



THE
QUANTUM
BREACH

*A MORMON
HACKER NOVEL*

DENVER ACEY

**THE
QUANTUM
BREACH**

DENVER ACEY



BONNEVILLE BOOKS TM

**An Imprint of Cedar Fort, Inc.
Springville, Utah**



September 3, Albuquerque, New Mexico

The alarm clock buzzed the same annoying way it had each morning for the past seven years, but today the sound was more tolerable. Tanner Zane didn't loathe waking up at the early hour. In fact, he was thrilled to start the day. After years of diligent work as a computer programmer, he was ready to take his long-awaited vacation.

Shaking the sleep from his head, Tanner got out of bed and walked toward the kitchen in an early morning daze. He opened the empty refrigerator, looking for a can of soda. Soda was, perhaps, an odd choice for a morning drink, but Tanner didn't drink coffee, instead opting for the sweet taste of Mountain Dew. He often heard that Silicon Valley ran on Mountain Dew. *Maybe it's the same thing here in the Rio Grande Valley*, Tanner speculated. Reluctantly, though, he realized he was out of his favorite drink.

Despite the lack of Mountain Dew, today was a momentous day. Tanner glanced at his packed bags by the door. He had finally made it to his sabbatical, the reward his employer gave him after seven years of faithful work. Most of his coworkers fell off the face of the earth during their two-month sabbatical, and Tanner intended to do the same. He planned to be a rested, carefree employee when he returned back to work after Halloween.

Tanner headed into the bathroom, pausing for a moment in front of the mirror. His brown hair was getting a little long. He should have gotten it cut before taking his trip, but he had been preoccupied with some last-minute details at work. Even though he had earned the right to have his sabbatical, Tanner didn't want to dump everything on his remaining coworkers who had to pick up his project load while he was gone.

Tanner vigorously rubbed his blue eyes before splashing hot water on his face. It was time for his daily shaving ritual. As he lathered up his face, he listened to the news coming from the TV in his bedroom.

"Today's headline comes from California," the reporter started. "Another major retailer is the victim of a hacking incident. Initial estimates say that nearly twenty million credit card numbers were stolen over the past two weeks. The hackers appear to have gained access to the private information by exploiting an unknown security flaw in the corporation's point-of-sale network."

Tanner shook his head as he listened to the report. The cyber-attacks were becoming more frequent and more public. He understood firsthand the damage a cyber-criminal could do to an unsuspecting corporation.

After all, he'd done it himself once.

Tanner finished shaving and took a brief shower. He quickly got dressed and packed his SUV with two suitcases and his prized possession—a Fender bass guitar. He wasn't sure if he'd get a chance to play his guitar during his sabbatical, but he decided to bring it anyway. His last task before leaving was to take out the trash.

"Hey, Tanner," his next-door neighbor shouted as Tanner walked outside into the cool September morning.

"Morning, Doc," Tanner said. Larry Killpack was a dentist who had moved in last month.

"Anything planned for this weekend?" Larry asked. He put his garbage can on the curb next to Tanner's.

"As a matter of fact, there is. I'm leaving on my sabbatical today."

"Sabbatical? I thought those were just for professors. Don't you work at a microchip company?" Larry asked.

“That’s right, but everyone at my company gets a paid sabbatical after seven years of employment,” Tanner explained.

“That’s a nice benefit. I should get a job like that.”

“Hey, you’re a dentist,” Tanner joked. “You don’t even work a full five days a week.”

“That’s a good point,” Larry said before changing the subject. “Do you need me to get your mail while you’re gone?”

“No thanks. I’ve got the post office keeping it.” Tanner liked his new neighbor, but he was paranoid about anyone holding his mail. The majority of people received credit card statements and other private information in the mail, and Tanner knew that it didn’t take much effort to steal an envelope and assume a new identity.

“Maybe there is something you can do,” Tanner said, deciding to take his neighbor up on his offer to help. “Would you mind putting my trash can back? I’ll be gone for a while.”

“No problem. Have a good trip,” Larry said as Tanner turned and walked back to his garage.

“Enjoy pulling teeth,” Tanner responded before climbing into his Toyota 4Runner.

Despite having ample money in the bank, Tanner lived a modest lifestyle. Being a millionaire wasn’t one of his dreams. Technically, he had already “been there, done that,” and the lifestyle wasn’t as wonderful as most people anticipated. That had been four years ago. Tanner had abandoned his lavish lifestyle when he found religion and joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, informally known as the Mormon Church. However, he had kept one item from his time of affluence—his forest-green Toyota 4Runner. It wasn’t the best vehicle for gas mileage, but it was perfect for his occasional weekend trip to the Jemez Mountains.

Driving out of his neighborhood, Tanner glanced east toward Sandia Peak. It was the highest mountain around and had a tram going from the eastern edge of town to a fancy restaurant on top. Tanner had never eaten up there, but he had taken the tram to the summit many times to watch the spectacular sunset. With his focus on Sandia Peak in the distance, Tanner failed to notice the black Suburban following nonchalantly behind his 4Runner.

Three miles down the road, Tanner made a quick stop at a convenience store. Grabbing a forty-four-ounce cup, he filled it with Mountain Dew. Choosing a donut from the counter, Tanner willfully surrendered \$2.36 for his unhealthy breakfast before calling his parents on his cell phone.

“Hello,” Tanner’s father, Gordon Zane, answered.

“Gordo!” Tanner said as he walked out to his SUV. Tanner knew it rubbed his dad the wrong way when he called him Gordo, and that was the exact reason why Tanner playfully continued doing it.

“Where are you?” his dad asked.

“I’m just heading out. I should be there by dinner.” Tanner was taking his mom and dad on a leisurely tour of the Pacific Coast during his two-month sabbatical. It was something he had wanted to do for years. He planned on picking up his parents in Arizona before heading over to Southern California.

“We’re really excited for this trip,” his dad said. “We’re all set to go.”

“Remember, I’m paying for everything. I won’t let you buy a single piece of gum,” Tanner reminded him.

“I know, I know. You’ve already made that perfectly clear.”

Gordon and Carla Zane were well into their sixties, and Tanner had decided it was the perfect time for an extended trip with his parents before health issues might prevent them from such an adventure in the future.

“I’ll call you when I get to Phoenix,” Tanner said, preparing to end the phone call.

“Wait, Mom wants to say hi,” Gordon countered. Tanner endured the awkwardly long pause before his mom finally got on the phone. It always seemed like she was preoccupied with something else.

“Are you bringing anyone on the trip with you?” Carla Zane asked.

Here we go again. “I’m not seeing anyone right now.” Tanner braced himself for the inevitable conversation that always followed when talking about his love life.

“Don’t you think it’s about time for you to bring someone home to meet your parents?” Carla pressed. “You’re thirty years old now. A nice young man your age should have settled down and started a family already.”

Tanner winced at his mother’s comment. He wondered if she knew that being single at thirty wasn’t all that uncommon anymore. “Don’t worry, Mom.

I'll let you know when I have a serious prospect.”

Carla softened her tone. “We just don't want you to be lonely your whole life. That's all.”

“I know, but don't worry about me. I'm still waiting for the right person to come along,” Tanner assured.

“Okay. We'll see you tonight,” Carla said. “I love you.”

“Love ya too, Mom.”

As an only child, Tanner often copped grief from his parents about still being single. Tanner knew his parents tolerated his conversion to Mormonism in hopes that he might get married sooner and introduce grandchildren to the family. Unfortunately, Albuquerque wasn't exactly overflowing with single Mormon females his age. Of course, the LDS faith didn't prohibit Tanner from marrying outside his religion, but he felt it was best to find a spouse who shared his newly embraced beliefs.

Over the years, Tanner had dated a variety of different women. Ironically, the closest he ever got to marriage was before his religious conversion, back when he'd dated Megan Holland during his junior year in college. Unfortunately, a misunderstanding had soured their relationship, and they separated instead of working things out. Tanner slightly shook his head in frustration. He had acted foolishly, handling the breakup like a pimple-faced teenager instead of a young adult. He wished he had spent more time making the relationship work instead of pulling out after a heated argument. As he accelerated his SUV onto the interstate, Tanner thought about Megan and where she might have ended up in life.



Tanner reached the outskirts of Phoenix just as the sun completed its descent over the White Tank Mountains. He called his parents' home but hung up when the answering machine started. Tanner tried his dad's cell number next, but it also went unanswered, something that frequently happened.

The Valley of the Sun had changed a lot since Tanner had grown up there. Old cow towns, like Gilbert and Chandler that he remembered from his youth, were now huge cities themselves. It seemed the city had doubled in size

since he'd accepted a scholarship to the University of New Mexico almost twelve years ago.

Pulling into his parents' neighborhood, Tanner recognized the familiar saguaros welcoming him back. Tanner never lived at this particular address because his parents had moved twice since he'd moved out. Nevertheless, visiting his mom and dad in Arizona still had the feeling of coming home.

Parking his 4Runner in the driveway, Tanner took a moment for an elongated stretch in the cool evening air before heading up to the porch. He rang the doorbell, but nobody answered. Usually Angie, the family's cocker spaniel, barked anytime the doorbell chimed, but tonight her yapping was noticeably absent. Tanner checked the front door and found that it was unlocked. Something wasn't right.

Letting himself in, Tanner shouted "I'm home." All he heard in reply was a muffled cry. Looking toward the kitchen, Tanner stopped in astonishment. His mom and dad were blindfolded, gagged, and bound to dining room chairs. Shocked, Tanner quickly moved to help his restrained parents. He started to undo the ropes binding his mother's hands to the chair but suddenly felt himself lurching backward as he was forcefully grabbed from behind.

Tanner tried to scream for help but couldn't. A hand covered his entire mouth while a large and powerful arm compressed his carotid artery in a sleeper hold. Tanner vainly fought against the unseen assailant, but it was no use. The room went black.



September 3, Los Alamos, New Mexico

One hundred miles northwest of Albuquerque sits the quiet town of Los Alamos, New Mexico. With a population near 12,000 people, this city on a remote mountain plateau is anything but typical. Los Alamos happens to be home to Los Alamos National Laboratory, or LANL, making it the city with the highest concentration of PhDs in the world. The laboratory is one of the largest science and technology institutions on earth. Over eight thousand physicists, chemists, engineers, and other scientists work at the thirty-six-square-mile facility, conducting multidisciplinary research in areas as varied as national security, renewable energy, nanotechnology, and supercomputing. Despite these current areas of focus, LANL's notoriety comes from the super-secret Manhattan Project of World War II.

Before 1943, Los Alamos was a private boys' ranch on the Pajarito Plateau in northern New Mexico. Looking for a secret and secure location to develop the first atomic bomb, the United States government purchased the ranch and replaced the adventurous boys with the most brilliant scientific minds of the time. From universities all over the country, hundreds of scientists and their families disappeared into the desert to develop the atomic bomb before Nazi Germany could. Under the direction of J. Robert Oppenheimer, the scientists

of Site Y achieved their goal and proved it by detonating the world's first nuclear weapon on July 16, 1945.

While nuclear weapon stewardship was still a primary focus at Los Alamos, the laboratory had since branched out into other fields, searching for the next scientific breakthrough. Such an event was unfolding in Technical Area Six, where Dr. Jodi McDonald and her team of scientists watched in amazement. For three years they had anticipated this moment. Battling through numerous budget cuts and congressional oversight committees, some of them wondered if their hours of work would pay off. They had. Gathered in the dark in a secure room in Building 72, the scientists created history as they started up the world's first operational quantum computer.

Dozens of green lasers sparkled spectacularly off a 500-carat diamond surrounded by wires and other optical components. This was no ordinary diamond—it was a man-made quantum diamond intentionally filled with imperfections. Throughout the diamond's crystal lattice structure were thousands of nitrogen vacancy centers, where a nitrogen atom was embedded instead of a normal carbon atom. By adjusting the frequency of the green laser, Dr. McDonald and her team of eight scientists had managed to control the magnetic spin of the nitrogen atom, creating a qubit, the fundamental component of quantum computing.

Quantum computers differ significantly from their traditional counterparts, which have been around since the 1970s. In essence, a traditional computer can only perform one computation at a time, but with qubit manipulation, a quantum computer can work on billions of computations simultaneously. All over the world, scientists were racing toward quantum computing with limited success. Recently, a Canadian start-up company showcased their prototype quantum computer using just a half-dozen qubits. Pursuing a different concept using nitrogen vacancy centers, the scientists at Los Alamos National Labs were able to manipulate 128 different qubits at once. This allowed their quantum computer to perform 2^{128} or 340 trillion, trillion, trillion simultaneous calculations—more processing power than every computer on the planet combined.



Jodi McDonald stood off to one side in the dark room, watching the high-fives and hugs among her team. With her arms folded across her white lab coat, she quietly embraced the euphoria of the moment. Even she, as the leading scientist on the project, had trouble wrapping her mind around the momentous occasion. A junior physicist who had noticed his boss quietly watching the rest of the group left the impromptu celebration and approached Jodi.

“Don’t you want to join us?”

“I’m just savoring the moment. I can’t believe we did it,” Jodi said.

“It’s history in the making,” her coworker observed.

Jodi’s smile faded. “Unfortunately, we’re still several weeks away from going public with our breakthrough. We’ve got to test everything again and validate our findings. We can’t afford to be off on anything.”

“Always the skeptical one, eh?”

“I’ve been burned by hasty conclusions more than once in my tenure. We have to be absolutely sure about the processing power. I don’t want any doubt when I present our findings next month.”

Jodi tensed as she thought about the upcoming International Conference on Quantum Information and Computation. She was a keynote speaker, promising to wow the conference attendees with “unprecedented research in quantum computing.”

“It’s not just about the conference, is it?” the other scientist playfully prodded.

Jodi glared at her junior teammate. Then an enormous grin broke out across her face. The upcoming conference was important, but everyone on the team knew that wasn’t the real prize Jodi wanted. If her presentation at the conference was successful, it would pave the way for her nomination for the Nobel Prize next year.



September 3, Chandler, Arizona

Everything was dark. Tanner's mind spun in frantic circles, trying to make sense of his current situation. He forced his eyes open and stared blankly at a single lightbulb overhead. It took him a moment to recognize his surroundings. He was sitting on a dining room chair in his parents' garage.

"I imagine you're shocked," a man's voice said from the shadows. Turning toward the mysterious voice, Tanner realized his wrists were duct-taped together and bound behind his back. Trying to use his legs as leverage, Tanner realized they too were bound together.

"What's going on?" Tanner demanded, working to regain his composure and annoyed that his voice sounded so feeble. Off to the side of the garage, he noticed lifeless carcass of the family pet discarded in a cruel manner. A sickening feeling washed over him. What had he gotten himself into?

"Let's start with what you know," the voice said. Slowly, a bearded man in his early fifties moved out of the shadows and into Tanner's view. While the man's voice had been intimidating, it was his size that truly struck fear into Tanner now—his assailant had to be at least six feet six inches tall and 240 pounds.

The attacker smiled brazenly at Tanner's fear, staring penetratingly into his eyes. "We are in control. Cooperation is your only option. Do you understand?"

"What are you talking about?" Tanner asked, fear gripping his emotions.

"You'll have to wait another seven years for your sabbatical," the tall man said. "You're going to spend the next two months working on a special project for us. There's no negotiation. If you cooperate, your parents will live to see their next wedding anniversary."

"What do you want?" Tanner asked, feeling more desperate. His wrists were beginning to throb, and his bladder was about to explode from too much Mountain Dew.

Leaning toward Tanner's right ear, the attacker whispered, "We need you to do some computer hacking for us."

Tanner's back stiffened, and he held his breath. The revelation that someone had found out about his secret hacking past was frightening. Tanner's fear turned to panic. He started to tremble and a wet spot appeared on his jeans. "Tall" smirked as he watched Tanner looking like a little puppy that had just wet itself after being scolded by its master.

Desperate to get some control over the situation, Tanner tried to reason with his unknown captor. "Okay, let my parents go, and we can talk."

"It's not going to work that way," Tall said. He nodded curtly his head, and an unseen conspirator standing directly behind Tanner went to work.

Someone behind Tanner held him in place as Tall put two strips of duct tape over Tanner's mouth. Then Tall placed a dark canvas bag over Tanner's head, completely blinding him. There was a brief pause, and then Tanner jolted as water from a garden hose washed away his urine. Cold and wet, with no ability to speak or see, Tanner only had his sense of hearing to predict what was coming next. He heard the garage door open and a large car or truck backed into the entrance. The vehicle turned off, and the garage door closed.

"We're going for a little ride," Tall said as he and the other captor lifted Tanner, still bound to his chair, and tossed him through the open hatch of a Suburban. Landing painfully on his left shoulder, Tanner felt like a discarded bag of trash left on the curb.

Tanner wasn't sure where he was going or how long he would remain in this precarious state, but he didn't have much time to speculate. Someone grabbed his right forearm, and Tanner recognized the cool tingle of evaporating rubbing alcohol. He knew what was coming next. He jerked involuntarily at the sharp prick of a needle. Fighting ineffectively against his restraints, Tanner realized he was being drugged. As his heart pumped what was probably Propofol throughout his body, Tanner's mind relaxed into a passive stupor. He was now heavily sedated, but not unconscious. He would remain coherent for the next several hours, but the milk of amnesia would effectively prevent him from remembering anything that had just happened.



Seeing that Tanner was prepped and ready for his long trip back to New Mexico, the mysterious men went to work on his parents. Gordon and Carla Zane wouldn't get the luxury of being drugged to forget the next part of their arduous journey. Still gagged and bound to their dining room chairs, Mr. and Mrs. Zane were covered with a blanket and wheeled out the back door of their home on a moving dolly. Using the cover of darkness to their advantage, the captors transported the couple across the quiet backyard to a U-Haul truck waiting in an adjacent alley. The kidnappers went about their duties nonchalantly, appearing to the casual observer to be legitimate moving men. The husband and wife were pushed up the ramp and into the moving truck. Quickly securing the chairs into place with moving straps, the men threw in the four suitcases that the couple had conveniently packed for their tour of the West Coast. With their passengers and luggage ready to go, the kidnappers started up the U-Haul and discreetly followed the black Suburban out of the quiet neighborhood.



Fall Semester, University of New Mexico ten years ago

Come on, I need your help,” Jeff Kessler pleaded.

“It’s not that I can’t do it. It’s just that I’m not sure it’s worth it,” Tanner responded to his twenty-two-year-old roommate.

“There’s no way I’m going to pass that class. If you don’t change my grade, I might not graduate next year,” Jeff said.

Tanner thought about his roommate’s predicament. Jeff was failing chemistry, badly. Even if he studied day and night, Tanner knew that Jeff still wouldn’t learn enough about chemical reactions and covalent bonds to ever pass. In his desperation, Jeff had begged Tanner to hack into the campus computer network and alter his grade.

“What’s in it for me?” Tanner asked.

“I’ll buy you a pizza.”

“I could get into a lot of trouble. That’s a lot of risk for just a pizza,” Tanner said.

“Then consider this the ultimate challenge,” Jeff said. “We’ll see who’s smarter. You or the campus IT department.”

Tanner laughed out loud. Jeff knew how to push a deal. He should have been a used-car salesman. “Okay, I’ll try it. Just to see if it can be done. But if

it gets too messy, I'm out."

"Just see what you can do. That's all I ask," Jeff said. "But I know you're a computer nerd, so I doubt you'll have any trouble."

Tanner hadn't realized it at the time, but he had just crossed the blurry line of ethics and entered into the world of computer hacking. Ironically, it wasn't the promise of wealth or fame that made Tanner commit his first cyber-crime. It was the thrill of trying something that hadn't been done before.

It didn't take long for Tanner to accomplish his hacking job because computer security was not a high priority at the time. The university used standardized computer accounts for everyone, consisting of a combination of a person's last and first names. From that information, Tanner quickly determined that the chemistry professor's login was "dixonbar." Discovering her password was almost as simple. All he had to do was go to the chemistry department.

"Hi, I'm Tanner Zane. Is Dr. Dixon here?" Tanner asked the part-time student receptionist.

"No, she's out for the rest of the day. Can I take a message?" the young woman asked.

Tanner flashed the receptionist an easy smile. Turn on the charm. "It's nothing really. I just brought her a little gift, seeing that the term is almost done." He held up a box of chocolates covered with wrapping paper.

"Are you trying to buy a good grade?"

"That's not necessary. I already have an A in her class," Tanner said with a tiny bit of arrogance. "But she's the best professor I've ever had, so I wanted to get her something to show my appreciation."

The receptionist studied Tanner and apparently decided that he seemed harmless "Her office door is open. It's the last one on the left. You can just put the gift in there," she offered.

Tanner gave the young woman a friendly wave before walking down the hall. Once inside Professor Dixon's office, he set down the gift and got to work. First he checked the professor's computer screen to see if she was logged in. She was, but the terminal was locked. He glanced around the desk and then lifted up the keyboard. He found what he was looking for, a yellow sticky note with "Whiskers" written on it.

Probably the name of her pet.

Tanner quickly logged in to the professor's computer with her password. It worked, but he didn't change Jeff's grade. Instead, Tanner locked the screen and left the office. If he spent too much time in here, it would raise suspicion. There were hundreds of terminals across campus where he could change the grade shortly.

"Anything else?" the receptionist asked as Tanner came back down the hall.

"No, you've been very helpful. Thank you," Tanner said,

It was just that easy.

Later that night, Jeff and Tanner celebrated his success over pizza.

"Did you give me an A?" Jeff asked.

"No way. That would be too obvious. I gave you a C." Tanner said as he took another bite of pizza. They were at their favorite pizza joint—Dion's.

Jeff leaned in over the table. "You know, I've been thinking. We might be able to turn this into a profit," he whispered. Jeff was always looking to make a quick buck.

"Changing grades for money?"

"Exactly. We could set up a little business. I'd be the front man and recruit all our customers, while you'd do the computer stuff. We'd charge people a hundred bucks to change their grade or get other valuable information," Jeff said.

The thought had also crossed Tanner's mind, but it was more than just the money. Tanner was hooked on the rush of doing something illegal. He wanted more, and with youthful invincibility unrestricted by moral values, Tanner quickly agreed to Jeff's scheme.

"We'd have to keep it simple. If we go too big, we'll get caught," Tanner said.

"Agreed," Jeff said. "I'll do all the leg work to find clients."

"And I'll do the hacking." Tanner chuckled.

The next day, the duo embarked on their new business venture. Changing grades or finding out a girl's class schedule would soon become some of their more popular requests. Since the chemistry professor didn't have the sense to change her password frequently, they had unlimited access to the university's mainframe to pilfer all sorts of information. Tanner didn't know it at the time,

but their little business venture would earn them almost \$10,000 over the next two years.



The black Suburban bumped wildly as it turned onto a dirt road, jarring Tanner out of his drug-induced sleep. Where was he?



September 4, Jemez Mountains, New Mexico

Tanner felt horrible—like he was experiencing one of the hangovers he'd frequently had before swearing off alcohol. Trying to clear his mind, he blinked a few times until he realized that a bag over his head, not blindness, was the reason he couldn't see.

Listening carefully, he searched for some sort of clue to his whereabouts. He could hear the faint sound of the car engine and feel the rhythmic movement of the vehicle as it bounced over a dirt road. Tanner's entire body was immobilized, and he couldn't open his mouth to speak. Making grunting noises, he tried to signal anyone who might hear him. Suddenly, the cloth sack covering his head was rapidly jerked away.

"Good morning, beauty," Tall said, slapping Tanner hard across the face. "How'd you sleep?" Tanner winced from the blow, and Tall laughed before crawling back to the passenger seat.

Tanner tried to get his bearings. His internal clock told him it was morning, and looking out the rear window to see faint pink light on scattered clouds above, Tanner figured he was correct. He tried to put the facts together from the previous night. He remembered arriving at his parents' home and finding them tied up, but after that he drew a blank. He couldn't remember anything else. It was as if time had skipped from last night to right now.

Tanner willed himself to relax and think. Observing and analyzing were some of his best strengths. Like his dad often said when he was younger, Tanner was full of street smarts. He knew he'd have to get his emotional mind in check. Only rational and deliberate decisions would help him survive.

The vehicle came to a sudden halt. With the Suburban motionless now, Tanner's mind quickly focused on the aches and pains in his body. From what he could determine, he had been tied to the chair all night. His back hurt terribly, and his legs were numb. Trying to swallow the pasty saliva in his mouth, Tanner wished for a cold drink of water and a Tylenol.

The tailgate of the Suburban quickly opened as Tall and another kidnapper lifted Tanner out of the back and set him upright on the ground. Tanner got a head rush as the blood flowed down to his legs. Tall reached out and ripped the duct tape off Tanner's mouth. Tanner howled in response due to a day's worth of stubble being ripped out by the roots. He wanted to swear at his kidnappers, but suddenly he remembered more pressing matters.

"I gotta go to the bathroom," he said rapidly.

"Well, go then," Tall responded unsympathetically. Unable to control his natural functions, Tanner wet his pants for the second time in twelve hours.

"Welcome to your new home," Tall announced, stepping back from the mess Tanner had created on the gravel driveway. "This is where you'll live and work for the next two months."

Tanner glanced around and got his first good look of the area. He was in a high mountain meadow. Large pine trees lined the edge of the clearing and seemed to spread out in every direction. A cabin stood off about ten yards from Tanner—really more of a mountain home than a cabin, with a log façade and a green steel roof. A spacious wooden deck came out the front door and wrapped around the entire ground level, with another deck extending out of a master bedroom on the second floor.

Tall spoke again. "As you can see, we are completely isolated here. That dirt road is the only way in or out," he said, motioning to the path they had just traveled. "It's a four-mile hike in any direction until you see another sign of life. That's plenty of time for us to track you down and kill you, just like hunting a deer. Our best marksman can easily hit a target at five hundred yards with his sniper rifle. You'd be foolish to even attempt an escape."

Tanner studied the other kidnapper. A little shorter and skinnier than the leader, this man had blond hair and glasses. He too looked ordinary and had no tattoos or other identifiable marks. Chances are Tanner would walk right past this man on the street and not even give him a second glance.

The shorter man reached into his coat pocket and took out a switchblade. Flipping the knife out, he cut the duct tape off Tanner's arms, wrists, and legs. Tanner momentarily thought he might be free, but before he could do anything, Tall lunged forward and smashed his fist into Tanner's gut. Tanner fell to the ground, gasping in pain. The two kidnappers then grabbed Tanner by his arms and dragged him onto the porch. Opening the front door, they shoved him through the entrance and threw him onto the floor. Tanner lay motionless for a moment, clenching his stomach.

The two men again lifted Tanner to his feet. "Don't!" he gasped. "I won't run. Just stop it, okay?" Satisfied he wasn't going to flee, the two men took a passive, but watchful, step back.

"Take off your clothes. You stink," Tall said.

Tanner did as he was told and was escorted by Tall to a small bathroom down the hall.

"Take a shower and clean up, but don't do anything stupid," Tall ordered. Tanner turned on the water and stepped into the shower, feeling uncomfortable that another man was watching him just three feet away. But the warm water soon soaked Tanner's head and helped clear his mind. Glancing around, Tanner noticed that he was in a typical bathroom complete with soap, shampoo, towels, and ... his electric razor on the counter.

Tall noticed Tanner's longer than usual gaze at the counter and responded, "Yes, that's your razor. You'll also find your other personal items here. This is your bathroom. Across the hall is a closet with all the stuff that you conveniently packed for your sabbatical. But you don't get your own bedroom," he warned. "You'll sleep on the couch."

Finished with his shower, Tanner grabbed a brown towel and dried off before walking over to the hall closet. Someone had neatly unpacked his clothes and hung everything up. At the bottom of the closet was a small dresser that contained his socks and underwear. He even had an extra pair of tennis shoes waiting for him. Tanner slowly got dressed, favoring his stomach, which

was still sore from the sucker punch. With a fresh pair of clothes on, Tanner turned toward Tall.

“Well, what do I do now?”

You've Just Finished your Free Sample

Enjoyed the preview?

Buy: <http://www.ebooks2go.com>