

CHAPTER FOUR

Two hours later, Williams was sitting nervously at the edge of an executive leather chair behind an eight-foot mahogany desk. His office was overpoweringly conservative. Facing the front of his desk were two high-backed Victorian chairs located on either side of a polished cherry table. A waist-high cabinet ran the length of two sidewalls and was spotless with the exception of a family photo or two. Handcrafted, brass lamps. Persian rug. Even a late 1800 French-style armoire emblazoned with his initials held anchor to resist the passage of time.

Williams stared pensively at a printout of Mason's personnel file. Located in these documents was an array of private information ranging from Mason's physical history to an extensive psychographic profile. His eyes scanned meticulously over each line item through a pair of half-frame glasses resting on the edge of his pointy nose. The events regarding Mason's patients over the last three weeks were taking their toll on Williams' ability to endure the idiocy of those around him. As far as he was concerned there was absolutely no excuse for not taking swift and decisive action. Two deaths? My God, what in the hell were they waiting for?

Finally he reached it, a series of historical psychological tests and evaluations. He looked quickly over the dates until he'd located the right one. Williams sighed. It was all right there in black and white. He pushed the report halfway across his desk, leaned back, and stared blankly up at the ceiling. He'd sworn to himself many times never to use that information. Making it public would no doubt ruin Mason's career and certainly taint the Center's reputation. To use it against an employee for any

reason contradicted the very cornerstone on which his great institution was based.

He pulled the report back across the desktop and re-read the damaging information. Given the recent events, however, the question was not if to use it but when. After all, the future of the entire center was at stake. It was *his* back that was against the wall. It was *his* ass on the line here. After reaching the last page, he gathered the stack of papers, organized them into a neat pile, and slipped them inside one of the desk drawers.

Williams picked up the phone and dialed a number in Colorado. He tapped his pen against a stone paper holder while he waited for the call to go through.

The line was busy.

He hung up and gazed vacantly across the room. What a mess. Williams could feel the stress biting in his stomach.

A green light flashed on his monitor and Williams leaned forward to take hold of the keyboard. He loved technology for the power it gave him.

“Security, control, and total information awareness, Karl,” Williams said in their first meeting. “Don’t worry about the money. I want lockdown here.”

And together they invested significant CME dollars towards protecting the data and research beneath his wing. He went as far as making each physician sign a non-compete, non-disclosure agreement with a \$500,000 dollar penalty which meant that any research being done at the CME was going to stay there for quite some time.

As far as he was concerned, the only way to achieve complete security was through absolute control. Each physician and researcher was forced to keep his or her records, measurements, and transcripts on a central database that was hand-designed by Beltman for maximum security. Although each doctor could easily access his or her own work at anytime, only Williams could access

everything. This would prevent a disgruntled researcher from leaving with someone else's idea. It allowed Williams to effectively "lock out" anyone from their own research should they choose to leave the CME. It also gave Williams total visibility into everything that went on.

A shiny gloss covered his eyes as the screen lit up and named its parameters. Ten seconds later, the screen read:

-PASSWORD?

His fingers danced speedily over the keys.

-VERIFICATION?

He typed it again.

-STAND BY FOR PHYSICAL
IDENTIFICATION...

The cursor blinked rapidly and then disappeared into a sea of black. Within seconds the computer screen split into two separate halves. The section on the left had a two-dimensional chart with a zigzag line connecting the tops of several colorful bars. Plotted beneath were the words "Dr. Allen Williams." The right half of the screen remained blank with the exception of four bold words across the top:

-VERNACULAR RECOGNITION SEQUENCE
READY...

Williams reached for a long pen-like lever at the side of his computer, pulling it downwards like a gambler drawing the lever on a slot machine. He spoke slowly and deliberately into the tip.

"Dr. Allen Williams."

The right half of the screen changed from black to a chart identical to the left side. Moments later the computer moved the graph on the right to a position directly on top of the left half to show a perfect match. The system beeped as the screen flashed again to darkness.

-GOOD AFTERNOON DR. WILLIAMS...

The screen erupted into several brilliant colors and then arrived at the intended destination. Peering anxiously at the screen through his rectangular glasses, Williams' fingers continued to pound the keys.

-C>: VIDEOTRANSIT

This was the command to enter a secure, video-conferencing communication system. This software, although compatible with any other video conferencing system, was specifically designed for Dr. Williams' and the Center's use. Beltman developed it with features that would ensure the secrecy and security of the CME's local area network when connecting with sister nodes across the globe.

-DR. ALLEN WILLIAMS CONFIRMED...
PROCEED...

The screen changed instantly to a computerized version of a Rolodex. He carefully positioned the cursor above the advance button and slowly rolled through each phone number. There it was. Geniomics, Inc. He touched the Internet address and the computer automatically dialed the number.

-LINK ESTABLISHED... transmitting sequence

Williams tightened his tie and adjusted a small camera that rested on the top part of his monitor. After patting down the side of his thinning hair, he tapped a button that read "PHANTOM." This feature allowed Williams to contact select Internet locations outside of the Center without an official record of a communications transfer. In effect, it scrambled the transmission so that the phone lines, routers, switches, ISP and the local server could not register an outgoing signal. It also enacted a compression and triple-DES encryption sequence that would further scramble the transmission in the event of a mid-line breach.

A couple of three-dimensional icons appeared at the top half of the screen. One was an external picture of the

CME and the other a photographic rendering of the Geniomics headquarters in Seattle. Connecting them was a rotating disk that appeared to spin in mid-air and travel along an arc between the two buildings. Depending on who was transmitting the signal the disk would switch directions.

A small box suddenly appeared in the lower quadrant of the screen. Centered in its frame was a man with slicked black hair, thin, angular eyebrows, and a sharp, angled nose. He wore an expensive suit and was chewing ice.

"Hello, Allen," said the man, his voice instantly condescending. The other man was Randy Edmonds, the aggressive thirty-eight year old CEO of Geniomics, Inc. Although he had originally started his corporate career with a high-tech telecommunications firm just outside of San Jose, his chemical engineering background and entrepreneurial spirit soon took over. At age twenty-three, Edmonds founded the Seattle-based, Geniomics Incorporated with fifteen thousand dollars. The pharmaceutical giant's market value was currently set at well over \$80 billion. More impressive was the fact that in two short weeks they would announce to the world, the first ever cure for the common cold.

A massive publicity campaign had already begun. Television. Talk shows. Tabloids. Newspapers. Radio. Everywhere one looked, Geniomics' name was in the spotlight. Their new drug was labeled everything from "the most significant discovery of the 21st century" to "a sign of the second coming of Jesus Christ." The only remaining barrier was to finalize some minor, ancillary tests before the FDA's approval hearing in eight short days.

Williams adjusted the VRS mike at the side of his monitor to better capture his voice. "Randy, just calling to see how things are going."

Edmonds' image jerked slightly as Williams' system decoded each frame and data signal. "No glitches so far. Things are progressing as planned."

"Is the money in place?"

"Yes, Allen. Again. He better take it this time."

Williams felt suddenly uneasy. "He will. This is more than he's ever seen. I don't anticipate any problems."

"Good, though I'm not terribly impressed with your skills to anticipate." Edmonds tapped his own finger against his desktop camera, the image filling Williams' screen. "You provide me with solutions, you got that? Money will be available by five o'clock today. He better take it, Allen."

Williams' smiled nervously. "I'm sure he'll be interested. This is an incredible opportunity for him."

"Damn right it is."

"Another patient died today."

Edmonds' eyes brightened perceptibly. "Good for me."

"Yes. I suppose that is good for you." Williams unlocked a drawer and took out a copy of Geniomics' financial reports. He set the document beneath the desk lamp and thumbed slowly through each page. "And the approval?"

Edmonds' winced. "That's another story. Those idiots in DC scrutinize every goddamn detail. But I've got a couple of friends who owe me. Things should be taken care of."

"And the testing is still on schedule?"

"We'll see."

Williams frowned. "What's the timeline we're looking at here?"

"Tests will be ready. That is not your concern, Allen. Is there a problem?" Edmonds asked.

"Of course not. But Shane's memo will specifically draw attention to those tests. We need to make that deadline. We need to pass and be ready to move."

"Who the hell do you think you're talking to, here?" Edmonds asked, his face suddenly tense. "Don't you think I know that? One thing at a time. You take out the risks on your end. This will be the biggest damn thing of the modern era."

"I hope so."

"Just do your part, Allen."

Before he could reply, Edmonds had terminated the link-up. Williams exited the system and stared irritably across the room. He felt unsure. Unsatisfied. He picked up the phone and re-dialed the Denver number. It was still busy. He hung up and then leaned back into his chair, closing his eyes and placing his hands on his head. He wasn't happy with what Edmonds had told him. Things were getting messy and he needed help in cleaning them up.

Williams rolled back through his electronic Rolodex and quickly jotted down a new phone number. A local number. He turned off the computer and punched his intercom button to get an outside line.

"Good afternoon, KVTL-Channel Four, can I help you?" said a friendly male voice.

"Yes," answered Williams, his thin hands gripping the armrests of his chair. "Get me Katie Burns. I have some information I know only she can appreciate."