

## CHAPTER 1

Friday, November 29—Two Weeks Earlier

FBI Cryptanalyst Forensic Examiner John Decker was working late at the National Counter Terrorism Center in northern Virginia when he got the results of a test he'd been running. A screen at his workstation came to life with an audible *ping*. Decker leaned forward to scan it more closely.

Just shy of six feet tall, a trifle thin but wiry, Special Agent Decker had thick coal black hair, pale gray eyes dotted with blue and green specks, a strong mouth and a thin, rather delicate nose. Only a long white scar, barely visible below the hairline and sweeping along one eye, and a slight lopsidedness to his face marred his appearance. He was thirty-eight.

A known hacker named H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>, on a watch list, appeared to have broken into the email server of Boston-area defense contractor Westlake Defense Systems, pierced through the firewall and embedded a Trojan, enabling outside access at the root level.

Decker smiled. *Caught you*, he thought.

H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> had first come to the attention of law enforcement when, at age twelve, he had hacked into his local Telco and stolen gigabytes of customer information, including Socials, passwords and bank account numbers. A junior high school rival had ultimately ratted him out but, due to his age, his sentence had been reduced to time served, which was basically nothing.

His real name was Jeffrey Greenberg. He'd grown up in Pennington, New Jersey, the only son of a lawyer and stock broker. Three years later, H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> was linked to a blackmailing scheme. Allegedly, he and a pair of friends out of Russia had threatened to shut down a host of online gambling websites with Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks. Fearful of losing even more money while their sites were being flooded with more requests than they could possibly handle, many online casinos had paid. Their sites *were* their businesses, after all. But one had alerted the FBI, and it was only due to some silly prosecutorial error—uncovered by the hacker's own mother—that the fifteen year old H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> had escaped being indicted for blackmail.

After that, he had kept his nose pretty clean, except for a couple of incidents.

One, he'd been linked to black hat hacker group LulzSec, as well as Anonymous, the decentralized online community associated with collaborative, international hacktivism.

And two, he'd been responsible for initiating a Flash Mob attack in Philadelphia using Twitter. Thousands of teens had converged on the corner of South Street and Sixth, and a woman had been robbed and assaulted. But, once again, Greenberg only got a slap on the wrist. The state couldn't prove that he'd intentionally provoked the assault, and eventually the case was thrown out.

By monitoring his movements—via cash withdrawals and cell phone trilaterization—Decker had finally managed to track H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> down through a street surveillance video feed near an Internet Café called the Java Company on Second Avenue in Philly, meeting with a man whose face he could not quite discern but . . .

*That man!* An icy fist clamped Decker's heart. It looked just like . . .

The stranger's body and body language brought to mind El Aqrab, a notorious Jihadist bomber whom Decker had battled eight years earlier.

*But that isn't possible!*

Even after all this time, the Lebanese terrorist still haunted Decker's dreams. El Aqrab's calling card had been to wrap people up with incendiary devices designed to produce flames in the shape of Koranic verses when exploded remotely. Some called it aesthetic destruction.

Eight years earlier, El Aqrab and his Brotherhood of the Crimson Scimitar had stolen eight kilos of highly enriched uranium in Kazakhstan and threatened to set off a nuclear device. Although most at Homeland Security were convinced the weapon was headed for New York, only Decker had believed the bomb's true destination was the island of La Palma, in the Canary Island chain. El Aqrab had planned to use the device to precipitate a mega-tsunami across the Atlantic aimed at destroying the entire Eastern Seaboard. Everyone thought El Aqrab had died on La Palma. Everyone. Well, not quite everyone . . .

Decker used every technique he could muster to examine the video feed from the Internet café. But, in the end, he couldn't be sure if the man in the picture was indeed El Aqrab or someone who simply looked like him. The angle wasn't conducive. It was almost as if the stranger were intentionally avoiding

the surveillance camera in the street.

Decker packed up for the day. As he prepared to depart, his boss, Ed Hellard, the NCTC Associate Director, appeared at his desk. Decker had heard him approaching from the squeak of his shoe.

“You were looking for me?” he began. Tall, jowly and bald, Hellard had large sloping shoulders, broad hips and brown basset-hound eyes, deeply set in the face. He might have passed for an undertaker were it not for his suit—hand-stitched in England, meticulously tailored of the finest merino and cashmere.

“Yes, sir,” said Decker. He explained his suspicions to Hellard.

The Associate Director listened but he was less than enthused. He was late for a dinner engagement. “Meeting Rory at *Le Paradou*. You know Rory Woodcock, don’t you? Or, I guess I should say *Doctor Woodcock*.” He laughed privately. “NSC. Formerly ADS.”

*As subtle as the flash of a class ring*, thought Decker.

“El Aqrab died on La Palma,” said Hellard. “You’re letting your imagination run away with you.”

Decker had run into Dr. Woodcock before, the last time at a Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board meeting hosted by Vermont’s Senator Fuller when Decker had served briefly on an Anti-terrorism Congressional Panel following the El Aqrab incident. Woodcock was a holdover from the previous Republican administration, a sometimes unofficial spokesman for the Tea Party movement, and a staunch supporter of shrinking both taxes and government, and letting private enterprise and the efficiencies of open markets prevail. He had made his billions at data management company Allied Data Systems, where he had served as Chairman from August ’96 through 2010. Prior to joining ADS, Woodcock had been treasurer and SVP of U.S. Express. Born and raised in Greenwich, Connecticut, the son of investment banker Tyne Woodcock and socialite Mary Smythe-Pierrepont, Woodcock had earned his Bachelors from Harvard and his MBA from Wharton, UPENN.

*If Hellard’s hanging out with the likes of Rory Woodcock*, thought Decker, *that tells you something about his politics*.

“Put H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> under 24/7,” Hellard concluded, plucking lint from his jacket. Then he seemed to relent. He hunched over and said, “I hear you’ve been sleeping in the office again, John. What’s going on? Talk to me. How are your sessions with Doctor Foster progressing? You know, I had a cousin named Terry with PTSD. Screaming Eagle. Everyone called him T-Bird. No laughing matter.”

“I’m fine,” Decker said.

Hellard stuffed his hands in his pockets. He stared down at Decker with his basset-hound eyes. After a moment he added, “You look like you could use a good meal, John. Why don’t you join us this evening? Come to supper with Rory and me. I think you two could learn a great deal from one another. Let sleeping dogs lie is what I say. General Darius of Cyber Command will be there.”

“I’m sorry, I’d love to,” said Decker. “But I have to get home to my daughter. You know.”

“Right, Rebecca,” said Hellard. “Of course. How old is she now? Seven, eight? Fully recovered from \_\_\_”

“She’s fine. We’re both fine.”