

## CHAPTER 7

Monday, December 2

It was around four o'clock when Decker discovered that someone with the handle BORG347 had recently challenged H<sub>2</sub>O2 in a programming chat room to see if he could hack Westlake Defense Systems. Ivanov was no longer around. He'd been called off to check on the DOW. A "rogue algorithm" was buying, then selling millions of shares without explanation, sending values soaring or plunging.

On his own, Decker had gotten first crack at H<sub>2</sub>O2's hard drive, uploaded by Armstrong, which had led him to the Internet Relay Chat Room and the log of the hacker's exchange.

It was amazing how forthcoming people were in IRCs. They talked about everything. Some made an attempt to use codes, but the ciphers were usually so obvious that Decker unraveled them easily. It was as if they didn't realize that once you posted a comment, they were there for the whole world to see, for all time.

By tracking down a similar handle—BORG743—through the Net Registry, Decker soon uncovered a website about Persian cuisine linked to a physical address in Tehran. Further, this physical address was associated with a Gmail account, fronted by a fictitious name, but married to a particular IP address, the unique numeric identifier for a computer on a network.

*Now I've got you*, thought Decker. In just a few hours, using one of Ivanov's programs, Decker managed to break into the PC associated with the IP address and, upon further scrutiny, determined that someone had used this machine to indirectly plant "bombs" in certain Westlake Defense Systems software in order to make it fail during enemy attacks; the logic bombs would make hostile and friendly aircraft look similar.

It was incredible. And Westlake didn't seem to be the only defense contractor compromised. H<sub>2</sub>O2 may have been dead but his legacy lingered. Somehow, he had assisted his Iranian masters in penetrating a half dozen top secret DoD systems . . . before someone had managed to put a small caliber bullet in his temple only minutes before Armstrong and his team had arrived.

Decker was about to probe further when the secure phone at his desk started ringing. "Decker," he said, barely concentrating, but there was nothing but silence at the other end of the line. "Hello?" he continued. "Hello, this is Special Agent Decker. Who's there?"

"Have you missed me?" a voice said in Arabic.

As soon as he heard it, Decker's heart turned to stone. He knew that voice. It was reaching up from the grave. El Aqrab!

"I've missed you," he continued. "I've thought about you every day since we last saw each other."

Decker caught his breath. "Who is this?" he answered in Arabic.

"You know who this is."

"How did you get this number?"

El Aqrab laughed. "You gave it to me. Remember? On La Palma."

"What are you talking about?" Decker started to peck at his keyboard, trying to set up a trace.

"Don't bother," El Aqrab said. "I won't be on long."

Decker hesitated.

"That's better."

It was as if he were actually watching him. As if he had a camera right there in the Crypt.

For a moment, neither of them said anything. Then El Aqrab asked, "Don't you miss going out into the field, Special Agent Decker? Or do you prefer people like Armstrong doing your dirty work for you? Why doesn't Hellard ever let you play with the real agents?"

Decker didn't respond.

"Too bad H<sub>2</sub>O2 was dead when they got there."

"Is that why you called me, whoever you are? To gloat about H<sub>2</sub>O2. To brag about how you put a slug in the back of his head."

El Aqrab laughed. "Good try but he was shot in the temple. And it wasn't by me. I'm not in

Philadelphia. In fact, I'm in your neck of the woods. I believe that's the proper expression. Neck of the woods. Not that far away. I have other plans for the day."

Decker felt the world grind to a halt. "Plans. What plans?"

"Go to the following IP address, Special Agent Decker, and see for yourself."

Decker pulled out his keyboard. "What address?" He brought up a browser.

El Aqrab started to call off the numbers. Decker began typing them in when he suddenly locked on the sequence. *Not a four*, he thought desperately.

" . . . four . . . three . . . "

*Not a six and a seven.*

" . . . six . . . seven . . . "

It was the IP address for the nanny-cam in Becca's bedroom.

Decker leaned forward as the browser started loading the image. For a moment there was nothing. Then it swam into view.

His daughter and Marisol were tied up on Becca's bed. They were bound, back to back, entwined by some gray metal ribbon that Decker recognized instantly. Magnesium ribbon. El Aqrab's trademark. Soon, he would set them ablaze and the ribbon would project ornate Arabic writing, Koranic calligraphy sculpted in fire. The camera zoomed in on Becca's face. There was a cut on her eyebrow and she looked utterly terrified. Someone had stuck a sock in her mouth.

"Please don't do this," said Decker. "It's me that you want. She's only seven years old."

"Who says I want you?" The camera started to turn. It swiveled and aimed out the window. For a moment the image was blurry. Then it fell into focus.

A man in the street was looking up at the house. He was wearing a raincoat, light gray, and holding a phone. El Aqrab! There was no doubt about it. The same lupine face. The same smoldering features. He looked up from his phone screen and waved at the camera. "I wanted you to see me, to look into my eyes as I did this. Have I lost weight? I think I've lost weight. What do you think?"

"My daughter hasn't done anything to you. Why kill her? And my housekeeper. This isn't your style. What's the point?"

"Rarely does death have a point, Special Agent Decker, except to prove that it is. You should know that."

El Aqrab lifted his hand. The one with the phone in it.

"No, wait!" Decker said, but it was already too late.

There was a loud screech and the image on the PC screen burst into light and then vanished. It was just gone. The phone died in his hand.

Decker refreshed the browser but it returned a nondescript 404 error. Site not found. *Site not found*, Decker thought. Becca!