

SPLIT SECOND

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First Edition

PART ONE

Breakthrough

Split Second (noun):

1. a fraction of a second.
2. an infinitesimal amount of time.

—Dictionary.com

“The past cannot remember the past. The future can’t generate the future. The cutting edge of this instant right here and now is always nothing less than the totality of everything there is.”

—Robert Pirsig

1

Jenna Morrison kissed her sister, Amber, goodbye, ignoring the shrieks of tiny Sophia, who was swaddled so completely in a baby blanket that her actual presence could not be confirmed by eye, as though she had fallen into a cottony-soft, mint-green black hole. The swaddling did nothing, however, to lessen Sophia's eardrum-searing screams, honed by evolution to be exceedingly irritating and impossible to ignore.

Amber patted Sophia's back gently, holding her close, hoping that the need for a burp was causing this unholy racket and shooting her sister a look of apology and helplessness. The baby's timing couldn't have been worse.

"Thanks for coming, Jen," said Amber. "You're a life saver."

"Are you kidding?" said Jenna, a little louder than usual to be heard over her niece's shrieks. "I wouldn't have missed this for the world. I got to see you. Bond with Sophia. Not to mention getting a baby fix. I should thank *you*."

"You truly are the best," said Amber, unable to keep the sadness at her sister's departure, and the mounting panic Jenna knew she was feeling, from her expression.

But who could blame her for feeling panicked? Becoming a mother at twenty was one thing, but having the father disappear within two months of the birth was another, and would freak out just about anyone, regardless of their intestinal fortitude.

Jenna had flown out from San Diego as soon as possible after Amber had learned she would be raising a baby on her own, to help with Sophia and give Amber moral support, at least for a week. The visit had been a good one, and she was convinced her sister was beginning to regain her emotional stability, although regaining it fully could well take months or even years.

But it was extremely encouraging that not only did Amber not show any signs of postpartum depression, she was one of those moms who seemed to glow from within, basking in motherhood and drowning in the soothing oxytocin that was released by the infant's tireless efforts to suck the nipples right from her body.

Jenna would have liked to stay longer, but she was in the middle of a relentlessly challenging PhD program in genetics and needed to get back to her life. And also back to her fiancé, Nathan Wexler.

"You take care of yourself," said Jenna earnestly. "And remember, don't let *anything* keep you down. Everyone has bad days. But you have a great life ahead of you. I know it. Sophia has no idea just how lucky she is."

Amber nodded as a tear formed in the corner of one eye. Jenna kissed the mint-green blanket, pressing her lips into the material so the screaming baby could feel the weight of them on the back of her head, and then let herself into the back of the waiting cab without saying another word.

As the cab made its way to O'Hare, Jenna reflected on life. She wouldn't wish what had happened to her sister on anyone, but babies were undeniably adorable, and many women had thrived as single mothers. And Jenna had been surprised to learn that she had a strong motherhood instinct as well, just waiting for the sight of a baby to reveal itself.

When would she and Nathan begin having a family? she wondered. And how many children would they have?

Nathan Wexler was a brilliant physicist and mathematician, and while she wasn't nearly at his level—who was?—she was considered gifted herself. Both of their lives were sure to be demanding, and fulfilling, for as far into the future as they could imagine.

They had agreed they wanted to have kids at some point, but they had only discussed parenthood in the vaguest of generalities. True, they had plenty of time. After all, Nathan might be twenty-nine, but she was only twenty-six. But would they *ever* decide the time was right? In between careers and intellectual pursuits that might change the world—a possibility that was especially likely for Nathan.

After all, they hadn't even managed to get around to making their unofficial marriage official. They had been living together now for eighteen months and already thought of themselves as husband and wife, but Jenna's interest in stealing time from other passions to make this happen was vanishingly small. And a quickie Vegas wedding was out, as well, since Nathan's family would never forgive them.

So they needed to find a venue. Plan out a ceremony. Invite guests.

She shuddered. She would rather sit on a mound of fire ants.

Jenna wondered how long it would take for her and Nathan to get around to tying the knot. And if they couldn't seem to find the time to plan a wedding, would they *ever* get around to having kids? Maybe not.

Just a year earlier, she and Nathan had watched an old movie called *Idiocracy*, which they found quite humorous and often bitingly brilliant, but which had also struck a nerve. The movie's premise was that humanity was on course, not to evolve toward greatness, but to *devolve* into idiocy.

And this point was made quite effectively. A narrator pointed out that the process of natural selection once ensured that the strongest, smartest, or fastest reproduced in the greatest numbers. But now, in the case of human society, with no natural predators to thin the herd, evolution didn't reward those with the most intelligence, but simply those who reproduced the most.

The movie then demonstrated this premise by showing scenes of illiterate slobs who would screw anything that moved, including various relatives, and who seemed to think chucking chairs at each other at the slightest provocation was the height of good sport. The film showed these people reproducing with total abandon, like rabbits with a sex addiction.

Why? For lack of anything else to do with their time. Because they were impulsive and not bright enough to even understand the importance of birth control. And because the more kids they had, the bigger the welfare checks and food stamp handouts they received.

This was contrasted with a scene in which two prissy, high-IQ professionals were discussing having children. They both agreed that

having children was an important decision and that they needed to wait for the right time, since child bearing wasn't something that should be rushed into. Ultimately, they died childless.

The moral: the dimwitted and impulsive might not be able to hold a job or learn algebra, but they sure knew how to screw each other—and reproduce like crazy.

The movie took place many generations in the future, after which this reverse evolution had run its inevitable course, resulting in a society largely composed of morons.

A comedy, yes, and while the accuracy of this premise was still being debated in scientific circles, it was hard for Jenna to fault its logic.

She was brilliant, while her sister was far less so, and far more impulsive. She wondered how many children Amber would have. And if she and her super-genius husband would ever have *any*.

Jenna was greeted at Lindbergh Field in San Diego by a beaming but bleary-eyed Nathan Wexler, who looked the same as he had looked during their Skype calls all week—as though he were allergic to sleep.

After a long embrace, and when her luggage finally arrived at the carousel in an airport known for the slowness of its luggage retrieval, Wexler began the drive back to their small rental home in La Jolla, where he was by far the youngest full professor in the physics department of the University of California, San Diego, having already produced groundbreaking work in several areas of physics and mathematics.

Wexler peppered Jenna with questions about her visit with her sister and her view of Amber's mental health on the way home, even though they had discussed this during their daily calls. When they arrived, he produced a bottle of expensive red wine and two elegant, oversized crystal glass goblets, and filled them up with a sparkle in his eye.

"Welcome back," he said as he poured.

Jenna was impressed. It took a special occasion for them to use anything other than plastic cups. She and Nathan were both wearing old jeans and T-shirts, of like mind that comfort was more important

than style, and fine wine in a fine crystal goblet seemed too fancy for their current attire.

It was nearing midnight and she was exhausted. In just minutes Sunday night would officially change into Monday morning, although this had occurred hours earlier in Chicago and her body was still on this time. Nathan appeared to be even more exhausted than she was, but he also had a triumphant glow about him, like he had recently won a lottery.

They had never been apart for this long since they had moved in together, so maybe this separation had affected him more than either had expected. “You know you don’t have to get me drunk to have your way with me, right?” she said, the corners of her mouth turning up into a wry smile.

What was he waiting for? They should be tearing each other’s clothes off by now. Sometimes exhaustion, especially mental exhaustion, led to epic sex. The more the brain was taken out of the equation, allowing primitive, primal instinct to run the show, the better.

“Good to know,” he replied, returning her smile. “But this isn’t about getting you drunk. If it was, I would have poured the usual. You know. From the giant carton of wine in the fridge.”

“Yeah. Last week was a good year for wine,” she replied with a grin.

“I trust you noticed that this came from an actual bottle. With an actual cork, made from, you know, cork.”

“Impressive,” she said. She raised her eyebrows. “Miss me that much?”

“Of course I missed you,” said Wexler. “But I have to admit, this is for something else.” He paused. “You’ll never guess.”

“You got a huge raise?” said Jenna.

“No, I wasn’t asking you to *guess*. I was saying that, *literally*, you could live to be a thousand and would never guess.”

Jenna laughed. He was a bit quirky, but given his intellect, far less than one might expect. And he was funny and loving and so fast on the uptake that it was dizzying.

She had always hated dumb guys. When she met Nathan, despite having been the valedictorian of her high school and earning a near perfect SAT score, she had suddenly become the slow one. Discussions with him were exhilarating.

But it had to be difficult for him. To be so far ahead of everyone else. Even the best brains in the physics department couldn't measure up. And if brilliant people were slow by comparison, how much patience did he need to bear people who were average?

Jenna had no doubt that having the chance to be stimulated intellectually by a mental giant was worth putting up with some quirks. And this was, after all, par for the course. She had seen a movie about Stephen Hawking and how his wife had not only put up with the quirks of the super intelligent, but with a man whose entire body was paralyzed. Well, all except for his penis, which enabled them to have three children, although the thought picture of how this was accomplished wasn't something on which she liked to dwell.

The Hawking situation had been a thousand times more difficult than anything *she* had to deal with. Nathan was just fashion-impaired, absentminded, and too literal sometimes. He talked to himself under his breath fairly frequently, and often couldn't remember where he had left stuff, as though his mind was too powerful to dwell on the mundane. All traits she now found endearing.

"Okay, so if I'll never guess, how about you telling me," she said, raising her glass.

"I thought you'd never ask," he replied with a grin. "I had an epiphany the day you left and have been working on it around the clock. Astonishing really. I stumbled across some esoteric mathematics that had never been found to have any real-world applications, and suddenly I had an insight that allowed me to come up with something truly remarkable."

"How remarkable?"

"You're about to drink wine that didn't come out of a box, remarkable. Possible *Nobel Prize* remarkable. I haven't begun to determine if there are any real-world applications, but on theoretical grounds this could be a huge breakthrough. Immense. I'm not saying

it's on the level of general relativity, but once it's fleshed out, you never know. And even if it doesn't quite reach the level of importance of relativity, I think it will be just as surprising to the world as this was when Einstein first presented it. And maybe as revolutionary."

"And you've been working on this the entire week?"

He nodded.

This explained his lack of sleep, she realized. When he was in the throes of a major idea, he would work on it around the clock until he collapsed from exhaustion. "How is it that you never said a word about this when we Skyped?"

"Well, you were dealing with a crisis, and I wanted to make this week about you and your sister. Besides, I was never sure I wasn't hallucinating the entire thing. I'm still not."

"You're killing me. Are you going to tell me what you've found?"

Wexler smiled. "I don't know," he said, teasing her. "Maybe I should wait until I'm absolutely certain. I still need to finish triple checking the calculations and logic, and have this vetted by the best minds I know, just to be sure I don't embarrass myself. It's possible that I've missed something big."

"We both know *that's* unlikely."

"I appreciate your faith," said Wexler sheepishly. "But in this case, the complexities of the math and logic dwarf anything I've ever done. This makes string theory look as simple as addition. I've already written Dan Walsh, telling him what I think I've discovered, and asking him to clear the decks for a bit so he can be a second set of eyes on it, to check for accuracy."

Dan Walsh was a physicist at nearby UCLA and had been a close friend of Nathan Wexler for years.

"Okay," said Jenna. "This is very cute and all, Nathan. I like how you're trying to build the suspense. But enough already. I'm at the edge of my seat. Really."

She set the goblet of wine down on a nearby end table. "So out with it. Spill. I'm not going to drink to a breakthrough discovery until I at least know the gist of what it is."

Wexler tapped the screen of his cell phone and a drum roll issued from the speaker.

“Really?” said Jenna, laughing. Apparently, the wine wasn’t the only thing he had prepared for this moment. “I had no idea you were this theatrical.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me,” he replied with a broad smile as the drum roll continued to loop in a repeating pattern.

The front door shot open and three men burst through the threshold and into their small home, as though cued by the drum roll.

For just a moment Jenna thought they might be part of the show, but something about their look, their seriousness, squelched this notion, and gave her an unmistakable sense that these men were highly dangerous. And Nathan’s reaction—his mouth dropping open and his eyes almost exploding from their sockets—made their uninvited status a certainty.

She didn’t know who these men were, or why they had stormed into their home, but one thing was certain—they were highly skilled. Not only had they managed to unlock the door without a sound, but had somehow deactivated the alarm that Nathan had set as well.

What in the hell was going on?

The men stood their ground, silently, waiting for the two scientists to digest their presence.

“Who are you?” whispered Nathan Wexler in alarm to the trio of intruders. “And what are you doing here?”

2

Jenna knew immediately the men were not there to rob them. A team this good would have set their sights on a far more valuable prize. A mansion or an art museum. But certainly not the small house they were renting.

“Dr. Wexler,” said the tallest of the three, nodding at Nathan. “Miss Morrison. Sorry about the intrusion. But I’m afraid you need to come with us. If you cooperate,” he continued, “I can promise that you won’t be harmed.”

The man’s two companions, a short, stocky black man, and a pale blond who looked to be of German ancestry, remained silent and alert.

“Who are you?” repeated Wexler. “And what is this about?”

“This is about the discovery you just made. I need to bring you to someone who wants to discuss it with you.”

“How do you have any idea of what discoveries I might have just made?”

“Look, my mission parameters are very tight. I’ve already disclosed more than I should have. My job is to bring you in, gently, but ask you to put off all questions until you meet with my boss. Apparently, any discussion I might have with you is above my pay grade.”

“And if we refuse?” said Jenna.

The man shook his head while his two colleagues maintained a calm but hardened look. “I’m afraid I can’t take no for an answer.”

Jenna’s mind raced. The man hadn’t made an explicit threat, nor had he drawn a gun. But then again, he didn’t have to. She had no doubt that just one of these men, unarmed, could probably best her and Nathan if they both had machine guns in their hands.

What had Nathan discovered? How did they know about it so quickly? And Nathan had said his discovery was largely theoretical, with unclear real-world applications, so why the intense interest?

“We’ll be leaving in a moment,” said the gang’s spokesman. “Apologies again, but we first need to take care of a few things.”

He nodded toward his two companions who began to carry out what were obviously pre-planned tasks. The blond made his way to Wexler’s desktop computer and produced a small screwdriver, expertly dismantling the computer and removing the hard drive in less than a minute.

His colleague searched the house for several minutes and returned holding Wexler’s laptop. “I’ve confirmed that he only has the one desktop and one laptop, as per our intel,” he reported. “I’ve also removed all of our bugs.”

The tall man nodded while Jenna’s heart leaped to her throat. They had been bugged? For how long? And why?

But if this was about Nathan’s recent discovery, she reasoned, he had only spoken of it out loud minutes earlier. They couldn’t possibly have carried out an operation with this little notice. The conclusion was inescapable. Along with the bugs, they must have been monitoring Nathan’s phone and computers as well. Nathan had told her that he had sent an e-mail about his discovery to Dan Walsh recently. This must have set the wheels of this raid on their home in motion.

The tall man lifted a phone to his face. No 3D image hovered in the space before him, which meant he had purposely kept the call audio-only. “I trust you’ve copied everything in Wexler’s cloud storage account, correct?” he said into the phone.

He listened to the response, which must have been an affirmative. “Great. Go ahead and wipe the account, then,” he ordered, and then ended the call.

He turned to the two scientists. “I’m afraid I need you to give me your phones,” he said, holding out his hand.

Jenna glanced at Nathan. He blew out a long breath and nodded, handing the tall spokesman his phone, and Jenna followed suit. Once this was done, the man gestured toward the front door, ignoring

Jenna's laptop that was still packed in her carry-on luggage. She was somehow certain that these men knew her laptop was there, but had no interest in any of her work.

"I'd love to be civilized," said the tall intruder, clearly the group's leader and spokesman. "So can I count on the two of you not to scream or attract attention? These actions won't change a thing, and I'm sure you'd prefer not to be gagged. We'll be gone before anyone can intervene or call the cops." He shrugged. "And to be honest, even if they do, it won't matter."

He said it with such a total air of certainty that it was impossible for Jenna not to believe him.

3

The La Jolla night sky was cloudless, as usual, and the display of stars would have been awe-inspiring under normal circumstances. As it was, Jenna fought to calm herself and become a dispassionate and clinical observer and thinker.

The physical and mental exhaustion she had been feeling had been obliterated by repeated surges of adrenaline and she was hyper-alert as the group of five rounded the block, stopping before a semi. The truck was small for an eighteen-wheeler, but it was still an *eighteen-wheeler*, a fish out of water in a residential neighborhood. It dominated the street like the rare moving vans that would visit the neighborhood every few years.

As if the night hadn't been surreal enough, the truck had the words *Hostess Cakes* emblazoned in blue on both sides. Several red hearts were arrayed around this logo, and large images of cupcakes, Ho Hos, and Twinkies adorned the outside of the vehicle. While the sky was moonless, the star field was just bright enough for her to make out these decorations, as well as the truck's license plate, which she memorized.

Another man was already seated in the driver's seat of the cab, apparently waiting for his three colleagues to return. The back of the truck was open and dimly illuminated, and they were led up a ramp and inside.

Three more men were waiting there, sitting against one wall, and nods were exchanged as their two colleagues came into view in the back of the truck.

Wexler turned to the short, stocky man beside him and arched one eyebrow. "Sure you brought enough men?" he said sarcastically.

“Yeah, this is total overkill,” admitted the man with a shrug. “I’ll give you that. But take this as a compliment, Dr. Wexler. It’s a measure of your importance.”

The shorter man, clearly the team’s second-in-command, motioned for them to take a seat on the wall opposite his three associates, and they complied. He parked Wexler’s hard drive and laptop beside him, and he and his blond partner sat next to their colleagues on the wall opposite the two prisoners as well. Seconds later the truck’s engine roared to life and the large vehicle pulled away from the curb, beginning its mysterious journey.

Heavy equipment of unknown type was stacked against the back wall of the windowless trailer and strapped tight, and each of their captors had large nylon duffel bags resting beside them. Jenna had no idea what was inside these bags, but it wasn’t a shipment of Twinkies or Ho Hos, of that she was certain. She guessed weaponry of some kind, although their captors had yet to point a gun in their direction and continued to try to maintain the illusion that their cooperation was voluntary.

Jenna stared at the stocky man and forced a smile. “Surely you can tell us *something*,” she said. “I get that your boss wants to control the discussion with Dr. Wexler. But what’s the harm in telling us where we’re going? I mean, we *are* American citizens, after all, and you’re military, right?”

The man smiled and shook his head. “Nice try. You can assume anything you’d like. But I still can’t tell you anything more. But rest easy. You won’t be harmed, and answers are only a few hours away.”

Jenna frowned at this response, but also realized her attempt had not been entirely futile. At least they had a sense that their journey in the back of a semi would be a relatively short one.

The truck made a number of turns as it worked its way out of residential areas. Within ten minutes they accelerated up what must have surely been a freeway onramp, and less than an hour later they began climbing steadily. While there were a number of mountains and mountain ranges near San Diego, after twenty minutes of

steadily increasing elevation their current location was clear. Only one mountain was this tall and this close: Palomar.

Palomar Mountain State Park was only about sixty miles north-east of San Diego, although winding one's way up a mountain with an elevation of over six thousand feet was slow going, so the trip could take as long as ninety minutes to two hours. The park was densely wooded with oak trees and any number of conifers, including pine, cedar, and fir, as well as large numbers of ferns.

The mountain's chief claim to fame, stationed near its top, was the Palomar Observatory, home to the Hale Telescope, for many decades considered the most important telescope in the world.

After five additional minutes of slowly winding up the corkscrew road, the driver slammed on the brakes, and the inhabitants of the trailer were all jerked several feet toward the cab, fighting to regain their balance and find a handhold on one of the straps hanging down from the walls.

"Change of plans," said a disembodied male voice, one that was tense and agitated, no doubt the driver communicating via some kind of speaker system. "Our forward car spotted an assault team a mile ahead. They'll try to hold them off while we backtrack down the mountain. We can't rule out that we'll run into a flanking team behind us, so prepare for imminent action. We're calling in reinforcements."

The reaction inside the trailer was immediate and frenzied. The men removed compact submachine guns and numerous clips the size of cigarette cartons from their nylon duffels and readied themselves for a possible assault. Several of them voiced variations of the phrase, "what the fuck?" with great agitation, as the truck reversed course, hurtling dangerously back along the narrow road that corkscrewed down the mountain. The residents of the back of the truck all clutched straps and hung on for dear life, but were still thrown this way and that with considerable force.

"What is going on?" demanded Jenna, unable to control her frayed nerves any longer, her words screeched out more than spoken.

"Don't know," said the man in charge as he continued to prepare for whatever might be coming. "We know there's a rival group out

there. But there is no way they could know about this op. No way,” he repeated in dismay. “This was supposed to be routine. A milk run. Our large force of men and spotter car were just standard precautions. We weren’t expecting any trouble.”

“That’s very comforting,” grunted Wexler, clutching at a strap he shared with Jenna as the truck continued careening down the mountain.

Then, from out of nowhere, their small stretch of Palomar Mountain State Park became a *war zone*.

The driver slammed on the brakes once again, almost yanking Jenna’s arm from its socket as she fought to retain her grip on the handhold, as horrifying sounds of explosions and heavy gunfire filled the trailer. The forces on the braking Hostess delivery truck became too great for it to hold its line, and it fishtailed. The trailer slammed over onto its side and left the road, shearing away from the cab and sliding down a steep slope.

Inside the trailer, bodies flew in every direction, and the machinery at the back of the trailer tore loose from its bonds and collided randomly with the inhabitants. After ten or fifteen seconds of this, the sliding trailer slammed into a line of evenly spaced tree trunks and came to a rest against them, on its side and at a thirty-five-degree angle.

The trailer’s light had been extinguished immediately during the slide, and they had been tumbled in absolute darkness, as though stuffed inside a massive clothes dryer filled with heavy objects.

As gunfire continued to rain around them, one of their captors managed to produce a glow stick and crack it open, and two others soon followed suit, providing enough illumination for Jenna to take stock. She had several minor cuts and abrasions but was largely unscathed. Two of their five captors were unconscious, and from the blood leaking from their heads, were most likely dead.

And both of Nathan’s legs had been broken!

He was alive, but something heavy had crashed into his lower body with incredible force. He was groaning in agony, his legs splayed in

awkward positions. A bone poked through his lower right leg, which was bleeding profusely.

She slid over and put her hands under his head, lifting it slightly, as tears rolled down her face. The sound of machine gun fire continued to echo through the trailer.

“How bad is it?” asked Nathan, his voice thin and reedy.

Jenna was glad Nathan had known enough not to look at his legs himself, which might have sent him reeling into shock. “Not so bad,” she lied through her tears. “Nothing a few good doctors can’t patch up good as new,” she added, forcing a smile.

She had to keep him as relaxed as possible. Keep his mindset positive.

While she spoke, their three remaining captors, all of them more or less healthy, had affixed sophisticated night vision goggles to their faces, pulled, no doubt, from their mysterious bags. “McFadden, you’re with me,” said one of the men, who immediately slid toward the trailer door, with someone who must have been McFadden following.

The door had been designed to slide up and down, but now had to be forced from left to right in the capsized trailer. “Simkin,” barked the man now in charge, as both he and McFadden pulled the door open enough for them to leave, “you stay here and watch our guests. And don’t forget the stakes we’re playing for,” he added grimly.

Just as the two men exited the trailer there was another burst of gunfire, at point-blank range, and Jenna had no doubt they had been ambushed as they tried to leave.

Seconds later a voice called into the truck. “Simkin,” it said. “I only want to relieve you of Dr. Wexler. There is no need for you to die. Lay down your arms and I’ll leave you in peace.”

Simkin didn’t reply, but his eyes frantically surveyed the tumbled contents of the trailer. In seconds he found what he was looking for, Wexler’s hard drive and laptop, and put several bursts of automatic fire into each of them, ensuring that not even the best forensic computer specialist on Earth could get anything useful from them.

Upon hearing these shots, the men outside moved in and began firing at him.

But instead of returning fire, Simkin did the unexpected. *The unthinkable.*

As bullets tore into his body, he reached out and yanked at Jenna, sending her sliding away from the man she loved, and in the same motion, with his other hand, he pointed his weapon at Wexler's head.

Then, as his last act before finally succumbing to death, the man named Simkin sent a burst of rounds into the magnificent brain of Dr. Nathan Wexler, instantly and totally obliterating one of the greatest minds in history.

4

Jenna Morrison heard a bloodcurdling scream and realized a moment later that it was coming from her own mouth.

The two intruders slid along the smooth trailer wall until they were directly in front of where Jenna had been moments earlier, surveying the carnage.

Simkin and Nathan Wexler were both dead, although Wexler's head was a bloody pulp, unrecognizable, turning him into nothing but a torso and a pair of bloody, shattered legs. Crimson liquid had sprayed everywhere and puddles collected at various locations in the trailer, drawn there by the inexorable pull of gravity.

"*God-dammit!*" shrieked one of the men, sounding almost as anguished as Jenna, who had only avoided vomiting because she had nothing in her stomach. "*Fuck!*"

"Jenna, come with me," said one of the men, turning to her. "I'll protect you."

Her eyes were unfocused and she made no sign of comprehension.

"Jenna, come on! *Jenna*," he repeated for a third time. "Snap out of it!"

The man's words were incomprehensible to her. She felt numb, paralyzed, and it seemed as though she was hearing everything through ten miles of cotton, including the never-ending barrage of gunfire going on in the woods outside. Her mind and her psyche were unable to process Nathan's barbaric and sudden death.

Just that morning she had been with her sister and niece in Chicago. Only hours ago with Nathan in her cozy home in La Jolla.

And now?

Now she was in the bowels of *hell*. In the middle of a war zone. In a beautiful state park in California that might as well have been Afghanistan or Iran.

Nathan was dead! Just like that. The love of her life. With his mighty intellect spread all over the back of a *cupcake* truck. How could this be happening?

She only gradually became aware that the world had taken on a green glow, several seconds after the man who had spoken to her had finished affixing night vision goggles to her head, his actions having failed to register with her at all.

“Jenna, come on!” he implored once again. “God-dammit!” He slapped her in the face, hard. “*Come on!* Getting yourself killed won’t bring back Dr. Wexler,” he said, slapping her a second time.

This time the pain finally registered and she was sparked back to reality once again. His last sentence now drilled into her returning consciousness.

He was *right*. She couldn’t bring Nathan back. But she could find out what this was all about and why it had happened. She could, *somehow*, make sure those responsible roasted in hell.

“My name is Andy,” said her rescuer, having looked into her eyes and realizing his slaps had pulled her back from the abyss. “Andy Cavnar. I’ll make sure you’re safe from these bastards. But you have to come with me.”

She allowed the man to pull her toward the exit, letting her eyes focus for the first time, surprised by just how vivid the neon green world appeared through the night vision headset.

They slid out of the truck with Cavnar’s partner in tow. She vaguely became aware of the ferocious whipping of helicopter blades thundering through the cool night air. She realized a moment later that the large aircraft responsible was hovering above the treetops, not twenty-five yards away, showing up with surprising clarity in her goggles.

Cavnar rushed her away from the trailer, but they were still on uneven, acutely sloped terrain, and Jenna collapsed to the ground, unable to fight off a bout of dizziness that had suddenly engulfed her.

Dizziness that saved her life.

Four men were now sliding down ropes that had dropped from the helicopter, firing as they did so, spraying the area she was in at chest height. One of her two escorts was nearly torn in half as she

hugged the cool, pinecone-strewn ground, while Andy Cavnar fell to the forest floor beside her, shot in the leg.

Even before the four rappellers touched the ground they were engaged from behind, giving Cavnar a reprieve and Jenna the few seconds she needed to regain her senses, and her equilibrium.

Cavnar fired at the four men, now caught in a crossfire, as another group of four began to descend from the helicopter. He paused for a moment, shoving his partner's compact submachine gun into Jenna's hands. "Go!" he commanded. "Run!"

Jenna took a deep breath and clutched tightly at the weapon. Crouching low, driven by adrenaline and a stronger survival instinct than she had guessed she possessed, she half-ran, half-skidded down the wooded slope as quickly as she could, while Cavnar brought his gun into the battle once again.

Jenna turned every so often to look over her shoulder. The gunfire had become sporadic, as though the two forces had annihilated each other, with no one left standing. One of the dying combatants had managed to put a bullet into the helicopter and it was belching black smoke, forced to limp away so it wouldn't crash into the trees and burst into a fireball.

After five minutes of racing down the slope she arrived at the road, having traveled from one of its corkscrew turns to a lower one. Bats were darting about everywhere, their hidden lives revealed to her night vision equipment. Normally this would have freaked her out beyond measure, but after what she had just gone through she could spare no adrenaline or fear for these nocturnal animals, who were no doubt feasting on insects and were careful to avoid humans. At least she hoped.

After she had walked along the pavement for twenty minutes headlights suddenly emerged from a higher elevation. Without thinking she closed her eyes and rushed to the middle of the road, parking herself there with her right arm fully extended in front of her face, her palm facing the oncoming vehicle. If the driver was paying any kind of attention, he or she would stop. If not, she would be road kill.

Sure enough, the driver saw her with plenty of room to spare and brought the car to an abrupt halt in front of her.

She pulled off the night vision apparatus and ran to the driver's side of the car. The driver was a chubby man in his early thirties, already going bald. She raised her automatic weapon and pointed it at him, pushing away all feelings of guilt. "Get out!" she demanded, loudly enough to be heard clearly through the closed window.

The driver looked at her in horror and disbelief, but there was no denying the reality of the submachine gun in her hands, nor the cuts and blood spatter that adorned her body.

"Now!" screamed Jenna as the driver continued to hesitate, paralyzed by fear. One part of her mind remained purely clinical, taking note of how quickly the survival instinct could turn an otherwise civilized scientist like her into a barbarian. It was remarkable, and horrifying.

The man stumbled out of the car with his hands up.

"I'm not going to hurt you," she said as calmly as she could manage. "But I do need to borrow your car. It's a matter of life and death. Believe it or not, I'm a victim, not a perpetrator."

The man appeared to not believe this for a moment, but remained silent. He was likely praying for his life, she guessed, even if he had been an atheist moments before.

"Give me your phone," said Jenna.

He handed it to her and she shoved it into the front pocket of her jeans.

"I can't have you calling the cops just yet," she explained. "But I promise you you'll be okay. I'll call one of your close contacts in three or four hours and tell them where to find you, and where I've left your car. Like I said, I just need to borrow it."

She handed him the night vision goggles. "Here," she said. "Use these until sunrise."

She was happy that she didn't have to leave this poor guy stranded in total darkness. At least that was *something*.

She wondered if any more cars would be passing by at this time of the morning, and if so, if the displaced driver would try to copy

her gambit and flag one of them down. She doubted it. Right now he would want to lie low until the morning light and then assess his situation. He wasn't nearly as desperate as she was. Staring into approaching headlights to stop an oncoming car wasn't for the faint of heart.

She made the balding man walk ten feet away with the goggles in his hand before she entered his car and adjusted the seat and mirrors. She lowered the window a few inches. "I am really, really sorry about this," she said. "But I promise you, you'll get your car back soon."

And with that, Jenna Morrison powered the window fully closed again, stepped on the gas, and shot off into the darkness.