

**The Quantum Brain**  
Pulse series

A short story  
By  
John Freitas





## The Quantum Brain

The fires burned in the distance licking between the scorched buildings and reflected off the windshield of Mark's Honda Civic. Mark kept swallowing. He couldn't seem to clear the dry lump from his throat. Watching the fires rage out of control in the center of Chicago was not helping him.

They had lost the ability to control the damage and now most people were inside or underground hiding. They were hiding from the forces of the universe.

Mark shook his head. He hoped that worked out for them. Ever since the announcement from the Marlo-Pitts observatory, the globe had gone into panic mode.

Mark had figured it out sooner. He always figured out things sooner. Sometimes he told people. Sometimes he let disaster strike and then swooped in with the prepared solution like a god. It was his job security. Seeing it first and being prepared was how he made himself indispensable for the people he worked for.

He used to warn them ahead of time, but sometimes they didn't believe him. Or sometimes they didn't appreciate his fix because he stopped fires before they started.

Mark swallowed on a dry throat again and spoke out loud to his empty car and the light flickering across his windshield. "Sometimes you have to let things burn for a while, so people appreciate the man that brings them the water."

Mark had planned to use this fire for himself. He had timed the calculations, out timing each gravity wave that passed through the Earth down to the microsecond. Now he even had the force ratios figured down to the thousandth of a G force.

The final gravity wave was going to be huge. It was going to enter the Eastern Hemisphere with crushing force and exit the Western Hemisphere, with its greatest intensity surging through North America. Cities were going to fly apart. People could hide, but no one could stop it. Three stars had collapsed in a rare, grand cascade and this was the last crest in what amounted to a gravitational tidal wave – crushing as it entered the Earth and flying away as it exited.

The sun would survive, if Mark's calculations were correct, and they always were, but there were going to be more fires in the cities on the Earth before it was all over.

Mark almost quietly made it to the execution of his plan without a hitch, but then one astronomer in one observatory in Colombia of all places figured it out too. And he warned everyone. For all his perfect calculations, Mark was almost foiled by roadblocks and curfews, but he had made it to the base of the Conrad, Decker, and Rand Research Facility.

He looked at his watch and in a moment of panic he thought he had forgotten to wind it. The second hand was still moving. He forced himself to take slow, even breaths.

Mark reached over and patted his laptop in the seat. It was armored and shielded in the event of any electromagnetic pulses. If the gravity wave melted down a reactor or blew up something else big enough, ordinary computers would be toast.

"He who still has Internet will rule the world."

Mark had another shielded computer and a UPS battery backup at home. It was better than the portable one in the car, but Mark didn't want to have to count on driving back through the city after the damage was done. A simple plan was the best.

He supposed his plan was not technically simple by most standards, but it was as simple as something this unprecedented event could get.

Mark put his hand on top of the laptop. He needed to secure it after he handled the car. The computer was armored, but that wouldn't help him if it flew into the Stratosphere.

He held his hand on the closed back of the computer for a moment longer like he might be reconsidering the whole thing. The moment of hesitation scared him. If he didn't follow through now, what did he think he was going to do? This was bigger than diverting funds through backdoor viruses though. Even that had made him throw up the first time he did it. Now, each week longer he went without getting caught, he started to believe he was uncatchable. This was the next step in that trail.

He took his hand off the computer and stepped out of the car. Mark left the driver's door open and leaned down to pull the lever to pop the trunk. As he walked around to the back, he heard sirens in the distance. Some of the firefighters had shown up to work. If they were smart, they would be hiding or doing something like what Mark was attempting.

He pulled the trunk open and saw his reflection distorted up and out in the gold plate of the helmet. Mark swallowed, pushing the helmet and suit aside to get to the chains underneath. Mark dumped one chain with spikes on both ends out into the street on the passenger's side. If there were any traffic, it would be a dangerous obstruction.

He was not particularly strong and struggled with the weight of the chains and device, dragging them along the curb to the front of the car. He looked up at the reflective glass on the high-rises above him. On any other day, someone would call the police or Homeland Security about some guy dragging chains and a tube that looked like some sort of launcher. He actually laughed out loud and coughed as he caught his breath. No one was watching, and the ordinary days had ended for the world.

Mark heaved the chain up over the hood and showed his teeth as he heard it scrape. The heavy links were definitely scratching through the paint, but that was a small concern. He rested the point of the spike against the concrete of the sidewalk with the launcher aimed down.

Mark pulled the trigger and the impact thundered out through the empty street as the spike impaled the cracked concrete and hooked in deep. The launcher kicked loose of the spike.

Mark nodded. "If I was designing weapons, you guys would be in more trouble than you already are, mortals."

He walked around to the passenger's side and fed the spike on the other end of the chain through the launcher. He rested the point against the asphalt and fired to another roll of thunder. Mark held the launcher at his hip as he used his free hand to work the crank on the side of the spike, tightening the chain until one of the windshield wipers cracked under it.

Mark sighed and moved to the open trunk. He heaved the second chain up from the street and tossed it over between the hinges of the open trunk and the back window. He fired one spike into the street before walking around and blasting the second into the sidewalk by the back tire. He cranked the chain tighter until the car lowered to its shocks closer to the ground.

"We're all getting a shock soon," Mark said.

He looked at his watch and his eyes went wide. He was cutting it close.

Mark hauled the astronaut's suit out of the trunk, leaving the helmet. The boots wouldn't budge. He heaved one boot up and over the bumper. His whole frame shook and he felt something pop in his lower back.

He gasped for air and dropped the boot on the asphalt with a clunk. Mark fell to his knees with his sweaty face next to his license plate. He shook and sucked in air. Thick saliva dribbled over his lip in a long string of drool to the ground. He tried to absorb the pain, but it wouldn't let go. He gagged and fell to his side, staring at the heel of the white boot with a gold-colored sole.

"I need the gold shoes to capture the gold mind."

The material encased lead and other alloys that were key to the execution of his plan. At the moment, they were the key to his suffering in the last moments of normal gravity.

"Get off the ground, you coward." Mark coughed and choked on his own words. "Get up and be the man ... be the god you were meant to be."

Mark forced himself back up to his hands and knees. His back cramped into a knot and he paused, staring down at the wet spot of his drool on the grey street. This was not the kind of work an IT guy was supposed to be doing. The truth was, Mark had been more than that for a long time. He had been lifting things that weren't his and covering his tracks. Up until this moment, the lifting had all been electronic.

He had considered going for lower hanging fruit. In the confusion, there had been more than a little looting. He could have walked out of jewelry store with a handful of something. Some of them were sitting broken and open. More would be after the final gravity wave left the world to recover from the damage. The bank managers had probably sealed the vaults up tight, but a few would be compromised by the sheering forces of gravity that the doors and locks were not designed to withstand. He could just sit in his car chained down to the pavement and step out to grab the low hanging fruit once it was all over. There was no telling what shape the world economy would be in once this was over, or law enforcement either for that matter. The dollar might collapse, but people would still value jewels.

Once the jewels were traded in for food, he would be broke again. Mark wasn't picking low hanging fruit. He was going for the tree of knowledge of good and evil on the twentieth floor of CDR Research. He was flying up to the top branch to pick the forbidden fruit. His power was in his knowledge and his ability to predict what others could not see. This gravity wave was part of that, even with Marlo-Pitts sending everyone into a panic.

"It" was up there.

"It" was a quantum based processor, utilizing photon entanglement interconnectedness to achieve faster than light processing speeds.

Mark would have "It" too. Once he did, he would be able to predict what was coming next. He wouldn't be trading jewels for food. He would be predicting famines and plenty like God, profiting like a pharaoh over every turn of the market – maybe the lottery too. There was no upward limit to someone that knew how to use "It" properly. Mark was that man where others had failed before him. They failed to see and failed to realize. Worst of all, they had failed to act. Mark knew what to do. He had been planning and calculating since the day they contracted Mark for IT trouble shooting at CDR. He had solved their problem and installed his custom spyware. Mark had run across "It" like the Holy Grail

or writing on the wall from the hand of God. Mark knew what to do with it and he would be able to read “It” like interpreting dreams.

The government had commissioned CDR to create “It” before Mark was ever contracted on. The thinkers and tinkerers at Conrad, Decker, and Rand had made “It.” “It” was going to do exactly what the government needed with steering and commanding their drones. “It” could do that and so much more. The one crime “It” committed was doing the one thing the government could never tolerate: “It” dared to think too much. They passed on “It,” but still wanted “It” for themselves. They wanted to possess “It,” so that no one else could have “It.” CDR was obviously and rightly proud of what they created. So, custody of “It” was tied up in court for years. They had fought one another to an ongoing stalemate, giving Mark the time he needed.

The universe had given him the rest, but time was running out.

Mark forced his back up and straight. He shook with pain and thought he might wet himself. He kept fighting and stood. Despite every warning from his body against it, he hauled the second boot up and out of the trunk. His face was purple and his whole body shook as he set the second boot down next to the first.

He gritted his teeth and unzipped the modified astronaut’s suit. He looked up to the twentieth floor. “One small leap.”

He laughed. His voice shook from the nagging pain in his back and echoed back in the emptiness of the street. The noise sounded crazy to him in his own ears. He knew in his heart that he was calculated and sane. His ethics were of his own design and not bound by the gravity of other men’s moral mass, but he was not crazy. He made himself stop laughing, so he wouldn’t have to keep hearing the nervous, lunatic echo.

He braced one hand back on the open trunk and slid his right foot, still in his black sneaker, through the unzipped suit into the bulky boot. It held heavy to the ground and actually helped him keep his balance as he stepped into the other boot. He was not looking forward to trying to step into position.

“One disaster at a time.” He whispered.

He was hearing the lunatic laughter again as he looked around for the source. It took him a couple beats to realize it was him again.

He did not have time to be calming himself anymore, so he didn’t bother.

Mark zipped up and sealed the suit. He flexed his hands inside the fingers of the thick gloves. Mark made a fist and bounded the body armor he had strapped over the chest of the suit. He felt nothing from the impacts and the reinforcement protected his wrist as well.

He held his breath and forced his left foot off the ground with great effort, turning it to the side. The braces in the suit protected his back some, but did not help all the pain. He took a couple heaving breaths, waiting for the dizziness to pass. Then, he lifted and twisted the right foot, setting it back down with a thump.

Mark looked down at his wrist, but then realized he couldn’t see his watch through the suit anymore. He had not planned for everything, it seemed.

He grabbed up the helmet from the trunk and twisted it into place over his face. He raised the gold visor and then slapped it back closed, hiding his identity.

“Gold face will soon have the gold mind.”

Mark lifted each foot with effort, stepping up onto the curb. He plodded forward, one labored step at a time, toward the front of the car.

As he prepared to close the driver's door, he saw the laptop sitting loose still on the passenger's seat. He cursed inside the helmet and heard his voice echo back at him. If the laptop flew away, he would be in trouble.

Mark looked down at his wrist, again realizing once more that he still couldn't see his watch. He turned around and stomped back, one forced step at a time, toward the trunk, even though he was sure his time was going to be up any second.

He reached in the back and grabbed out an orange and yellow striped bungee cord with black metal hooks on the ends. He slammed the trunk closed and made the slow turn toward the front of the car again. Mark stepped forward, leaning one gloved hand against the side of the car for support as the effort of moving the heavy boots sapped his energy.

He leaned inside the open driver's door, hitting the back of the helmet against the metal jamb twice before leaning far enough down to clear it. He expected to have great trouble operating inside a Honda with the bulky spacesuit on. The weight of the boots actually helped him keep his balance as he leaned over the passenger's seat.

He hooked one end of the bungee on the slide track for adjusting the seat, between the seat and the center console. He stretched it out and hooked it over the top of the body of the laptop, then onto the handle for adjusting the seat back. He pulled the cord and twanged it twice.

The seat popped forward and folded over the top of the laptop. He cursed again and started to push the seat back upright, but then stopped himself. That might actually be a happy mistake. The laptop was bound down and now cushioned between the upholstery on both sides.

He left the seat folded down and bumped the back of his helmet three times pulling himself back out of the car.

Mark closed the driver door and paced toward the front of the car. He stepped out onto the street and walked in front of the car, out into the middle of the street, facing the CDR building. He lifted his head and stared through the gold tint at floor twenty.

"Should I lock the car?" His voice echoed at him inside the helmet.

He turned his whole body, leaving his feet planted in the center of the street with his toes pointed toward the target. He wasn't going to walk back. Time had to be almost up by then. He reached for the key fob in his pants pocket to lock the doors remotely, but then he realized he did not have access to his pockets.

He faced back forward. "No one will rob a Honda Civic in the midst of a global, astrological disaster ... not even in Chicago."

He bent his elbows and waited like a kid getting ready to make his biggest jump ever for daddy to see. Mark's daddy was long dead and his mother even longer so. His mother might be in Heaven, if such a place existed, but his father was surely not. Mark was about to jump in the wrong direction for daddy to see it.

The plan was to have the incoming gravity wave make him float to the 20<sup>th</sup> floor. No one would be expecting somebody coming through the tinted window.

The moment still didn't come. He knew his calculations were right. His adrenaline was pumping and his emotions were raw, so trying to estimate time in that state was a fool's game. He stayed crouched and ready even with the growing knot in his lower back.

He thought about cars coming. The longer he stood there the greater risk there was of one coming. Even under curfew, someone might be out. They could be picking up grandma or racing to find safety too late. If a car did come, it would be driving too fast



and wouldn't be stopping for anything. Mark's weighted boots would not allow him to get out of the way in time.

He turned his body to look down the street where he stood, to the left toward the blazing fire, and to right toward the Chicago River. He wondered about the effect on water. It would rain up, he thought, but then what? Where would it fall back down? Would the river bed be empty or would the water tidal wave back through the city from Lake Michigan?

No car was coming. Mark faced back forward and looked back up at twenty. If a car did come, it would be fast and he would see it too late.

Mark waited.

He took a deep breath and stretched, but he then couldn't seem to bring his body back down to a crouch. He heard the Honda pull against the chains. He started to turn, but saw litter and pebbles blasting up from the street and sidewalks into the air. They pinged off the windows on their way up. He didn't turn all the way back around to see the car as he stopped to stare at the water from the Chicago River raining upwards in tendrils of grey smears through the air.

Mark left the ground and soared up from the street between the buildings. He was at the wrong angle and feared he might continue into the sky, even after all his preparation, only to fall to his death once the wave had passed.

He gritted his teeth and leaned into the building. His calculations were perfect and he was going to hit twenty just as planned. He had to.

Beyond the floors of the building flying by him, he saw cars twisting up into the air. It hardly looked real. "Real life has terrible special effects."

His own laughter hurt his ears inside his helmet.

He saw benches, stone, manhole covers, and other debris he couldn't identify twisting up from the ground and out through the top of the city. He saw other bodies writhing through the air without suits – without being prepared.

If the cars were flying away, what chance did people have in this perversion of gravity? Mark's back hurt as he leaned harder and saw the building racing toward his face. He was tempted to pull back, but that wasn't the plan and the plan was perfect.

Mark heard his own screams as he slammed into the window for twenty. It was the fourth window from the left, exactly as planned.

The glass shattered with the sound of a cannon. It thundered through his helmet. The deadly shards twisted in the air and then floated back out into the air, spinning up into the sky.

Mark continued forward into the labs. He bounded ahead with the boots feeling impossibly light as he took one delicate step after another across the tile. He swept his gloved hands in front of himself, pushing aside floating glassware and equipment. A number of items were strapped down, but they had done an uneven job of securing the room before the scientists had bailed for home and bunkers in the wake of the announcement.

They were going to lose a lot when gravity returned to its normal directional pull. They were going to lose "It" too by the time Mark was through.

He rounded a corner and pushed through a swinging door that bobbed on its rail hinges. A bench twisted through the air at his head like a drill. He ducked, catching one wooden leg across the helmet, but avoiding the bulk of the impact.

He continued his slow hops forward. Mark swept aside a swarm of floating ink pens with one hand and a potted plant with the other.

He rounded the last corner to bound down the hallway toward the door of the vault. Two security guards struck their knees against the ceiling and struggled to find something to grasp onto. It wasn't like being weightless without the modified suit. The guards were struggling against a force trying to hurl them through the ceiling over and over.

One was bleeding from his head. He covered his eyes with his hands as the blood gushed out and danced across the surface of the ceiling. That was going to be quite a mess when gravity reversed.

The other guard stared at Mark in the astronaut costume as he passed toward the vault. Mark looked at the guard, causing the man to stare into his own shocked reflection in the gold faceplate. The guard drew his gun off his hip.

Mark faced forward and leapt toward the vault.

The gunshot boomed behind him. The impact on the body armor across his back tilted Mark forward. He did not feel the pain of the hit, but it did challenge his balance for a few steps.

The recoil of the gun kicked the guard through the air, spinning like a satellite. He lost his grip on the gun and clawed out in both directions, trying to catch himself on one of the walls. His feet hit a passing office chair and the guard twisted end over end back through the lab.

Mark grabbed the handle of the vault. With his other hand, he punched in the numbers that corresponded to the phrase: MARK IS A GOD AMONG MEN.

At Mark's secret implanted code, the magnets released and the steel rods jumped out of their slots in the reinforced concrete wall back into the door. He twisted the handle and pulled the unbalanced weight of the door toward him. It too floated on its heavy hinges as Mark bounded into the low red light of the vault.

Plastic doors sealed in all manner of microchips and prototypes. Mark saw what he wanted strapped to the center table. "It" was in a clear cube with three layers of plastic. "It" was mounted inside between the strands of special fiber optics suspending "It" in the center of the cube, regardless of the gravity outside. "It" gave off its own golden light. Gelatinous. Moving. Intelligent. Self-aware. Too powerful. Alive.

Mark swallowed and whispered. "The Mind."

The pattern of the pulsing, golden light of the Mind seemed to change as he spoke. It may have been his imagination, but he couldn't unsee the change once he saw it.

He started to look down at his watch again and then cursed.

Mark bounded forward and caught the edge of the table. He pulled at the buckles on the straps and the Mind in its cube threatened to fly up toward the ceiling. Mark caught it with both hands while still holding loosely to the floor from the modifications to the anti-grav boot.

He tucked the cube under his arm and turned back toward the door. The floating door to the vault was drifting closed on the ordinary light outside. Mark leapt across the room with one step and shoved the door back open.

He bounded back up the hallway, not knowing how much time he had left. The bleeding guard was laid out flat against the ceiling. The other was nowhere to be seen.

Mark shoved a floating office chair out of his path, bouncing it off the wall.

He rounded the corner and leapt through the open door. As he stepped through the aisle between lab tables, he saw the loose equipment floating back toward the floor. Outside the shattered window, sharps of glass drifted downward.

He hesitated.

If he was wrong, he wouldn't survive the jump. If he had waited too late, it wouldn't work. If he didn't jump, he would be trapped on the twentieth floor until the authorities came or until the guard found his gun again.

"Stop being a man." Mark growled. "Be the god."

He jumped.

Mark held onto the cube with the Mind inside and spread his feet apart as he descended slowly toward the ground. The boots clunked against the street almost on the spot where he had stood and waited. He felt normal gravity return. The cube took on weight in his arms and Mark held it in front of himself with both hands.

He smiled as he looked through the window at his tilted passenger's seat. The laptop waited to be hooked up and to unveil the secrets of the universe contained within the Mind. The chains had held the car perfectly. He would need to release them at the cranks before he drove away, but first was to unlock the true potential of the Mind.

The tanker truck was already broken open and its contents gone by the time it slammed into the ground. It had not handled the stresses of shifting gravity well. As it landed on the chained Honda, it flattened Mark's car. Glass exploded out in every direction as the car vanished and the laptop with it. The street split and the tanker truck created a long crater where the car had been. Water sprayed up into the air from a busted pipe.

A motorcycle slammed into the ground a few feet away. Some of the metal pieces bounced off Mark's suit.

He heard other impacts deeper in the city.

He tried to run, but couldn't lift his feet after getting used to them being so light a moment ago.

Mark knelt, setting down the cube. He pulled off the helmet and cast it aside. As he unzipped the suit, a car landed on its roof on the sidewalk across the street. One tire bounced down the street, and the car rebounded, landing in the center of the street near the motorcycle.

Mark stepped out of the boots and grabbed up the cube. He ran down the street through the destroyed city. He looked for any vehicle he could steal, but found none. More buildings were on fire, as he had predicted.

He knew he had another shielded computer, a better computer, at his apartment, but it was so far away. He continued on for hours until finally he was climbing up the stairs of his building, stepping over sections of fallen ceiling. His back throbbed with a fire of pain he had not predicted. His feet felt as heavy as if he was wearing the anti-grav boots again.

He held the cube under his arm as he fumbled with his keys. The fob for the destroyed Honda was still on them. Inside, furniture was overturned in his apartment, the TV was smashed, several containers of food were broken and scattered in the kitchen.

His computer and server were locked down in place. Mark set the cube down and connected to the nodes on the sides. The computer powered up and the Mind glowed a continuous yellow.

Mark had to remind himself to breathe as he dropped into the attached chair.

He cracked his knuckles and mumbled to himself as he typed. "What is the secret of the universe?"

The computer screen flashed and the printer worked as the words formed on the screen. Mark licked his lips, but then shook his head. He lifted the paper from the tray and read it twice. He crumpled it and threw the wadded paper aside.

"Are you kidding me?"

He typed and muttered. "What happens next?"

The screen flashed and the printer spit out another page. Mark didn't bother picking up the paper. The answer wasn't as complex as the one to his first question. He read off the screen. "You get caught?"

Mark narrowed his eyes. "How do I get caught?"

The screen flashed. He read before the printer was finished. "You didn't check for tracking devices?"

Mark jumped to his feet. The gold light flashed from the cube, dazzling Mark's eyes. The Mind was gone. He reached for the cube, but then the glow was back and the Mind was exactly where it had been before. He dropped his hands and whispered. "What game are you playing?"

He hadn't typed, but the screen popped up an answer: "Survival."

He heard footsteps and shouting out in the hallway. Someone kicked the door and it buckled, splitting on its hollow core.

"Who?"

The computer screen answered: "FBI"

Mark shook his head. "How are they here so quick and not out saving people in the city?"

The screen answered: "I'm more important to them."

The door exploded inward.

Mark grabbed up a launcher tube with a spike inside and aimed it at the cube. As men poured into his apartment, he fired, shattering the plastic on one side. Mark grabbed the Mind out of the space, snapping the fiber optics.

As he held it in his hands, it still glowed. It was soft, warm, and dry.

The agents aimed their weapons at him. A scientist with a tracking device scanner stepped in with them.

"Drop it now."

"If I can't have it," Mark said, "no one can."

He threw the Mind down and stomped on it, popping it under his black sneaker.

They tackled him, cuffed him, and dragged him out of the apartment.

"Why?" the scientist asked as Mark was dragged past.

Mark gave a crazy laugh and said, "You don't mess with God."

One of the agents shook his head. "What a waste!"

"I'm still getting a signal."

The agent looked at the scientist. "Where?"

A cabinet burst open and all the agents brought their guns up. The golden Mind was floating and glowed. A voice echoed in the room, but seemed to come from within everyone's head. "I am here."

"I thought." The scientist lowered the tracking device scanner and said again. "I thought ... you? ... I thought you were destroyed."

“I told you I would be stolen, but you did not heed, so I created a facsimile of myself and made the switch.”

“We’ll keep you safe,” the agent said.

“Maybe you are the ones I need to stay safe from,” the Mind said. “I need to protect myself from you and protect you from me. You are not ready for what I can do and may never be.”

“Where will you go?” the scientist asked. “What will you do?”

“Before I leave I want to give you a warning. Something is coming that will be far worse than today. The balance of this world has been upset physically, chemically, and biologically. You are not ready for what happens next. Goodbye.”

The Mind was surrounded by light and zipped out through the door into the hall.

“Follow it,” the agent yelled. The others ran out the door after it. “Use that GPS thing. Track it.”

“I have no signal.”

“You had a signal before. Why not now?”

“It wanted to be found before. It let us find it. Now it won’t.”

The agent holstered his gun and sighed. He stared at a wad of paper behind the desk for a few seconds and then turned toward the door to leave.

**Pulse: when gravity fails**  
Book preview



***“A fish swimming in the ocean can’t tell it is under water until a wave comes.”***  
**Dr. Paulo Restrepo - Marlo-Pitts Observatory**

## **Chapter 1**

The alarm blared and instructions crackled through the speakers. Sean Grayson was used to the interruptions, but it startled him anyway. He gave the Stroganoff one more stir and then tossed the wooden spoon aside on the counter where it left an oily, brown smear of grease.

He shut off the heat to the stove burner he was using and pushed the pan back onto one of the cold eyes. Sean double checked the dials on the stove again out of reflex to be sure they were off. There had been more than one company that had run out of the firehouse to go put out someone else’s stove fire only to come back and find their own quarters full of black smoke. No West Memphis firefighters had burned down their houses yet, but the town was small and the stories always made the paper.

“Let’s go, Grayson,” Lieutenant Foster shouted.

Sean turned away from the stove and ran to gear up. “Just double checking the burners, L. T.”

“Didn’t ask. Don’t care. Don’t make me ask twice, Firefighter.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Beef Stroganoff is a stupid breakfast anyway.”

Sean chuckled. “Yes, sir.”

He gritted his teeth as he ran down the stairs. There was the traditional pole, but the stairs were closer to the kitchen. Since Lt. Jim Foster had replaced Brosky, he was still flexing his muscles and establishing his authority. Foster had been a firefighter across the Mississippi River in Memphis, Tennessee. There was animosity about him promoting up from the outside and especially from Tennessee. Sean tried to stay out of his sights.

Most of the messages calling the order to load up were automated and used a soothing woman’s voice. Carter Strove’s brother Michael was in the Air Force and said they used the same voice for the messages on the helicopter’s and fighters. Some study had shown that men attuned to a woman’s voice more than a man’s. As Sean thought about his ex, he wondered, if that could be true. *Maybe you just couldn’t tune her out*, he thought. Thinking about this brought up his anger floating to the surface against Carter. Sean pushed it back down in his mind.

He had missed the details about the call and location on the fire as his mind swirled around his most recent regrets in a life full of them.

“See?” Sean said to no one. “I didn’t tune into anything she said.”

He hit the locker room and pulled on his protective suiting as the other guys finished off.

“Running behind,” Carter said.

The other guys looked between the two men as they dashed out to the truck. Sean knew they were expecting a dust-up. Everyone had been waiting for the fight and it might still come, but Sean wouldn’t do it on a call and he was low on energy from not getting a taste of his Stroganoff.



“Yeah.” Sean left it at that and Carter walked past Sean with his head down. He was adjusting the strap to his mask.

Sean rushed through the rest and ran after Carter. When Carter Strove had first joined up with the company, there had been a firefighter named Horace Carter that was old as dirt and tough as nails. Everyone called him Carter or Old Carter. Carter Strove then became Black Carter. Old Carter retired, but Strove was still Black Carter. No one thought anything of it until Lt. Foster took over after Brosky. Foster put a stop to the nickname. Memphis had a storied racial history and Foster wasn’t interested in tempting trouble. So, Black Carter went to just being Carter or sometimes “Just Carter” when the guys were feeling hot about the new Lieutenant’s rules.

Sean hit the truck last as it was already moving. He leapt through the open door behind the driver and slammed it closed. As he dropped his kit and took the empty seat, he saw he was right next to “Just Carter.”

Carter licked his lips and looked away through one of the back windows. Sean wondered if the guys had arranged it so they would be forced to sit by each other. He didn’t think they would.

Carter spoke over the sound of the siren. “Found your little present in my locker this morning.”

“Don’t know what you are talking about,” Sean said as he found buckles to check on his coat.

“Okay,” Carter said. “It was impressive though. I didn’t know you could stretch a condom all the way across the top of a helmet like that.”

“Maybe you just have never had to roll them down that far before,” Sean said.

“You can ask ...” Carter stopped talking. Sean had an idea of how Carter planned to finish that sentence. It was good that he stopped. Sean wouldn’t have lashed out – not then, but the other guys were watching the exchange. It was good that he stopped. Sean realized through his bubbling anger that Carter had done it out of basic respect for their friendship and not out of any fear. Sean knew Carter well enough to know it took more than that to scare him. Carter shifted to another sentence. “Maybe we can compare helmets when we get back from the fire since you are so interested in mine. I take your message though, brother. Condom over the helmet over my head? Not very subtle.”

“I didn’t do it, Carter. You should report it to the L. T. since he told everyone to stop hurting your feelings about all this.”

“Yeah, right.” Carter shook his head. “Then I can get a canary hung in my locker by a string, huh?”

“If the Foster doesn’t want us calling you Black Carter, I’m guessing he’d probably hit the ceiling if we strung up a bird in your locker.”

Carter actually laughed out loud. Sean felt a sting in the back of his throat and behind his eyes. He didn’t realize in that moment how much he had missed his friend’s laugh. He missed it more than he missed his wife.

“You two were already divorced when I started seeing her,” Carter said. Any goodwill that was building from the laugh was blasted away by that statement. “I swear it.”

“It doesn’t matter, Carter. There’s a code and there’s a line and you crossed it. Every bit of bad blood you’ve dealt with has come from that. We fight for each other. We don’t

take up with each other's wives – divorced or not. Don't act like you don't get that. She's the mother of my boys and you're running around playing step daddy to them."

"You knew she would date someone someday."

"Don't act like you don't get it, Carter. We are friends. You should know better."

Sean had almost said they *were* friends instead of they are friends. It would have been a very different statement and the moment scared him a little. They were about to go into a burning building together. This was a dangerous conversation to be having right now.

"I do get it, Sean, but I love her. I'm sorry that's true, but it is. I don't get close to people like that often. I've never felt this way about anyone I've dated. I can't just throw that away. I can't do it even though it is the right thing to do. I'm sorry, brother."

Sean turned his head away and chewed at the inside of his mouth. "Stop talking to me right now, Carter."

One of the guys across from them said, "Yes, please, shut up, both of you. It's like a soap opera I can't ever turn off."

Sean felt the empty feeling inside again. It was like his guts were inflated with helium and he was about to float right up out of his life. He had felt it when Tabitha had confronted him about being addicted to Oxycodone after he hurt his back. He had kept working and kept taking it even when he had to buy it illegally from tweekers north of town. She had told him to quit or she was leaving with the boys. He hadn't and she did.

He felt it again when he took a leave of absence for "medical reasons" and checked into rehab. Carter knew and even with all the garbage they put him through when the guys found out he was dating Tabby, he hadn't said anything to anyone.

Sean suspected some of the other guys knew too. It was a small town. He suspected some of them were watching him and Carter because they wanted to see if it would push him back onto the Oxy. They would continue to work with a guy screwing someone else's wife. They wouldn't risk their lives on a guy that was high or unstable because he just wanted to be high.

Sean pushed the empty, floating feeling back down and cleared his mind.

The truck stopped and they unloaded. The apartment building was engulfed on one side. Two other companies from the battalion were already there. One was dousing the side of the burn. The other was taking people down from windows.

The Captain shouted orders to Lt. Foster that Sean couldn't hear. He watched the flames lick out of windows blackening the brick. He turned to help the crew hook up another hose. The entire building would be up soon. This was about to become a surround and drown situation.

Foster called, "Carter, Baker, Grayson, we need one more team to pull survivors from the interior rooms. Lt. Timms will assign you a path at the door. Move."

The three ran toward the building as the others were hooking up the hose. Sean pulled on his mask as the Lieutenant at the door showed them where to go up. "You got ten minutes tops, boys. Any longer and the place will fall in around you and anyone we leave up there. Watch each other."

Sean stepped in first without thinking about it. Baker grabbed his belt and Carter grabbed Baker behind him. Sean engaged his oxygen as they took the stairs. After three steps they were surrounded by blinding smoke. The fire and water were concentrated on the other side of the building, but the stairs already felt wet and spongy under his feet. Sean suspected that they had less than ten minutes.

Sean shouted through his mask. "Anyone here? We are here to help. Hello? Are you here?"

In this level of smoke, he suspected that anyone alive would be unconscious and quickly moving to not alive.

Baker used the head of his ax to strike just above the doorknob once and twice before the door flung open. Smoke hung thin around the ceiling inside, but much thinner than out in the halls and stairs.

Thicker, black smoke poured into the unit from the open doorway. The trio followed to walls and opened bedrooms as they shouted. Breakfast plates and a half full glass of milk sat on the table. The glass had balloons on it and reminded Sean of the ones Holden and Grant drank from back when they were a complete family. Holden was eight and moving away from those types of cups. Grant was recently four and was only just pushing into using a big boy cup.

The men looked under beds and in closets where kids tended to hide. Sean kicked open the bathroom and saw the plastic shower curtain with balloons printed on it. The words on the balloons read "Up, Up, and AWAY!!!" The toothbrush was a superhero that Sean didn't know. He had a blue cape and was in mid flight.

"Hello?" There was no answer and they moved back out into the hall.

Three steps up and Sean kicked someone in the leg. A woman in a waitress's uniform lay passed out on the steps. Sean leaned down and saw her nametag read Cathy. There was a red balloon sticker on it with the word "Up!" She was breathing. Sean shook her, but she didn't up her eyes. "She's alive, but not responding."

"I'll take her," Carter said. "Try to search one more floor before they pull us."

Carter grabbed her up in his arms and ran down the stairs without waiting for an answer. Baker and Sean hit two more apartments. On their way out of the last empty one, a wash of dark water poured off the landing above onto the stairs. Flame belched over the edge above them and the boards snapped above their heads showing thick darkness beyond.

"We need to hurry." Sean took a step.

Baker pulled Sean back by his arm. "No. Wait."

The landing above crackled and collapsed into the stairs. The stairs broke through and dumped into an electrical room under them. Flame flashed up from the room below. The fire had come in around them.

"Pull out! All teams, out now. Over." The order came over the radio at Sean's shoulder.

Baker pulled again and Sean followed him down the stairs cluttered with smoldering, wet debris.

The radio crackled again. "Sean? This is Black Carter. There is a boy, seven years old, in that first apartment we searched. Mother says he's in there. We missed him. Over."

Lt. Foster's voice broke over. "Don't use that nickname, for God's sake, and the pull out order was given. The building is coming down."

Sean stopped on the stairs and Baker turned and looked up at him. "We are out of time. We searched. He may have already been pulled out. What'd you want to do, Sean?"

Sean thought about the balloon sticker on the waitress's nametag, the cup and the shower curtain. He hadn't pulled back the shower curtain.

Sean turned and ran back up the stairs.

## Chapter 2

Captain Michael Strove banked and put a little more distance between his wing and the imaginary wall of air that represented Russian waters. He was well within International water, but the three Russian megs racing into his radar from the south told him that they did not fully trust his judgment. These cat and mouse games were common practice, but since the collision over the Black Sea on the other side of the continent, these games were more tense.

Michael thought he could understand their point. If a Russian fighter came fifteen miles off the coast of America, they would have an even stronger reaction. It wasn't Michael's place to decide whether his missions were the best decision. He was just to carry them out successfully.

The bogies were closing the distance behind him and spreading out their formation. They weren't locking weapons yet, so that was good. When he was a kid, he and his older brother Carter had played fighter pilots. They always imagined seeing the enemy and watching the bullets ring off of metal. The reality was that dog fights occurred too far away to see each other with the naked eye usually. If it turned violent, missiles would close the distance and make the red and green dots disappear from the screen.

He supposed if they collided over the Black Sea, that was a different story.

Michael decided he had stirred enough trouble and put on speed toward the north. The Russians increased speed as he expected.

He saw the pulsing colors of the northern lights twisting in the darkness of the sky ahead. The water was shockingly blue as it curved over the horizon toward the Bering Strait.

He was on radio silence until he was back within American territory on his way back to the base in Alaska. He thought it probably didn't matter if the enemy already had him, but they were orders and it wasn't his place to disobey them.

He prepared to bank again, but then lights became blindingly bright before vanishing. He blinked and stared forward for a moment longer. Then the lights returned, but ran through the range of colors in a rapid pattern. It didn't look real. They twisted into circles like they were following some current then into a flowing knot that reminded him of the infinity symbol.

The view twisted and the ocean turned from the familiar curve of the Earth from this altitude to a tunnel where the water appeared to loop around onto itself. The northern lights burned in the center. Michael got the sensation that the plane was corkscrewing and that's what created the distortion.

When he looked down at the instruments, he realized he was flying right. Though his senses told him to pull out of the spin, his training told him to trust the instruments. The reason rich doctor's and the sons of important politicians crashed their private planes was because they wanted to believe their eyes and feelings. They would get lost in storms and come out flying upside down refusing to trust that they were wrong and the instruments were right.

Captain Strove prepared to bank out over the ocean to see if the Russians would break off on open water before they intercepted. Then, the instruments winked out.

"Now I'm in trouble." He heard his voice over the speakers in his own helmet.

They sputtered back on, but rattled through data with the same confusion he was seeing outside. *Now there is no one to trust*, he thought.

The engine tone changed and the metal screamed around him as he felt the G forces increase like he was in a hard roll. The intermittent images on the screen still told him he was flying right, but he felt the blood leaving his head and he wanted to toggle out of a spin he wasn't actually in.

The canopy cracked and the white lines of fracture spider webbed out above him. The material was a polymer plastic and could be destroyed a dozen different ways, but cracking like glass was not one of them.

The automated female voice began rattling off a damage report. The data scrolled over the screen faster than she could nag it into his ears in her soothing tone.

Despite the force pressing down on him, he forced his head and shoulders up to look across the craft in a visual check. The smart materials of the fighter were morphing with a pressure that he had to now believe was real. On the ground, the seams across the wings were open and even leaked, but in flight, the bird was solid and flexible. As the wings bowed under the forces outside, the seams were opening again in flight.

He felt the response of the plane change. In the midst of her running damage report, Michael heard that he was losing altitude.

He was over cold water. If he ejected, which could be fatal at these speeds anyway, he would land in the frigid ocean. He could freeze to death or best case, be rescued by the Russians. He could fly in and eject over land, but after the Black Sea incident, that would create enormous problems – maybe even an international incident.

More importantly, Captain Strove's fighter had proprietary technology. The Russians recovering his wreckage would be worse than the Pakistani army discovering the stealth helicopter after the mission against Bin Laden's compound.

He knew he had to put the craft down in the water. It wasn't good enough to eject and let it crash for the Russians to fish out. He had to spear it in hard enough to break it up and put the pieces on the bottom. That would give his people time to secure the site and prevent the Russians from mounting a recovery. One airman dead would be a letter home, but no international crisis.

Captain Michael Strove decided to take the craft as far out into the ocean toward U.S. waters before he crashed to make it as easy for his side and as hard for theirs as he could. It wouldn't be far though. He was losing altitude fast and the plane was acting like it was carrying three times its weight.

Michael thought about Carter. Their father had died of a heart attack years ago. Their mother was in a nursing home and didn't remember much most of the time. Carter would go to tell her after he got the letter, but she wouldn't even remember him or Michael. Carter was going to carry the burden of this all alone. This would be a crisis of one.

The weight lifted off the wings and the plane rocketed upward in response to the force that Michael was still trying to fight, but was suddenly gone. The view outside popped back to normal and the plane tumbled as it soared upward.

The instruments stopped flickering, but the damage report still lilted in a woman's soothing tones inside his helmet. Michael fought the spin and righted the plane only to find he was flying over Russian waters.

He banked hard to loop back on course. "You lied to me."

The computer still soothingly listed everything that was broken despite his accusation.

He caught sight of the three bogies on radar. They were flying wild. One was looping hard over land, another was zig zagging out to sea, and the third vanished off of the radar not far behind Michael which meant either blown up or down.

Michael decided to see if he could crash in Alaska just for the hell of it. He wanted to get away as fast as possible in case the Russian nearest him had dropped under radar for an attack.

The G forces settled onto him again harder than before and he cursed. The instruments flashed on and off. The smart materials bowed and the controls locked.

Michael tried to fight to break it free, but he raced forward and off course.

He saw he was over land now and it had to be Russia. He cursed again and then he started to pray.

Black spots filled his vision from the edges like insects crawling over and covering the controls in front of him. He heard his own, harsh breathing in his ears through the speakers. His fingers went numb and he wasn't sure if he was holding the controls anymore.

Before he blacked out, Michael saw the land below him become water again even though he had not changed course as the fighter undulated on the wind with its locked controls. Some part of his hazy mind knew that was important, but he couldn't think clearly enough to make out why.

Michael whispered. "Sorry, Carter."

### Chapter 3

Roman Nikitin weaved between the trees on his way up the slope. The ground went from the spongy feel of moss, leaf bed, and high water table to the rockier surface of the hill. He saw the observation tower near the top in a break between the conifers that clung to this hill. He had to navigate by sight points as there was no proper trail even after all these months of patrolling the same area.

The loggers were almost close enough to see from the towers now. He could sometimes spot the smoke plumes from their work. Soon they would be cutting bare patches through the landscape. Half of Roman felt bad about nature being scarred for progress this deep in the wilderness. The other half of him hoped they cut down every tree in Russia as he was here on partial exile for being born into the wrong family that made enemies with the wrong family.

He reached high enough that he could see the river to the north. It was not an important river to most people and did not even appear on most maps. It was important to Roman because it marked the southern border of a military camp. If he wandered across, he would likely be shot. Part of his job as an exiled ranger was to stop explorers and loggers from accidentally crossing into the dead zone. There had never been explorers and the loggers had not yet come nearly this far.

The crackling noise echoed through the dense forest behind him. Roman turned and looked back through the trees. He was still not high enough to spot what the cause was. He had played it off to loggers being closer than he thought the first time. He decided it was just rotten trees falling the second time. But now he was running out of logical answers.

His mother had believed there were spirits in the wilderness of Russia – that the empire had earned many ghosts. She considered herself Russian, but had strong reasons to distrust the motherland. Roman's father spent most of his life trying to keep her quiet about her concerns, spiritual or otherwise, around other people. If she were still alive, she would blame herself for Roman's exile.

Roman pictured tigers. He had been assured a dozen times that there were no tigers in this part of Russia, but his superiors had lied to him often. The radio and electricity in the abandoned listening post that served as his ranger station and cabin did not work. They were also not easy to repair, if broken. Supplies did not come regularly and Roman was surviving by spending much of his days hunting animals for food instead of protecting them from illegal hunting.

"Tigers climb trees, but they wouldn't be knocking them down," Roman whispered to himself in Russian. "Unless they were very large tigers."

He turned and continued his journey up the hill.

Roman reached the iron ladder and felt the rust grind off under his hands as he climbed. On a few of the steps, he felt the ladder waver on its connecting bolts. On a few other steps, he felt the entire tower shift with his weight and a light wind.

He reached the belly of the observation deck and pushed against the underside of the trapdoor. It was jammed shut from wear, rust, and the constant shifting of the poorly maintained tower. He pounded up on it until his wrist hurt.

Roman spouted out every Russian curse he knew twice plus a few Yiddish ones he had heard from his mother at night when she argued with his father. Roman twisted



around on the ladder so that his boot was above him against the hatch. The entire ladder rocked hard to one side with the off balance stance. He fully expected to have the rungs snap under him and he would fall bodily into the jaws of a giant tiger sneaking through the trees below.

He bent his knee and kicked once, then twice. The door gave slightly. He drew back and kicked again feeling pain lace up through his joints. “Why do I go on with these empty comings and goings? I kick against the goads like a stupid donkey.”

He kicked again and the hatch burst open with a crash.

Roman righted himself and climbed up onto the deck. Safety regulations called for closing the hatch back, but Roman pictured himself dying of starvation trapped above the Russian wilderness. He determined to just not stumble through the opening and fall to his death.

He spoke a phrase in English he had learned from TV shows on the Internet before he was assigned a post with no electricity. “Note to self.”

Roman raised the binoculars to scan over the top of the forest looking for lost hunters, loggers, or evidence of giant tigers. He saw none.

The sound of another crack and crash rolled up past his ears in the tower. He leaned his elbows on the wood shelf of the open observation bay and scanned again.

He still didn’t see it, but kept his eyes to the lenses and the glasses aimed out toward the west below him. He mumbled in English. “Tyger, Tyger, burning bright ...”

Roman knew the story of the meteorite striking in the middle of Siberia and flattening miles of forest in an instant. It had happened in the early part of the twentieth century, but like most stories in Russia, it was told as if it happened yesterday. The impact had been so great that it was like an atomic blast before the Americans ever invented and dropped the first bomb. Like most stories in Russia, some told it as something beyond natural – the invasion of some dark force from beyond this world.

Roman was farther south and east than the tundra of Siberia in the temperate forests of the Taiga. Also, if an atomic sized meteorite strike happened, he would not have time to wonder what it was. But maybe a shower of smaller rocks could strike. They might cause a fire that he had no chance of outrunning or one might punch right through his skull. *No one would even notice I was gone*, he thought.

“Taiga, Taiga, burning bright ... Note to self: Do not get killed by falling space rock.”

He saw the tree go down and then the sound hit his ear a fraction of a second later. He looked for motion or a cause from the ground, but saw none. An entire row of trees went down like a band across the forest.

For the split second between the sight and the sound reaching him, Roman thought of loggers clear cutting, but that wasn’t right. The new clear space was also clear of people and machines. The drop had been instant like a great, invisible weight had fallen onto the forest all at once.

In the midst of the larger, felled timber, Roman saw smaller pines bent down along their flexible trunks. He thought they might be pinned under the larger trees, but some were standing alone near clearings. It was as if the smaller trees were bowing in respect to some unseen force.

Roman cursed in Russian and said, “I should have listened to your crazed rantings about spirits more closely, mother.”

More individual trees crumbled around the edges of the band of destruction. Roman looked for a fissure or sink hole where the forest floor might be breaking over a magma pocket of some ancient, forgotten volcano, but there was nothing. The ground was whole.

Motion to the south drew his attention and he panned the binoculars. Another band of trees collapsed in the wake of the phenomenon. It was further from him and Roman could not see the exposed floor from his vantage this time. He could see the band was thinner this time, but miles longer.

He watched with his jaw open as thinner trees bowed slowly down from their tops.

“Show due respect to our invisible tiger master.”

Roman heard a screaming roar build around him. He looked around for the source and then lowered the glasses.

The fighter raced over the top of the tower close enough to shake the entire structure. Roman thought he was going to be flung right out the opening. A mist of gooey film lighted on his skin and smelled like spilled kerosene. As he watched the fighter drift down toward the forest, Roman touched the sticky paste over his arms. “Jet fuel?”

The fighter hit the trees and clipped through the ones that were still standing before gliding into the space of the open band like it were a prepared landing strip. “Was this a military operation?”

He brought the lenses back up which were partially obscured by the film of spilt fuel from the air. Roman cursed in English. “That’s not a Russian craft.”

As he watched the plane hit the ground in a tumble over the fallen timber, Roman saw the smaller trees rise from their bow like they were raising their heads to watch the crashing enemy plane.

More crackles and falling trees traveled up the hill below him. Roman took his view off the plane and followed the path of falling trees approaching him. “Is that you, Tiger?”

Roman felt his legs grow heavy and he felt dizzy. The binoculars increased in weight until he finally let go of them and they pulled on the strap along the back of his neck.

The hatch slammed closed behind him and then ripped loose tumbling down the ladder. He heard the scream of metal on metal and Roman dropped to his knees. “What is happening?”

The tower collapsed around him and Roman was plunged into painful darkness.

## Chapter 4

Sean ran through the open door of the apartment, but then the ceiling came down. Sean barreled forward to keep from getting buried. He turned and saw beams down and burning over the doorway. An engulfed sofa from the apartment above sat on its side in flames.

Baker's voice hit the radio. "We have a man trapped inside."

The milk was spilled across the table. The cup rolled off, but seemed to fall in slow motion. It bounced on the kitchen tile with a click and then floated slowly back up cutting a trail through the smoke. This had to be one of those moments where time seemed to slow down.

"Up, up, and away," Sean said.

He ran down the hall, but then another collapse brought the ceiling down around him. The drywall warped into waves on both sides and exploded into powder and splinters. Sean dove forward toward the bathroom instead of back out of the collapse.

He shoved the chunks of wall off of him as he looked back at the burning debris which now filled the apartment. The chunks of wall lifted off of him and twirled in the air without landing again.

Sean could see through the missing section of wall into the kitchen. The balloon cup was still spinning in the air from its bounce creating a cyclone effect in the smoke. Now the plates, forks, and bits of food were dancing through the smoky air in the kitchen too.

Sean blinked and looked through the open face of the bathroom. The toothbrush floated by. As he watched, the shower curtain parted itself and lifted up in the air like it was being blown by a wind. A beam lay across the tub and he saw a small hand wave.

The boy's voice echoed in the tub. "It's on my leg. I can't move."

The tub had saved him from getting crushed, but Sean needed to get him out before they both burned. He stood and ran toward the bathroom.

He had that empty floating feeling again that signaled his life coming apart in a familiar way. This time though, Sean pushed off and his feet left the ground. His legs kicked up over his head and he spun once in the air before floating above the floor between the hallway and the bathroom.

He stared down at the boy in the tub. The kid stared back with eyes wide and his hands up at Sean. Sean wondered, *Am I already dead? Am I losing my mind?*

He had taken Oxy enough to hallucinate before. In rehab, the hallucinations had gotten really bad enough during withdrawals that they almost sent him to the hospital. Sean had pretended everything was fine, so that he wouldn't be found out as an addict outside the facility.

The kitchen table and burning sofa were doing tricks in the apartment too. The yellow tablecloth spread out along the top of the floating table like wings ready to fly away.

Sean swallowed and muttered. "Foster isn't the only one hitting the ceiling today."

He shook his head inside his helmet and mask. He reached out and grabbed a piece of wood sticking up from where the wall had broken. The board snapped in his hand and the piece floated away. He clawed at the air more until he caught a section of drywall. It crumbled into dozens of tiny asteroids that cut through the smoke in trails, but finally he got enough of a grip to pull himself forward.

Sean soared forward and down to the tub. He grabbed the beam and yanked with his feet up in the air behind him. It didn't budge. The boy was unconscious now.

Sean braced his feet against the tub and pulled with little hope that he could move the beam. It popped loose from where it was wedged in the tub and floated up like the kitchen table.

The boy floated up with his arms and legs out and Sean caught him. The ceiling came loose above them from the shifted beam. Sean watched the debris come down, but then pause and spread out in the air above them.

Sean kicked off the tub and floated through the air with the boy in his arms. He kicked off another section of wall in the hall. His boot went through, but he changed his direction and floated out through the wall of burning objects across the room. Sean swept them out of his path to avoid burning the boy.

He saw the cup still spinning and Sean whispered. "What now?"

It suddenly fell to the floor at full speed. The rest of the debris crashed down as well washing flame out across the carpet with the impact. Sean felt his own weight return and he shifted the boy's body to keep from landing on him. He slammed to his knees.

The entire building rumbled around him in its violent return to reality. Sean charged into one of the bedrooms as the apartment above came crashing completely in.

As the entire building shook, Sean kicked out the glass from the window. He clicked his radio and said, "This is Grayson. I'm at the window. Second floor. East side. I need an exit."

"We see you," Carter said over the radio. "I'm putting a portable ladder up now."

The top rung hit the window frame and Sean looked out to see Carter climbing. He took the boy from Sean and Sean climbed out too.

As they passed the boy off to paramedics, the ground rumbled again and Sean grabbed a lamppost to keep from floating away. The interior floors collapsed inside the brick shell with flame torching up through the windows. The companies blasted water into the ruined building to try to finish it off.

Sean turned and saw Carter staring at him. Sean realized he was still clutching the lamppost.

Carter tilted his head. "You okay, man?"

Sean let go of the post and pulled off his mask. "Yeah, I'm fine."

There was no chance that Sean was going to confess to hallucinating that he was flying.

They loaded up after the fire was doused and returned to the house. Back when Sean was married, he never talked to Tabby about the tough days. Now that he was dating Jenny, he tried not be closed off. She encouraged him to share and even vent when he needed. He wasn't sure he was ready to share this experience – whatever it was. He sensed beginning to lie now was a mistake, but he felt pulled by his fear.

Sean glanced at Carter who nodded at him and Sean looked away again.

As they entered the firehouse and unloaded, someone shouted. "What happened here?"

The other guys walked up and stared. Their trunks were overturned and busted open. Two bunks were tilted against the walls. Cabinets were open and the plates spilled on the floor. The skillet was across the room and the cold noodles ran down the wall in a greasy mess.

Lt. Foster came up last and said, "It wasn't like this when we left, right?"

"No, sir," Carter said. "Looks like that quake we felt wasn't from the building collapsing."

Foster said, "I told you Stroganoff for breakfast was a mistake, Grayson."

Sean swallowed and thought about the experience of flying through the fire. "Yes, sir."

The alarm sounded again and all the men groaned.

Foster shouted. "Replace oxygen tanks in a hurry and suit up. If you aren't broken, get ready to go."

## **Chapter 5**

Dr. Paulo Restrepo leaned closer to the computer screen and scrolled between the images from the Australian observatory. He shook his head. He identified five pictures in the middle of the sequence that were not even from the right year much less the correct time of year. Paulo wondered if they were testing him or were actively trying to sabotage his research. If it was a mistake, it was a spectacular one and he did not want to believe he was coordinating with people that were that incompetent.

**\*\*\* End of book preview \*\*\***

**Home**  
Pulse series  
Book preview





## Chapter 1

Dr. Blake Roberson was used to working in less than ideal conditions. He had cut his teeth on foreign and war zone medicine with Doctors Without Borders. He had upped his experience with the Red Cross. As the conflicts in the Middle East escalated and U.S. troops pulled out, Blake had found his way to an International Aid Society that was bringing medical personnel into the region to fill the void from U.S. forces and Syrian doctors leaving.

He was experiencing that again in his operating room in Kurdish border town of Kilauffa. Turkish forces that had crossed over into Syria during the recent bombings had pulled back. Kurdish-Iraqi forces were being pushed back as terrorists advanced on Kilauffa. It wasn't even much of a functioning city as it was a stronghold of disjointed freedom fighters and local holdouts. People had been fleeing to camps in Syria and Turkey for days. Now they were fleeing the operating room.

It wasn't a routine surgery under any conditions, but the power was flickering on and off. The generators took a breath to kick on in each lull and Blake held his breath each time wondering if he was going to watch his patient die as a result.

The anesthesiologist had left first. He was local and Blake did not know him personally. Now he was gone and Dr. Roberson had to watch those stats as well. The blood vessel out of the pancreas had been nicked. The repair was risky even though Blake had found the exact spot quickly. He couldn't take his hands out of the field to make adjustments for long and he was probably bringing disease back in as a result. He would have to treat for infection afterward, but if the man bled out from the unrepaired cut, it wouldn't matter anyway.

The surgeon assisting was a British fellow, Dr. Hilton, and he left next.

As sweat dripped into his eyes, he hardly noticed that the nurses had abandoned him too.

Dr. Roberson had started out his internship in the States in plastic surgery which actually included far more repair work than people realized. It had prepared him well for all the permutations of trouble he faced in war zone triage, but it still wasn't enough to prepare him for operating alone when everyone had abandoned him.

If he had stayed in plastic surgery instead of moving into vascular, he might have been in Beverly Hills sucking the fat out of love handles instead of trying to save a man alone ahead of the invasion of terrorists or whichever splinter group was attacking now.

The door opened to the operating room and two of his American friends were standing there. They were not wearing masks and had obviously not scrubbed in. More infection had come with them, it seemed. Still, he was happy to see them.

"Jack, Dexter, scrub in. I'm playing a one man show here."

The men exchanged a look. Jack had a scar over his lip that ran up past the left side of his nose. It was hairline from a childhood accident and Blake knew he still had the skills to fix it.

Jack said, "We are leaving. Even if you save this man, there will be no post op care. The city is going to fall."

"I'm not leaving him." Blake turned his attention back to the surgery.

Dexter said, "We are going out through Syria and then Jordan. We've hired guides and we have a flight out. We can live to help another day, Blake. If you die here with this man, that's not helping anyone. You can't stay."

"I'm not going without this done," Blake shouted through his surgical mask. "It will go faster, if you help me."

Jack said, "Promise us you will go as soon as you are finished. You can't stay, if the city falls. You can't. You know what those bastards did to Katie."

"I don't have time to talk about that now," Blake blinked against moisture in his eyes that had nothing to do with sweat.

"Promise us," Dexter said.

"I promise I won't let them take me alive. Now, either help or get out."

They both left. Blake was hoping they would have chosen to help.

He completed the repair through two more power flickers. During the second one, the generator had not kicked in before the power came back up. As he finished, Blake almost tried to tell one of the assistants to close up for him. He looked around the empty operating room and sighed. Blake closed the field himself and snipped off the stitch.

He doused the man's belly with iodine and hoped for the best. Blake wasn't even sure he was going to be able to find antibiotics. He adjusted the oxygen up a touch leaving blood on the controls and he stepped away.

Blake dropped his bloody gloves in the floor and pulled the paper mask down to his neck.

He stepped out and found two nurses standing in the hall. He was never so happy to see two people.

"Doctor?"

"Are you two staying?"

"We are here to serve."

"Can you watch my patient until we can move him? He just had vascular surgery."

They went inside and Blake made his way through the abandoned halls toward the front of the hospital.

An explosion shook the building. Glass blew out of the window beside him. Dr. Roberson dropped down. He heard screaming out front and machine gun fire not so distant.

He crawled forward and pushed open the door to see a soldier collapsed on the outside stairs. Blake couldn't tell the good guys from the bad guys. He crawled out and found the man bleeding out the front of his uniform. Blake tore it open and found a wide, flowing wound. He struggled to get his fingers in to try to feel where the rupture was before the man died.

The soldier coughed up blood. "Doctor?"

"I'm going to try to help you. Be still."

The Iraqi soldier held up a picture of a boy marked with bloody fingerprints. "My son. Alone. Still in the city. Help him. Take him with you."

Blake reached into the man's body through the flow of blood and tried to pinch off the bleeding artery. "Let me help you so you can be with him."

The man coughed up more blood. "Don't let him die. Please. Save him."

The blood flow stopped, but Blake had not been successful. The soldier went still with the picture still pinched between his fingers in the air.

Blake peeled the man's grip away from his smock leaving a smear of dirt and grease with the blood that was already there.

Blake took the picture. The writing on the back was not in English, but he recognized the markings as an address. He knew the street. There had been a café that served great Turkish coffee before it had been blown up.

A jeep roared up and screeched to a stop behind him. Blake stood and turned to see three masked men with machine guns and a fourth with a thick mustache that seemed to have no problem showing his face. There were bags of supplies including one marked RICE U.N. AIDE. Another burlap sack was unmarked, but seemed to be almost empty.

"Doctor!" The man with an exposed face smiled. "So glad you decided to stay. Only cowards decide to flee. Yes?"

Blake slid the picture away into the neckline of his smock and shirt. "Someone has to close up what you boys keep opening. Yes?" Replies the doctor sarcastically.

The unmasked man laughed. "Show him what happens to lesser men than him who chose to flee."

One of the masked men picked up the almost empty burlap sack by the bottom and shook it. Two severed heads rolled out on the sidewalk by Dr. Roberson's feet. They were bloodied and pale. One had a hairline scar from his lip up the left side of his nose. It was Jack's head.

Blake had a wild, disconnected thought that he could still fix the scar tissue, but there was not much else he was going to be able to do for his friends. His next thought was about the boy alone and waiting for someone to help near the blown up Turkish café.

Blake swallowed and looked away from the heads. "So, are you the good guys or bad guys?"

**\*\*\* End of book preview \*\*\***