

# Back Cover Text

## No Refuge

(Brainrush 6)

#1 *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author Richard Bard, who entertained fans with his wildly successful Brainrush thriller series, now unleashes the heart-pounding series finale in a two-book ride that will take your breath away.

Jake Bronson's family and friends are mourning him. They'd watched as he sacrificed himself so their lives could return to normal. But normal wasn't to be. The megalomaniac whom Jake had killed during his suicide assault left a legacy of videos that damn Jake and everyone associated with him, leading to a price being put on their heads, dead or alive.

They go to ground, unaware their every move is being tracked by a new breed of young, tech-savvy jihadists about to unleash vengeance on America's homeland—with Jake's family and the unsuspecting citizens of Los Angeles in their crosshairs.

As the jaws of the terrorist trap begin to close, Jake's eight-year-old son, Alex, faces a threat of his own. He carries a deadly secret that endangers the world, and now that his father is dead, Alex is the only one who can deal with it. He slips away to heed the call of unearthly visions that demand his presence, and his journey draws him to the back alleys of Bogota, Columbia, where he encounters a group of terminally ill orphans. One of their siblings has been abducted by child traffickers. Alex can't ignore their cry for help, and the unlikely alliance plans a nothing-to-lose rescue mission that has little chance of success.

But the bloodthirsty outcry against Alex's family and friends reaches beyond those who wish them harm, as do the visions that reveal their dark secrets to Alex. Help is on the way...

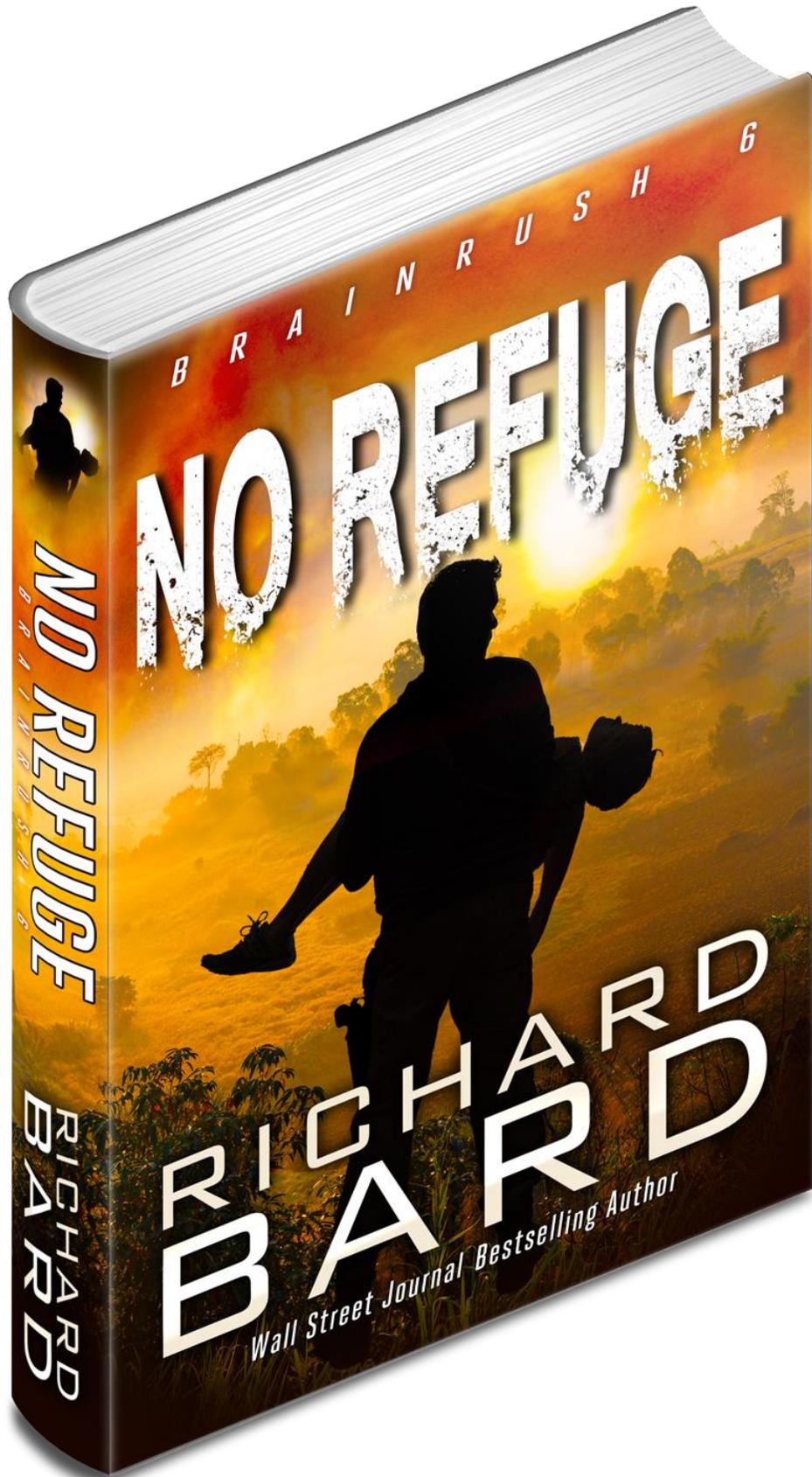


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# Dedication

For my wonderful nephews Dylan and Ryan

# No Refuge

Brainrush 6

Richard Bard

# Chapter 1

## *South Lake Tahoe, California*

I killed thirty-one people last week, and I still can't wash the smell out of my nose.

I'm talking about *real* people with homes and families and hopes and dreams, not video game avatars that respawn after ten seconds. In *that* world I'd killed tens of thousands. Well, the actual number is 45,268. It's not that I made a point of keeping an exact count. It's just that my brain did it for me. It was the same for pretty much everything else I saw or heard. The data gets dumped into various drawers in my head, and I can recall it whenever I want. Trust me, that's not always a good thing. There are plenty of memories I'd like to forget forever, including the expressions of terror on the faces of the people I'd killed.

Or the look on my mom's face as she'd watched me do it.

*Or the smell.*

Sure, I hadn't had much choice in the matter since it had been the only way to save my family and friends, but that didn't make the shame go away.

Yesterday was my eighth birthday. We hadn't celebrated.

"It's not fair!" my brother Ahmed said, interrupting my thoughts. He paced in front of the small couch by the TV. He was eighteen years old, and the brain implant that controlled most aspects of his autism didn't do much to prevent him from going into one of his rants. He was angry. "We didn't do anything to deserve this," he continued. "What about school? What about my short board? What about simply walking down the street without worrying somebody is going to kill us!"

My thirteen-year-old sister Sarafina stiffened at that last comment. She tucked her legs beneath her and sank further into her corner of the couch. When her eyes closed I knew she was disappearing into the music streaming from her earphones. Music was her thing. If we'd been back home she would've found comfort through the keys of her piano. But she'd never see that piano again. We couldn't go home. Ever.

The three of us couldn't have looked more different. Ahmed had strong Afghan features and a stern gaze that tended to put people on guard, while Sarafina's soft face and big brown eyes

made you want to smile. She was Italian. Me, I'm just a normal-looking American kid with a mop of light brown hair and a crooked smile. Mom and dad weren't my siblings' biological parents, but so what? The three of us were brothers and sister in every way that mattered, especially after everything we'd been through.

"It's all fake," Ahmed said, shaking his fist at the TV, where a photo of our Dad was embedded beside the newscaster. The banner across the top of the screen read GLOBAL TERRORIST. The volume was muted, but it didn't matter because we'd heard it all before. "It didn't go down that way," Ahmed said. "Dad wasn't responsible for any of it. If it hadn't been for him, the world would've been decimated. It's not fair! What about—?"

I followed my sister's lead and tuned him out. Ahmed was frustrated. And scared. We all were, and each of us had different ways of dealing with it. Ahmed ranted, my sister escaped into her music, and I stuffed my emotions into drawers in my head and slammed them closed—or at least I tried to.

We were in one of two adjoining mini-suites at a roadside motel on the south end of Lake Tahoe, California. It hadn't been a planned stop on our road trip from a secret government facility in Nevada to a new hideaway in California, but a huge wildfire had closed down the 80 freeway, and the government men leading our caravan had detoured toward the lake in the hopes of getting around it. It would've worked if it hadn't been for a sudden second blaze that shut down highway 50, stranding us and thousands of other motorists at the lake. Thanks to the quick thinking of Doc, who was a close family friend and in charge of the government escort, we'd grabbed a couple of rooms on the outskirts of town before late afternoon traffic had come to a standstill. Others hadn't been so lucky.

I opened a slit between the closed blinds of our second story window, and turned my gaze to the crowds milling around below. It was a bright summer morning, and there were so many cars and people outside the scene reminded me of a tailgate party at a sporting event. The motel's parking lot was full, and ten times as many vehicles occupied the golden fields of a closed-for-the-season snowmobile park on the other side of the road. Cars and RVs were parked this way and that, intermingled with tents, lawn chairs, spread-out blankets, and even a few portable barbeques. People mingled, chatted, and shared food, and a group of teens sat in a circle as one played a guitar. Kids were laughing and goofing off, one group of them running every which way playing dodge ball in the field beyond. There were even a few hobby drones overhead. All in all, folks were making the best of a frustrating situation.

Well, not quite all of them. A long-haired burly man wearing a leather vest and silver-tipped boots stormed back and forth beside an old-style motorcycle parked in front of the motel's coffee shop. He had a phone pressed to his ear and he was barking into it. Folks nearby edged away. After several moments the man stopped pacing. His back was to me but I saw his head nodding as if he'd gotten his point across to whoever he was speaking to. Finally, he pocketed the phone and climbed on the bike. But before starting the engine, his head turned slowly around and he stared up at my window. His eyes narrowed and I swear that even from that distance it seemed as if he was looking right at me. He sneered and it made my heart jump. I snapped my fingers from the blinds and slid to one side, my heart pounding in my ears. Two breaths later I heard the deep-throated rev of the motorcycle's engine, and I listened anxiously as it kicked into gear and faded into the distance. By the time I found the courage to peek back outside, the man was gone. I blew out a breath and calmed myself. I guess Ahmed wasn't the only one on edge right now.

As I peered back outside, my eyes were drawn to a group of boys and girls mingling near a couple of tour buses in the motel's parking lot. Two or three adults watched over them. The kids looked like they were dressed for summer camp, wearing colorful t-shirts, shorts, and tennis shoes. Many of them wore baseball caps sporting deer antlers that wiggled as they walked, and I guessed they'd just come off of a weekend of fun at the lake. One group stood off by themselves, and something felt off about them. Smiles were forced, and I sensed their longing as a couple of them watched the dodge ball game across the road. I understood the feeling. What I wouldn't give to be able to run outside and play instead of being trapped in this motel room surrounded by what Doc had called a protection detail. I watched as several of the kids headed toward the motel's coffee shop and gift store. I wondered why there was no bounce in their steps, and that's when I noticed that a few of them wore tight-fitting head scarves beneath their caps. I'd seen that look before, and I knew what it meant.

*Chemotherapy.*

The realization sent a chill up my back, and my heart went out to them. I noticed two of them holding hands, providing each other some small comfort in the face of a difficult circumstance. I wasn't surprised that I was drawn to them. I get that from my mom. She—

My stomach went hollow when I heard the faint sound of my mom sobbing. I moved to the adjoining door between our rooms, and cracked it open.

## Chapter 2

Francesca curled into the corner of the couch. Emptiness gnawed at her insides. It was her new state of being, and nothing in the world could ever change it. Her husband was dead, the world thought she and her friends were terrorists, and—

She grabbed a throw pillow and hugged it.

Lacey placed a hand on hers. “It’s going to be okay.”

Francesca sensed the lack of conviction beneath her friend’s words, and that made her feel even worse. At thirty-three, Lacey was six years younger than her, and despite the emotional and physical torment they’d faced the past week the blond actress still looked like a ready-to-go college coed. Her contagious zest for life and fearless determination made it seem as if nothing fazed her. And usually that was the case. But not now. Francesca’s empathic gift allowed her to see beyond Lacey’s facade, and they both knew it. They all wore casual clothes, but they felt like they were at funeral.

Lacey sighed, “I’m scared too.”

Marshall and Tony rose from the dining table to join them. Jake’s best friends both looked worn out. They felt the pain of Jake’s loss as deeply as she did.

“We’re all scared,” Marshall said, as he sat next to his wife.

Tony sat across from them. The seasoned cop’s New York accent was thicker than usual. “But that don’t mean we ain’t gonna get through it,” he said. His wife and two kids had been at the airport to meet them when they’d returned from Hong Kong. Their group hug had lasted a long time, and Francesca had envied them. But Tony’s relief at seeing his family had vanished when the video of Jake was splashed across the TV monitors. It had been doctored to make it appear as if Jake had admitted guilt to the very string of terrorist acts that he and his friends had fought to prevent. When similar videos appeared featuring Tony and the others, Tony had pulled out all the stops to remove his family to a safehouse. His wife had been furious about it, insisting they stay together. But Tony wouldn’t have it. The target was on his back, not theirs, and he wasn’t about to place them in harm’s way. *Again*. Francesca had wanted to send her children with them, but Doc had convinced her otherwise. They’d been part of what had happened in Hong Kong, and he’d insisted they’d be safer in his care along with the rest of them. She’d

finally agreed, but since then she'd had a growing sense that it might have been a mistake. It was why she'd just agreed to Tony's plan.

She followed Tony's glance toward the open bedroom door at the rear end of the suite. The sliding glass door was open, and Doctor "Doc" Albert Finnegan—head of a clandestine arm of The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) stationed in a secret underground facility in Northern Nevada affectionately referred to as Area 52—stood on the walkway overlooking the pool. The sixty-eight-year-old scientist had met Jake eight years ago, shortly after the first alien pyramid had been launched, and he'd been a close family friend ever since. He knew the videos were a lie, and he was doing everything in his power to protect her and her friends. But he still worked for the government, and that meant he bore the brunt of the pressure from those in power who weren't so easily convinced of their innocence. It was the same around the world. The outcry of anger toward Jake and his friends was brutal, fueled by radicals who claimed vindication for their beliefs that America was the true Satan, spawning its own form of terror across the globe. The faked video admission by Jake that he'd been responsible for the launch of the alien grid that had nearly decimated the planet was all the proof they needed. The voices from the few that knew better—like Doc—were quickly drowned out, and there was nothing any of them could do about it. But that didn't shake Doc's determination to keep them safe until the world could be made to see the truth. So when Doc's team first saw the anonymous postings featuring photos of the secret blast doors at Area 52, accompanied by claims that Jake and the rest of them were being housed there, he'd been quick to react. He'd feared someone in his organization had leaked the information, and when he learned that a team was en route from Washington D.C. "to take the terrorists off your hands," he'd decided to move them to a new location that even his superiors didn't know existed. Doing so without approval would likely cost him his job, but still he hadn't hesitated.

Doc was speaking to someone on the phone, and the deep furrow between his bushy white eyebrows told her the conversation wasn't going his way. When he noticed her concerned stare, he turned away. He was a good man, and he'd been fiercely loyal to Jake. The thought of betraying his trust didn't sit well with her.

"This traffic rift could be just the thing," Tony whispered. "It might be a hell of a lot easier to break away here rather than waiting until we get to the new location."

"In broad daylight?" Marshall asked. "With hundreds of people outside who might recognize us? The last time I checked the darknet the reward on our heads was approaching two million

dollars. And when I say ‘on our heads,’ I mean it literally, because the only reason they want us taken alive is so they can behead us on live TV.”

Francesca shivered. Marshall had explained earlier that the darknet, or deep web, was the restricted access portion of the internet utilized by the underworld, where drugs, arms, even children—could be bought and sold anonymously without fear of tracking by the authorities. It was a panacea for criminals and terrorists around the world, and unnamed radical groups were fueling the fervor for their capture, or worse, with a growing pot of money.

*Crowdfunding at its worst.*

Lacey said, “It doesn’t matter. We’ve got to do it. I love Doc for trying to protect us, but we’ve got to get out from under the government’s thumb while we still can.”

“What about wheels?” Marshall asked.

“You kiddin’?” Tony said. “We’re surrounded by parked cars.” He pulled a folded wire coat hanger from under the couch. “And I’ve got a skeleton key.”

Tony’s smile was forced. The normal twinkle in the big man’s expression was gone, and that spoke volumes to Francesca. If tough-as-nails Tony was worried, they were in big trouble. How would they survive out there on their own? A selfish part of her wished the friends who had been with them at the airport had stuck around. But once the videos splashed over the screens, the homecoming celebration had broken up quickly. Jake’s Air Force pals Cal and Kenny—who had yet to be implicated—had reluctantly returned to their duty station in San Diego, and Tony’s family had been whisked away by a couple of his cop buddies. Becker and Jonesy had wanted to leave, but they’d been front and center on the videos so Doc’s government team had insisted they remain. Becker had winked and said, “Sure, Mate. No worries.” But ten minutes later the Australian Special Forces operatives had vanished into the crowd, and by now were laying low in the outback. As for Lacey’s friends Pete and Skylar—whose help had meant the difference between life and death for all of them—they’d scoffed at the notion of accepting protection from the government. Hollywood was the stunt team’s home turf, and they’d insisted they could take care of themselves.

It’s just us, she thought, searching for courage in the eyes of her friends—but not finding it. Jake’s death had taken a piece of each of them. *And they don’t even know the worst of it yet.* She choked back a sob, holding her breath. They stared at her, and the deep concern that radiated from them broke her resolve. She burst into tears.

Lacey moved to embrace her. “We’ll find a way past this.”

Francesca shook her off. “No we won’t . . . I won’t.” She dropped her face into her hands. Her voice quaked. “It’s Alex.”

“Oh,” Marshall said with a sigh. “Of course. What he’s been through is unthinkable. It’s no wonder he hasn’t spoken a word since it happened.”

“He’s a tough kid,” Tony said. “We’ll stand by him. He’ll snap out—”

“No!” she cried. “He won’t snap out of anything. He’s very sick.”

“Huh?” Tony said.

“My boy,” she said between sniffles. “He’s dying.”

“W-what?” Lacey said.

Marshall gaped.

Tony leaned forward and placed a hand on her knee. “No—How?”

The pent up words tumbled out of her, needing to be shared. “I found out that morning. Before we were all taken. I was going to tell Jake that night, but now. . .” Her chest hitched.

“Dear God,” Lacey said.

They let her cry for a moment, not pressing her with the questions she knew were spiraling through their minds. Marshall rushed to the bathroom and returned with a box of Kleenex. She took one and dabbed her eyes and face. Blowing out a breath, she said, “The doctor said his body’s cells are aging out of control. He wanted to bring Alex in for a bunch of tests.”

“But he seems fine,” Marshall said.

Tony said, “It’s gotta be a mistake.”

She shook her head. “No. Not a mistake. There were a few subtle changes over the past few months that I ignored—his hair growing faster, his voice breaking a couple times, and even when Jake commented that his physical coordination playing catch had seemingly improved overnight.” She bit at her lower lip. “I discounted it all, attributing it to an early onset of puberty. Then, two weeks ago . . .” Her gaze lost focus as she relived the moment in her mind. “I was holding his hand when I noticed the texture of his skin had lost its softness, and when he returned my gaze I saw something in his expression that reminded me of my grandfather. Alex has always seemed wise beyond his years, but this was something different, and the closer I looked the more I realized his eyes had actually changed. It was as if they’d lost some of their luster.” She shivered at the memory. “That’s when I took him to the specialist. He ran a full battery of tests, and I played it off to Alex as a special physical the whole family was going to have after everything we’d been through. I met with the doctor last week to go over the results. They were irrefutable. Alex’s body is ageing too fast. But unlike progeria or other ageing syndromes which

are inherent at birth and usually revealed within an infant's first year, the genetic anomaly in Alex appears to have been recently acquired from some unknown external source. The doctor urged immediate hospitalization and further testing."

"Unknown external source?" Tony asked hesitantly.

She stared at the three of them, unable to mouth the words.

Lacey gasped, "Oh my God—"

"The Grid," Marshall said. "He was connected to it."

"Damn," Tony said. "How long before, uh . . . I mean—"

"S-six months."

## Chapter 3

I sucked in a breath and flattened myself against wall. I'd heard it all, and it felt as if a giant hand had reached inside me and squeezed the breath from my lungs. I wasn't a crybaby, but I couldn't stop the tears from welling up and spilling down my cheeks. Was I really going to die before Christmas? Thoughts of denial rushed through my head faster than one of my brother's rants. I examined my palms, rubbed them together. Mom said they used to be softer, but to me they seemed the same as always. I clenched my fists, and if anything they seemed stronger than ever. Plus, I felt fine inside. Well, except for my dad dying, and the guilt I'd felt over killing those soldiers, and the worry I had about the mess we were in. But other than that, it didn't seem to me like my body was ageing too fast. My shoes still fit. I didn't have aches and pains like older people, or memory issues, or wrinkled skin, or silver hair, or even that funny odor—

I stopped myself, unable to avoid the truth. I *knew* better. I'd been connected to an alien force that had invaded me from head to toe. It would have killed me then and there if my dad hadn't joined the link and helped me control the terabytes of chaotic data that had flowed into my head. With his help, I'd been able to stuff it all away deep in my mind, and ever since I'd done everything I could to keep it buried. But a part of me always knew the truth: It *had* to have changed me. I just hadn't known how . . . until now.

I forced myself to move closer to the crack in the door.

\*\*\*

Francesca stiffened when she noticed Doc pocket his phone and walk toward them. She wiped her eyes, using the motion to disguise a head shake to the others. Doc didn't need know about Alex's condition. They took the hint, and Tony turned around and said, "What's the news, Doc?"

Doc's clothes were wrinkled, and the usual twinkle beneath his frameless spectacles had vanished. He sighed. "They know we're here."

Tony stood, his fists clenched. "*Who* knows?"

"My bosses in Washington."

"Crap," Marshall said.

There's more," Doc said. "Homeland is seriously worried about Passcode. The realization that the thought-controlled software used in the Spider headsets had allowed Jiaolong's team to

subliminally acquire personal information and passwords from so many top level cyber gatekeepers has got the Office of Cyber Security and Communication (CS&C) *and* the U.S. Cyber Command (USCYBERCOM) at their highest threat levels. All because of a video game.”

Francesca tensed at mention of Jiaolong. The megalomaniac game creator who’d orchestrated the mass kidnapping of her family and friends had been responsible for the uploaded video files that had placed them on the world’s Most Wanted list. It was because of him that Jake was dead.

Marshall nodded at Doc. “I’m not surprised. The homeland agents freaked out during my debrief when I gave them the list of beta testers from the game’s leader board. I know most of them by reputation. They represent a cross-section of some of the top cyber-security specialists in the country, and like everyone else in our industry they love video games. They were easily lured into the beta test program. Between them they have top secret access to some of the most secure government, military, utility and financial networks in the country. Anyone with combined access to all their networks could change the shape of the world.”

“But they’ve all changed their passwords since then, right?” Tony asked.

“Sure, but that doesn’t mean someone didn’t gain access beforehand and drop in a backdoor.”

Doc said, “And that’s why they’ve sequestered every one of them to work together to figure it out—drilling into their networks for signs of any intrusions. It’s a massive undertaking.”

“To say the least,” Marshall added. “Trillions of lines of code. Forget about finding a needle in haystack. It’s more like a trying to find a particular needle in an Olympic-sized pool full of needles.

“But I don’t understand,” Lacey said. “How does this affect us?”

Francesca gasped as she realized the truth. Her eyes widened as she stared up at Doc.

Doc’s expression tightened. “They’ve learned that Alex may be the key to unlocking the mess. They’re coming for him. Worse yet, with so many people involved we have to assume that word of his involvement has leaked beyond government channels. And that means others will come looking as well. It places all of you at even greater risk than before.”

\*\*\*

My stomach dropped. Half the world already wants my mom and friends to pay for terrorist acts they didn’t commit, and now they’re at *greater* risk than that? Because of me? It felt as if all the air had left the room. I couldn’t catch my breath. My mind swirled, and for the first time I knew how my dad must have felt. He’d blamed himself for endangering all of us, and in the end he’d

sacrificed his life because of it. I glanced over my shoulder. My brother and sister were still on the couch—my sister lost in her music and Ahmed watching TV—and as I looked at them my mind superimposed glowing red targets on the backs of their heads.

And this time it's *my* fault.

The room closed in around me, and a wild panic made my insides want to explode. Blood pounded in my ears. With fists clenched I squeezed my eyes closed trying desperately to push away the realization of what I had to do. Was it even possible? Could I even do it? I'm only eight!

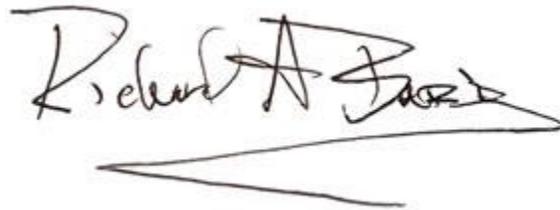
My face wanted to cry but I refused to let it happen. Instead, thoughts of my dad invaded my consciousness, of the love he'd had for all of us, of his determination to do whatever was necessary to protect us.

*Of his courage.*

I clamped my jaws shut to steady myself, and I narrowed my gaze on the hallway leading to the bedroom where I'd left my backpack.

##

I promise a wild and satisfying ride to follow! 😊

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Richard A. Fink". The signature is written in a cursive, somewhat stylized font. Below the signature is a long, horizontal, slightly wavy line that tapers at both ends, resembling a stylized underline or a decorative flourish.