

THE ROCKET'S! RED GLARE

Part One – The Incident

*1.01 Pastor Technology, Inc., Oak Ridge, TN -
Saturday, June 19*

The tenants at 10529 Szilard Court in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, had installed a security camera to surveil their front door and parking lot as a means to lower insurance premiums. In the corner of that image, part of the parking lot and the front door of their neighbor's building could be seen. 10527 didn't have any surveillance, the theory being that no one would want to break in and steal its contents. Before 9/11/2001, that was a pretty good theory.

The building at 10527 was owned by Pastor Technology, Inc., and licensed by the State of Tennessee to possess and use up to one million curies of various radioactive elements. At any given moment, it contained that much, and occasionally more, although Kenneth Pastor, Sr., the founder and owner, would never admit that. He had a record of minor regulatory infractions and was much less concerned with strict compliance than he was with making a dollar.

As Kenneth, his preferred name, told the rare visitor to illustrate the danger and enhance his image, if you were to put a teaspoon of Cesium-137 in your pocket, you would have a greater than 50% chance of dying in three hours. At any given time, he had about 10,000 teaspoons in his inventory. In his thirty-seven years in business, there had never been a radiological injury to anyone in his employ. That was the record he stood on, not the twenty-three significant license violations he had accumulated from various state and Federal agencies over the years. If they had been traffic tickets, he would have been taking the bus to work.

The camera at 10529 did the digital equivalent of a click at 5:29:42 PM, catching Kenneth in mid-stride between the just-locked and alarmed front door, and his Buick LaCrosse parked directly in front. It clicked again six seconds later, and repeated the process in six-second intervals, catching a staccato record of Kenneth's departure for home for the weekend. The images were written to a hot-swappable hard disk on one of the twenty-two servers at the security company who owned and monitored the system. The disk was scheduled to be pulled at 5 AM the next morning, and a new, clean one installed. It would be. It was then scheduled to be stored for seven days before being erased and recycled into the surveillance system. It wouldn't be.

Exactly 5,141 images later, at 2:04:24 AM, an identical Buick LaCrosse pulled into the same reserved parking spot, now dimly lit by the parking lot streetlights. A similar-looking man got out and returned to the front door, unlocking it and entering the building. The camera recorded a very low-quality image of the event. 268 images later, almost twenty-seven minutes, a similar departure process was recorded in six images. As far as the camera was concerned, nothing else happened that weekend.

After entering the building through the front door with the key he'd been given, the man, code-named Fida, entered the security code he'd memorized and watched as the green "Armed" light flicked off and the red "Unarmed" one lit. Without turning on any lights, he removed several pre-cut heavy black fabric pieces, edged in elastic, from his briefcase and proceeded to fit these over the four front windows working by the dim illumination from the outside lights. Satisfied that he was now invisible from outside, he reached back into the same briefcase, removed a flashlight, and examined the room. It was just as he'd been told.

He took the throwaway, pre-paid cell phone from his pocket and keyed a text message that simply read "OK" and sent it to a stored phone number, and then he sat down to await the response. It came just over fifteen minutes later, reading the identical "OK" indicating that there had been no security response to his 2 AM entry. He left the building as he came, repeating the process Kenneth had done nine hours earlier, skipping only the alarm reset and leaving the building unsecured.

On the far side of the building, out of sight of the camera, four large panel vans drove up to a roll-up truck door located at the middle of the building's side. A man using the name Hadi got out of the driver's side of the first van and went to the keypad on the left side of the door and entered a code. When he pushed the final key in the seven-digit code, an electric motor growled, the door jerked once and then rolled up smoothly. Hadi returned to his van and drove in while the building door was still rising, missing it by fractions of an inch. After all four vans had entered and were lined up in the large, open truck bay. Hadi got out and pushed the close button on the inside door frame, and the door unwound downward from the spool above the opening.

Only when it had fully closed did Hadi turn on the lights, finding the switch just where he'd been trained it would be. The large, open area took up about three-quarters of a simple rectangular building, about ninety feet from end to end, and sixty feet front to back. The exterior walls were twenty-four feet high, rising slightly to thirty-two feet at the center where the sloping roof peaked. There was no ceiling, just steel framework and electrical conduit and lights and ventilation ducts. At the far end, another roll-up door allowed drive-through loading and unloading of vehicles.

A wall divided the building from side-to-side, separating the open, industrial space from the offices in front. A long, concrete bunker ran along this wall, eight feet high and extending twelve feet into the open space like a huge step. Five concrete doors were irregularly spaced along it, identifiable only by the joint in the concrete where the heavy doors ended and the wall began. They had no handle nor hinges, electric motors behind access panels driving them outward on tracks instead of swiveling open.

This bunker was the reason for the entire building, the source of work for all the employees – five heavily shielded "hot cells" equipped for working safely and remotely with the huge amounts of radioactive material that Pastor Technology used to fuel the medical and industrial irradiators that they made to sterilize anything put in their beam of photons, from food

to human blood to critical space-shuttle experiments that couldn't be contaminated by even the tiniest bacteria.

In the high-bay area where Hadi and his team were parked, trucks could drive in, be loaded or unloaded by crane, and drive out the door at the other end. Along the back wall was a machine shop with all kinds of metal cutting and forming machines, hand tools of every size and description, and piles of steel and lead and other metals and plastics and wood. And there were two-dozen or so irradiators themselves, some new and some used, stored in a locked wire mesh cage in the far corner, awaiting delivery or service, and isolated to prevent accidents.

All of this Hadi knew from his training and his one clandestine visit several weeks earlier, and he felt familiar in the room, ready to go about his work with confidence in the outcome. His cell phone hummed an almost silent alert, and he looked at the screen. A text message read simply, "Here." Hadi turned off the lights and pushed the "open" button on the door control panel. When the door had risen about four feet, the nose of the LaCrosse slid under, and the car entered as the truck had, just clearing the door's bottom edge. Hadi pressed "close" and turned the lights back on.

The driver's doors opened on the remaining four vehicles. Fida got out of the Buick, and Jalal, Dhakir, and Mahdi each got out of the trucks they had driven in and parked to the side, leaving the middle open for the anticipated traffic. Somewhere outside, equipped with press-to-talk cell phones and Kalashnikov AK-47 assault rifles, Rasul and Sajid patrolled, remaining unseen by any passer-by. The names, like the cell phones and weapons and vehicles, were temporary, all acquired for this one operation and to be discarded immediately after.

Fida went to the crane controls, a metal box attached to a cable dangling from the crane itself, twenty-five feet above the floor. He pressed the button marked with an arrow pointed toward the bottom of the control box, and the hook from the crane lowered slowly. Jalal went to the assortment of cables and shackles hanging on the rear wall and selected a four-point lift – four separate cables attached to one ten-inch oval steel ring with large-diameter shackles attached to their loose ends. Dhakir and Mahdi climbed the metal stairs to the top of the hot cells and positioned themselves at the near end and waited.

All were re-enacting moves they had learned and practiced many times. These four men were Hadi's cell, all carefully recruited and trained by him. Two came from his own mosque and he'd found the others on the Internet using videos of attacks on Americans to attract comments from sympathizers, Facebook entries to get acquainted, and friends-of-friends at other mosques to vet each and every recruit.

The guards outside were unknown to Hadi, a different cell, probably organized in a similar manner. He knew there were four of them, patrolling in two-man teams on four-hour shifts, but he had only their code names for reference.

Inside, Fida had slung the ring over the massive crane hook and Jalal pushed the up-arrow button. He maneuvered the cables to where Dhakir and Mahdi waited and they shackled

each of the cables to eyebolts embedded in the hot-cell roof plug. Once locked in, Jalal raised the crane hook again, this time lifting out a four-foot square concrete block, built with several steps around the perimeter, like a three-tiered wedding cake, only upside down. Hadi, the only one of the men trained in the risks of handling radioactive materials, knew these supported the weight of the removable roof plug, and also eliminated any straight-line gap where radiation could leak out and be a danger to anyone in its path.

When the plug was removed and unhooked, they repeated the procedure at the two neighboring hot cells and soon had all three open from above. Anyone standing on the roof above these holes was now in danger. But there was no one there, and the dangerous beams of radiation streamed upward, where their power would dissipate quickly with distance from the source of the radiation, the hundreds of thousands of curies of radioactive cesium and cobalt and americium and strontium and yttrium and other very dangerous radioisotopes.

Jalal and Fida began unloading equipment from the vans. Hadi led Dhakir and Mahdi through the shower and locker and storage rooms to the front of the building, where a full-length hall ran past the front of the hot cells. This was the operator area. Each hot cell was equipped with a thick, glass window, tinted yellow from the lead oxides used to make the glass even more dense to shield the gamma radiation. Sticking out of the wall above the windows were seven pairs of remote-control manipulators, articulated aluminum tubes full of cables and pulleys that extended two feet out from the wall to an “elbow” joint and then down to a “wrist” that was attached to a pistol-handled grip.

Inside the hot cells, the manipulator “hands” were simply clamps mounted at the end of some very sophisticated robotic arms that mirrored the ones outside. The operator could hold the handles on the outside, and by twisting and moving and squeezing his hands, control the two-prong clamps at the end of the arms inside. Dhakir and Mahdi knew from their training that while it looked easy enough, two-handed operations like cutting metal and pouring granules and closing lids all required a patience and touch that only came with practice, and they had done hours of it, simulating the exact tasks they would now need to perform for real.

Dhakir went to the wall-mounted file holder at the front of the cell and sorted through the papers he found there. He stopped at the second sheet and told Mahdi, “17-205.” In the far left corner of the cell, Mahdi spotted a lead cylinder with these same numbers on a large, yellow plastic tag attached to the lid. Using the manipulator, he lifted the lid and set it aside and carefully clamped the handle on the basket inside and lifted it out. In the basket were three silver metal capsules, each about one inch in diameter and three inches long, arranged upright. According to Dhakir’s paperwork, these were eight-year-old blood irradiator sources and currently contained about 1,500 curies each of Cs-137 in a pressed-powder form.

Extraction would be difficult and time-consuming. The silver capsules they could see were just the outside stainless steel shell. Inside was another just like it, and both of these would have to be carefully opened using high-speed cutting tools. And then, the fine granular powder that had been hard-pressed into the shell, forming a solid cylinder of cesium, would need to be

removed. There were a number of safe extraction methods, including dissolving the cesium salt in water and then boiling the water off, but these took a lot of time and that was something in very short supply for Hadi's team. They had a faster and cruder method - simply drilling into each capsule, breaching the shell and breaking up the cesium powder in one operation. The large, shallow pan under the drill press would catch the powder.

The potential for spills and for airborne particles to spread contamination was great, but Hadi and his team weren't trying to comply with safety regulations, they were trying to move as much material in as short a time as possible. If they inhaled cesium, that was of small concern. If they spread contamination inside the cells, that was not important. If enough escaped the cells to set off radiation alarms in the building, that was a concern, and the reason Hadi had turned all of them off.

1.02 San Pablo Avenue, Oakland, CA - Saturday, June 19

Cops in the rear-view mirror started Kenny Pastor's hands shaking, and he gripped the wheel harder to make them stop. It was still dark, but he knew they were cops because of the flashing lights and short burst from the siren. At 4:50 AM with no traffic on a Saturday morning, San Pablo Avenue was a straight shot south to his job, and today he was speeding. Really speeding, distracted by the nervous tension that had dogged him for days, angry that he had taken it out on Patsy, frustrated he had to work the weekend.

He pulled over just past MacArthur Boulevard, almost under the freeway overpass, and waited, hands on the steering wheel, in plain sight. The Oakland Police Department officer approached, one hand loosely on his holster and the other holding a flashlight that he used to light Kenny while keeping himself in the dark. Kenny rolled his window down and the officer asked for his license, registration, and proof of insurance. Kenny moved slowly and deliberately, taking his wallet from his left rear pocket and removing the license.

"The papers are in the glove compartment. OK if I get them?" He was struggling to remain calm and polite, taking no chances, his previous experience with the OPD having been very uncomfortable and resulting in his three-year prison sentence for drug distribution. The two kilograms of marijuana he'd had in the fake windshield washer fluid container of his previous car didn't qualify as personal use.

There was a moment's hesitation while the cop used the flashlight to illuminate the license. "Kenneth Pastor, Jr.," he read out loud. "Mr. Pastor, do you have any weapons in there?"

"No, of course not. Just the papers and some junk."

"Fine. Go ahead and get it."

The policeman took one step back and kept the light on Kenny as he got out the plastic folder with the owner's manual and all the old registrations and insurance cards that he never threw away. He leafed through these until he found the current ones and handed them to the officer, who told him to wait in the car.

After some moments, the officer spoke to him over the loudspeaker, from behind the open door of his black and white cruiser.

“Please step out of the car, Mr. Pastor. Slowly. And keep your hands where I can see them.”

Kenny did as directed, fully expecting this once the cop ran a check on his record.

“Now, please keep your hands raised and walk backwards towards me. Good. Stop there. Turn to your right and put your hands on the car and spread your legs. Good. Do you have any weapon or drugs on you?”

Kenny said no, and the officer got out of the cruiser and circled around. Approaching Kenny from behind, talking to him the whole time, telling him he was going to pat him down and then cuff him while he asked some questions. The officer sat Kenny in the back seat of the cruiser and talked to him through the open door, asking what he was doing out before 5 AM.

“I’m on my way to work. I drive a delivery truck for Coastal Produce and I have to get the orders ready, load the truck, and make my deliveries to local restaurants before they open. My supervisor’s name is Carlson and you can call him to verify that. They know I’m a parolee.”

“OK if I search your car,” the officer asked.

“Yeah, go ahead. I’m clean.”

When he returned from searching the car, he helped Kenny out of the back seat and removed the cuffs.

“I’m ticketing you for forty-four in a thirty-five zone, even though I clocked you at fifty-seven. Your parole officer will be notified, of course, but nine miles over doesn’t constitute any parole violation. No traffic this early makes it tempting to drive too fast, but any screw up, even a traffic accident with someone injured, could send you right back to prison. You slow down and remember that. The other people who are out here at this time of the morning are half asleep.”

The ticket just added to his frustration. That would cost him \$275 and a couple of points on his license. Neither mattered, not with the cash he had stashed in the offshore account. He still had over \$90,000 left from the down payment he’d gotten, and the balance in the escrow account would set him and his family up comfortably somewhere he wouldn’t need a California license.

The frustration was from the uncertainty about what was going on back East at that very moment, and what would be happening in the near future. And most of all, keeping his name out of it.

It was his name that had gotten him involved in the first place. He never did find out how they had discovered his relationship to Pastor Tech, but the guys who had approached him in prison had made no secret of their connections outside, and of the interest those connections had in his relationship to his father's company. That Kenny hadn't seen or talked to his father in over two years didn't bother them. That he hadn't been inside Pastor Tech in all that time didn't bother

them. That he still had his old keys and knew his father's unchanging password protocol interested them. That he had worked there and knew the layout and equipment and safety procedures excited them. Kenny's interests were simple – survive his time in prison and take care of his family when it was over. These guys could arrange both, and that overcame his initial reluctance.

He had written a sort of manual on how to get into Pastor Tech, and what to do once you were inside. He didn't want to know why they wanted the information, or what they were going to do with it. He was content to pretend it was all academic, just writing down what he knew. If someone else chose to use that information, well, that wasn't his fault. He'd broken no laws. And besides, his father would suffer, and that was almost payment enough. Almost. The \$1 million promised covered the rest.

This weekend was show time, and that was all he knew about them and their plans. He had gained access to Pastor the first night of his trip to Tennessee that the parole officer had allowed so he could get his family and bring them back to California. He'd never met the man he took with him that night, and couldn't identify him now because of the balaclava the man had worn over his head the whole time. They had spent two hours touring the facility, verifying everything Kenny had told them, and with Kenny making notes of the new equipment and new radioactive sources and any other changes. He'd revised his document to include these, and then gone back to California with Patsy and his new daughter to start their new life.

Showtime. After this weekend, the remainder of the \$1 million would be transferred from the escrow account, and he would serve out his parole and then disappear.

So he was nervous and anxious as he drove off, leaving the cop to do whatever it was they did after issuing a traffic ticket. He decided he'd better calm down and not do anything else that would draw attention to him on this very important weekend.

1.03 Pastor Technology, Inc., Oak Ridge, TN - Saturday, June 19

Hadi's cell phone vibrated in his pocket, awakening him instantly. He took it out and glanced at the message before erasing it. He waited for another minute and the phone vibrated again, this time with the confirming message. As dawn was breaking, his guards were changing shifts, the overnight pair leaving to get rest, and two new ones – Ubaid and Tawfiq – taking their place. If Hadi didn't get both messages, he knew something was wrong, and their contingency plan, basically every man for himself and scatter cesium everywhere, would go into effect.

It was time to get started for the day, a busy Saturday for certain. They had eight loads to package and ship, and the first truck would be arriving within thirty minutes. Overnight they had prepared three canisters for shipment. While Jalal and Fida were to handle loading each truck as they arrived, Mahdi and Dhakir would continue working at the manipulators to make more canisters, staying ahead of the arrival and departure schedule so there would always be a full canister ready when an empty truck arrived.

Empty was not an accurate description of how the trucks would look to any observer. Each pickup truck would be loaded with miscellaneous gear, some trucks looking like scrap-metal collectors heading for the recycle center and others looking like delivery trucks hauling drums of materials and others like service trucks ready to provide welding or repair work. The common factor would be the 55-gallon drum mounted dead-center between the sides and a little ahead of the rear axle. Each drum would have stencils or graphics or just rust appropriate to the seeming purpose of the truck, but inside they were all identical, built in Mexico to a special design.

Hadi's cell was working through the weekend in the Pastor facility, enduring the risk of discovery, because the handling facilities and equipment for the huge amounts of deadly radioactive material were there, and duplicating it somewhere else would have been too apparent to anyone searching for the missing cesium after the theft was discovered.

Hadi roused each team member with a single nudge of his foot. All were sleeping on air mattresses on the floor near the roll-up door. Without any conversation, Fida and Jalal prepared a simple breakfast starting with hot, thick coffee from a brewer they had brought. They also had a small refrigerator for meats and cheeses, and several loaves of bread. Mahdi and Dhakir cleared all the sleeping gear and prepared for the arrival of the first truck.

They had just finished cleaning up from breakfast when Hadi's cell phone vibrated and he read the message. From their gear, Fida handed each person a black silk hood, a "balaclava," which they pulled over their heads, covering their faces and concealing their identity. Hadi would be the only one speaking, and his English was as flawless as someone born and raised in Detroit could speak it.

The vans they had brought with them were parked to the side, leaving the aisle clear for the pickup trucks to enter and exit. As soon as everyone was covered, Fida opened the roll-up and the first truck drove in, directed to stop by Jalal when it was within range of the overhead crane. The truck was painted in the colors and logo of something called Kwik-Lube with an address in Seattle, and had three 55-gallon drums in the back, all from a well-known oil refiner. The driver and passenger, both wearing balaclavas themselves, waited as the roll-up door descended.

Without a word, Hadi nodded and his team and they went to work. Fida climbed into the back of the truck and removed the locking ring that clamped the lid to the middle drum. Once open, he could see inside, with everything arranged just as he'd seen many times in their training.

Centered in the drum by a wooden framework was a thirteen-inch diameter lead cylinder with a one-and-a-half-inch diameter steel pipe embedded in the middle like it was the axle for a lead wheel. The pipe was the mortar, the barrel that would launch the cesium projectile. Three eye-bolts protruded from the cylinder for lifting the 1,287 pound lead container into the hot cell where they would load the cesium.

Jalal appreciated the irony of the lead cylinder. It was intended to shield the contents from radiation detectors, and it was called a *pig*. Perfect, he thought, an unclean container named after an unclean animal for the ultimate unclean weapon, a dirty bomb. Once the lead shield was in place, the drum would be filled with lubricating oil that would hide the true contents in the unlikely event that anyone opened and examined the drums.

There would be eleven more pickup trucks arriving throughout the weekend and all of them would be loaded in the same way. The last of the sixteen cesium containers would be loaded in identical drums and placed in the four cargo vans that they had brought with them. His men would take two of the vans, and the four guards from the other cell would drive the other two. Hadi would take the Buick. Everything would be put back in place before they left, and with luck, it would be lunch time or after on Monday before anyone knew there was a problem.

1.04 Interstate 40 West, Harriman, TN - Saturday, June 19

The female voice with a vaguely European accent told Roger Aikens where to go.

“Right turn ahead. Then, take the motorway.”

“Did you hear that,” his passenger, Bill Morse, asked.

Roger nodded his head just once without taking his eyes off the road and said, “Yup. Turn right.”

“Not that. Shit, the sign tells us that. No, I meant ‘motorway.’ What the hell is a motorway? It’s a fuckin’ British interstate highway. Except, of course, Britain doesn’t have states so they can’t have inter-states, can they? They have counties. So they call it a motorway. Couldn’t very well call it an inter-county highway, could they? This is some Belgian’s idea of how Americans talk. Did you know that these GPS’s are made by a Belgian company? Why can’t they get the language right? Better yet, why didn’t we buy an American GPS instead of this foreign crap?”

Roger said nothing, familiar with Morse’s constant rants, his know-it-all attitude, and his impatience with anything non-American. Roger thought of him as a *wefe*, world’s expert on fucking everything. Roger was Morse’s perfect foil – imperturbable, quiet, patient, and mostly silent. He just continued to listen as he angled up the entrance ramp onto I-40 West, thirty minutes into their fifty-two hour trip to Seattle. To Roger, Morse was something like talk radio, but with good reception no matter where they were.

He’d listened to Morse all the way from Boise, two days of constant chatter on every conceivable subject. Billboards and road signs were like cue cards to Morse, sending him off on verbal tangents that quickly digressed from the original subject into unpredictable new realms, all of them entertaining if only for the curiosity of where he would go next.

“So, what the hell do you suppose is in that drum back there?”

Morse had obsessed on the purpose of the trip for most of the drive east from Boise, and now that they sort of knew they were simply hauling cargo, it looked like he was going to obsess on the drum for the whole trip back.

They'd been given the pick-up truck the previous Wednesday, painted with a Kwik-Lube company logo on the doors and three 55-gallon drums in back. They had no idea what was in them, but the way the truck crouched on its rear springs and sloshed through corners they knew they were heavy. The instructions were simple – drive to Knoxville, Tennessee, check into the Super 8 Motel, and press 1 on the speed-dial of the cell phone that came with the truck. After resting for the day and sleeping at the motel, they were given an address to put into the GPS, to arrive there at 6 AM Saturday morning, and to press 2 on the speed-dial once they got there.

At their destination, they put on the black hoods, like ski masks, only a lighter fabric, and drove into the building. Instructed not to talk or leave the truck, they watched similarly hooded men open one of the drums, attach a crane to its contents, and lift out what looked like a dull metal cylinder. About an hour later it had been re-loaded into the drum and the lid attached. One of the hooded figures, the apparent leader of the group, directed them to exit through a roll-up door on the opposite side of the building. Once clear, they'd pressed 3 on their speed-dial and received a Seattle address that they'd entered into their GPS.

“Did you see the sign on that building,” Morse continued as they drove west toward Nashville. “It said Pastor Technology. Technology. Get it? We’ve got some high-tech weapon back there. I’ll bet it’s a bomb. No, why would they need high-tech to make a bomb? Unless it’s an atomic bomb. Now that’s high-tech. But who would make an atomic bomb in Nowhere, Tennessee? All that shit is done in secret army bases, or maybe in them FEMA death camps with slave labor!”

Roger listened to the monologue, somewhat curious himself. Morse riffed through every high-tech weapon he could imagine that would fit in a metal cylinder, and he finally said, “I’ve got it! That Pastor place is a secret government lab and they’ve developed some designer virus that only attacks specific DNA, like if you’re a nigger or a kike or something. You know they have different DNA, don’t you? Things that are wrong, you know, at some microscopic level and that’s why they come out black or all hook-nosed or whatever. I’ll bet they want to use it on those A-rabs, too, and get all that oil. This is probably some test to see if it works in the real environment, not just in some lab. She-it. How cool is that?”

Roger spoke for the first time since entering the interstate.

“Can’t be no government lab. No way they’d give it to us.”

“You’re right,” Morse said, snapping his fingers. “The Army’d be testing it on some Mexicans or something. It’s got to be one of ours. That’s why they put it in East Podunk, Tennessee. No one would expect us to be there. Hell, they think we all live in Montana or Mississippi. They just don’t get it, do they? We’re fucking everywhere, and now we’ve got a secret weapon. And we’re taking it to Seattle. You know why that is, don’t you? What do they do

in Seattle? They ship shit to China, that's what. Maybe this is going over there and we're going to melt some chinks. Fuck! This is great shit."

The GPS interrupted Morse, instructing Roger to exit in two miles and then follow the motorway. He wondered what the next program on Radio Morse would be.

1.05 Interstate 59, Picayune, MS - Sunday, June 20

Billy Ray Jr. was driving his three-hour shift in the big pickup truck when his father awoke and simply said, "I'm hungry. Get off at the next exit," and went back to sleep. Junior was tired. They had been driving non-stop for eleven hours since picking up the mysterious drum in Tennessee the day before, and a break would be welcome. Nine miles later, at the Memorial Boulevard exit in Picayune, Mississippi, he did as he was told, that being the only possible choice in the family of Billy Ray Ebbers, Sr.

"We're getting off, sir," Junior said in a normal voice, knowing that it would be enough to instantly rouse his father, and that he would immediately be fully awake and attentive.

"Good." Billy Ray Sr. glanced around and said, "Turn left and head for that Chevron station."

At just before 7 AM on a Sunday morning, there was little traffic and few customers at the station.

"Gas it up," Senior said, handing Junior two twenties, "then park over there at the Waffle House across the street and wait for me. See that spot right in front? That spot. Don't leave the truck, and keep your gun handy and hidden. Any trouble, you shoot and keep on shootin' till I get here. No one gets near them drums. Got that?"

"Yes sir, I do."

And he did. They were on a mission. A military mission, and Billy Ray Sr. was in command. Junior didn't understand the mission – he didn't need to. He only needed to understand that his father, the local commander of the White Aryan Resistance in Southern Texas, had been given this mission and he had chosen Junior as his accomplice.

"I'm gonna eat in there," Senior continued. "I'll bring you somethin' and I'll take over drivin'."

Inside the Waffle House, Billy Ray Sr. took a booth at the window where he could watch the truck and Junior without turning his head. The waitress, a young, African-American, handed him the plastic-laminated menu and asked if he wanted the coffee she was already pouring into his cup. Billy Ray waited until she had filled it and then said, "No."

The waitress – her nametag read Rushawn – glanced up, almost jerking to attention like someone had poked her from behind.

"Just kiddin'," Billy Ray said without a smile. "Rushawn. Is that a African name?"

“It’s the name my momma gave me,” Rushawn answered, familiar with the Billy Ray’s of the world, and still trying to be civil and salvage a tip.

“You a Christian girl?”

Rushawn didn’t answer, instead pulling out the gold cross that hung on a chain around her neck.

“Good. I’ll have the steak and eggs. Both done hard. No pink, no runny. Dry white toast with honey on the side. Grapefruit juice. That’s for here. Then I’ll have one of those egg sandwich things and coffee to go.”

“How do you want your egg sandwich?”

“I don’t care. However you do it.”

Billy Ray watched Rushawn leave and then turned his attention to the truck, backed into the parking spot so it faced the Waffle House window where he sat, just as he knew Junior would do because he’d taught him these things. Junior sat in the driver’s seat, glancing around constantly and looking at Billy Ray every few glances, making sure he was still there and he was seeing Junior be alert and ready for anything.

The dawn service at the Covenant of Faith and Truth Apostolic Assembly in Goliad, Texas would be over by now, Billy Ray knew, the first service he’d missed in three years. His senior Deacon would have given the Bible lesson that Billy Ray had written, without any deviation from the text. *Just one more to go* he thought with profound satisfaction. He could hardly wait for that last sermon, the one that would announce the coming apocalypse. Well, not announce it. Foretell it. That was better.

And once foretold, there would be no turning back.

He finished his breakfast and got the check, calculating a 10% tip and leaving a penny less. It was his standard statement, and he didn’t care that no one ever understood it. You are expected to do a good job, he believed, and you shouldn’t have to be bribed to do it. 10% was what his small congregation tithed from their income to pay him to run and maintain their church, and the penny less simply acknowledged that no one got more from Billy Ray Ebbers, Sr. than God did.

Taking Junior’s sandwich and coffee, he paid the bill at the register and left without a word.

Junior saw all of this and knew the 10%-less-a-penny story by heart. He struggled to climb over the center console into the passenger seat rather than get out and go around because Senior had told him to stay in the truck. In silence, Senior handed him the sandwich and the now slightly cool coffee and started the truck back to I-59 south, heading toward New Orleans.

The silence continued for sixteen miles while they passed Nicholson and Pearl River, turning west on I-12 and passing Slidell, Louisiana and Lacombe and Mandeville. Outside

Covington, Junior asked the question that had been on his mind since 4:30 AM that morning when his father had picked him up at Days Inn in Knoxville where they'd stayed the night before.

The question was the culmination of all the questions that had been congregating in Junior's head ever since his father had arrived home on Friday in the strange pickup truck with the sign that said *Rig Services Inc. Houston, Texas*, and the three oil drums in the back. Those questions went unasked on the trip north, along with the new questions about where they were going and why. And now this new information, this escalation that made the drums in the truck a life and death urgency. "Shoot and keep shootin," Billy Ray, Sr. had told him. Not a new directive. In fact, one he'd heard many times before in the context of government and Jews and niggers and such. But not one ever delivered over a 55-gallon drum.

It was finally too much even for Junior's regimented relationship with his father.

"What's in the drums, sir?"

The silence resumed for the seventy-two miles past Hammond and Walker and Baton Rouge, and finally, near someplace called Grosse Tete, Billy Ray told him.

"The wrath of God, son, that's what's in the drum. The day of reckoning is near."

1.06 Interstate 75, 19 miles north of Lexington, KY - Sunday, June 20

The GPS had indicated 954 miles to their destination when they'd left Pastor, and it had clicked off the miles on I-75 as regularly as a metronome. It read 783 when they decided to get off at Exit 113 for fuel and a break. They had been up and going since 5 AM, and some coffee and food would help get them past the doldrums they were experiencing thirteen hours later.

The four vans that they had brought with them to Pastor and were now using to get to their targets were all heavy-duty panel vans, different from the pick-up trucks in almost all ways. Different design, different drivers, different plans. Same cargo. Sajid was driving and would be the videographer when they got there, recording the event for display on al Jazeera television news. Rasul would wear the vest of C-4 and cesium, and he would be the event. They used a van instead of a pick-up for privacy. The cesium would have to remain in the shield right up until the last minute to avoid detection, and then Rasul would load the vest and put it on inside the van without being seen. He would have only minutes to get to his assigned location and detonate the weapon before he would succumb to the intense radiation.

The gas station was on their left at the T-intersection at the end of the exit ramp. Sajid waited, first in line to turn left on Paris Pike. When the light turned green, he looked left to be sure the intersection was clear, and then drove across the two southbound lanes of the divided highway. He had just started his left onto the northbound lanes when a black Toyota pick-up truck shot out from behind the U-Haul truck stopped on the right. Sajid jerked the steering wheel hard to the left to avoid a collision. The Toyota driver seemed unaware, and suddenly turned left himself, forcing Sajid into the median.

Rasul was thrown into the passenger-side door and as he struggled to recover, he noticed that the heavy drum, tied down in the back, had shifted slightly to the right, but he had no time to consider that. The van slid into the grassy median dividing the lanes and came to an abrupt stop. Both men looked around quickly, trying to orient themselves and absorb the sudden events and process these into their plans. Rasul recovered first and said, “Go.” Sajid glanced at him, and then ahead to be sure the way was clear, and jammed the accelerator to the floor, spinning the wheels on the grass and fishtailing back onto Paris Pike, heading away from I-75.

Rasul grabbed the GPS while it recalculated their route and said, “Turn left in 2.4 miles.” Sajid had the van up to seventy-five before Rasul told him the turn was half a mile ahead and he started to slow down. After the turn, Rasul said, “In seven miles, take the entrance back onto I-75. And slow down. We don’t want to attract any more attention.”

The two straps they had used to tie down their very heavy drum were arranged in an X pattern across the top of the drum, hooked to the floor at four points, but not to the drum itself. After Sajid got them back on I-75, Rasul climbed into the cargo area and found it had shifted only a couple of inches, and the straps were all tight. It was too heavy to move, so all he could do was keep the straps tight and hope for the best.

“Rasul,” Sajid called, his voice urgent, “there is a police car following us.”

Rasul looked over his passenger seat to see the flashing red and blue lights closing fast from behind through the rearview mirror.

“It came from the rest area back there,” Sajid explained. “They were watching for us! What do I do?”

“There is nothing we can do now, my brother. We cannot escape the police on this highway. Our mission is to avoid capture and release the weapon. Drive. Keep us ahead for a few minutes. I will open the container. *Allahu Akbar.*”

Sajid didn’t reply, he just pushed the accelerator all the way to the floor and concentrated on keeping the van on the road. Rasul opened the small tool box they had for emergencies and, using his pliers, opened the bung hole in the side of the drum to drain the oil so he could remove the lead plug and get the cesium jar. As soon as he did that, he realized his mistake – the oil on the floor made it impossible to get any footing to open the drum lid. *Fool*, he thought, and tried anyway.

The drum lid was sealed by a locking ring – a circumferential hoop split at one point and held together by a single bolt. Removal was just a matter of undoing the bolt. In a moving van with a slick floor, it became almost impossible. After repeatedly sliding away, Rasul braced himself between the drum and the wall of the van and succeeded in getting the bolt off. He then used the box cutter to cut both nylon straps freeing the lid and exposing the lead plug. He grabbed it with both hands and started rocking and twisting it, like he was trying to uncork a very large champagne bottle.

“Hold on,” Sajid called as the van swerved to the right. The now loose drum slid left in reaction, violently throwing off the balance of the van. Sajid jerked the steering wheel left to compensate, and the drum, skating on a fully-lubricated floor, slid back to the right. Rasul didn’t even have time to repeat his entreaty to Allah before it slammed into him, crushing him against the wall.

The 1,300 pounds hitting the wall of the already-teetering van was all that was necessary to topple it over, and it landed on its right side, sliding for over 180 feet before coming to a stop facing mostly forward and straddling the right lane and shoulder. The air bag discharged at the impact of the rollover, and the noise deafened Sajid, but left him alive and conscious, held in place by his seat belt and shoulder harness. He looked behind and saw Rasul’s upper body protruding from under the drum, now laying on its side, open.

Sajid released his seat belt and fell into the passenger door and seat. Reaching behind, he recovered their duffel bag and then kicked out the shattered windshield. Once outside, he could see the police car stopped some fifty or sixty feet behind, and several other cars off the road or in the median, no doubt because of his accident. In front of the van, he was out of the police vision while he opened the bag and took out both AK-47’s and the first of four doubled banana clips, two regular clips taped together for easy reloading. He prayed as he stood and looked over the van at the single trooper, approaching slowly with his pistol drawn. He was saying something – Sajid could see his mouth moving – but his hearing was gone, and he didn’t care to listen anyway.

He brought the assault rifle to his shoulder and fired a disciplined three rounds, and Allah answered his prayer as the policeman died without firing a shot. With no immediate threats to him, Sajid emerged from behind the van and went to the closest vehicle, an SUV in the median. The lone occupant, a young man, just stared as Sajid shot him in the head. He started toward a Japanese sedan behind it and two people jumped out and started to run away. Sajid aimed carefully and dropped them both with three shots.

By now, the other car occupants realized what was happening and were running away. The northbound lanes were stopped, cars abandoned as people ran south. The southbound lanes were becoming jammed as drivers gawked and then sped away. At a minivan, he found a woman driver clutching a small child to her breast, crying and imploring him with words he couldn’t hear and wouldn’t care about anyway. He shot the child in the back, the bullet passing through and hitting the woman in her heart.

Most targets were now out of range and Sajid turned west, setting up for more carnage. The highway was divided by a low concrete wall, low enough that he had a good field of fire across the road. Establishing his firing stance, he put a three-shot burst into a southbound car, and it immediately swerved off the road, uncontrolled by the dead driver. There was no barrier on that side, and it continued across the grassy area and into a wide ditch that separated the road from some houses nearby. He repeated the shot with the next car, and it crashed into the center barrier and skidded to a stop several car lengths past him.

There was chaos now – cars trying to avoid the wreckage and still escape once they understood the cause. He shot and halted three more vehicles while several others escaped, using up the thirty rounds in the first clip. As he released it and turned it over to insert the one taped to it, he saw flashing blue and red lights coming toward him on his side of the road. It was time to seek cover back at the van where the remainder of his ammunition was still in the duffel bag.

He jogged back, pausing to fire at several more southbound cars that had been foolish enough to try to negotiate the wreckage he'd caused there. Traffic was stopped on both sides now, and his targets would come harder, he knew. And there would be police and return fire. He guessed he'd killed fourteen people so far, and he hoped he could kill a few more before he died. There were no houses on his side of the road, just open land and a large, two-story building in the distance. Too far to run. Getting across the street to the houses on the other side would be his best option, providing some cover and possible targets before the police inevitably cornered and killed him.

Grabbing the duffel bag, he ran across the road and vaulted the concrete divider, crossed the southbound lanes, heading for a group of one-story brick houses about 400 feet away. A few people had gathered in their back yards to see what was causing the noise and commotion, and he stopped behind a large evergreen and opened fire. They were well within the range and he hit two before the others scattered back into their houses. Picking up the duffel, he ran toward the nearest house and crashed through the rear door.

He heard noises in the room to his right and started there, kicking open doors and finding an empty den and bathroom. At the first bedroom, he kicked the door open and was surprised when three shots were fired, bullets passing close and hitting the wall behind him. He fired three blind shots into the room to harass whoever was shooting and ran out the front door, looking for less dangerous targets.

He ran across the street to the house there, figuring the further he got from the scene, the less aware people would be and therefore less cautious. The front door was locked, but he solved that with a single shot to the latch and a good kick. He heard the back door slam closed and followed the sound out onto a cement patio where he saw two adults and two children running away. Knowing that he would run out of targets and time before he ran out of ammunition, he fired four three-shot bursts and hit all of them.

The yards of these houses were very large, and he had over 300 feet to cross to get to the back of another row of houses. His hearing still impaired, he didn't hear the helicopter so much as feel the shock waves from the rotating blades and looked up. It was a news chopper, the WLEX Channel 18 logo prominent on the undercarriage. He let it hover unmolested, not caring that the police would have an excellent view of his location if they were smart enough to turn on their TV. News attention, and hopefully some good video for his brother jihadists to see and rejoice at, were all that was left to him. That, and as many more dead infidels as he could manage.

He was tiring, and walked across the lawn. There was no one in sight, and at the next house, he found the back door open and unlocked. He entered and walked through a small kitchen into a large room with a dining area and a living area. On the couch, a surprised woman of about forty looked up from the television and started to say something just before he shot her.

Not stopping to search further, he exited the front door and was crossing a narrow street when the police car came roaring from an intersection to his right. He dropped the bag and emptied the remaining seventeen rounds in the clip into it. The car immediately slowed and drove across the lawn to his right, coming to a halt when it hit the side of the house he'd just vacated. Sajid had lost count, but guessed that was about number twenty.

After inserting a fresh clip, he started down the middle of the road in the direction the police car had come from, figuring that was the most likely area for more traffic and targets. The street signs told him he was at the corner of Mariner Drive and Agena Road, and that was where he died, the bullet from the police marksman at the north end of Mariner Drive, about 700 feet away, entering his chest just to the right of the sternum and about an inch higher than the shooter had intended, but instantly lethal just the same.

“Shooter is down. I say again – the shooter is down.”

Lt. Alan Slocumb exhaled. As far as he could remember, for the first time since he'd arrived and directed pursuit of the gunman.

“Roger, Sniper 1. Send your SWAT team in to secure.”

Slocumb clipped the radio back on his belt and turned to the SWAT team commander. They were in the Mobile Command Vehicle, a twenty-four foot RV equipped with communications equipment and computers and space to work. It was parked on the northbound side of I-75, along with dozens of State Police and Scott County Sheriff vehicles, and many more abandoned private vehicles. The only time Slocumb had ever seen so much chaos was in a movie.

“Witnesses said there were two people in the van. We'll send the robot in to see if the other one is holed up or what.”

The radio-controlled Talon robot sped up I-75 at 5.2 mph, easily the fastest moving vehicle on the seven-mile stretch between Exits 129 and 136, where traffic was at a standstill while police tried to gain control and understanding of the situation. The operator had moved to an abandoned vehicle about 500 yards from the overturned van, well within the operating range of his handheld controller and the wireless signal from the optical and thermal cameras mounted on the articulated arm.

The operator also set up a repeater to transmit the signal back to the Command Vehicle, another 500 yards behind him. In the vehicle, Lt. Slocumb and his team watched the road slide by and the van expand on their screen as the camera got closer. The robot turned slightly left,

paralleling the van while the camera swiveled to watch it. It reached the front and the viewers saw the kicked-out windshield hanging by one edge, looking like a flap on the entrance to a tent. The Talon slowed further, approaching the front carefully for a look inside.

The front seats of the van were clearly visible and empty. The cargo area behind was harder to see without any windows. The operator turned on the LED spotlight and extended the arm to peer between the front seats. Slocumb could now see a drum tipped over on its side with someone pinned underneath in a several-inch deep pool of the dark liquid.

“See if you can get a response from him,” Slocumb said to the operator.

Through the speaker on the Talon, the operator said, “You there! Can you hear me?” There was no response or movement, even after the command was repeated several times.

“OK. Continue around the van and then we’ll decide what to do,” Slocumb said.

The operator withdrew, swiveled left, and continued the clockwise circumnavigation. Other than the liquid on the ground with an AK-47 in it, there was nothing unusual.

“Set up in front where you can see both inside the van and the far side. I’m sending SWAT in to check it out.”

A three-man team, fully armed and armored, moved in from three different angles. When they reached the van, one moved to the front where he could keep the body under surveillance, and the other two approached the cargo doors in the rear, one positioned further back to provide cover, and the other up close to open them. When everyone was in position, he opened the door and stepped back to the shoulder of the road, out of sight from inside the van. The door slammed into the pavement, and nothing moved inside. Again, the operator hailed the body with no response.

Using hand signals, the SWAT moved in and with very little time and effort, concluded the man was dead, mostly relying on the fact that he seemed about a quarter-inch thick where the drum lay on top of him.

“We’re clear here,” he said, climbing out. “He’s dead, looks like he got crushed in the accident.”

With the threat of armed resistance gone, and with two dead perpetrators and a lot of victims, the crime scene became a scramble between the police trying to preserve evidence and medical personnel performing triage. A perimeter was set up and one of the cops stationed just off the shoulder of the road, about twelve feet from the top of the van. He had been standing there for several minutes when a medical technician walked toward him, intending to get to one of the vehicles further ahead to look for victims. As he passed by, a small pager-like device on his belt suddenly squealed, and both men jumped, startled by the abrasive sound.

“What the hell is that,” the cop asked.

But the EMT's attention was on his device, and then on the van, a look of shock on his face.

"Oh, shit. Get out of there," he waved frantically and shouted at the cop as he started running back toward the command vehicle. "Everybody get back," he yelled as he ran. "There's a nuclear bomb or something in the van! Get back! Now!"

A police sergeant grabbed him as he ran by and said, "What are you talking about?"

"My pager went off! There's a shit load of radiation coming out of the van. You need to get everyone out of here! Now!" And with that he took off.

The sergeant keyed his radio and said, "Lieutenant, one of the med techs says his radiation pager went off. We need to pull everyone back."

The call went out on all the radios and several loudspeakers, some mounted on police vehicles and some handheld. The scene, already chaotic, turned to pandemonium with the approximately eighty police, fire and rescue and medical responders moving away from the van, victims in tow, in whichever direction got them the furthest, fastest. As they reached the scene perimeter, they had to in turn move the civilians, stacked up in jammed vehicles on both sides of the highway, and approaching on foot from the nearby community of Moon Lake Estates.

Slocumb called in for the HazMat team, owners of a Talon robot of their own, this one equipped with chemical, biological, and radiological detectors, and they soon had their robot at the van. The fire department operator provided commentary on the readings he was getting at his control station.

"There's nothing so far, maybe just a little above background," he said as the robot moved around the open rear doors of the van and started along the shoulder next to the roof.

"Wait, I'm getting something. Still less than 10 microrem, nothing really serious."

The monitor from the police video showed the fire department robot moving along the roof line of the van, maybe one foot away and still at the rear corner. As it moved slowly toward the front, the operator read off the readings.

"I've got about 40 microrem now. Definitely something here but no biggie. OK, it's climbing, at about 60 now ... up to 100 microrem ... wow up to almost 1000 ... it's now over 1 millirem. Climbing faster, up to over twenty millirem, now! Wow, up to almost 1,000 here, and still increasing. Shit! Wait, can that be right? It just pegged. This thing reads up to 350 rem per hour. That's 350,000 millirem, and it just pegged!"

Slocumb understood something bad was happening, but he had no frame of reference.

"Tell me what that means. In plain English!"

"Well, if that was you standing there in a 350 rem field, you'd be dead in maybe three hours, and dying long before that. But the reading must be much higher because my meter is in

overload, there's too much radiation and it won't go any higher. Best I can do is back off and find a place where I can get a reading and then use inverse square to estimate a dose rate."

"I don't know what you're talking about, but if you can, give me some numbers. Then I can call the radiation experts and get some support here."

While the operator relocated his robot, Slocumb went to his computer and pulled up his RAP contacts and emergency notification procedures. RAP stood for Radiological Assistance Program and was run by the Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration. RAP teams, working out of nine regional offices, were on-call 24/7 to assist state and local authorities in any radiological emergency. They had the best technology available to monitor and analyze a radioactive accident or terrorist event. The closest RAP team was based in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and normal procedures would have them on the way within four hours of notification.

"Lieutenant? I think I've got the best estimate I'll be able to come up with. I'm about two feet from the roof, and I'm getting just under the max reading on my meter, about 350 rem per hour. I'm no expert, and these things depend a lot on the size and shape and configuration of the source of the radiation and any shielding, but if it's in that drum, then there's a lot of lead or something around it except for this one hole, so we're getting a beam of radiation, like a flashlight. That's why we didn't notice it until the tech walked into the beam. I'd say you've got something in there that reads twenty, maybe thirty thousand rem per hour on contact. In your terms, you wouldn't last ten minutes next to it. We've got us a situation here. Oh, and we need to know if it's leaking. I haven't got that kind of equipment."

"Leaking? Leaking what? Aren't you monitoring the leak?"

"Radioactive material. Look, it's like dog shit – I'm just monitoring the smell. I don't know what the shit looks like. If this is a solid piece of cobalt metal or something, then that's one problem. You just can't go near it. But if it's a powder or liquid, well then you need air samplers and soil samples 'cause it's gonna be coming out of there and spreading all over. You know, like Chernobyl."

