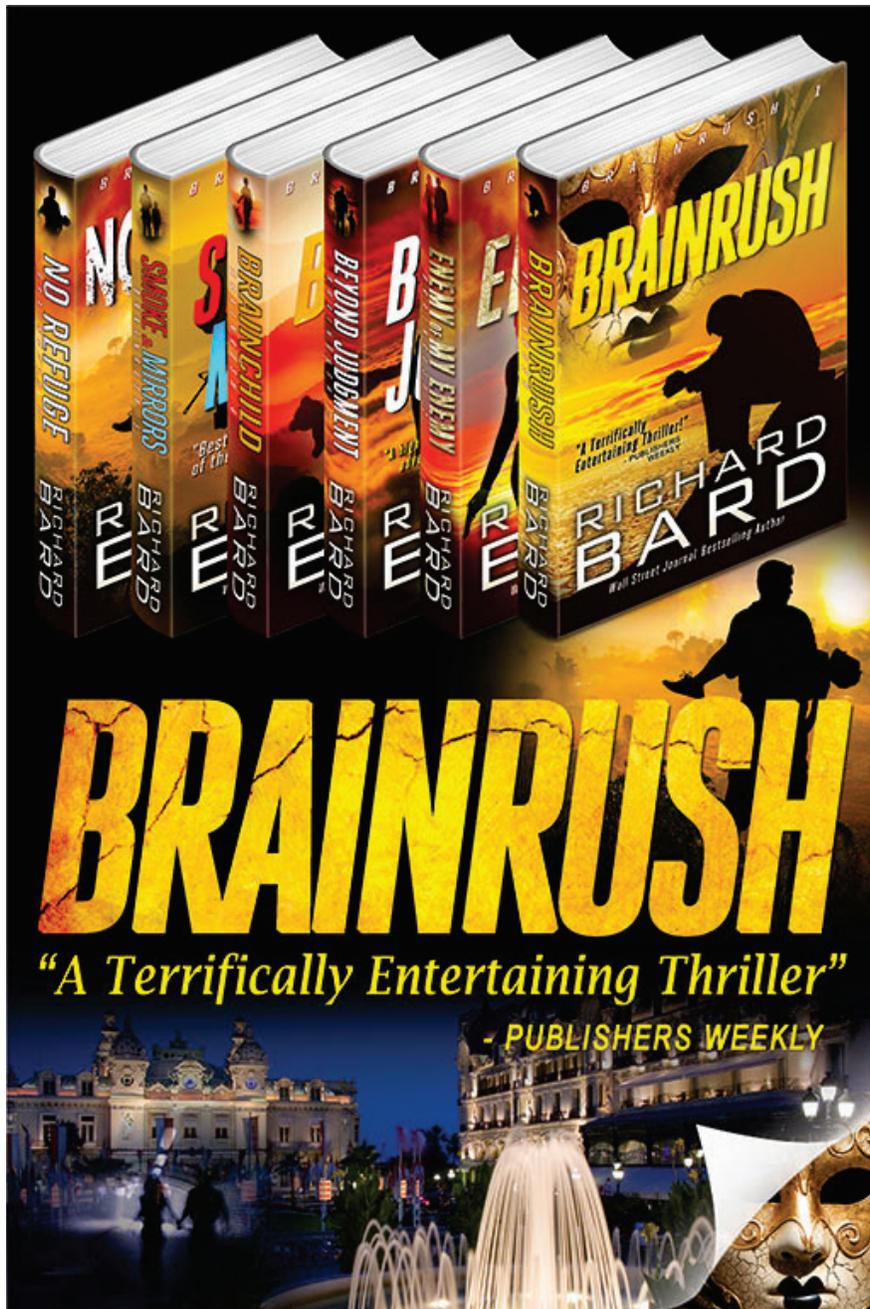


Important Forward

From Author Richard Bard

This novella is intended for readers who are not yet familiar with the *Brainrush* thriller series—providing a quick entrée into *The Wall Street Journal* #1 bestselling thriller that *Publishers Weekly* called “terrifically entertaining.” With over 2,000 Amazon 5-Star reviews to date, the 5-book series has captured the imagination of a growing number of enthusiastic followers. I hope this novella encourages you to check out the series.

Gifted is a compilation novella featuring the characters from the *Brainrush* thriller novels, *Brainchild* and *Smoke & Mirrors*. It is a complete story unto itself, however, if you’ve read or listened to books four and five of the series, then you’ve already read most of the contents of this novella.



The Brainrush Series

Brainrush is a story about second chances, and embracing every day of your life as though it's your last. Called "a terrifically entertaining thriller" by Publishers Weekly, Book-1 of the series was named *The Wall Street Journal* #1 Bestselling Action/Adventure in their *Guide to Self-Published Big Sellers*, while Book-2 was on the Top-10 Amazon Mystery/Thriller Top Rated list for 53-straight weeks. This set the stage for the blockbuster release of the third book in the series, which was heralded by *Suspense Magazine* as "part science fiction, part thriller, part suspense,

part love story, and part mystery. It's got it all and that's what makes this novel one of the best." The characters live on in the final three books of the series. Books 4 & 5 were released in 2014, and were met with rave reviews. Book-5 was named "one of the best books of the year" by IndieReader.com. The final book of the series is scheduled for release in 2017.

GIFTED

A Brainrush Novella

Richard Bard

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The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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“The flame that burns twice as bright burns half as long.”

Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching

Prologue

*Veterans Administration Medical Center
Santa Monica, California*

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

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

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

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

"They mentioned me by name?"

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

Jake cringed. He'd done everything possible to maintain a low profile regarding his connection with the Grid event—when more than a thousand small alien pyramids had awakened from a twenty-five-thousand-year-old sleep, erupting from beneath the earth to circle the globe, counting down to the point when every human on the planet would be eliminated. Doc and the

government had worked to divert attention from Jake, agreeing to keep his involvement—and that of his friends and family—a secret. But information had leaked out, and though Jake’s name had not been mentioned, a Swiss newspaper had run a story about the mysterious man it called “the Brainman,” crediting him with averting the world cataclysm. There had been a global outcry for more information; the population wanted—*needed*—a hero to thank. But Jake hadn’t wanted any part of it. Eventually, the topic had faded from the headlines as inquiries continued to be met with tight lips and false trails, and the media refocused on the knowledge that man was no longer the only sentient life form in the universe.

Jake blew out a long breath as Doc’s warning sank in. What he’d heard so far was worrisome but not alarming. They stood in the corner of the physical therapy room of the Advanced Prosthetics Technology Center, located in the basement of the main hospital on the 388-acre Veterans Affairs Medical Center campus. Therapists were assisting several patients in the large room as they performed exercises and tests designed to acclimate them to their new robotic appendages.

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

Doc sighed. “I’m afraid so—”

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

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

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

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

The corner of Mike’s lips lifted. It was the first time Jake had seen him smile since they’d met two weeks ago. The battle trauma had taken more than just Mike’s body parts. According to the lead therapist who had called for Jake’s help, the soldier—who had previously been known

for his boisterous personality—had sunken into a suicidal depression. Jake had been happy to assist. His ability to transmit thoughts into the minds of others was limited in most cases, especially with strangers, but at least he'd developed a knack for projecting a calming influence and mental clarity on subjects. It had proven to be a helpful talent with patients who needed to train their brains to control the latest evolution of thought-controlled artificial limbs. Jake had helped out with several patients over the past year. Today was his third visit with Mike, but progress had been slow in coming. Until a few moments ago, when Jake had interrupted his session to speak with Doc and Alex had unexpectedly stepped in.

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

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

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

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

Mike's glance shifted from Jake to Alex and back again. His eyes narrowed and Jake sensed the man's awareness of the situation. It was as if the mental connection he'd had with Jake over the past few sessions—as well as the one he'd just experienced with Alex—had provided him with unique insight about father and son. He shook Jake's hand with a firm grip. "I couldn't have done it without you, Mr. B," he said with a deep Southern drawl, offering Alex a wink in the process. "I'm in your debt and I won't forget it. Now, didn't you say you were late for an appointment or something?"

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

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

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

"It'll have to wait," Jake said over his shoulder. "Like Mike said, I'm already late."

The trio hurried down the hallway.

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

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

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

If the truth ever got out...

"You know better, son," Jake said, squeezing his hand.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Of course. Why shouldn’t I be?”

“It’s just that—”

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

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

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

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

Chapter 1

Redondo Beach, California

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

Sensing.

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

“Mom, is everything okay?”

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

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

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

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

At least that's the way I see it.

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

Mike was more interested in dying than living.

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

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

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

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

"Mom says we have to stay here."

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

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

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

Chapter 2

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

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

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

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

I had lots of drawers.

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

They didn't get me.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

My favorite weapon was the robotic swarm. It became available after you used conventional weapons to kill twelve players without dying yourself. The swarm consisted of twenty-four dart-

sized drones that hovered and zipped around like hummingbirds. The player could switch his screen view to any one of them, and a single strike from a drone's needle-tipped nose spelled instant death. The key to my success with them was multitasking. Players tended to maneuver a swarm as a single unit. A few of the better players had learned to split their drones into two groups and they had a far higher kill rate than everyone else—other than me, of course. I used an entirely different strategy, my brain separating the drones into twenty individual units so they could either move with the swarm or operate independently. It came naturally to me, so I guess it wasn't very fair to the other players, but heck, war isn't fair, right? Besides, the better I got, the more the other players teamed up against me to even the odds.

I loved it!

Chapter 3

I WAS MIDWAY THROUGH a leap off a building, blasting my M1216 shotgun at two opponents who'd just run past, when my cell phone vibrated in my pocket. It was a burst of three short vibrations, then three long, three short—Morse code for SOS. I think my heart might've skipped a beat because my breath caught in my throat. I glanced up to see shocked expressions on my sister and brother, and even with my noise-canceling headphones on, I knew the ring tone that accompanied the code on all our phones was “Danger Zone,” a song from Dad's favorite movie, *Top Gun*, programmed to play by an application that synched specific text messages with distinctive tones.

I ripped off my Spider and we all scrambled for our phones.

“Oh my God!” Sarafina gasped. Her face was white.

“No, wait a minute,” Ahmed said, standing up so fast that his chair toppled backward. “I was supposed to go surfing. What about school? My stuff? I haven't even eaten lunch yet. This can't be for real—”

I ignored him because the moment I unlocked the screen on my phone, I knew it *was* real. Mom and Dad had pounded it into our heads over and over again. The alert message would never be sent as a drill. The group text had come from Mom's phone. I stared at the four characters that would change our lives forever:

NOW!

Sarafina dropped her phone on the table. Her hands shook and her fingers danced in the air as if they were playing an aggressive song on the piano.

Ahmed's rant continued, his words spilling over one another. “Where's Dad? We don't even have a car. I love this house. What about my board—”

I tuned him out, recalling Dad's instructions:

Don't question. Act!

I snapped off the back of my phone, yanked out the battery, and threw the device as hard as I could against the tile floor. Glass cracked, plastic splintered, and my sister and brother froze. I set my jaw and returned their stares, ignoring the tears spilling down my cheeks. Sarafina's fingers calmed and Ahmed's lips tightened. We needed to work together. I knew it. They knew

it.

Ahmed blew out a breath behind clenched teeth. His eyes narrowed and a nod told me he was back in control. He removed the battery from his phone and dropped the remnants beside mine on the floor. Sarafina followed suit. That act of solidarity was like the Spider game's countdown clock reaching zero.

"Move!" Ahmed said, grabbing his laptop and running toward the staircase leading to our bedrooms. Sarafina was right behind him. I jammed the Spider and tablet into my backpack and followed.

"Sixty seconds!" Ahmed shouted as he dashed into his bedroom.

My sister let out a yelp and disappeared around the corner.

I ran into my room and a flush of sadness washed over me when I realized this would be the last time I'd ever see it. I pushed the feeling aside and kept moving. Most of the stuff I needed was already in my pack, but Dad had drilled into us that our survival depended on having everything on the list. So I opened the bottom drawer of my dresser and pulled out a new cell phone, a rolled-up sweatshirt, a Swiss Army knife, and a rubber-banded wad of documents and money. I shoved it all into my pack.

"I hate these long pants," my sister shouted from her bedroom. "They make me look fat."

"Don't forget the barrettes!" Ahmed said.

I pulled on my jeans, laced up my sneakers, and slung the pack over my shoulder. Fighting back a snuffle, I took one last look at my room, memorizing every detail—the action figures on my dresser, the wall covered with my favorite fractal patterns, the model airplanes hanging from the ceiling—

"Thirty seconds!" Ahmed shouted.

I flinched, grabbed my favorite Transformer figure, and rushed out the door. There was one last thing I had to get that wasn't on the list.

Dad's life depended on it.

##