated, qualified and then compiled data directly from the Internet.”

“When you say data, can you give me an example?”

“Yeah, the Encyclopaedia Britannica in its digital form. The Digital Yellow Pages. Digital Language training software. I mean, if the educational data was on the Internet and downloadable or on a CD or DVD, it was compiled into The Five’s learning language and then we delivered it to The Five.

Then when The Five were fifteen years old, Abby reported that she was sure, that The Five were communicating telepathically. Dr. Rothschild told her he thought it was nonsense. Nevertheless, to be sure, he set up a series of test and when he got the results, he found Abby was right. Not only that, one of the staff, when administering a verbal exercise, which was part of the testing, she reported that number Five, the Black Female, spoke to her; In her head”.

“Can you describe these kids for me?” asked Jacob.

“Yeah, Number One was a White Male; he was born with Down syndrome. Number Two was a White Male. Number Three was a White Female. Number Four was a was a Hispanic Male and Number Five was a Black Female. They were all the same age, born in the same month.”

“So, what happened next?”

“Nothing, said Zane. They slowed down on their demands for new data and there were no more reports of incidents involving telepathy between them or the staff. They started acting like fifteen-year-old kids. Abby did say to me that she was concerned about their health. She had observed what she described as a blank out. One of The Five would just go blank.

“What do you mean by blank,” said Jacob?

I never saw it but Abby said they would just stare straight ahead. If you spoke to them, they would not respond. She said this lasted for about fifteen minutes and then, they would return to

normal. Rothschild did not seem concerned and said it would go away when they had completed the study. However, this was also during the time that they laughed, joked and were starting to build friendships with the staff. Rothschild approved supervised field trips to Aspen. This allowed The Five to go shopping at the mall, or watch a movie at a theater. Everybody was excited and then Dr. Rothschild started preparing tests for The Five. The testing was to establish and verify the data fed to The Five, had actually imprinted and the neural pathways did exist. We obviously had been testing all along and there was no question The Five were retaining the data. Nevertheless, Dr. Rothschild needed an elaborate set of test so that when he published his paper for peer review, there would be no place for his critics to attack him. Of course, there was a very complex system of recording all the data with multiple system backups. We documented and recorded every byte of data administered to The Five. Dr. Rothschild began spending a good deal of time questioning The Five. He too became enamored with them. He confided to Abby that The Five had assisted in the development of the final tests. Then at a staff meeting, Dr. Rothschild informed everyone that he intended to run comparative analysis using all the backup records of the data. His reason for this was to verify that there were no discrepancies between our working data and the data contained in the multiple backup data systems. This of course was against our security protocols. No one could have access to more than one of the backup data systems. His argument was that if there was a difference of one byte between the backup data and the working data, the credibility of entire project was at risk. Dr. Rothschild insisted he have access. We found this strange, as it was Dr. Rothschild that originally assigned the backup systems to David Morris, Sid Bloomfield, and me. I refused to provide my password without a direct request in writing from Devon Aldine. Both David and Sid agreed with me and refused to give up their passwords. About a week after that meeting, Devon approached me in my lab and asked me if I thought Dr. Rothschild had been acting different or unusual. I told him that other than the request he had made to have access to all the backup data, I did not see him acting unusual. I added that since Dr. Rothschild had been the one who created the Security Protocols, I found it odd that he would demand we violate the same protocols that he created. Devon agreed and told me that Dr. Rothschild had him in an awkward position. He said Rothschild had threatened to resign without completing his paper for peer review. Devon went on to say that Rothschild insisted he could not finish the paper without doing a comparative analysis of all the backup data. Devon told me that he would send me a memo instructing me to provide my password to Dr. Rothschild. He asked me to contact Sid and David to inform them that they too would receive a memo. I reminded Devon that Sid was at his mother's funeral, and that I would brief him when he got back from the funeral. I did so, and two weeks after David, Sid and I provided Dr. Rothschild with our passwords, he died from a brain aneurysm while sitting at his desk. It was a week before we discovered the virus. Our Security Department, which consisted of some of the best System Forensic Analyst in the world, informed us that only Dr. Rothschild could have fed the virus into the back-up systems. After I looked at the reverse engineered virus, I informed Devon and the security people that Dr. Rothschild was not that skilled as a programmer. The complexity of this virus was far beyond Dr. Rothschild's abilities. Devon agreed and instructed security to continue their investigation and re-screen all personnel that had even the slightest involvement with Project Five. Sid, David and I spent the next three years trying to reconstruct Dr. Rothschild's work. Fortunately, he had submitted numerous and detailed reports to Devon. From these reports, we were able to put Project Five back on course. That is when all sorts of strange things started happening. It started with George Witowski in Board Design. Security found a Prototype Multi-Layered Board design, submitted to the Fine-

Line Imaging Department. The design was foreign to anything that Neurdine was working on. George swore he knew nothing about it, but Security said it was definitely his signature on the work order. George passed the polygraph that security administered. Devon fired him anyway. No one could figure out what the board design was supposed to accomplish. Devon told me in private that the design was extremely complex. Far more complex than anything Neurdine was working with. A year later, thirty-two Florida Instruments Z7000 chips were missing. These were the most sophisticated Integrated Circuit chips ever produced. Along with the chips, a Z7000 chip programmer was also missing.

After this, people started dying. Jennifer Tucker from The Five Personal Development Department had a brain aneurysm and died in the cafeteria while eating lunch. Joe Bromley in the Security Department had a stroke and died in the ambulance before he got to the hospital. Joe, by the way, was in charge of the Z7000 theft investigation. Maria Lopez committed suicide by hanging herself in the women's bathroom. Maria was the dietician responsible for the meals provided to The Five. Overall, there were nine people that died over an eight-month period, and every one of them had some personal contact with The Five. Five died of brain aneurysms, three died from strokes and there was the one suicide. OSHA and the Colorado Department of Health were all over us, trying to find out how five people working for the same corporation could have brain aneurysms. The odds were billions to one. The same went for the strokes. Only two out of the eight deaths, which included both aneurysms and strokes, had any previous indications of cardio vascular disease. In addition, Maria Lopez, the one that committed suicide, had no history of depression or any other psychological disorders. She was a mother of three and was happily married. The deaths stopped as soon as the investigations started. The investigation lasted for about a month, and then it suddenly stopped. No more OSHA and no more Department of Health people came around. It was very strange and suspicious.

Shortly after the investigation ceased, people started hearing The Five talk to them when they were away from the Project. I was at home taking a shower when Number One asked me to explain a very complex and new development with Neurdine's ANN software. I say it was number One, but it was more like, I felt it was Number One. The vocal tone in my head was like I was hearing more than just number One; multiple voices with kind a tinny sound. The software program he, or they, were inquiring about was under the tightest security Neurdine had ever provided to any Project. After Project Five's security problems, Devon was taking no chances. It was strange, hearing a voice inside your head. I did not know whether to give a response or to go and see Number One to tell him that he was out of bounds. I did not respond, a few minutes later, I developed the worst headache I have ever experienced. It went away after about thirty minutes, but I thought for sure I was going to die from a brain aneurysm.

Three months ago, David Morris came to my home, and we discussed an idea he and Sid had come up with to modify the Project Five Compiler. This modification was actually dealing with the Ten Project, the next step in Devon's plan. That night after David had left; Abby and I were discussing enrolling Jimmy in a private school she had found in Aspen. I started to ask Abby a question when the voice or voices of The Five, interrupted my thoughts and telepathically told me that David and Sid's idea would not work. I asked how they knew it would not work but there was no answer. This event really upset Abby. We were afraid to talk about it because we did not know if our home was bugged or if The Five were reading our thoughts. Before we went to sleep that night, Abby asked if I could meet her at the private school, the one she had mentioned earlier. I agreed and we set a time. The following day I wrote a message requesting

David and Sid meet me at this same school. The note also gave a brief description of what had occurred the previous night. I approached each of them individually and let them read the note.

We met that afternoon at the Mountain Vista School. David Morris brought his wife, Susan. Sid was not married and he came alone. We walked to a grassy area in front of the school and discussed all of the events that had led up to and occurred since Dr. Rothschild's death. There was a woman standing about ten feet from us, she just stood there staring at us with a blank look on her face. She was holding a cell phone up to her ear. She was not talking; she was just staring. I motioned everyone to be quite and I started to approach the woman to ask if I could help her. When I spoke, the woman got a terrified look on her face and dropped her cell phone; it shattered when it hit the sidewalk. She looked down at the cell phone, and then looked up at me and screamed. Then she turned and ran away. Abby, David and Sid asked me what that was all about. I told them I was not sure. A few minutes later, an older man, he looked like he was in his seventies, walked over and stood close enough to hear what we were saying. He had that same blank look on his face. The man was wearing one of those old-fashioned hearing aids, you know, the type that hides behind the ear. At first, I thought it might be a Bluetooth earphone. It was not and when David asked the man what he was staring at, the man did not respond. We tried to walk away from him, but he followed. I took out my note pad and scribbled that I thought The Five might be behind this. When I showed the note to the others, Sid shook his head and said, no way. Then he looked at the man, who was just standing there with that blank look on his face. I suggested on paper, that we all walk away in different directions, not far enough that we couldn't see each other, just to see what would happen, what the man was going to do. David and Susan walked in one direction while Abby and I walked in the opposite direction. Sid walked to an area that was equally between us. We formed a triangle with the old man in the center. The man got a strange look on his face. He looked at Abby and I, and then he turned his body and looked at Sid. He turned again and looked at David and Susan. He turned back to Abby and I, then again back to Sid and then David and Susan. He kept this up, turning faster and faster. I was getting dizzy just watching him. This lasted for about a minute and then the man just collapsed. Sid ran to the man and felt for a pulse. There was no pulse; the man was dead. Sid grabbed the man's hearing aid threw it on the ground and crushed it with his foot. We decided that we would all leave Neurdine in the very near future.

The next three weeks were sheer hell. All communication we did not want transmitted to The Five had to be done with hand written notes. By this time, The Five had the freedom to go anywhere they choose and it was becoming apparent that Devon was somehow being controlled by The Five. He quit smiling and walked around half the time with that blank look we had seen on the people at the Mountain Vista School. Then, Devon called a mandatory meeting with all departments and said for security purposes, there would be no paper, pens, or pencils authorized at Neurdine, and that all communication was to be through the computer system. Several of the mothers with children asked about how the Neurdine School was going to function without paper and pencils. Devon just feigned a smile and said this was just a temporary policy and that he would remove it when they eliminated the security threat. Then, a few days later, Abby went to the Neurdine Infirmary to check on something, I do not remember what it was. But, she walked in on some type of surgical procedure that was being conducted with Number One. Devon was there as well as the other members of The Five. Abby said she had never seen the man that was performing the surgery, but he looked like he knew what he was doing. Number One was sitting in a chair leaning over with his arms resting on his knees. The man had shaved a portion of the back of his head. He was holding a scalpel and there was blood on the linen draped

over number One's shoulders. Abby said the man placed the scalpel in a metal tray and picked up some kind of small device. She said it was round, about the size of a quarter and looked like some kind of electronic device that had wires protruding from it. Abby left the infirmary in a hurry and came to my lab. She said two words, 'School Now.' I used the same two words to both David and Sid, but with David, I added the name, 'Susan.' When I arrived at Mountain Vista, I was surprised to see that Abby had brought Jimmy. The first words out of her mouth were, 'We're not going back.' I could see she was upset and when I asked her what had happened, she described what had occurred at the Neuraldine Infirmary. David, Susan and Sid arrived shortly after this. Abby re-told the story of what happened in the Infirmary. Abby's hands were shaking and she said there was something very wrong at Neuraldine and she was not going to take Jimmy back there. Susan walked over and put her arm around Abby's shoulder and Abby began to cry. I had only seen Abby cry once since we had been married. That was when her mother died. I looked at Abby and told her that we were not going back. Susan then told David she was not going back either. Sid, who was usually the devil's advocate jumped in with 'I am not going back either.' All of a sudden, two men and a woman approached us. They stood there, with that blank look on their faces. I walked over to Sid and David and whispered 'Woodland Park, tomorrow at eleven a.m., Asher Road until it dead ends.' The three strangers walked forward like automatons, trying to get close enough to hear my whispers. I was done by the time they got close enough. This all happened three weeks ago, and since that time, bounty hunters or mercenaries have chased us, I am not sure what they are, the Police, the FBI and god only knows who else. They have used helicopters, Hummers and some very sophisticated equipment. A Delores County Deputy Sheriff came real close to catching us outside Rico. He rammed my Land Rover. We were able to get away but the crash caused my fender to rub against the rear tire and the friction started a fire. We were on foot from that point on."

"Where is Abby, your Wife?" asked Jacob.

"She is dead," and the thought and image of Abby falling to her death brought tears to Zane's eyes.

"What happed?" asked Jacob.

"Fucking bounty hunters, they just threw her off the cliff, like she was some inanimate object. It was like they were throwing a stuffed doll over the cliff," Zane said with a voice full of bitterness drawn deep from within him.

"Did the boy see it?" asked Jacob.

"He was there, but he didn't actually see what happened. I killed both of those heartless bastards. Jimmy did see that part," he said with a regretful tone.

Jacob got up and walked over to the small TV set on the kitchen counter. He turned it on. There was a commercial just ending and then a talking head from some news organization came on. The reporter was standing with a microphone in his hand, using the Capitol Building as a backdrop. He was rambling and Zane was so upset, having relived the death of Abby that only some of what the reporter was saying was getting through.

"The Vice President will be addressing the nation at Eleven o'clock this morning, now back to you Jim."

Another talking head;

"The terrorist that did so much damage at the Mall of America on Monday night, are being sought by the FBI. Security cameras catching the terrorist actually placing the bombs have been released." Suddenly there was a close-up photo of Zane and David Morris. The shot of David was a profile but the image of Zane was a clear frontal. The camera zoomed out and you could

see a small suitcase sitting on the floor between them. Then there was a second photo and you could see Sid joining Zane and David, and setting another suitcase next to the one between Zane and David. The next shot showed Zane carrying the suitcase while using a key to unlock some kind of door. A similar photo of David entering a door that had a sign that read “Authorized Personnel Only.” Sid was standing next to a log cabin replica, which served as a Kiosk. It had Moose Antlers attached on logs above the counter. This image gave Zane a sense that he was some character in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*. He had read the story to Jimmy and he remembered a part where Alice was saying: “If I had a world of my own, everything would be nonsense. Nothing would be what it is, because everything would be what it isn’t”

“This is impossible, I’ve never been to the American Mall, this is not happening.”

“I know, said Jacob. Monday night my nephew, Jason was trying to pull you over just outside Rico. The FBI had put out a BOLO for you before the Mall of America.”

“What... What is a BOLO and what did you say about a nephew?”

“A BOLO simply means, “be on the lookout”. My nephew is the Deputy Sheriff that crashed his squad car while chasing you. He got in a little trouble for taking the squad car down a road meant for four-wheel drive vehicles. During the shift briefing that morning, the FBI resident agent out of Colorado Springs had passed out photos of you and your friends as well as a description of the vehicles you might be driving. They did not specify any crimes, only that it was terrorist related. As it turns out, he was chasing you at the same time the explosions went off at the Mall. Jason came by the day after he rammed you. He wanted to tell me about his little incident outside Rico, he brought the briefing paper the FBI had passed out to the Deputies. He forgot to take it with him when he left. I saw that same photograph on TV earlier this morning.” Jacob reached across the kitchen table and picked up a sheet of paper that had been laying face down and handed it to Zane.

“Like you, I had to wonder how the FBI was handing out the same pictures almost a week ago, pictures which I am now seeing on TV. They were using the same pictures before the explosions at the Mall.”

The images were close-ups of him, David and Sid. When Zane looked closer, he could see a log cabin structure behind Sid.

“Jason didn’t see Jimmy until it was too late, he said he would not have rammed your vehicle if he had known there was a little boy in it,” said Jacob.

“Those photos are Photo Shopped, said Zane. I have never been to that Mall. I don’t even know where it is.”

The kitchen door opened and Jimmy came in all excited.

“Dad, you’ve got to see this, really, you’ve got to come and look at this.”

It took a minute for Zane’s mind to let go of the series of thoughts that had just passed through it like streaking bullets passing through paper targets.

“What...what it is it,” asked Zane in a dull and uncomprehending voice.

“Mr. Hansen has a horse, and he... Well you’ve got to come and see it.”

“I see you’ve met Mr. Ed,” said Jacob.

“Is that his name?”

“Yep, he’s the smartest horse I’ve ever owned.”

“Dad, please, you’ve got to come and see this.”

“Come on, said Jacob as he took Zane’s elbow and started leading him to the door. I think Jimmy and Mr. Ed have made friends, and when Mr. Ed likes you, he performs some pretty nifty tricks, am I right Jimmy?”

“Yes sir, he sure is smart,” said Jimmy.

They entered the barn and there was a strong smell of hay tinged with a slight fertilizer odor. It was a country smell that neither Jimmy nor Zane had ever been exposed to. Jimmy was leading the way, followed by Zane and Jacob. Jimmy stopped in front of a stall that was the first of at least ten stalls. A beautiful and large palomino gelding was nodding his head up and down as Jimmy approached. He whinnied, let his head down, and waited for Jimmy to rub behind his ears. Jimmy did not disappoint him either. When Zane watched Jimmy rubbing and petting the horse, it dawned on him that this was the first time he had noticed the boy smile since Abby had died. He felt a physical surge of emotion rush into his body and his mind, and he did not know whether to laugh or cry. He felt like doing both. He compromised, with tears welling up; he smiled at Jimmy and choked out, “What a beautiful horse.”

He felt Jacob’s hand squeeze his shoulder and once again, he almost lost control, the emotional tiger wanting out of his cage. Zane took in a deep breath and walked over to Jimmy and Mr. Ed.

“Ok, what is this trick you and Mr. Ed are going to show me?” he asked Jimmy as he put his hand on the boy’s head and ruffled his hair.

“Watch this, said Jimmy.

“Mr. Ed, do you like me?” Mr. Ed nodded his head up and down.

“Mr. Ed, do you like my dad?” said Jimmy while pointing at Zane. Mr. Ed nodded his head up and down.

“Mr. Ed, do you like bounty hunters?” said Jimmy?

Mr. Ed shook his head back and forth.

“Jimmy, I forgot all about lunch, what do you say we go back and have lunch?” said Jacob.

“Ok, but can I come back out and see Mr. Ed after I eat lunch?” He looked at Zane, then at Jacob.

“I don’t care if Jacob doesn’t,” said Zane.

“Eat first, and then we’ll talk about it,” said Jacob.

Jacob made five ham and cheese sandwiches, placed them on a plate in the center of the kitchen table, and poured a large glass of milk for Jimmy. He asked Zane what he would like to drink with his lunch. Zane requested milk. Jacob poured a glass for Zane and himself.

“I don’t understand how The Five could be doing all of this. There has to be something else that we do not know about. I mean the FBI?”

“Look, Zane. I am not going to ask where you and your friends are going to meet up. But, I would be very careful, especially with Jimmy being along. I spent twenty-five years as a police officer. This world has changed in ways I had no idea it could change. I don’t know what you folks did to those five children but it sounds like you may have created something powerful. That is not to say that your intentions were not good, but someone once said, ‘The road to hell was paved with good intentions.’ In other words, merely intending to do good, without actually doing it, is of no value. In this case, there seems to be a lot of damage to those five kids and I am not sure you folks at Neurdine achieved anything of value.

“Jacob, I really don’t care what other peoples intentions were; Abby and I were trying to do something that would help children. If anybody was critical and concerned about the welfare of The Five, it was Abby. I do not even want to think about fixing blame at this point. The Five are no longer kids or children, and they are only chronologically twenty years old. The fact is they are the most intellectually advanced people that have ever existed. They are the equivalent of one hundred Albert Einstein’s. Emotionally..., that is another question altogether. Abby did not even know how to describe their personalities other than to say they seemed to be a clone of each

other. 'Created something powerful' is really an understatement. Think of all the future inventions for the coming millennia, that is how intelligent they are. I am not worried about what the intentions of the people at Neuraldine were. I'm worried about what the intentions of The Five are."

Jacob nodded thoughtfully.

"Zane, I'm going to let you take my truck, and don't worry about paying me for it. It just dawned on me that Moose is going to see your picture on TV, and he is going to go nuts. I need to call him and tell him that I am on my way down there and I will leave my phone off the hook to tie up his line for a few minutes. I have to get back into town and bring him up to date before he does something stupid. I want you and Jimmy there, to go wherever you were going to meet up with your friends. It sounds like you folks need to figure this thing out before someone gets hurt."

"Are you sure about how Moose will react?" asked Zane.

"Oh, don't you worry about Moose. I have known him since he was a kid. Your secret is safe with him as long as I get to him before he sees your picture on TV."

"Thanks Jacob, I will be back to settle up when this is all over. I know that Jimmy is going to insist we come back so he can see you and Mr. Ed."

"I hope so. Jimmy, I'm sorry that you're not going to get to tell Mr. Ed goodbye, but I will explain to him that you were in a really big hurry."

"Thanks Mr. Hansen, I hope we can come back real soon."

Jacob could see the disappointment.

"What the heck, get out there and say goodbye yourself, if that's Ok with your dad that is."

"Can I?" asked Jimmy with pleading eyes locked on Zane.

"Make it quick," said Zane with a smile.

Jacob reached out his hand to shake Zane's hand.

"Take care of that boy, I kinda like him, said Jacob as they shook hands. Oh, damn, I almost forgot. He walked to a small secretary desk and pulled out a piece of paper from the middle drawer. He picked up a pen and signed his name on the paper. I had Martha down at the bank, notarize this two years ago, when I bought my new truck." He handed the truck's Certificate of Title to Zane.

"I gotta run," said Jacob as he walked out the door, leaving Zane standing in his kitchen. Zane picked up the two sandwiches and wrapped them in paper towels. He locked Jacobs's kitchen door and walked to the truck.

"Jimmy," he yelled.

Jimmy came out of the barn running with a broad grin on his face, a grin that reminded Zane of Abby.

Chapter 2 Ben Barboncito

Monday June 8, 2020 6:05 P.M.

Zane drove the truck on highway 160 until he passed over the river that Sid had mentioned in his directions. He turned on the dirt road and drove until the road joined back to 160. Thirty minutes later, they were driving through the little town of Teec Nos Pas. Jimmy lay sideways using his rolled sleeping bag as a pillow. They passed through Teec Nos Pas and drove on until Zane came to the Highway 191 junction. Zane turned south on 191. Jimmy slept for about an hour. When he awoke, Zane was coming up to the small town of Chinle. A road sign advertised the Canyon De Chelly National Monument. The red and blue lights turned on first. Zane had not even been aware of a vehicle following behind him. When he did not respond to the lights, the police officer turned on the siren. Jimmy bolted upright.

“What’s happening?”

“Police,” said Zane.

Suddenly there appeared to be several police vehicles stopped in the road five hundred feet ahead of him. They also turned on their red and blue emergency lights. Zane had been traveling at about fifty miles per hour, but he slowed, looking for a way to avoid stopping and pulling over. The terrain on either side of the road looked impossible. There was an irrigation ditch on his side and on Jimmy’s side, the road dropped off about six feet and then the rough countryside presented nothing but flat and bushy flatland.

“We have to stop.”

“At least they’re not bounty hunters,” said Jimmy.

Zane pulled up twenty-five feet in front of the two Chinle City patrol cars, The Officers wore their hair long and in braided ponytails. They were unmistakably American Indians. The Officer in the vehicle behind him was already approaching. Zane noticed that he had not drawn his pistol and neither of the Officers in front of him were presenting their firearms.

“Mr. Knight?” the Officer asked as he stood at Zane’s open window.

“Ah, ah... Yes,” said Zane. The officer was about six feet tall with short black hair and dark penetrating eyes. He exuded authority but at the same time, his smile made him appear affable.

“Sir, I need you to follow me. He saw the confusion and fear painted on Zane’s face and added; you and your son are in danger, but not from us. Please follow me.”

“Ah, Ok, said Zane, where to?”

“We are going about seven miles from here; my grandfathers home. I will explain when we get there.”

Zane noticed the officer’s badge said Apache County Sheriff’s Department, and his nametag said David Barboncito. Why, he wondered, did the two officers in front belong to the city police and David Barboncito was a Deputy Sheriff?

The deputy pulled his Ford Explorer out onto the roadway as the other two officers got into their vehicles and left in the direction of the city of Chinle. Officer David Barboncito turned onto a dirt road before they got to Chinle. The road was rough and full of ruts. The Deputy’s patrol

vehicle was dispersing a large cloud of dust that was funneling into Zane's open window. Jimmy coughed and Zane rolled up his window.

"You Ok?" he asked Jimmy.

"I'm scared."

"Me too," said Zane.

The Deputy pulled up outside a small silver travel trailer. Behind the trailer there were horse corrals; a dark horse whinnied and came up to the side of the corral as if curious about who the visitors were. There were two medium sized mixed breed dogs. As Zane got out of the truck, the dogs carefully approached him wagging their tails. Jimmy started to follow Zane out of the truck door, but Zane motioned him to stop.

There was a large pen next to the corrals and it was full of bleating sheep repeating the baa-baa sound as if they too were curious. On the other side of the trailer, Zane saw a chicken coup, he heard a fluttering of wings and cackling sounds. David Barboncito knocked on the trailer door.

"Grandfather."

The door opened and an old man emerged. The man appeared to be at least eighty years old, thought Zane. The man's skin was the texture and color of a walnut hull, and his hair was thin, white and tied into a braided ponytail. He was wearing denim trousers and an un-tucked, long sleeved white shirt. The old man stooped as he walked, and when he turned to look in Zane's direction, he turned his body rather than his head. He weakly lifted his hand and motioned Zane to walk in his direction. As Zane started towards him, the man whispered something to David Barboncito.

"He wants you to bring Jimmy, he would like to meet him," said David.

Zane paused and then motioned Jimmy to join him.

Rather than ask them to enter the trailer, the old man went over to a cheap green and white webbed lawn chair. The worn sun-bleached webbing looked tattered and the aluminium frame appeared unstable. The old Indian sat anyway and then motioned for David, Zane and Jimmy to sit. Zane looked around for more chairs but saw none. David seated himself on the ground in front of the old man. Zane looked at Jimmy and smiled.

"When in Rome," he said.

Zane awkwardly sat a few feet away from David, and Jimmy sat next to Zane.

"I am Benjamin Barboncito. Please call me Ben. You are Zane and Jimmy Knight. I have been waiting for you. I am very sorry about your loss."

"How is it that you know of our loss?" asked Zane, dumbfounded.

"I am a dream walker, I see much when I sleep and recently, I have been seeing too much." Zane looked across at David Barboncito in hopes he could provide a modicum of sanity to this conversation.

"I see you are confused," said Ben.

Zane nodded his head politely, and looked at David once more.

Ben smiled.

"You work and live in a world that does not allow you to understand. You have helped create The Five, and now, you seek to undo what you have done."

Uh-Oh! Another one of those Alice in Wonderland moments, thought Zane.

There was a pause.

"If I had a world of my own, everything would be nonsense. Nothing would be what it is, because everything would be what it isn't," said Benjamin Barboncito.

“Oh God,” said Zane, a wave of shock and fear caused beads of sweat to exude from the skin on his forehead.

“My Spirit Guide is Kitchi Manitou and he has made me a dream walker. I think I am to help you but my dreams are still not clear about how.”

“This is...Zane stopped and thought. You are right, I am not sure I understand. Also, I’m not sure I will ever be able to understand,” said Zane.

“This is Ok, said Ben. But I must go with you to Sedona. Maybe you will become smarter by the time we get there.”

Zane once again looked at David for help but found none.

“What exactly do you mean, you must go with us?” asked Zane.

“My dreams have been clear about this. You and Jimmy will not be safe without me. When we get to Sedona, I will help you stop The Five. Tonight, you must stay here. The FBI is close by. Tomorrow, you and Jimmy will put on disguises. We will make you look Indian,” said Ben with a slightly wicked and squeaky laugh.

Without another word, Benjamin Barboncito stood up and slowly walked to his trailer, entered the door and then closed it. Zane looked over at David Barboncito and saw a wide smile on his face.

“Great,” whispered Zane with an exasperated surrender.

“Are you and Ben real Indians?” asked Jimmy.

David and Zane could not help but laugh.

After helping Zane and Jimmy set up a small campfire, David told them he had some errands to run for his grandfather.

Tuesday June 9, 2020 11:47 A.M.

“Cheyenne Mountain,” asked Maxwell Duran?

“Yes sir, said Steve Gardner, Director of the National Security Agency. Mr. President, everything we presently know would indicate they were using EHF. Our people have been in touch with Los Alamos and they say that they are doing research with weaponized EHF. In theory, it may be what they used against you and President Brooks.

“What in the hell is EHF,” asked Duran?

“Extremely High Frequencies, Mr. President. These frequencies are in the range of thirty to three Hundred gigahertz. If in fact we are dealing with EHF, then Cheyenne Mountain would be the safest place for you sir. Your living and office facilities are inside the mountain and the mountain is two thousand feet of solid granite. The only radio frequencies or any other frequencies for that matter, that are not blocked are the frequencies the Air Force allows into their communications system. Nothing can penetrate two thousand feet of granite.”

“I’ve have to address the Nation tomorrow. Can I do it from there?”

“Yes Sir, Mr. President.”

“Then, make it happen,” said President Maxwell Duran.

Wednesday June 10, 2010 8:30 A.M.

“Shoe polish, I mean, is that the best you could come up? Shoe polish?” said Zane.

“Yeah, and black hair dye,” said David Barboncito.

“Cool, you mean we are going to dye our hair black?” asked Jimmy.

“No, your hair is already black, said Zane. Will this dye wash out?”

“I think so, I mean, how would I know, does it look like I’ve ever had to dye my hair black?”

“Oh Great,” responded Zane.

They all heard Ben Barboncito’s trailer door open. Ben slowly exited the trailer holding a coffee cup. Without acknowledging anybody, he walked over to the lawn chair, sat down, and took a sip of coffee. He looked at Jimmy and gave him a diminutive smile.

“You don’t look Indian to me.”

“We get to dye our hair black and David, I mean Mr. Barboncito, brought us shoe polish to rub on our skin,” said Jimmy with excitement.

“Well, you better get at it, said Ben with a smile. But I don’t think you need to dye your hair, it’s already black.”

“Zane, would you mind if Jimmy calls me David?”

“And me Ben?”

“No that’s fine, said Zane. He looked at Jimmy and winked.

An hour later, both Zane and Jimmy could easily pass for Indians. David had purchased a cheap pair of sunglasses for Zane to hide his blue eyes. Jimmy had brown eyes. David had also brought a couple of worn and dirty straw cowboy hats.

“Cool, a cowboy hat,” said Jimmy.

“Now, you look Indian, said Ben. But I’m not going to let you become an honorary Indian until you have proven yourself.”

“What do I have to do, I mean, how do I prove myself?” asked Jimmy with a serious but anxious look on his face.

“I will tell you when the time comes.”

Ben slowly stood up and walked back to his trailer. He returned carrying a large worn suitcase. The gray dirty fabric covering the suitcase had a tear on one of the corners. Jimmy immediately offered to carry the suitcase, and Ben gave no argument.

“I will drive,” said Ben.

“Now wait just a minute,” started Zane.

Ben held up his hand and Zane paused to hear what he had to say.

“Sir, may I see your Drivers License and Registration,” asked David in an official tone, hoping Zane would understand his grandfathers reasoning.

“Ok, said Zane. When is the last time you drove a car or truck, I mean are we safe?”

Ben started his wicked squeaky laugh and ended it with a coughing jag that lasted fifteen seconds. Smiling, he motioned Zane to hand over the keys to the truck.

Ben drove the truck no faster than twenty miles an hour while passing through Chinle. He waved at every person, man, woman or child. He is showing off thought Zane. He wants everyone to see that he is driving a truck and that there are two people stupid enough to be in the truck with him. Once outside of Chinle, Ben sped up to a dangerous forty miles an hour. The speed limit was fifty-five miles per hour. Numerous cars had to pass them on the two-lane highway. Two people honked their horns while passing the truck. One gave them the finger. Forty minutes later Zane saw a sign announcing they were approaching the town of Ganado. Ben slowed down as they approached a line of stopped cars. Oh great, thought Zane, a traffic

accident. The line of cars was proceeding forward very slowly. After having traveled a couple hundred feet Zane could see that it was not a traffic accident, it was a roadblock.

“Pretend you are asleep,” Ben said to Zane. Jimmy, you just sit there and don’t say anything.” Zane leaned back and pulled the hat down, partially covering his sunglasses. As they slowly proceeded forward, Zane could see the two blue and white police cars. Their painted emblems depicted “Arizona Highway Patrol.” Zane also noticed a black Chevy Suburban with darkly tinted windows. A man in a suit was standing next to it watching the two officers conduct their search. When Ben approached the roadblock, an officer greeted him.

“Ben, what are you doing driving?” the officer asked.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Well, I meant no offense; I just haven’t seen you drive before.”

Zane peeked from beneath his hat and saw that the officer looked Indian.

“Who is that you got with you?”

“My daughters boys from California, said Ben. Who are you looking for?”

“Those guys that blew up the Mall of America, I doubt they will be coming this way though,” said the officer.

“They make you work for the FBI?” said Ben, tilting his head towards the Suburban and knowing the FBI was a dirty word with most Indians.

“No, this guy is with Homeland Security. How is David, I haven’t seen him for a while?”

“He’s Ok, there was a slight pause, for a policeman,” said Ben, and this caused the officer to laugh.

“You better get out of here or I’m going to have to cite you for driving without a license,” the officer said to Ben with a smile and a pat on Ben’s arm. Without another word, Ben pulled the truck forward and was soon driving at a risky forty miles per hour towards Interstate 40 and Flagstaff Arizona.

They entered Sedona on State Highway 89, and when Zane looked at the directions Sid had given him, he started to tell Ben what street to turn on.

“I’m taking Dry Creek Road up to Boynton Canyon,” said Ben.

Zane looked at the directions again.

“How did you know that, tell me, how did you know that?” demanded Zane.

“We are going to the place where I met Kitchi Manitou. I was just a boy. It was here that I became a dream walker,” said Ben.

“Oh, of course, why didn’t I know that?” said Zane with a note sarcasm.

“When are we going to get there?” asked Jimmy.

“I don’t know, why don’t you ask Ben? I’m sure he knows,” said Zane with an obvious attitude.

Ben looked at Zane and smiled.

“We’re almost there,” said Ben.

Chapter 3 Sedona

When Ben turned into a drive, Zane looked for it but did not see the residence. A few minutes later, they approached what looked like a western style mansion. The house was a two-story ranch style house and had to have at least twenty rooms, thought Zane. The landscaping was natural, white oak mixed with various pine trees. There was a circular drive and Ben pulled up and parked parallel to the front door of the residence. The door opened and a man Zane thought he recognized, walked out the door, and started towards them. A few seconds later, Sid Bloomfield followed him.

“Zane yelled Sid as he ran to him and gave him a hug. He ruffled Jimmy’s hair. Where’s your mom Jimmy?”

Jimmy immediately started to tear up and Sid looked to Zane for some form of explanation. Zane’s facial expression and eyes told him everything. Sid could see that a tragedy had struck his friends and inquired no further. He waited for a more appropriate time.

“Zane and Jimmy, this is my good friend Joseph Friedman,” said Sid. Although still emotional, Jimmy stuck out his hand.

“Nice to meet you Mr. Friedman.”

Joseph Friedman took Jimmy’s hand.

“I’ve heard a lot of good things about you, Jimmy, and it is nice to meet you too.”

Joseph was a tall man with curly dark hair that was neatly trimmed. His sparse beard gave him the look of a professor or scientist. He had an affable way about him.

Zane shook hands with Joseph and chose to nod his head rather than speak.

“Who is this, you have brought with you?” asked Sid while looking at Ben Barboncito.

“I am Ben Barboncito,” said Ben in a somewhat formal tone.

“Ben got us here safe, said Zane, I’m still not quite sure how, but he is our friend.”

Sid walked over and shook Ben’s hand.

“If you’re a friend of Zane’s, you’re welcome here. Isn’t that right Joseph?”

Joseph nodded his approval while he shook Ben’s hand.

Please come inside, our group keeps growing and everyone has been waiting for you to get here,” said Sid.

Zane, Ben, and Jimmy were ushered into the home and immediately surrounded by people. Some Zane knew and there were many that he did not know. David Morris walked over and gave him a bear hug. Susan was standing behind her husband when Sid gently grabbed her arm and whispered something into her ear. Susan jerked her open hand to her chest and her face turned ashen. She could not help but look at Jimmy who seemed lost, standing amongst this crowd of people. Susan walked to Jimmy and putting her arm around his shoulders, she began to move him away from the celebratory crowd towards the kitchen. Ben looked and felt a little out of place. He saw Susan moving Jimmy towards another room, and he followed. Susan sat Jimmy down at a large oak table and asked if he was hungry. Before Jimmy could answer, Ben said, “I am.” Jimmy, surprised and happy, jumped up, ran to Ben, and grabbed his hand.

“Here, sit next to me.”

Susan, confused, looked at Ben and started to say something.

“I’m Ben. I am a friend of Zane and Jimmy. And you are?”

“I’m Susan. I’m also a friend of Zane and, there was a slight pause as she started to say Abby but caught herself, and Jimmy.”

“Well I guess that makes us friends,” said Ben, pointing at Susan and then to himself.

“Well, I guess it does, said Susan with a smile. Can I fix you something to eat?”

“If that is coffee over there, he pointed at a carafe on the kitchen counter; I could sure use a cup of that. But if you’ll take care of Jimmy, I’ll help myself.”

Susan nodded and pointed to a cupboard where the cups were.

“How about it Jimmy, what can I get you to eat, I can fix anything you want,” said Susan. Jimmy smiled politely.

“I haven’t had a peanut butter and jelly sandwich since we left home.”

“Ugh, a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, yuck. I offer you steak and lobster and you want a peanut butter and jelly sandwich?” she mocked with a scrunched up face.

Jimmy laughed.

“I’ll take the steak and lobster, cook the steak medium rare please,” Ben said this with a straight face.

Susan looked at him for a second; thinking he was serious, then she caught the thin upturn of his lips and they all started laughing.

After numerous introductions to people Zane did not know, Joseph Friedman suggested that Sid, David and Zane accompany him to his office. The office was on the second floor and was larger than any office Zane had ever seen, including Devon’s office. The ceiling was at least sixteen feet high and two walls were floor to ceiling bookshelves packed with books. There were wheeled ladders in front of both walls, enabling access to the top shelves. The décor was wood, wood, and wood. Most of the stained wood was a dark cherry color and decorated with slightly darker and intricate moldings. In the center of the room sat a long conference table with ten or twelve chairs. Joseph’s desk was a large cherry wood desk with an inlaid marble top. Behind the desk, mounted on the wall, was a plain green chalkboard, the kind you would see in any public school. The chalkboard contained mathematical equations scribbled from top to bottom in white chalk. Joseph sat down in the high back leather chair behind his desk and gestured for the others to sit on either the chairs or the sofa arraigned in front of the desk.

“Please, don’t mistake my sitting at this desk as some kind of authoritarian symbolization. I have been sitting at this desk for so many years, and well, it is like my security blanket, said Joseph. Besides, Sid will tell you that I am a humble man that has an ego that is made up of theories and mathematical equations only.”

Zane nodded, thinking he had met this man before but could not quite remember.

“Before we start talking about The Five; Zane, what happened, with Abby?” asked Sid.

“Bounty hunters, well that’s what we called them, but we did not know who or what they were. They had starting chasing us from outside of Aspen. When we got to Rico, a Deputy Sheriff tried to stop us. We evaded him but lost the Land Rover in the process. The bounty hunters caught up with us somewhere around Deadwood Gulch. They jerked Abby off a ridge; there was nothing I could do. She died when she fell sixty feet and hit the bottom.

“My God,” said David!

“What did you do, I mean, how did you and Jimmy get away?” asked Sid.

“I killed the two bastards that did that to Abby, and then Jimmy and I were able to escape in the dark.”

David went over to Zane and put his hand on Zane’s shoulder.

“How is Jimmy doing?” asked David.

“Look guys, I’m really not ready to talk about this, I haven’t had a chance to even think about it. I have been pre-occupied trying to get Jimmy here safely. My emotions are raw and I am

afraid to think about how devastating this has been to Jimmy. Can we just drop it for the time being?

There was a pause and an awkward silence.

“Have you heard of Joseph Friedman before? In conjunction with Artificial Neural Networks?” asked Sid.

Then it hit him, Harvard, 1994, he attended a lecture given by Joseph. Joseph Friedman was an American Professor of Cybernetics and was teaching at the University of Reading in England. The broad scoped lecture covered the use of Artificial Intelligence to enhance man’s ability to project thought. Techlepathy was the term he used to describe his research into computer-assisted telepathy. He remembered that this tied into a theory in physics. String Theory, he recalled. Zane remembered thinking, that if Friedman had not achieved an international reputation, having published in several fields outside of Cybernetics, his peers would have labeled him a “nut.” Zane also remembered that he was very impressed with Joseph’s knowledge of ANN and his discussion of the theoretical use of ANN with Cybernetics.

“Cybernetics, Harvard, 1994, said Zane. I attended your lecture but was unable to get a personal introduction.”

“How unfortunate, I’m sure we would have had a lot in common,” said Joseph.

“Joseph and I met at Harvard, said Sid. We had a couple of mutual friends and over time, we became good friends. That was a long time ago. Then by chance, we both ended up working at Los Alamos. Joseph was working in the Physics Department, while I was a programmer in Missile Technology. We were a lot younger then.”

I would like to think we are a lot wiser now, but I can only speak for myself,” chided Joseph.

“How much do you know about Neurdine?” asked Zane.

“Probably as much as you do. Maybe a little more since I have gone over your compiler programming as well as the data fed to The Five.”

“What... How did you go over the compiler programming?” asked Zane.

“I brought it with me, said Sid, along with the back-up data that Rothschild tried to destroy.” Zane looked at David Morris, and then he looked at Sid.

“Ok, will someone tell me what in the hell is going on here?” said Zane.

“Remember when Rothschild demanded access to the back-up data systems. Do you remember, a few days after that, my mother died, and I had leave Neurdine to attend her funeral?”

“Yeah,” said Zane.

“Well, I knew what Rothschild was asking was for was not only strange but it was downright suspicious. Rothschild needed only one of the backup systems to do a comparative analysis. If he found an anomaly or an error, then he could have looked at another backup system. In addition, who wrote the comparative analysis program? Shouldn’t he have asked one of us to write that program? I kept waiting, but he never brought it up. Then I left for my mother’s funeral. Joseph attended the funeral and I briefed him on Project Five. There is no one on earth I trust more than Joseph. Of course, Joseph had written numerous papers on Techlepathy, and when he heard about The Five and their telepathic abilities, he was enthralled. However, like me, he was very suspicious of Rothschild’s request. Joseph suggested I backup my backup and I agreed. I also backed up copies of our compiler programs and the search engine you and David put together.”

“How, were you able to store that much data,” asked Zane?

“Twelve five-hundred terabyte hard drives,” replied Sid.

“So, why didn’t you tell me or David about your backups? How many years did we spend trying to replicate the program?” asked Zane with anger in his voice.

“Zane, if I would have admitted that I had made copies of the data, I would have come under suspicion by not only you and David, but if Devon found out, he would have fired me. Look what happened to George Witowski in board design.”

“So, who are all these people, the ones I met down stairs?” asked Zane.

“Some are Neuraidine employees, some are Joseph’s colleges, people that he called in to help,” said Sid.

As Sid was talking, Zane saw and felt a strange distortion of the atmosphere around the room, affecting not only his vision but also temporarily affecting his equilibrium. It occurred like a ripple. Like a ripple created by a pebble being dropped into a pond. It started at one end of the room and passed right through him. As it passed through him, he felt a slightly relaxed sensation. This happened over a period of about three seconds. At first, Zane thought he was feeling the effects of exhaustion, but when he glanced over at Joseph, the man was smiling.

“What?” said Zane as he looked from Joseph to Sid and then at David.

Sid looked at him questioningly but Joseph kept smiling at him as if they shared a great secret.

“Ok, you want to let me in on the big secret?” asked Zane, while looking straight at Joseph.

“You felt it, didn’t you?” asked Joseph.

“Felt what?” asked David.

Sid looked at Joseph, then at Zane, waiting for his response.

“Yeah, I felt something, what was it?” asked Zane.

“We call it a Vortex for a want of a better name. It is the reason my father bought this property fifty years ago. He used to come here to meditate and experience what you have just experienced.”

“You felt it, asked David, why can’t Sid and I feel it?”

“As I said before, it is a phenomenon that not everybody is able to experience. Although, you might go to one of the many other Vortexes here in Sedona, and experience an effect that Zane and I might not,” said Joseph.

This is what Ben was talking about. This is where he came to meditate. This is where he met Kitchi Manitou and this is where he became a dream walker, thought Zane.

“Ok, I have met a lot of people I didn’t know before, and I’ve had the Vortex experience, so now what?” asked Zane.

“Now, and I don’t mean right this minute, we start planning on how to undo what has been done to The Five. Many of the people downstairs came here for that reason. Hans Gerber and Fredrick Heinz are the foremost String Theory Physicist in the world. They have been working with the M-Theory for years and are on the cusp of a new theory that will change everything we have ever thought about our universe. Eleanor Mc Kinsey is a Psychiatrist I have worked with for years, she is very familiar with my work in Cybernetics,” said Joseph.

“Excuse me, I don’t mean to interrupt, but I don’t understand the reasons for Physics, and what does this have to do with Cybernetics?” asked Zane.

“The telepathy that you and your colleges experienced is a first, said Joseph. There has never been a documented case of telepathy in the history of mankind with one small exception. Therefore, we must assume that somewhere in the data you have used to educate The Five, there are answers that have to deal with Cybernetics. This is my field; Cybernetics is the field of science concerned with processes of communication and control, especially the comparison of these processes in biological and artificial systems. Your wife, Abby, witnessed some type of

surgery that might have involved an electronic device, this would certainly involve Cybernetic Theory. The field of Techlepathy is machine-aided telepathy. We have made tremendous strides; this is the exception I previously mentioned, but the problem is the amount of computing power required. Currently, Techlepathy requires a 164 core Cray CX1000 Super Computer. Even then, our successes have been limited to very short distances. We have achieved telepathy but at a prohibitive cost and like I said, minimal distance. With regards to Hans and Fredrick, they are concerned about The Five and their abilities. They fear The Five might be able to hypothesize their new Osmonics Theory. They say this could be very dangerous. Their going through the data looking for clues that might shed light on The Five's phenomenal abilities, and to determine how much of the data is related to physics.

We know that The Five were telepathic before Abby walked in on that surgical procedure. Therefore, this brings up two questions, said Joseph. How did they become telepathic and what was the surgical procedure for?"

"We had to reverse engineer the compiler, and now we are feeding the back-up data through it so that we can understand what we actually taught The Five," said Sid.

"We're nowhere close to being through the data, but Zane, you would not believe what Rothschild was feeding The Five. I mean, they were receiving a good deal more at an earlier age than we thought," said David.

Zane looked at Sid, David and Joseph.

"I'm exhausted. Too exhausted to think, and I have to check on Jimmy," said Zane as he stood.

Joseph stood and said, "Of course, you have been through a great deal. Let me show you to your room and then we can go and find Jimmy."

Thursday June 11, 2020

"Nicely done, Mr. President," said Steve Gardner. The President had finished his address to the nation and they were on their way back to the Presidential Office.

"Have you made any progress in determining the source of the...", Duran paused because he realized how insane it all sounded. The source of the voices?" he finished.

"No sir, but I can assure you, with all the monitoring equipment we have set up, we will be able to make that determination if they contact you again."

"How about the leak to the Times, how did those bastards find out I was coming here?" Director Franks assured me Homeland Security is investigating the leak, and I am sure they will find it, said Gardner. Franks also informed me of something I felt you should be advised of."

"What's that?"

"Sir, you know the NSA does not monitor traffic inside the U.S. unless it is a call going out of the country or coming in. However, we do sometimes monitor law enforcement traffic, if we think it might be terrorist related. I personally set up the protocol. Mr. President, there has been some curious traffic regarding the Mall of America incident and the FBI Director."

"Steve, will you please get to the point."

"Sir, it appears that the terror suspects that the FBI identified are innocent citizens being set up. Mr. President, the Director, Jim Dorn, has been personally directing the investigation."

“What is the NSA doing conducting an investigation. Your Charter is strictly COMINT. So, explain to me what investigating Jim Dorn, the Director of the FBI, has to do with Communications Intelligence?” asked Duran.

“Sir, I turned our surveillance information over to Director Franks. This does come under Homeland Security’s Charter. I had lunch with Bill yesterday and, well, I think you need to set up a meeting with him ASAP.”

“Alright, I’ll have Mary set it up. I want both of you at the meeting.”

“Jackson,” said Duran, as they continued to walk towards the Presidential Office.

“Sir?” responded Jackson.

Ed Jackson was grateful that President Duran understood his reactions on the day President Brooks died, were by the book and there was just cause to suspect Duran. After things had settled down, and it was determined that the President died from a brain aneurysm, Duran had sat down and told Jackson that he felt Jackson had performed with honor and requested he stay as his Secret Service SAIC. Jackson proudly accepted President Duran’s offer.

“I’ve changed my mind about lunch. Tell Mary I will be eating at my desk, said Duran, and tell her to get hold of the Speaker. I need to discuss this housing boondoggle with him. In addition, I need her to set up a meeting with Bill Franks, have her set it up for tomorrow.”

“Yes Sir,” said Jackson.

No sooner did the word “Sir” escape Jackson’s mouth, when he saw a strange distortion in the air, ten feet in front of them. It was like a ripple in the air, a clear shiny reflective film similar to a soap bubble, only it stretched to the height and width of the hallway. It was vibrating, tiny circular ripples traveling from the center outwards. It was moving towards them, and before he could react, the film passed through him. As the film continued past them, Jackson drew his Sig Sauer, grabbed hold of President Duran’s arm, and rushed him to his office, twenty feet away. Gardner and the other two Secret Service agents followed and entered the President’s Office suite behind him. Mary Wilson jumped up out of her chair, her face an ashen color; a small squeak escaped her lips as she anticipated the worse.

President Duran jerked his arm away from Jackson’s grip.

“What the hell is going on, Jackson?”

“Sir, Mr. President, didn’t you see that?”

“See what? What are you talking about?”

“There was some kind of distortion in the air, it was, it was... He paused to compose himself. Sir, it was like a clear sheet of film and it passed right through us. I felt a loss of equilibrium, a little confusion, and then it just vanished.”

“Steve, have your people check your monitors. See if your people have picked up anything out of the ordinary, said Duran. Jackson, how do you feel, are you injured in any way?”

“A little shook up sir, it was strange. My description does not really give it justice. It was like; I felt it pass through my entire body. I’ll be fine Sir.”

Jackson turned and looked at the others. They looked concerned and curious.

“Am I the only one?”

Mary Wilson, looked like she was in a state of shock.

“I felt it,” she whispered

“Mary, said Doran, sit down before you fall down.” Doran rushed and grabbed Mary’s arm, assisting her to the desk chair.

“Jackson, get medical up here, get my doctor, Dr. Martinez.”

“It was just like Ed said. I mean, it passed right through me. I felt frozen and dizzy, then when you and the others rushed into the office, I, well I was able to move,” said Mary.

“Mr. President, Gardner said, as he set the phone back into its cradle. We had two-frequency burst that occurred at the same time Ed experienced his event or whatever it was. In addition, we are getting reports from topside, as well as down here. Numerous people have experienced what sounds like the same thing as Ed and Mary.”

“Aarrgh, aarrgh!” The sound caught everyone’s attention as President Duran leaned over with both hands clutching the sides of his head.

“For the love of God, please, stop. Aarrgh, aarrgh! Stop it! Please, somebody help.” President Maxwell Duran fell limply to the floor just as Dr. George Martinez entered the office. Mary Wilson fell out of the chair in a faint and Jackson caught her before she struck the floor. Martinez immediately went to the side of Duran, knelt and placed his hand on the president’s neck, seeking the feel of a pulse. He felt the pulse then leaned over Duran and listened for breathing. Martinez reached down, loosened the President’s tie, and unbuttoned the top button of his shirt.

“What the hell is going on here, someone tell me quickly?” said Martinez.

There was not a person in the room that could describe the events of the previous two or three minutes. Finally, Jackson spoke up.

“He just grabbed his head and started yelling that he was in pain. It only lasted a few seconds and then he collapsed.”

“What about Mary?” asked Martinez.

“That’s another situation, said Steve Gardner. A situation that we cannot talk about, at this time.”

“What are you talking about; you don’t think I have clearance. You think I was not briefed on the entire event that led to the death of President Brooks? Now, I want some fucking answers, and I want them now,” said Dr. Martinez as he rearranged one of Duran’s arms in an effort to provide comfort.

“Sorry Doctor, I’m still a little shook. Just prior to the President screaming he was in pain, there had been an event, a phenomena, something that we have not been able completely identify, said Gardner.

“Does it have anything to do with the all the calls that were coming into the infirmary as I was leaving?” asked Martinez.

“I suspect it does,” replied Gardner.

“Can you tell me anything about what the cause might be?” asked Martinez.

The only anomaly we observed was a frequency burst; also, there was some kind of visual abnormality observed by some people. I will let Ed give you a firsthand description of this event. A sound issued from President Duran.

“Aarrgh, what the fuck happened, my head is killing me?”

He started to get up when Dr. Martinez placed his hand on the President’s chest, pushing him back down in a supine position. Jackson walked over to the sofa and grabbed a pillow, handing it to Dr. Martinez. The doctor lifted the President’s head and placed the pillow under it.

“I want a helicopter, I want to get him to Bethesda right away,” Dr. Martinez said to Gardner.

“What are you talking about, and don’t talk about me like I’m not in the room. I’m still the President, and ...”

“Hush, said Martinez. I am your doctor, and if I say you are going to Bethesda, you are going to Bethesda. Now just stay calm until we can figure out what happened.”

Duran glared at Martinez but he realized the doctor was right. The realization and fear were starting to grind at that part of his brain that had been hurting so badly just a few minutes ago.