

THE SIEGER CHRONICLES
TRADITIONS OF
THEIR FATHERS

— BOOK 1 —



WRITTEN BY

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BOOK ONE

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The Sieger Chronicles. Book One.

Traditions of Their Fathers.

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CHAPTER 1

Friday, June 4, 2060

"Again! Do it again!" three-year-old Sophie yelled, "Do Flying Angel again!" She had already worn Ben out but he found it difficult to say no to his youngest sister.

"OK, then! Here we go!" Ben laughed. Lying on his back and pulling his knees up to his chest, Ben grabbed her little arms. With a smooth motion he planted his feet on her rib cage and hoisted her quickly into the air. Once she was up, he leaned back and extended his legs completely. Sensing that she was stable, he let go of her arms. She was aloft and happy. She arched her back, threw her arms wide above her head and yelled, "I'm an angel!" After just a few seconds Ben started wiggling his toes. She giggled, rocking back and forth on his feet, until her perch was unstable. Ben then spread his feet suddenly and gravity brought Sophie crashing down on his chest. Ben cushioned the fall and began tickling her.

Ben and Sophie laughed and rolled and wrestled and tickled again and again. As they finally settled down Ben could see in Sophie's eyes that she was tired. "Hey Soph, it's past your bedtime."

"OK, Benny. Carry me to bed, please", she added with a smile.

Ben carried her gently to her room. As they entered the room she whispered, "I love you, Benny."

"I love you too, Sophie."

They went through the nightly ritual of pajamas, bathroom, teeth brushing, a drink of water, stories, prayers, and tucking in. Ben sat on

the side of her bed and sang her favorite lullaby. He stayed until she drifted off to sleep. He whispered, "I love you, Soph" again as he left the room and closed the door gently behind him.

Ben had recently turned fifteen but in some ways he was younger. He was homeschooled, protected from most external influences, and spent most of his time with his little sisters. He was thin and almost as tall as his father at 5'11" and likely on his way to 6'1" or 6'2". His mother loved his light brown hair, hazel eyes, good nature, and natural smile.

Ben waited in the hall for a few seconds to allow his eyes to adjust to the light and then walked toward the kitchen. As he walked down the hall he saw his two other younger sisters, Ava and Lynn, preparing for bed. He wished them a sweet sleep and hugged each of them. They returned his affection with kisses on his cheek.

Ben's mother, Eliza True, was cleaning up as Ben entered the kitchen. Eliza was 44 years old. Even with her hair pulled back and her apron on, it was still easy to see that she was a lovely woman. Her face radiated goodness – at least that's how Ben thought of her.

He offered to help. "Thank you, Ben, but I've just about got it. But please stay and tell me something good." That's what she always said when she just wanted to get him talking. Tonight she especially wanted to get him to open up a little. She was concerned for him.

"It's all good, Mom. Sophie makes me happy; Ava and Lynn, too. So it was a good enough day."

"And this afternoon?" Eliza asked, looking him in the eye.

"Ah, yeah. That. Well, that wasn't great, was it?"

"No. Not great. It worries me a little.

"Me, too."

"Your criticism of your father has escalated these last few months, honey."

"Yeah. You know I try to bite my tongue. But once in a while – more lately, I guess – Dad just drives me crazy. And I blurt something out. I'm sorry and then I'm not. I mean, come on, Mom, you see it. I get nothing from him but criticism. And I just don't get him."

"I see it, Ben, and I'm sorry it's hard. Your dad doesn't communicate that well. I have always wished he would talk more to me – to all of us. But that's who he is."

Ben felt ashamed to say it but his emotions began to run high so he forced it out anyway. "And who is he, Mom? Sometimes I step back and try to be more kind, to give him credit for things. I mean, I know he provides for us and he loves you. Then I stop and before long I'm creating a list in my head of the things that bother me. I can recite it. I wish I couldn't but I can. He won't answer any hard questions that I ask about our life. He is always on me for not doing enough. And, Mom, we live in a bunker in the middle of nowhere and no one – you included – has ever told me why. We're like hermits out here – freaks. You tell me if I have reason to wonder if he has lost his mind." After a pause, he added, "I'm sorry to be so unkind."

Eliza sighed and held back tears. "Oh, Ben, sometimes it's easy to forget that you're fifteen now and becoming a man. I always knew this day would come." After a long pause and a heavy sigh, she said resolutely, "Today is the day! You deserve some answers. Come here, son, and sit by me where I can see your eyes."

Ben, exasperated, but, as always, devoted to his mother, pulled up a chair and sat knee to knee with her.

"Ben, son, there are some things that only your dad can share with you. I will ask him – beg him – to do that. But let me tell you a few things that might help. I am doing this for two reasons. You deserve to know – you're old enough. And what I tell you will help you understand your father. Some of this will shock you. So brace yourself."

"Let's have it, Mom. I can handle it."

"Let me start with our home – our bunker – and why we live forty miles from any city, burrowed into a mountainside in

the desert and why you never get to go to town, and why we keep you here and school you here, and why you have never been allowed to have friends. It's weird, I know."

"Weird is an understatement, Mom."

"When we have given you answers to your hard questions, they have been lies. I am sorry for that. But it was to protect you. Ben, here is the truth. Your father is a wanted man. It's a long story and he will have to decide what he will share. But the bottom line is that if certain people in the government knew where your dad was, they would take him away from us. And they would kill him."

CHAPTER 2

Well after normal business hours, Malcolm Grant, Secretary of Information for the New States of America, left the conference room in the Reconnaissance wing of the Bose Military Building outside Atlanta. He marched briskly down the hallway with a file full of documents in his hand. He walked with a bounce in his step. He marched into General Grimes' office, past where the general's administrative assistant usually sat and right into his private office. General David Grimes was waiting for him.

Grimes met him halfway to the desk. "Is it really him?" he excitedly asked.

Grant smiled, "It's him! 100% confirmed! He's been hiding out in the Arizona desert all these years. It took fifteen years but we finally found the last surviving child of the old man!"

"Any chance he is organizing any kind of opposition or spreading lies?"

"No sign of anything. No one comes in or out."

Looking eagerly at the papers that Grant had thrown onto the desk, Grimes took it all in. Leaning back in his chair, he purred, "he has to go. We know exactly where he is. And he's there with his wife and kids. We know how to get at them. We have accurate missiles close enough."

"What missile will we use?" Grant wanted to know.

"We have those slimmed-down bombs on intermediate range missiles in west Texas. They pack about 5% of the punch of the original Daisy Cutters. Just one of those will be perfect – the right range, payload,

and accuracy. There will be nothing left of the cave.”

“Excellent. So when do we nail him?” asked Grant impatiently.

Grimes crowed, “Right now! I’ll get my team on it now. We’ll launch right after sun up tomorrow. That’s when they open their door every day, according to this report. And besides, I want the satellites to be able to give us plenty of good video when we blow Danny boy and his little family to kingdom come. Did you let President Bose know?”

“Not yet. I want to finish the job, wrap it up with a bow, and deliver the good news. As soon as we get confirmation in the morning and have the video, we can call him together.”

Grant added.

“Excellent!” Grimes excitedly responded.

CHAPTER 3

The only home that Ben had ever known was called the Bunker. Northeast of Florence, Arizona, it was situated on the east-facing slope of a small, barren hill, quite consistent with the surroundings for miles in all directions. The only sign that people might be around were several solar panels and two small satellite dishes, hidden about 200 feet away from the entryway amid some small palo verde trees that concealed them well while still allowing the panels to see the sun.

The only way into the home looked like the entrance to a cave. About six feet into the cave, always shrouded in dark or shadow, hung a large metal door. Once inside the Bunker, it looked, surprisingly, much like a normal house. Spread over two floors, there were carpets, wall coverings, lights, a stairway, a full kitchen, bedrooms, a game room that doubled as a workout room, and a computer room.

Ben's father, Daniel True, had built this comfortable home. His engineering background and attention to detail combined with his resourcefulness – which included plenty of theft – enabled the creation of this secret home in the desert. The solar panels had been maximized so that power was seldom an issue. Ben's father had even added several touches to keep his wife and children busy – books, computers with access to the Net, exercise equipment, even a flight simulator that he had taken from the remains of Davis-Monthan Air Force Base. Eliza had put a feminine touch into the home with some bright colors, desert flowers in season, and a compulsive desire to clean.

CHAPTER 4

Ben couldn't believe it. "Kill him? Mom, that's crazy. Are you sure?"

"Ben, everything I am telling you is 100% true. And here is what is worse. I am a wanted woman. If the government caught me, I would also be taken from you and I would end up dead. And they would treat you and the girls in the same way."

"What? Why?" Ben was reeling.

"I want your Dad to tell you that. But, Ben, we are in grave danger and have been for a very long time."

"This doesn't make any sense!" Ben blurted out.

"It will. Let me keep talking. Ben, I want to tell you about your father. He and I had to change our names and disconnect from society the best we could. Your father found this place. He bought and stole what he needed to create a place where we could hide and survive, where maybe we could hide long enough for the government to change and it would again be safe for us. Your dad worked for years on this home day and night to carve out a safe place. Son, every time your dad leaves us to go to town, I know that I may never see him again. And he knows that when he comes back, he may find that we've been taken or killed."

"Did Dad murder someone?"

"Nothing like that, son. Nothing. Your father is good and kind. Only because of his love for us and his bravery we are alive and well. It is because of his ingenuity and persistence that we have a life here, that we have beds, food, technology, and much more importantly, a little safety and peace and normalcy."

“Normalcy?”

“OK, that’s the wrong word. But at least we are alive. That is better than a life on the run or death. We even decided to have the three girls because we felt just safe enough.” Eliza pondered for a moment and muttered, almost under her breath, “And we have hope for a better day.”

Ben sat silently, not knowing what to say. He was somewhere between shock and disbelief.

“Ben, your dad walks over a mile to an old wash and uncovers our rickety old pickup every time he needs to get us groceries or supplies. He wears disguises, seldom goes to the same store twice, and avoids lengthy conversations and eye contact. He worries himself sick about us when he’s gone. He has to steal what he can’t buy. And then he shuttles everything he finds that mile from the pick-up, trip after trip. He’s been doing that for fifteen years.

Ben nodded.

“When I look at your Dad, I think he must be the best man that ever lived.”

Ben was processing the information. He finally found words. “Mom, none of this will make any sense until I understand why somebody wants to kill Dad and the rest of us.”

“Well, maybe I can help”, Daniel offered as he entered the kitchen. Daniel, like Eliza, was also 44 years old but looked older. His hair was graying by the sideburns although he still had a good head of hair. His brow was furrowed from years of fear. With his first word both Eliza and Ben jumped and jerked their heads around to see him enter.

“Daniel, my goodness. You startled me. How much of this did you hear?” asked Eliza.

“Just the last bit, my dear. And thank you for your defense of your crazy old husband.” He laughed just a little, as he circled around her and gently rubbed her shoulders.

Ben, having at least understood that he underappreciated his father, quickly said, "Hey Dad, about this afternoon, I am so sorry."

Daniel almost cut him off before he finished. "It's all right, son. I know you are growing up. I'm pleased you waited this long before demanding to know what is going on. I know our existence is crazy. And I know I must drive you crazy. It's no defense but, for what it's worth, I have my reasons. I am hard on you because I know that yours will be a difficult life and you will need to be hardened just to handle it."

"I am beginning to see what you might be talking about," Ben added softly.

"Well, you have the right to know more. So let's spend some time on this. First thing in the morning?"

"Dad, there is no chance I will be able to sleep. If you can stay up, can we talk now?"

"Yes, son, I can do that. Eliza, you want to stay up with us or get some sleep?"

"Well, I'll hang in there for a while," Eliza added with a tired smile.

"OK. Where do I start?" Daniel thought out loud while rubbing his chin. "I've thought about what and how to tell you so many times. Let me just jump in. First, let me say that when we are done you will look at everything differently."

"Mom kinda said that, too."

CHAPTER 5

Grimes picked up the phone. "Davis. We are a go. Yes, the coordinates we discussed yesterday. Exactly. They open the door for about ten minutes every morning at six a.m. That is your window. Hit it. Link me in before you launch so I can watch.

CHAPTER 6

Daniel exhaled and gathered himself. "Let's start. What can you tell me about Joseph Sieger?"

Ben blurted out, "Easy. I've read plenty about him on the Net. Ultimate bad guy. Enemy of the nation."

"What else?"

"He tried to assassinate the president and overthrow the government. When they caught him – in 2045, I think - they shot him on live TV. I've seen the video."

"OK, son. Of all of that, the only thing that is true is that they shot him on live TV. The rest is a lie."

"How do you know that? Did you know Joseph Sieger?"

Daniel laughed, "A little, I guess. He is my father and your grandfather."

Ben's jaw dropped. He looked carefully at his dad, studying the combination of pain and pride etched on his face. Then he studied his mom's face, which seemed to be hurting for Ben and the revelations he was now receiving. "So you're the son of a traitor. No wonder you'd be in trouble."

"No, Ben. You weren't listening. Everything you know about Joseph Sieger is wrong. I am not the son of a traitor. I am the son of a patriot, a great man, and a gifted scientist."

"Governments don't just lie about that kind of thing, do they?" Ben asked.

“Some governments don’t. Some do. This one does. This one lies about everything. But we’ll get into that more in a little while. Let’s get back to the basics. You already know most of this. In 2030 the global nuclear war started. It started in Pakistan. It’s a long story but one thing led to another and every major country got pulled in. It could have been worse. They believe that only about 1,000 nuclear bombs were detonated of the 10,000 that could have been used. A ceasefire was called in 2032. Of the nine billion people on earth, almost a half billion died in the bombings and another billion were so affected by radiation that they died over the next few years. More than two billion, mostly in poorer countries, eventually starved to death as growing seasons were wiped out from global temperature drops – it was horrific - and over two billion were forced to move. Massive amounts of desperation and unrest followed. With three and half billion people dead, two billion more on the move, and the rest of the world’s population uncertain about their existence, the world was a mess. Economies, technology, healthcare, just about everything was set back by twenty to fifty years. The world was – and still is these thirty years later – under extreme duress.

Since every major capital was devastated and uninhabitable and because most heads of state were killed in the bombings or overthrown in power struggles, governments with real power have generally been non-existent in many parts of the world until the last decade.”

Daniel went on at length about the global impact. He then turned to North America. Twice during Daniel’s lesson on worldwide impacts, the lights in the kitchen flickered. Daniel and Ben both knew that meant there was something wrong with the solar panels. That was not uncommon so they continued talking without interruption.

“The U.S.A. was obviously deeply affected. The President, Vice President and most of the cabinet and Congress died. Washington, D.C. Boston, New York, L.A., Houston, Chicago, a few other cities, and many military installations were all hit hard. Canada was less affected although Toronto, Montreal, and Ottawa were hit. But, even with all that, the U.S. and Canada were less affected after the blasts than many countries because of the resources available from the previous level of affluence. U.S. population dropped from 350 million to something like 240 million. And many of the 240 million were sick

or became refugees in their own country. Canada's impact was similar and the global cooling which followed drove most Canadians into the U.S. After the bombings stopped, political parties tried to establish a process and some law and order but it didn't hold. Looting and crime were rampant, especially in the cities. Some local clans and quasi-government groups sprang up here and there. For years it was chaos at the federal level. Food was scarce, growers had to move south; the south and southwest became the primary sources for crops. In about 2034, up stepped our current head of government and a whole new era began."

"Glanville Bose?" Ben interjected. "I've always liked him – at least from what I read."

"Yes, Bose. Let's get something clear up front. Forget what you have read about him, too. Bose is the devil himself. He is responsible for your grandfather's death, also the deaths of your uncles, aunts and cousins. My, that feels so good to say. I have wanted to tell you that for years. But since you were young and couldn't do anything with the information, I kept it from you. I kept it all from you."

"I don't even know what to say," Ben whispered as he looked at the floor.

"Bose came down from Canada – somewhere in Ontario – and cut deals with everyone that had any power. He was just crafty enough to make it work. He got himself appointed interim leader. Over a five-year period, he proposed and formed the New States of America, the NSA – more or less the old USA plus the old Canada - got himself elected as its first president, and began to take control. He catered to the military, allowing key generals to enrich themselves and rule with an iron fist. Much of that was well received by the citizens. They could see that their cities and towns became safer. Some semblance of an economy emerged. Bose was hailed as a hero. He used the surge in support to get himself appointed President for Life."

"About then is when it all got very strange," Daniel continued.

"By 2038, Bose had complete power. And power corrupts. His biggest concerns at that time were still basic security and peace. He knew that

his power base could only disappear if peace and order disappeared. Bose started to see patterns. When people were hungry crime went up. When people had too much time on their hands, crime went up. When people rallied around a cause, disturbances went up. Conversely, wherever the people were tired, overworked, and had enough to eat, crime and unrest went down. He came up with a plan to focus on food production and full employment. He wanted people's bellies full and their legs tired."

"Nothing too sinister there," Ben interjected.

"No, I guess not. But first, you have to take my word that all of this had nothing to do with Bose having people's best interests at heart. It was all about what would allow him to keep power and amass an unbelievable amount of personal wealth. But, on top of that, Bose went the next step. He decided that, in addition to food and work to keep the masses quiet, he would artificially influence it. He is a doctor by trade, a psychiatrist, and had seen the effect of drugs on even the most troubled minds. He knew that a crazy or violent person could be made completely benign with the right drugs. He put two and two together and realized his chances of controlling the citizenry were greater if he could basically dope them and make them passive."

"Really?"

"Really. Your grandfather was one of five scientists that Bose enlisted to run a project called Health Reform #23. Its described purpose was to create a protocol and process that allowed government health officials to manage a building of people – likely prison inmates or mentally ill people – by secretly administering drugs to them through the air they breathed or the water they drank."

"So my grandfather helped put drugs into air and water so prisoners were less violent and crazy people were less dangerous. So?"

"On the surface it seemed all right. But Dad said he had concerns even early on that, if misused, it could be a problem. You see, it was always about more than that for Bose. He always intended to turn the solution of this project into something he could use more broadly. It only took a few months for my dad and his peers to come up with

something that worked well. It was water-based – they could never make the air approach work as well. They could deliver a cocktail of depressant drugs through the centralized water system of a facility. They could ratchet it up or down, altering the capability of the drinker by a fraction or by rendering them completely quiet. They could increase dosage so slowly that it would be imperceptible to anyone drinking the water. As long as all - or almost all - of the affected group were dependent on that water source, they could make it broadly effective. The scientists knew that, since each patient was unique, this solution would not work for everyone but did see that it could be useful if there were periods of extreme agitation at a facility.”

“Can you see where this is going, son?” Daniel asked.

“I think so.”

“Bose took the science, moved the scientists on to other projects where they couldn’t stay connected, involved a tighter set of trusted friends in government, and devised a plan to use HR23 – that’s what they called it - in city water supplies.”

Daniel spoke for another hour about early trials, what worked and what didn’t, how Bose improved on the process of administering HR23, the effects in the cities where it was implemented, and a gradual roll out to many cities. He also described the efforts during the same period to improve the food supply and create more low-paying jobs.

Somewhere in there Eliza had enough and could not keep her eyes open any longer. She kissed Ben on the top of the head, hugged his shoulders, told him she loved him very much and that they could talk again in the morning.

Daniel finished up his explanation with, “The combination of safety, jobs, food, and drugs in the water created a controllable, happy-enough populace.”

“So how did Joseph Sieger – I mean my grandfather - get Bose against him?” Ben asked.

“Dad never trusted Bose. Dad told me once that Bose’s personality characteristics fit the definition of a psychopath – incapable of remorse, prone to bouts of violence, etcetera. So even though Dad moved back out west to Utah, he tried to keep track of what happened with HR23. He talked to fellow scientists and got a few data points here and there. He also watched economic reports and TV and noticed that the level of civil obedience, for a country still very much in the throes of recovery and turmoil, was extremely high, especially in the cities. He became convinced that HR23 was in the water, at least in the biggest cities. Never a fearful man, Dad wrote a paper on the possibility that this was true. His peers from HR23 and a few other scientists and thinkers also put two and two together and expressed their concerns.”

“What happened next?” Ben urged.

“Reprisal was swift. Some of Dad’s peers disappeared. Dad was arrested and interrogated – mostly to determine whether he had co-conspirators. They let him go. But Dad saw the writing on the wall and knew it was only a matter of time before he was arrested again. He came home and, over the next day, quietly documented everything he knew, everyone who was involved, the various drugs used, the process, the people he deemed trustworthy, the bad guys, etc. He made a few copies of his data and quietly passed a copy to me and to my brother and sister. The very next day, they arrested Dad. The next time I saw him was on TV two days later. Every channel was interrupted. They showed my dad, obviously beaten – his face was red and swollen. Bose came on and explained how they caught Dad in a plan to assassinate Bose. “This is what happens to traitors!” I still remember the exact words from Bose. They shot my dad dead on live TV.”

Ben had seen the video of his grandfather’s execution months earlier on the Net. Now, with this new information, the images made him sick to his stomach.

“The next day, my brother and his wife and their kids were killed in a car accident. Two days later my sister and her family died in a gas explosion in their home. Your mother and I, after we saw my Dad killed on TV, immediately drove to a favorite camping spot in the mountains

to clear our heads and think. Oh, and of course you were with us, Ben. You were just a few months old. We stayed there for four days and when we came back to civilization, I learned about my brother and sister when we stopped for gas.”

“What did you do?”

“It’s a blur. But we knew right then that we would be dead if we went home. We figured we would be dead in any case. But I knew I had to do what I could to keep my little family alive. We drove south into southern Utah and then just kept going. We started using fake names and used only cash. I had done some hiking here in the Arizona desert as a kid and figured it might be a place where we could lay low. Long story short, we have been here ever since. And we’re not dead yet.”

“Unbelievable.” It was sinking in for Ben. After a long silence, he said “So the NSA is full of near-zombies who are kept in the dark and are led by a small group of criminals who keep everyone under control and make themselves rich.”

“That’s pretty much it, son. From what I can gather in the media, I believe HR23 is everywhere in the East and almost everywhere in the West, at least in the big cities. They have almost complete coverage. It’s just the rural population where they haven’t implemented it yet. I’m sure it’s an interesting dilemma for Bose and his gang. If they dumb down the farmers, they stop complaining and pushing back but the food production suffers. They are probably experimenting with a fine balance. And they kill anyone who presents a real problem, the bastards. Sorry for the language but this gets me worked up all over again.”

Ben had not even noticed the swearing. He was moving to the next step. His quick mind had moved from disbelief to shock and now to outrage. “Dad, do you still have yourdad’s personal files?”

“Yes, son, I do.”

Ben gathered his courage, “Dad, have you done anything with it? Have you tried to fight back somehow or make people aware?”

“Ben, I have not. I am not sure whether I should be ashamed of that or proud of it. Your mother and I, you, your three beautiful sisters are alive and well. I chose to hide and survive. I know that if I would have fought, we would all be dead now for sure. So I have sat still. I have always hoped Bose would die and better people would step in to govern or that somehow things would improve. They have not improved. I do not believe I am afraid of pain or death, son, but I am very afraid of your death or your pain and the pain and death of your mom and your sisters. That fear or that love, whatever you want to call it, has led us here.”

Ben could see it. He had a good feel for the entire picture now. “You did the best you could do, Dad. What you have done is amazing.”

Daniel jumped in. “Thank you, son.” He continued, “I have always known you were more of a fighter than I am. I always held in the back of my mind that you might be more proactive than I have been. I dread the thought of you putting yourself in harm’s way but have resigned myself to it, to be completely honest, if that is what you choose. I could not imagine you sitting here much longer. Can you begin to see why I worked you so hard, why I demanded more, why I had you learn science, and war history, and why I taught you self-defense and how to work with your hands? Even the flight simulator experience, I thought, could even someday matter. Oh son, I just want you to be prepared if you ever go out there.”

Daniel was crying and his body shook. He walked over to Ben and hugged him. Ben hugged back and felt more respect and love for his father than ever, more than he ever imagined he could.

The lights flickered and Daniel and Ben recognized a familiar sight and sound. It interrupted their reverie.

“The solar panel connectors,” they said at the same time.

“I’ll go check them a little later,” Daniel said, regaining his composure. “Son, wait here. Let me get your grandfather’s papers.”

As Ben waited, he was still putting all of the puzzle pieces together. As both parents had warned him, nothing was the same. He knew a

few things for sure. He loved his mom and his dad and his sisters. He even loved his grandfather. He didn't have any idea what he could or should do. But he felt determined to somehow fight back against the man and machine that killed his grandpa, his aunts and uncles and cousins and that threatened his own family every minute of every day. He felt love and he felt hate.

"Here it is, son." Daniel handed Ben a packet of papers as he returned to the kitchen. "Do me a favor. We are both tired. I realize we talked all night. The sun is probably up by now. Get some sleep. You probably need that more than anything. I'll go check the connectors – it's time to open the door to air things out anyway."

"OK, Dad. But let me open the door and check the panels. I know the panels better than you do. Get some sleep. I'll be in bed in twenty minutes, I promise."

"Thank you, son. I appreciate that."

"I love you, Dad". Ben hadn't told his Dad he loved him since he was a little boy. But he said it and he meant it.

"I love you too, Ben."

Ben tucked the papers into his shirt, not wanting them to get away from him.

CHAPTER 7

Grimes was in his office early. He had hardly slept. This was going to be a great day for the NSA and for his career. At 8:30 a.m., which was 5:30 in Arizona, he joined with Grant in a videoconference room. A few underlings joined them.

“General, can you hear me?” Captain Davis’s voice crackled.

“Yes, Davis, loud and clear. And I can see you, too.”

“Good. All systems go. We will launch at nine a.m. sharp. The missile launch and travel time is about five minutes.”

“Excellent. We’ll stay on with you for the duration.”

CHAPTER 8

It was all so much for Ben to take in. His mind was reeling as he pulled back the latch on the large metal door. Ben always thought it stayed closed all day – except for about ten minutes - just to keep the home cool. That’s what his parents had taught him. Now he understood better. He always thought they repaired panels at dawn or dusk because it was cooler. Now he knew they needed to avoid the watchful eye of the government. The sun was just coming over the horizon. He hurried towards the solar panels, eager to get the job done and to get back inside.

The solar panels were older and not all the same type. Dad must have had to steal them from different places, he thought. It was hard to picture his dad as a thief. But he knew why and it was OK with him. Ben even thought it was cool. He quickly spotted the problem. There had been strong winds earlier and it had shaken two of the connections loose. Ben re-attached both and then checked all of the others. Once he was sure everything was in order, he turned to go back to the Bunker.

He had only taken a couple of steps when he heard it. It was a whining sound coming from the east. It happened fast. He looked up and saw a speck in the sky and the next thing he knew it was on him. The earth shook as a deafening explosion rocked the entire hill. Smoke and dust billowed all around him.

Lying against the rocky hill, trying to breathe amid the dust, Ben hoped it would dissipate soon as he was having trouble breathing. He believed he was unhurt. That’s lucky, he thought. The explosion must have been a little further away.

Then it hit him. In a moment he knew exactly where ground zero was. He knew the Bunker was gone. He knew everyone in it was gone.

The smoke and dust began to clear. He held still for minutes. His night of indoctrination, followed by the explosion, had quickly instilled in him an acute awareness. They could be watching him. There could be another missile coming – he assumed it had to be a missile. He held still for what must have been a half hour.

When he did move, the dust had settled and smoke was only coming from where the Bunker had been. He moved in that direction but could only get within fifty feet or so. It was hot – very hot. Smoke continued to pour from what must have been the door. That was the confirmation Ben needed that no family member could have survived.



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