

LARRY HOVICK

# THE DEVICE

The Device  
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# One

Matt Hugunin sat back in his office chair and smiled at the picture of his wife and son. The perfect little family would have a new member in a few months. He rubbed his eyes and stretched. He had rolled out of bed extra early so he could get to the office to finish the spreadsheet in front of him. He was almost done and would be on his way back home. He and his wife, Tracy, were to see the doctor this afternoon to find out if they were going to have another son or a daughter. He shook his head slowly thinking of the wonderful life he was so lucky to live, and then he turned his attention back to the spreadsheet he had to finish.

“Hey Matt, you ready to go?” Ryan Hughes asked, sticking his head inside Matt’s office door.

Matt appeared to ignore the interruption as he kept his focus on the printed copy of the spreadsheet on his desk. “One more smiley face exclamation point and I’m out of here,” he said, flashing a foolish grin toward Ryan.

“I cry bullshit. Accountants are wound too tight for goofy, happy shit like that. So quit fooling around and let’s hit it, mister,” Ryan said, turning away from Matt’s office and heading toward the stairwell to exit the second floor office space.

Ryan glanced around the quiet conference room as he made his way toward the stairs. He enjoyed working for the small tech company. His current salary as head of security and the bonus he was told was only a few months away would put him ahead of the financial goal he had set before he turned thirty. He had smiled when the two owners of the company said earlier that week in a staff meeting that they were close to cashing in on their latest invention. Ryan was carrying the high-tech device and the portable controller with him as he pushed the door open and headed down the stairwell.

“I’m sending now. My work mission is complete. Today is a great day. I am out of here,” Matt said, thinking Ryan was still within earshot. He shrugged, folded the completed spreadsheet, and closed his laptop. He put his favorite Kansas baseball cap on his head and jogged out of his office down the hall to catch his friend at the bottom of the steps, just before the exit to the street.

Ryan was standing there staring at his cell phone when Matt caught up.

“Hey, who’s stalling now, dude? Come on. Tracy and I have an appointment with the doctor to find out if Carter is going to have a little sister or brother today, so I need to get out of here.” Matt opened the door and stepped out into the late morning sunlight in the Financial District of San Francisco.

“It’s my neighbor who likes my dog letting me know my dog is barking like mad at the neighbor who hates my dog,” Ryan said as he stepped outside and turned to look at Matt to plead for help.

“Matt, can you take the portable controller and the device to Fremont for me? Ryan pleaded. “You know, the shop where they work on this briefcase is on the way to your house and the guys just want the device out somewhere to see how it is doing. I’ll head to the Fremont shop after I calm down my damn dog and my neighbor. Cool?”

“I don’t have time to argue, so you win,” Matt said, taking the small black briefcase and the pillbox holding the device from Ryan. “You know, for a single guy you have more issues at home than anyone in the office. You need to get rid of that dog or put her in doggie day care.”

“I owe you, Matt. I’ll buy the drinks on Friday at the pub.” Ryan turned and headed south toward his apartment.

“You cheap-ass bastard, you never buy, so who is full of shit now?” Matt started walking along Davis Street toward the BART station. He felt like it was his responsibility as the accountant for the small company to try and talk the owners, Joe and Chad, out of paying such high rent in the Financial District, but the young entrepreneurs were convinced they needed the prestige of the office to sell their product. The owners had convinced Matt that the smoke and mirrors of being in a high-rent office meant a lot to any government official visiting for a potential purchase.

Matt entered the BART station from the street and went down the stairs at a quick jog. He put his card into the machine to open the turnstile and entered the terminal of the aging Bay Area Rapid Transit. He rode the commuter train three or four days each week. One day a week he drove, just to keep the feeling of freedom alive behind the wheel of his car.

He walked onto the train platform and waited for the Fremont-bound train to arrive. His timing was right: in less than five minutes the sound of an approaching train could be heard and the monitors showed the destination was Fremont.

“Boom, no train changes for you,” Matt said to himself as he watched the train approach and stop in place. He had a knack for hitting the station at the right time for the right train. The doors opened and he walked into the train and looked for a seat on the midday car. There were a few people onboard already. He spotted one of his teenage boxing students sitting alone with an open seat across from him. He walked over and sat down facing the young man and reached over to push the hoodie back on his head to get his attention.

The young man tilted his head up and opened his eyes.

“Hey, Coach, wassup?” the young man said.

“I’m wondering the same thing, Reverend,” Matt said. “You should be in school right now, not out riding around on BART. You are a long way from home, mister, so what are you doing?”

The Reverend rolled his eyes and head around, so Matt knew he was stalling to come up with something believable. The Reverend started talking, but Matt raised a finger and gave the young man the international sign to wait since the commuter train was heading under the bay. The noise of the speeding train in the tunnel made it too difficult to talk, so the kid got off easy for a few minutes.

The Reverend nodded his head and pulled the hoodie down over his eyes again.

Matt shifted in his seat and pulled out the sports section of the *San Francisco Examiner* from inside the light jacket he wore. He loved to keep track of his home team, the Kansas City Royals. A man dressed in a black, shiny exercise suit moved to the open

seat next to the Reverend across from Matt. When he glanced up, the stranger was staring at him. He turned his focus back to the statistics, comparing wins and losses to other teams in the league, and smiled at the current run of wins the Royals were having early in the season. He looked up again and the stranger was still staring at him—maybe the guy was trying to read the back side of the sports section. Matt thought the stranger was young—early thirties, close to Matt’s age—and he could tell through the shiny sweats the guy was in shape. He looked at his hands and recognized the familiar marks from tape inside boxing gloves. Matt had similar scars and bruising on his hands from the hours spent training on the heavy bag. “No pain, no gain” was a popular gym phrase, and there were times Matt did not take the extra minutes needed to add more tape before pulling on his gloves. His hands would bleed and bruise, but it made him look tough to the other kids at school when he was growing up.

Matt had been short and thin as a kid, so looking tough gave him a reputation. He and his brother had started boxing before they were teenagers. Their dad thought it was better for his sons to have organized fights with gloves and some supervision in the ring. The time in the gym paid off. Matt and his brother grew to love the sport and both of the Hugunin boys continued to box through college. He still trained and coached at a gym near his Fremont, California, home. His wife, Tracy, had convinced him to coach after Carter was born. The broken ribs cuts and bruises from a tough boxing match scared Tracy now that they had a son. Matt enjoyed coaching, and the Reverend was in one of the classes he taught at the gym for under-privileged kids who worked hard in school. Matt taught that discipline in the ring was the same as a healthy mind, and it helped boost confidence. He was a firm but fair coach and mentor to a large number of Hispanic and black boys and girls in the East Bay.

Out of the corner of his eye, Matt saw the stranger move toward him. He turned in his seat and the stranger missed on his first lunge at him. Matt was up on his feet as the stranger turned quickly to catch his balance. The stranger attempted a hard uppercut, but Matt blocked the blow with his left hand, and with a quick right jab and then a lightning elbow to the side of his head, he saw the lights in the stranger’s eyes start to roll back. He caught movement out of the corner of his eye of two heavyweights coming to the fight from the front and with a quick glance to the rear of the commuter car he saw a matching pair of men in black pushing their way to the fight. The stranger was bent over and Matt brought his knee up to smash his nose. He threw the man as hard as he could toward the side of the moving train.

The Reverend jumped up to fight with his coach, but Matt shoved him back with force. At the same time, a large man swung wildly at Matt. He ducked, moved back, and came up hard, driving his fists and legs into the man’s head and torso, sending him sprawling backward. The Reverend knew it was Matt pushing him away, so he disappeared by moving between the bodies as two more men dove over the falling man and threw their bodies at Matt, pinning him against the side of the train in the space beside the first attacker.

He was squashed by the sheer size of the multiple attackers.

It was over.

## Two

Matt felt the movement first, but he listened and kept his eyes closed waiting for the rest of his senses to come back. He had lost fights and been knocked out a couple of times, but this was not in the ring and the reality was crashing hard in his brain as he flexed and felt that his arms and legs were tied to the chair he was sitting in.

*Son of a bitch!* he thought as he slowly opened his eyes. He was tied to a chair that was bolted to the floor inside the back of a small plumbing van. The front wall of the van was filled with rack-mounted computer consoles and monitors. There was only one other person in the van, and when he turned to face Matt, he recognized him as the guy who started the attack on the BART train.

The stranger was smiling and shaking his head no as he pointed to the fresh bruise Matt gave him on the side of his face. “Welcome back to the world, Matt Hugunin,” the stranger said reaching over and slapping him on the face, making his eyes water. “I owe you for this mark on my face. I underestimated your speed but that will not happen again.”

“How about you untie me and we go right now, asshole,” Matt said. He didn’t recognize the accent when the guy spoke.

“Not now, Matt. Maybe later on if I get bored—but now you need to show me how to work this thing.” The stranger shifted in his chair and picked up the black briefcase controller for the device, setting it on Matt’s lap.

Matt stared at the controller in his lap. *Your damn dog put me here, Ryan. Why did I do you this favor? Being a nice guy got my ass kicked, and now I am so screwed.*

“I’m the accountant. I don’t know how to work the controller,” he said in a flat tone.

The stranger slapped him across the face again—harder this time.

“Don’t play stupid and don’t fuck with me, Matt. People try to do that to me all of the time and it doesn’t go well for them. You work for a small company and I know all of you know something about the controller and the thing you call the device. You switched places with Ryan this morning because of his dog, but why was his dog so upset this morning? It was my men outside the window taunting the dog until they saw Ryan’s neighbor on the phone. You are part of my plan, Matt. I wanted you with the device. You know more about the device than your stupid security man, Ryan. He has been too busy being lazy and chasing pussy to care about how the device works. You are the young family man with the chance to make millions if the device is sold, so quit fucking with me, Matt, and show me how to operate it.” The stranger leaned forward and gestured at the briefcase in Matt’s lap.

“I can’t do shit with my hands tied—and who the fuck are you?” Matt said.

“My name is Yuri. I am going to untie one hand, Matt, but you must behave or I will use my knife to cut you in places that will hurt and take a long time to heal. I am good with my knife, Matt, so don’t fuck with me and you might survive this adventure to see your Tracy and Carter and to see the birth of your new child.” Yuri grinned and waved the knife in Matt’s face.

Matt stared at him as his brain caught fire as he listened. *Son of a bitch! He knows my family.* Matt watched Yuri easily cut the zip tie securing his right wrist to the chair. The blade never scratched him.

“You harm my family and I will beat you to death with one arm if I have to,” Matt said.

“Matt they will be fine. Just do as I ask and this will all be over soon and we will drop you off at your house and you can go on with your happy little life.” Yuri put his knife away and pointed to the briefcase again. He opened the catches, pulled the lid up, and sat down in his chair facing Matt.

“Now turn on the controller and use it to find the device,” Yuri said. “We searched you and we could not find it. You must take me to the device or you and your family are no good to me. Cooperate and everyone will be fine.”

Matt knew a lot about the device, but he only knew a limited number of commands on the portable controller. The designers of the device, Joe Litvag and Chad Cheek, were still tweaking and designing their invention. It was Ryan’s responsibility to take the device out of the office daily. Ryan would use his cell phone to communicate with the inventors so they would know his exact location. The inventors would rewrite the program to adjust and tweak the power of the portable controller and their digital IP address cloning device.

Matt stared at the small briefcase on his lap trying to remember what the knobs and switches all meant. They were marked, but it was all in a code that Joe and Chad had used since they were teenagers.

Matt had met the designers when they were in college together at Kansas. They became friends through their mutual love of KU basketball and beer on Mass Street after each home win. He learned that Joe and Chad had started programming computers when they were neighbors in grade school. They said it was tough being geeks alone, so they teamed up and had been best friends since. They designed a music computer program while in junior high, and, with the help of their parents, sold it for millions. Joe and Chad were instantly popular in high school when they became rich geeks with money and flashy cars, but they did not let the money stop them from working for the next big program. They had invented two video games that they sold to a major game distributor for some quick cash during their time at Kansas, and after college, Joe and Chad moved to San Francisco to be closer to the Silicon Valley and other developers. Joe kept in contact with Matt after college, and three years ago, Joe had made him an offer he couldn’t refuse. Matt and Tracy moved to the Bay Area and he took over the accounting of the business as Joe and Chad worked on the device.

“Yuri, I know some things, but I am nervous and I might shut it down by accident,” he said, looking at his attacker.

“Matt, I am not a patient man,” Yuri said in a flat tone. “I will give you five more minutes to show me where I can find the device or I will throw you out of the back of our van on the freeway. Your choice, Matt.”

“I have seen the guys use this controller, but I haven’t played with it or had any training on it.” It was part truth and half lie. Matt was hoping he would remember the right

order to flip the switches to type the commands on the portable controller that would send the alarm and get help coming his way.

“Time is ticking, Matt.” Yuri showed Matt the watch on his wrist.

Matt pretended he was unsure of what to do even to power up the remote controller for the device. Maybe his years in the ring and feigning weakness to his opponent would pay off now when he really needed it.

He had spent hours with Joe, Chad, and Ryan brainstorming and operating the device and the controller in the lab. He was a semi-techno geek, and the device intrigued him. Whenever he had time away from crunching numbers, he would join the inventors in their lab. As they downed a couple of cold ones to loosen up their creative juices, they talked and did their best to refine both the portable controller and the device.

He could tell Yuri was getting restless, and as soon as Yuri started to move toward him he managed to fumble with the right series of buttons and the controller came to life with a series of buzzes and beeps.

He was pretty sure he had typed the sequence in the right order to fire the GPS transmitter built into the controller. He was taking the chance that Yuri didn't have the equipment in the van that could pick up the signal. He knew Chad and Joe would be watching and listening for the ping on the controller in the home office.

In one of their brainstorm sessions, Ryan, the ex-wrestler and former marine, had said they should program something that only the team would recognize as a distress signal. Ryan went on to explain, while sipping his second or third beer, that there were bad people in the world who would want this invention at any cost and they should build something into the software to help locate the device and the controller—but to anyone not familiar it would appear like a malfunction. Joe and Chad wrote and installed the distress code before Ryan could finish the beer in his hand.

Yuri moved and sat in the bolted chair-seat next to Matt. He looked at the outputs on the portable while Matt typed. He reached to the front of the van and plugged a USB cable into the briefcase controller, and the image appeared on a monitor to make it easier to see than the small display on the portable.

“Does it always look like that, Matt?” Yuri said pointing to the screen as it moved in and out of focus.

“I have seen it crystal clear, and I have seen it do this. The guys told me it has something to do with distance from the device. It is one of the things they were working on.” Matt was doing his best to mix the truth with a lie.

“So does this tell you how far we are right now from the device, Matt?” Yuri asked looking at the monitor.

“I am going to guess thirty miles, or maybe a little more, since I know they solved the twenty-five-mile mark.” Matt was looking at the image fading in and out on the seven-inch LCD screen on the portable controller.

“Do you know the town San Ramon, Matt?” Yuri asked as he typed the name into his iPhone map app.



“Not really. I live in Fremont, but I know BART has a station there, so I am guessing the device is either on a train or someone in San Ramon has it.” Matt kept watching the image. He knew it would continue to be close but not exact as long as he could keep the controller operating in the “find me mode,” a term Ryan coined.

“You were on a Fremont-bound train this morning. So how did the device move to another train? You must have tossed it to the young black kid you were talking to. Where is he going, and who is he, Matt?” Yuri opened the sliding glass to the front of the van and spoke in another language to someone Matt couldn’t see in the front.

Yuri dialed his cell phone and dictated what Matt figured were instructions for other people to head to San Ramon. He appeared calm, but Matt knew he was pissed off with the situation. He wished he could understand what Yuri was saying, but his two years of Spanish in college were no help since this language was different. He wasn’t sure, but the name of his captor made him think he was Russian. Yuri put his cell phone away and moved back to the other side of the van. Matt decided he would just leave the controller alone as long as he could.

“I have to have some trust, Matt,” Yuri said. “I know your wife, Tracy, is probably wondering about you already. You were supposed to be home by now and she will worry. Maybe I should send someone to your house to let her know you are okay and will be home soon. Should I do that for you, Matt?”

Yuri struck a nerve whenever he mentioned Matt’s family. He was trying to stay calm but knew he was failing from the smirk on Yuri’s face.

“I think strangers showing up at our door would make her nervous and afraid. The controller is saying San Ramon and I am sure if we get closer it will give us the exact address. Please trust me a little—and believe me, I do not want any trouble for my family.”

Yuri nodded and leaned back in the seat across from Matt. The controller had a clock built in, so Matt knew it was 1:25 p.m. He should have been home at 12:30, but he would always call to let Tracy know if he was going to be late.

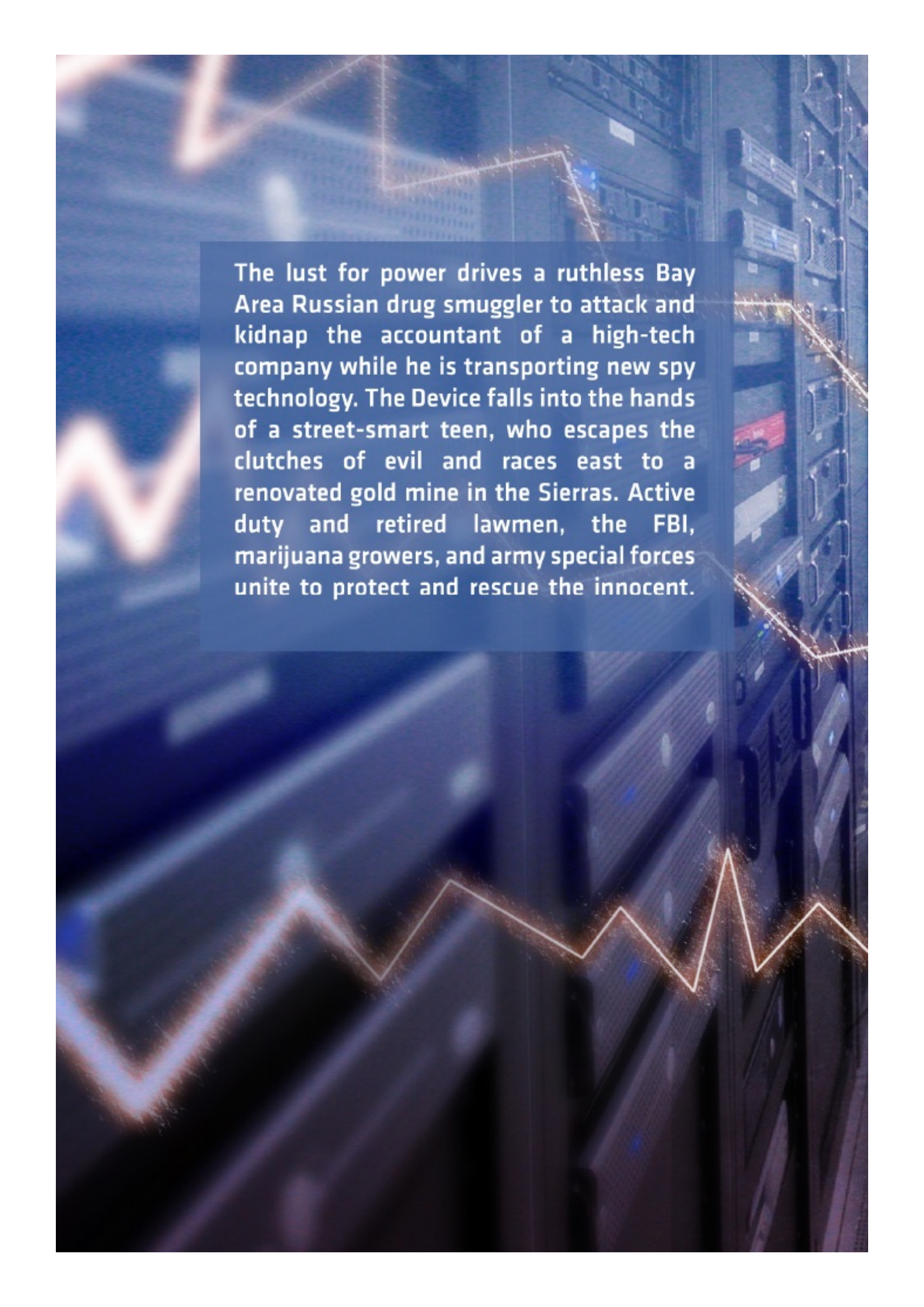
Matt let his thoughts drift to Chad in the office. Chad was a detail freak, and he was alert to anything good or bad when the device was out of the office. He was sure Chad would know the controller and the device were separated and would warn Joe that something was wrong.

He was also sure Tracy would be mad at him and would be trying to call him or Ryan to find out what is going on. He closed his eyes and said a short prayer. He had thought about a warning system for Tracy a few times but never discussed it with her. It was the no-way-it-would-happen-to-me syndrome, and now it was staring Matt in the face. *Son of a bitch—I hate your dog, Ryan.* Matt felt helpless and stupid for putting his family in danger.

Matt and Ryan had learned the full potential of the device one afternoon in the lab with Joe and Chad. It was exciting and frightening at the same time. The device was the size of a large vitamin pill. Joe and Chad wanted to build a powerful tool to spy on people they suspected were stealing their ideas and the codes they wrote. They programmed the device

to search and scan IP addresses within a twenty-foot radius. The device would transmit the captured signals in high-definition audio and video back to the controller. Joe and Chad were sure law enforcement agencies or the US government would pay a lot of money to have unlimited access to their enemies through such a small and powerful device.

Matt knew Yuri was not the U.S. government, and he was trying to steal the device. He tried to slow his breathing to relax and save his strength. His hands and legs were tied, but he was alone with Yuri and had beaten him once on the BART train; he could only wait and hope for another round.

The background of the image is a server room with rows of server racks. Overlaid on this are several glowing, jagged blue lines that resemble a stylized lightning bolt or a digital signal path. A semi-transparent dark blue rectangular box is centered in the upper half of the image, containing white text.

The lust for power drives a ruthless Bay Area Russian drug smuggler to attack and kidnap the accountant of a high-tech company while he is transporting new spy technology. The Device falls into the hands of a street-smart teen, who escapes the clutches of evil and races east to a renovated gold mine in the Sierras. Active duty and retired lawmen, the FBI, marijuana growers, and army special forces unite to protect and rescue the innocent.

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