

**THE TAKEOVER
HAS BEGUN**

THE SEQUEL TO *THE EYE OF MINDS*

**THE
RULE
OF
THOUGHTS**

FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE MAZE RUNNER*

JAMES DASHNER

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ABOUT THE BOOK

IT'S NOT A GAME ANY MORE

Michael completed the Path. What he found at the end turned his life upside down.

He thought he'd been helping VirtNet Security to track down the cyber-terrorist Kaine.

He thought the VirtNet would be safe for gamers once more.

But the truth is more terrifying than he could ever have imagined. Kaine is in fact a Tangent, a computer program that has come alive. And Kaine's master plan is to populate the earth entirely with human bodies harbouring Tangent minds.

Unless Michael can stop him . . .

JAMES DASHNER

**THE
RULE
OF
THOUGHTS**

RHCP DIGITAL

*For the #DashnerArmy.
We're in this together.*

CHAPTER 1

A STRANGER IN THE HOME

1

Michael was not himself.

He lay on the bed of a stranger, staring up at a ceiling he had seen for the first time just the day before. He'd been disoriented and sick to his stomach all night, catching sleep only in fitful, anxious, nightmare-fueled jags. His life had blown apart; his sanity was slipping away. His very surroundings—the foreign room, the alien bed—were unforgiving reminders of his terrifying new life. Fear sparked through his veins.

And his family. What had happened to his family? He wilted a little more every time he pictured them.

The very first traces of dawn—a gloomy, pale light—made the shuttered blinds of the window glow eerily. The Coffin next to the bed sat silent and dark, as foreboding as a casket dug from a grave. He could almost imagine it: the wood rotting and cracked, human remains spilling out. He didn't know how to look at the objects around him anymore. *Real* objects. He didn't even understand the word *real*. It was as if all his knowledge of the world had been yanked out from under his feet like a rug.

His brain couldn't grasp it all.

His . . . *brain*.

He almost burst out in a laugh, but it died in his chest.

Michael had only *had* an actual, physical brain for the last twelve hours. Not even a full day, he realized, and that pit in his stomach doubled in size.

Could it really all be true? Really?

Everything he knew was a result of artificial intelligence. Manufactured data and memories. Programmed technology. A created life. He could go on and on, each description somehow worse than the one before it. There was nothing *real* about him, and yet now here he was, transported through the VirtNet and the Mortality Doctrine program and turned into an actual human being. A living, breathing organism. A life, stolen. So that he could become something he didn't even understand. His view of the world had been shattered. Utterly.

Especially because he wasn't sure if he believed it. For all he knew, he could be in another program, another level of *Lifeblood Deep*. How could he ever again trust what was real and what was not? The uncertainty would drive him mad.

He rolled over and screamed into his pillow. His head—his stolen, unfamiliar head—ached from the thousands of thoughts that pounded through it, each one fighting for attention. Fighting to be processed and understood. And feeling pain here was no different from feeling it as a Tangent. Which only served to confuse him more. He couldn't accept that before last night he'd just been a program, a long line of code. It didn't *compute*. That *did* make him laugh, and the pain in his head intensified and spread, slicing down his throat and filling his chest.

He yelled again, which didn't help, then forced himself to swing his legs off the bed and sit up. His feet touched the cool wooden floor, reminding him once again that he was now in a strange land. Lush carpet had blanketed the apartment he'd always known, which seemed homier, warmer, safe. Not cold and hard. He wanted to talk to Helga, his nanny. He wanted his parents.

And those were the thoughts that almost did him in completely. He'd been avoiding them, pressing them back into that pulsing swirl of thousands of other thoughts, but they weren't going anywhere. They stood out and demanded attention.

Helga. His parents.

If what Kaine had said was true, they were as synthetic as Michael's programmed fingernails had been. Even his memories. He would never know which ones had been programmed into his artificial intelligence and which ones he'd actually experienced within the code of *Lifeblood Deep*. He didn't even know how long he'd existed—his true age. He could be two months old, or three years, or a hundred.

He imagined his parents and Helga as fake, or gone, or dead, maybe never there in the first place. It just didn't make sense.

The ache that had crept its way into his chest filled his heart, and grief overtook him. He slumped back onto the bed and rolled over, pushing his face into the pillow. For the first time in his existence, Michael cried as an actual human being. But the tears felt no different than they ever had before.

2

The moment passed sooner than he'd expected. Just when he thought the despair would swallow him whole, it pulled back, allowed him some respite. Maybe it was the tears. Back in his life as a Tangent, he'd rarely cried. He probably hadn't since he was a child. He just wasn't the crying sort, he always said. And now he regretted that, because it sure seemed to ease the pain.

He made another attempt to get out of bed and this time succeeded. Feet planted on that hard, cool floor, emotions in check. It was time to do what he hadn't been able to bring himself to do the night before: figure out who in the world he'd become. Since no one had come running at his screams, he knew he must be alone.

He walked through the apartment, turning on lights and opening blinds to let in the rays of morning sunshine. He wanted to see every detail of this odd place that had become his home and decide if he could or should keep it that way.

The city outside the windows wasn't the one he'd looked out on from his old apartment. But at least it *was* a city, something that brought a little comfort in its familiarity. Buildings stacked next to more buildings, cars making their way down crisscrossing streets, the ever-present smog blurring the view. People bustling below, going about their business. Not a cloud in the wistful, dull blue sky.

He began his search.

Nothing out of the ordinary in the bedrooms. Clothes, furniture, pictures cycling on the WallScreens. Michael stood and stared at the huge one in the master bedroom for a while, watching as various pictures of the family—Mom, Dad, son, daughter—took turns filling the space. He vaguely remembered what he now looked like, and it was beyond unsettling to see *that* boy in so many situations that had absolutely no meaning to Michael whatsoever: A family portrait in front of a stream lined with huge oak trees, sunshine filling the sky. The kids were young, the boy sitting on his dad's lap. Another portrait, much more recent, in a studio, mottled gray backdrop. Michael had stared at his new face for a long time in the mirror, and it was eerie to see that same face looking down at him from the wall.

There were other, more casual shots. The boy up to bat at a baseball game. The girl playing with silvery blocks on the

floor, smiling up at the photographer. The whole family at a picnic. In a swimming pool. At a restaurant. Playing games.

Michael finally looked away. It hurt to see such a happy family when he might have lost that forever. He sullenly walked to the next room, obviously the girl's. Her WallScreen didn't have a single shot of the family, just pictures of her favorite bands and movie stars—Michael knew them all from *Lifeblood*. There was an old-fashioned frame on the nightstand next to her pink-themed bed, with an actual printed picture inside. The girl and the brother—*him*—grinning big goofy grins. The girl looked to be about two years older than the boy.

The pictures only made Michael feel worse, so he set to rummaging through drawers for any clues as to who these people were. He didn't find much, though he did figure out that the family name was Porter and the girl's name was Emileah—strange spelling.

Then he finally found the courage to go back into the boy's room. *His* room. With the rumpled bedsheets and the Coffin and the hard, cold floor. And then he saw what he'd been both looking for and dreading: The boy's name. The boy whose life he'd stolen. It was on a paper birthday card, on top of the dresser.

Jackson.

Jackson Porter.

Scribbled red hearts littered the card itself, hand-drawn and quaint. Sweet. Inside, a message from a girl named Gabriela proclaimed undying love for Jackson and made various physical threats to his nether regions if he let anyone read it. Paired with a smiley face, of course. There was a slightly warped spot at the bottom, as if perhaps a tear had dropped there at the end, right after something about an anniversary. Michael tossed the card, feeling guilty, as if he'd peeked inside a forbidden room.

Jackson Porter.

Michael couldn't help it. He went back to the master bedroom and watched the WallScreen again. Only, now it had a whole new feeling. For some reason, knowing the boy's name made everything different. Made Michael stop thinking about himself for a moment. He saw the face and body that were now *his*, doing so many activities—running, laughing, spraying a hose at his sister, eating. He seemed like one happy dude.

And now he was gone.

His life had been stolen. From a family *and* a girlfriend.

A life that had a name.

Jackson Porter. Surprisingly, Michael didn't feel guilt so much as sadness. This hadn't been *his* choice, *his* doing, after all. But the despair of it still swelled within him like nothing he'd ever felt before.

He tore his eyes from the screen and continued searching the apartment.

3

Michael rifled through drawer after drawer until he decided there wasn't much more to find. Maybe the answers he needed weren't in the apartment. It was time to do something that should have been first on his list but was the last thing he wanted to do.

He had to go back online.

Right after he'd woken up in his new body the day before, he'd checked his messages—but only because of the direction from Kaine to do so. He'd logged on to a mostly empty screen, with only the one ominous, life-changing note from Kaine himself, revealing what had happened. However, Michael figured Kaine had only temporarily hijacked Jackson Porter's online presence for his own use, and that by now it had been restored. All he had to do was

squeeze his EarCuff and he could probably find out more than he'd ever want to know about the boy.

For some reason that felt wrong, which didn't make a whole lot of sense. Michael had spent a good portion of his life hacking into the VirtNet without the slightest twinge of guilt. But this was different. This didn't take hacking or coding. This was just a click or swipe away. He'd stolen a human life, and stealing that person's virtual life as well somehow seemed like too much.

Michael thought it through and realized he had no choice. Jackson Porter—the essence of what made him a person—might be gone forever. If Michael wanted to go forward, he had to accept that. And if Jackson *wasn't* gone forever, if there was any possible way of restoring him to his body, Michael would never figure it out unless he jumped back into things.

He found a chair—just a normal, boring chair, not the cloud-soft throne of pure awesomeness he'd once had back in his former life—and sat next to a window, shutting the blinds to ward off some of the brightness. He caught a last glimpse through the slats of a city mad with the day-to-day grind, moving and grooving. In a way he felt envious of those people, completely oblivious that a crazy computer program had the ability to steal their bodies. That anything was wrong in the world at all.

Michael closed his eyes and took a deep breath, then opened them again. He reached up and squeezed his EarCuff. A faint stream of light shot from its surface and created a large viewing screen, hovering a couple of feet in front of him.

It was exactly as he'd guessed. Jackson Porter's personal online life had been restored from Kaine's hijacking, icons galore covering the surface of the glowing screen—everything from social dens to games to school materials. Michael was relieved, but he hesitated. He had no idea what to do. Should he pretend to be Jackson? Escape into

the world and try to hide from Kaine? Seek out someone from VirtNet Security? He didn't know where to begin. But whatever he decided, it would require information. A lot of information. And if at all possible, he needed to dig in before someone came home.

Which brought up questions again: Where were Jackson's parents? Where was his sister? Michael had the sinking thought that somehow Kaine had gotten rid of them, just like he'd sworn he had done to Michael's own parents.

After quickly scanning several social sites that proved pointless, he found a personal text box and scrolled through its messages. There were several from the girlfriend, Gabriela; three just that morning. Reluctantly, Michael opened the most recent.

Jax,

Uhhhhh, you slip in the shower and bang your head? Are you sleeping in a puddle of soapy water and drool right now? Of course, you'd be cute and adorable even then. I miss you. Hurry? I'm on my second cup of coffee and there's a jerk at the next table getting friendly. He sells stocks, or companies, or dead people's organs, something. Please come save me. You might even get a coffee-flavored kiss.

Hurry!

Gabriela

She attached a pic, a shadowy, blurred image of someone Michael could only assume was Gabriela—dark skin, dark hair, pretty—with pouting lips, her finger tracing an imaginary tear down her cheek. Her brown eyes tilted down in mock sadness. With a heavy heart Michael swiped it closed and continued looking through the text box.

He didn't have to search long.

Several things fell into place when he found a note from Jackson's dad, sent just that morning:

Jax,

Hope all is well, buddy. I'm sure you're up and at 'em by now, right? Right? RIGHT? 😊

We're safe and sound. Puerto Rico is beautiful. For the millionth time, we're sorry you couldn't come along. But I know you have big things coming up this week, so we'll be thinking about you.

Keep us in the loop, and be careful when you access our accounts. Make sure you protect our codes! [That was Mom's input.]

See you next week. Is Gabby still visiting her dad? Say hi to her for us. We miss you already.

Dad

So Jackson Porter was obviously okay when his family left for vacation. Which meant that his body had not been merely clinging to life, brain-dead, like so many others discovered throughout the world. Had those all been tests of some sort? Michael wondered. Had Kaine actually perfected the Mortality Doctrine process before he used it on Michael? Or was Michael the first that had worked? It was a terrifying thought either way. If it seemed the attacks had stopped, no one would be worried about the VirtNet. Kaine could just move ahead and unleash an army of Tangents on the world with no warning.

But Michael had a more immediate concern—what to do about Jackson Porter. Reading that letter had made him absolutely certain of one thing: there was just no way he could pretend to be another person. The notion of passing for this stranger with his family and friends seemed ridiculous now, especially if Gabriela showed up and started whispering sweet nothings in his ear.

So what could he do?

He clicked off the NetScreen and slouched back into the chair. He had to get out of there. He could leave a note with some kind of explanation. It would break his family's hearts, but at least it would let them know he was alive. He

could even keep corresponding with them, keep the deception going. Surely that was better than finding out a computer program had erased the mind of their son and replaced it with another.

But there was the issue of money. . . .

Something banged, hard, against the front door of the apartment, startling him.

He turned and looked toward the noise.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

There it was again. A hard thunk, like wood against metal. Again, then again.

Michael jumped up from the chair and hurried down the hall, through the kitchen, toward the front door. The pounding happened twice more, as if someone were swinging something large back and—

With a splintering crash of the framework, the metal door exploded inward. Michael crouched down, throwing his arms up to protect himself as the door slammed to the ground, narrowly missing him. Heart in his throat, he looked up to see who was in the doorway.

Two men. Both dressed in jeans and drab flannel shirts, they held some sort of old-fashioned wooden battering ram. They were both big, muscular, one with dark hair, the other blond. Neither had shaved for a few days, and intensity strained their expressions. And if Michael wasn't mistaken, there seemed to be a hint of surprise hidden in there somewhere.

They dropped the length of wood and stepped toward Michael.

He shot backward, scrambling across the kitchen until he ran into the counter and lost his footing, dropping to the floor. The two men stopped just a few feet away, looking down at him with twin sneers.

"Do I even need to ask?" Michael managed to say. He wanted to feel brave—to *be* brave—but the vulnerability of his human body suddenly hit him. It was something he'd

never thought about in *Lifeblood Deep*. His world could end at any second.

The two men didn't answer; they looked at each other with puzzled expressions, so Michael spoke again. "I guess I do," he murmured. "Who are you?"

Both of them swung their gazes back to him.

"We were sent by Kaine," the dark-haired man said. "A lot has changed in the last day or two. We were sent to . . . *summon* you to a meeting. He has big plans for you, son."

Michael's heart sank. He'd hoped for more time. His mind spun with questions, but what came out of his mouth sounded plain stupid.

"Well, you could've just knocked."

CHAPTER 2

THE BIG, BAD WORLD

1

The men actually helped him to his feet—the blond guy even dusted off Michael’s back. But both remained oddly silent, and the whole situation was beginning to take on an air of absurdity.

“So,” Michael asked, “are you guys going to tell me anything? Your names, at least?” He felt oddly peaceful as he spoke, as if any immediate danger had been swept away by the man brushing the dirt off his pants.

The dark-haired man straightened and folded his arms. His face showed no emotion as he spoke. “My name is Kinto,” he said, then nodded toward his partner. “This is Douglas. We were under the impression that you were still inside the Coffin, still undergoing the Doctrine transfer.”

“Looks like we were . . . misinformed,” Douglas added in a gravelly voice.

“Yeah,” Kinto agreed. “Looks that way.”

Michael was still confused, but less so. At least the men knew about Kaine and the Mortality Doctrine. “So does that mean Kaine’s taken a human body, too? How many Tangents have done the same thing?” His mouth was still open when Kinto held up a hand to silence him.

“Stop. Talking.” The man’s expression was all business. “If Kaine wants you to know something, he’ll make sure you do.”

“You’ve been given a gift,” Douglas continued. “Life. For now, just be happy and do what you’re told.”

“Fine with me,” Michael replied. His insides were a churning storm—lightning, thunder, sleet, strong winds, the whole bit—but he tried to display a sense of calm. He’d had way too many experiences lately that had ended in his being dragged away, and it was something he wanted to avoid if at all possible. He would go with these men until an opportunity to break away presented itself or until he had a revelation about what he should do.

“Fine with you?” Douglas repeated, obviously surprised at the simple response.

“Fine with me.” Michael swallowed. He’d just keep his comments to a minimum and go with it until a better plan developed.

Kinto gestured toward the door. “Then let’s go. I don’t think I need to tell you not to try anything. Douglas will go first, then you, then me. Nice and easy.”

“Life couldn’t be simpler,” Douglas said gruffly, though he broke his stern act with a smile. “You follow me, Kinto follows you. And all your dreams will come true.”

The man didn’t wait for a response. He headed for the door and Michael fell in line behind him, with Kinto right on his heels. They went through the shattered doorframe and into the hallway, the apartment building silent except for their footsteps.

For some reason, Michael thought of *Lifeblood Deep*, how it had been his life’s goal to make it there someday, and a wave of sadness washed over him. He’d been there the whole time. And now look where he’d ended up. He knew it was ironic, somehow, maybe even profoundly philosophical, but all he could feel was defeat.

He kept walking.

Michael and his escorts made their way down the hall to the elevator, out of the building, through the bustling streets, and to the subway. He sat squeezed between the two men as they jostled along underground, and his thoughts kept returning to Jackson Porter. His family. His girlfriend, even. Gabriela.

What had happened to the consciousness of the boy once known as Jackson? Was that it for him? Had his mind, his personality, been erased? Or was it stored somewhere, somehow? If Michael could be transferred *into* Jackson's body, maybe Jackson could be transferred *out*.

He kept thinking about how Jackson's family was basking in the sunshine in Puerto Rico, oblivious that they'd lost a son and a brother. Guilt overwhelmed him. Though it hadn't been his choice, he'd taken a life, and he wished he could make the loss bearable for them in some way.

Not a word had been spoken between Michael and the others since they'd left the apartment, unless you counted the grunts the men made when they needed to change direction.

Michael sat, quiet, as the train pulled into a station and stopped. The doors opened and he watched absently as the passengers crowded in like herded cattle. There were some who smiled or apologized when they bumped into others. Those were few and far between. One woman barely made it through before the doors closed on her, catching the corner of her handbag. She had to yank hard before it came free, allowing the doors to seal shut.

As Michael observed, his mind started turning. His gaze went from the woman to her purse to the door, and his thoughts picked up speed. What in the world was he going to do? He literally knew no one, had no home, no money, no clothes. No place to start. Did he continue with these

people, go to this gathering place, this meeting, find out what Kaine wanted with him? He needed answers from the Tangent, but did he dare let himself be trapped in a situation he couldn't get out of?

He missed his family and his friends more than anything. They couldn't all be fake—he refused to accept that.

The train continued along the tracks, flashing lights breaking up the darkness of the tunnel. He was surrounded by people—some dozing, some reading, many just blankly staring into space. Kinto and Douglas sat on either side of him, their shoulders pressed against his, their faces as blank as most of the others on the train.

Michael had a sudden thought: if what Agent Weber from VNS had told him the night before was true, Michael wasn't alone. Somewhere out there in the big, bad world, he had the two best friends a person could ever ask for. They weren't Tangents like him—they never had been. They were *real*. Weber had said so.

Bryson and Sarah.

3

Michael then realized he was scared of something: what would his friends think of him? He was a *Tangent*. Did that change things? He had a sudden and terrible vision of them stumbling backward, running away from him, a freak that had taken the body of a real person. Stolen it.

But did he actually believe that? Wouldn't they understand?

Yes, he decided. Yes, they would.

The train bounced and creaked, everyone staring down at the floor. Lights flashed and dimmed, then blazed back on. His two escorts said nothing.

He couldn't go with them. He just couldn't. Yes, he needed answers. Yes, he needed to figure out a way to confront Kaine and find out the *why* of everything. But not this way. Not with the Tangent calling the shots.

Michael needed Bryson and Sarah. He thanked the stars that he'd seen that poor woman get her handbag caught, because it had sparked an idea.

He had to stay calm. He stilled his whole body until he sat frozen, like a wax figure, and waited for the right moment. The train began to slow and pulled into the next station. The doors slid open and passengers surged off en masse, plowing into those who wanted *on* the train. Cattle in, cattle out. Michael watched it all calmly, waiting. Riders found their way to seats until those were full, then packed in, clasping handholds attached to the ceiling and the poles running the length of the car. There was a loud tone and the doors began to close.

Without warning Michael launched himself out of his seat, knocking people out of the way, and lunged for the disappearing gap between the closing doors. He stumbled over something, recovered, dove for the thin sliver of an opening. His body made it through, but the doors slammed against his right calf, the rubber seals clutching, holding him firmly in place. He crashed to the ground, twisted around to look back. The two men stood just on the other side of the doors, calmly looking down at him through the gap. Their serene expressions actually scared him more than if they'd grown fangs and wings.

Douglas bent down and grabbed Michael's foot, pulling him with a shocking amount of strength, while Kinto attempted to force the doors open. They didn't budge. A blaring bell rang out, followed by a mechanized voice.

"Please remove all obstructions from the path of the door."

Michael gritted his teeth and pulled his trapped leg, kicking the train with the other, trying to squirm his way

free. But Douglas held firm on the other side, twisting Michael's foot painfully. Michael cried out and struggled even harder. A woman on the train screamed. It was a piercing wail that drowned out the alarm—it must have been clear that Douglas wasn't exactly trying to help Michael.

Then the train started to move.

It lurched forward, dragging Michael along the cement floor of the station as he tried to grab anything nearby, but there was only the floor. A second alarm rang out, this one more of a booming, electronic clang that filled the air, and the train stopped. Michael's leg screamed with pain; the doors pinched in a viselike hold where they had closed around his calf. Douglas continued to twist his foot from inside the train, and the other passengers were realizing that he was hurting Michael—doing more harm than good. There were shouts, and Michael strained to look and saw scuffling; a punch was thrown. Douglas's head snapped to the left, but his face registered no pain. Michael watched it all in a daze, as if his mind had risen out of his aching body.

And then someone was pushing his foot instead of pulling on it. A hand gripped the underside of his calf, trying to leverage it at a better angle. Kinto and a burly man were fighting inside the train—they fell to the ground and Douglas released his hold on Michael. He pulled himself up and pushed against the door of the train with his other foot. The alarms clanged and rang at a deafening pitch. Two men in uniform ran toward him, barking orders he couldn't understand. People on the train were shouting and pointing at him through the windows.

Finally his leg slipped free from the vise of the two doors and they slammed shut.

Michael pulled his leg in and rubbed his calf and ankle, watching from the ground as the train lurched into motion again. The alarm cut off and the familiar creaks and groans of transit resumed. He glanced up as the cars disappeared

into the tunnel. In the very last one stood Douglas, staring back at him through a grimy, fingerprint-smearred window, ignoring the still-chaotic scene playing out behind him.

And for the first time, the man looked angry.

CHAPTER 3

A HITCH IN THE GUT

1

Michael winced and clutched his leg, breaking his gaze with Douglas as he slipped away. The screeching sounds faded into echoes as the train finally vanished into the darkness of the tunnel. There was a scuffle of footsteps and then the two officials were lifting him to his feet. He stepped gingerly on his injured leg and thanked them.

After a couple of minutes of scolding and reprimanding, they let him go, warning him not to do something so stupid ever again. Neither of them had noticed that he'd actually been escaping a kidnapping or that a couple of stone-cold-expressionless men had been trying to yank him back onto the train. Which was a relief to Michael. He didn't want to draw any more attention to himself. He dusted off his clothes and tested his leg. It hurt, but it wasn't broken. He finally limped out of the station and onto the city sidewalks.

He stopped to take it all in. There were people everywhere, cars everywhere. And the world was full of sound. Horns and engines, talking and shouting and laughing. A hovering cop car zoomed past above him. The brightness of the day blinded him slightly, making everything a sea of blurred movement. He was still shaking from having lost Douglas and Kinto; it would take some time for him to adjust.

He found a bench and sat down, and not just because his leg ached. The whirlwind of events since he'd read the letters from Gabriela and Jackson Porter's dad had spared Michael from having to figure out what was going on. Kaine might've provided answers, but Michael had no doubts about his decision to run—he needed to stay as far away from Kaine as possible. How could he possibly trust the Tangent?

Elbows on knees, he dropped his head into his hands and took a deep breath. The reality was, to find Bryson and Sarah—to find his next *meal*—he'd need something he didn't have.

Money.

He desperately needed money.

His stomach rumbled with hunger and he almost laughed. It was funny how his old “fake” life resembled this new one. Unless he wanted to beg or go Dumpster diving, he'd need to figure out a way to fill his coffers with electronic cash. Then he realized the bigger problem: he didn't *have* any coffers. The kid known as Michael didn't exist in this world.

But Jackson Porter did. And according to the note the Porters had left, they knew he'd need money while they were in Puerto Rico.

Michael felt another pang of guilt, then reminded himself that Kaine had done this to the boy, not Michael. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to force himself to accept the thought. But he couldn't. Because he now existed in the real world, a family would never be the same. Maybe he could pretend, make the Porters believe their son was alive, just off to see the world. They'd be sad—not to mention Gabriela—but not utterly devastated.

He was safe for the short term, anyway, and would just take what money he needed. When the family returned from their vacation and realized he was missing . . . Well, one day at a time.

Right then he needed a better place to sit—a little darker, so he could see a NetScreen more clearly—and some time on the VirtNet. He found a relatively clean corner tucked away in an alley with just enough passing traffic to keep the hooligans away, and he sat down on the hard pavement to work. One click of his EarCuff and the glowing green screen that belonged to Jackson Porter flashed to life in front of him.

Then a cold fear crawled up his spine. What if his coding skills had been as fake as his life in the Sleep? What if the code was somehow different out in the Wake? The *real* Wake.

Scarcely able to handle the thought, he got to work, and soon realized his fears were unfounded.

He swiped and typed, allowing his mind to take over, and he dug further and further into Jackson's and his family's lives, searching the Net for codes and files he'd used or heard about before—password unlockers, false-identity creators, secret sites about the ins and outs of bank cybersecurity. It wasn't long before he'd created an entirely new human being—new to the virtual world, anyway. He called this new human Michael Peterson.

Kaine knew his first name, but it was common; there had to be thousands of Michaels out there. Hundreds of thousands. He couldn't bring himself to use a completely different name—it was all he had left from the life that had been taken. Plus, Kaine probably expected him *to* change it.

Luckily for him, the Porters weren't hurting in the money department. Michael started the process of transferring funds, making all the trails appear as if their sweet boy, Jackson, had actually taken cash credit withdrawals, practically untraceable.

Things were running more smoothly, more quickly than Michael would've hoped, and he was just beginning to feel good about himself when a glitch hit. A diagonal line of

bright blue slashed across the NetScreen. It only lasted half a second, but his stomach dropped. The glitch was unmistakable. Somebody was trying to break into his system.

Another slash. Brighter. Followed by another.

Michael's hands flew between the screen and the keyboard, his instincts taking over. He built makeshift firewalls and scrambled his digital signal—Jackson Porter's digital signal, rather—and coded some other quickie programs to block the intruder. But he could tell from the strength of the pushback coding that whoever it was had massive skills.

There was no question in Michael's mind. It was Kaine.

2

Michael couldn't hold him off much longer. The two dull-faced men who'd come to take him away must've reported back up the chain of command. Michael was now officially rogue, and Kaine wouldn't be happy.

Michael kept working, feverishly. He had to get a few more things done before he could sign off. Wrap up the new identity so he could access him later, tie off any loose ends so Kaine wouldn't be able to find him when he did so. He had to finalize the accounts, secure the money, make sure he could access it from somewhere else, respond to the Porters so they'd know their son was safe.

But there was one thing even more important than that.

Finding Bryson and Sarah. At least one of them. At least the general area where they lived. With Jackson's account compromised, it might be a while before Michael dared access the Net again.

A line of bright light slashed across his NetScreen again, wider this time, and it remained longer. Random numbers

and letters flashed, then vanished. Kaine—it *had* to be Kaine—was now throwing his full force, trying to sabotage instead of hack. Michael knew the signs from his own work over the years. He pushed back with a flurry of codes, not sure if he could do it again.

Instinct took over. He searched and searched, digging through the archives of *Lifeblood*, the game that had once meant so much to him. Data on players, high scores, dates, event logs. The image of the girl, Tanya, jumping to her death off the Golden Gate Bridge flashed in his mind. Michael had only been a Tangent, Lifting up from what had actually been *Lifeblood Deep* to play the game. But Bryson and Sarah were real—Agent Weber had said so, anyway—and there had to be one snippet of real-world information he could dig up from all the *Lifeblood* data before Kaine destroyed the digital existence of poor Jackson Porter.

Three slashes of searing white light burned across the NetScreen, wiping out the path Michael had been digging through the code. Once again, numbers and letters flashed, one after the other, blurring the screen in a rush of movement that drowned out the background. Michael swept it away with a last-gasp code that was absolutely illegal. The screen cleared once more and he jumped full-bore back into the *Lifeblood* data archives, his eyes stinging with tears from concentrating so hard.

Sweat beaded his forehead, ran down his temples, slicked his skin as he worked. *Lifeblood's* code was complicated and heavily protected. But Michael was good—he'd been part of the code itself. He dug and searched, looking for any background files he could find on his friends. Personal information was sacred in the virtual world. Sacred.

He could sense Kaine's efforts to crash his system. It was almost like a tangible pressure, pushing down on him. Ignoring it as best he could, Michael swam in a sea of data, searching, searching.