

BRING
A GUN
TO
SCHOOL
DAY

A Novella

DARIAN WORDEN



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Chapter One

Six fifty-five a.m. Erik Shylding's alarm clock went off. He rolled over and groaned as he awakened. Slowly opening his eyes, he looked at a piece of paper taped to the wall of his cluttered room. In thick black letters it said, "If I can piss off one asshole today, it was worth getting out of bed."

"Gonna have to be a lot of assholes today," he grumbled. Yesterday had seen the worst high school shooting in American history and he knew that somehow, they would find a way to make him suffer for it.

He stumbled over to his black jeans, gray socks, and beat-up combat boots then slowly pulled them on. Erik knew he would need to be on his highest guard today. His mind, his way of life, and all those things he saw as his self would be under attack like never before. Yesterday's shooter was too much like him for his enemies to ignore. He listened to similar music, wore similar clothes, and even looked a little like Erik. The fact that Erik had no intention of shooting up the school had no bearing on how he would be treated.

His enemies were numerous. From the school administration, to many teachers, to most students, to the cops he sometimes passed on his way

to the bus stop, nobody would give him an easy time today. Erik clenched his meaty fists and laced up his boots. The only way out was to fight.

But how? Erik wondered as he walked downstairs to get some food. *How do you fight people who wage war on your mind? Words don't deter them, reason doesn't sway them, and violence can't get them all.*

It was something he thought about a lot. With a muscular six-foot frame, frequent training, and plenty of aggression he had the confidence to take on anyone in a fight. He also knew how to use guns, brains, words, and other weapons. Unfortunately for Erik, his enemies always had the upper hand when he was at school. The institution was stupid, but it was bigger than him.

Looking at the clock, he snapped out of his reverie. 7:09 - the school bus would pass in a couple of minutes to bring him to his daily confinement at Suburban Regional High School. Erik grabbed his tattered army cap, his black backpack, and some beef jerky before walking out the door. He left his usual black leather jacket at home this warm April day. There was nobody to say "goodbye" to because his parents were both already on their way to work and his brother was at college.

He got to the bus stop just in time. After settling into an uncomfortable seat near the middle of the yellow human hauler, he opened the bag of jerky and started chewing. He talked to nobody. Two of his best friends lived less than a mile from him, but they were on a different bus route. Everyone on this bus was an asshole. He could hear them mumbling in the back. *Probably whispering about how I'm about to kill them.* He could not hear what they were saying, but he was right. They were wrong. This is how it always was. Erik sat alone, quietly stroking his stubbly chin.

Bus number 42 arrived at the school. Everyone got off the bus and filed toward the main entrance, an ugly row of glass doors wedged between yellow pillars. A black video camera was perched like a raven above the entrance. As always, students were corralled into their assigned areas to wait for the homeroom bell to ring. Erik went with the other juniors into the main cafeteria. He felt the hostile eyes of those around him. Even the teachers

were staring. With an angry face on, he momentarily met eyes with one he particularly hated. Mr. Stretch quickly turned away.

“Damn right, asshole,” mumbled Erik as he sat with his friends Henry and Johnny.

“Hey man,” said Johnny. The two of them got along well even though Erik would never have a sip of alcohol and Johnny already had some crazy acid stories to tell. They had enough in common that it didn’t matter. Erik grunted a greeting back at him.

“Dude, weren’t you wearing that shirt yesterday?” Henry asked.

Erik looked down. It was the one with the cracked skull and crossed spears on it. “I guess so,” he said. “I don’t really look at myself in the morning.”

“I wouldn’t either if I was you,” joked Henry. He was always a smartass, but he was rarely annoying about it. Like Erik, he did not care for school, but liked learning. He could spend hours at a time discovering all he could about any piece of machinery he came across.

“Did you hear about that shooting?” asked Johnny.

“Yeah,” said Erik. “Fucker killed like 20 people.”

“Yeah man, seriously. I bet if some dickhead tried that here, you and uh, Henry would find some crazy way to KILL his ass before his first bullet hit anything!”

Their laughter was interrupted by the buzz of the school public address system. “ATTENTION ALL STUDENTS. AT THE SOUND OF THE BELL, PLEASE PROCEED TO THE GYMNASIUM FOR A SPECIAL PROGRAM.”

“Oh great, a good old-fashioned brainwashing session,” snarled Erik. “We don’t get enough of that shit around here.”

“Seriously man, I bet they go after you today,” Johnny warned Erik. “Everyone’s already been sayin’ if anyone shot up the school, it would be you.”

“I know, I’m actually kind of worried tha-”

“EXCUSE ME, ERIK!” shrieked Mrs. Patty, everyone’s favorite busybody. “You need to take off that hat in the building!”

“What if it’s against my religion to show my head in such a foul, ignorant place?”

“You’re the one being ignorant, mister. If you were a member of a religion that has such rules, you can bring in a note from your parents and tell the administration. But you-”

“Oh so that’s it, huh? That’s what democracy means? If you’re not in a big enough group, the majority gets to screw you over for the common good?”

“Look, either take the hat off or I’m writing you up. And PUT ON YOUR ID’S!”

“Fine.” Erik grumbled. The three acceded to her demands, *THIS time*, Erik thought, his buzzed head exposed to the room.

“I just DON’T see what your big problem is with them anyway,” Patty said.

“I just DON’T like being tagged like goddamned cattle.”

“WATCH your mouth, Erik. You know there’s a good reason for them...”

“So we won’t complain as much when Joe Gestapo demands our papers later in life.”

“...AND the school decided that this is what we’d do. You HAD your chance to complain before.”

“Like any of them would listen to me.”

“Well maybe if you learned to be nice for once and looked like a normal person, not some weird action hero or whatever you’re supposed to be...”

“Well that just wouldn’t be very Erik Shylding of me, now would it?”

BEEEEEP! The bell cut off any further discussion they might have had. It was time for the good old-fashioned brainwashing session.

Erik and his friends left the cafeteria.

“Hey, you’re Winston Smith today,” noted Johnny. Erik nodded, an amused smile finding its way to his face. He thought he could hear hostile whispers in the crowd around them.

Henry looked at the pale yellow card dangling from a plastic tube around his friend’s neck. “Is that the guy from that *Nineteen Eighty-Four*?”

“Yup. It’s a good book, but I’m getting way too close to living it for my liking.”

Johnny agreed. “Yeah, dude. I read that a while ago. It’s pretty intense.”

Henry shrugged. The three noticed their friend David, “not Dave,” in the crowd exiting the stairway.

“Hey guys,” David spoke from between his braces. “ID’s today?”

“Yeah, man,” grumbled Johnny, “Patty is such a BITCH!”

“Tell me about it. I have to sit through a double period of her crap every day.”

David was Henry’s next-door neighbor. The two misfits had been friends since David had moved to Edgemoor when he was eight. This was before they came to know the elusive Erik and the out-of-towner Johnny, so they really had no other friends back then. Many adventures, explosions, and minor injuries later, the duo could still have some great fun together. Unfortunately they rarely saw each other during their school days because David was born a month after the cutoff date for entering school, so he was always a grade below his best friends.

He again broke the silence as the four walked with the crowd down the hallway. “Hey, I had a sweet idea last night. We should get some old-school prison-looking chains to use for our ID’s.” David preferred the type of protest that entailed as little risk as possible. His ID was on when he entered the building.

“That is a fucking sweet idea,” Henry said, “In fact, I myself might have some rusty-ass chains hangin’ out in my shed that would work great for that.”

“We’ll have to check that out after school then.”

They entered the gymnasium. As they walked up the bleachers, they were surrounded by nervous whispers and looks of fear and hatred, most of which were directed at Erik. They sat in the corner.

“Hey, got any good shit to throw at some douchebags?” Henry asked in his typically elegant style. “Oh wait here comes Miller.”

Mrs. Miller was one of the nicer teachers at the school. As much as the four friends hated school, there were always some teachers who could make the day a little better.

“Guys, I know David’s supposed to be sitting over with the sophomores, but I promise not to say anything if you just don’t disrupt this assembly,” she told the four of them.

“Aww come on,” Johnny pleaded, his head tilting to his right.

“Please, people are shaken up and I don’t think you guys want to be drawing attention to yourselves right now.”

“Attention is drawn to me,” said Erik, “I just be myself and it comes.”

“Well...whatever the case, could you just sit still and not yell too much? Okay?”

“Suuuure,” Henry said.

The bleachers filled up. Mrs. Miller took a seat not far from the four friends. Erik looked around and noticed that there did seem to be an undue amount of attention directed towards him. *I’ll be good today if they are* he thought. He doubted this would happen. Principal Wermlin glanced toward him nervously from the floor, and muttered something to disciplinarian Johnson. Erik and the disciplinarian did not quite make eye contact.

Wermlin stepped up to the microphone. “Could I have your attention please,” he stated. His shrill voice was obeyed. Erik made sure to pay close attention.

“For those of you who haven’t heard, yesterday a student at a Kansas high school pulled out two *handguns* from under his leather jacket and went on a *shooting spree*, terrorizing the school and shooting people at random

before killing himself. Nineteen of his fellow students and a teacher died in the tragedy. Twenty-two others were wounded.”

He paused. *This guy sure talks like a politician*, Erik thought. Wermlin did not mention that at least three of the students bled to death while the police wasted time “securing the perimeter” of the school, making sure nobody entered and nobody exited without first being frisked and detained for interrogation and counseling. They continued to justify their actions by saying that if they had done otherwise the shooter could have escaped and eluded arrest. However, news reports taken shortly after the tragedy contained many interviews with students who said they told police hours before they entered the building that the shooter had killed himself. By the time the evening news aired, these interviews were rarely seen.

Wermlin also did not mention that the shooter drew his first gun at the entrance of the school and shot his way through the metal detectors. The guard at the door ran for cover as soon as the shooting began.

What Wermlin did mention was a seemingly inconsequential detail, the shooter’s choice of clothing. *What purpose could that possibly serve*, wondered Erik, *besides further isolating those who seem ‘different,’ the system’s failures?* Erik had long known that government schools were designed to stamp the “proper” values on new generations. It made perfect sense for them to condone or encourage the ostracism of those who did not accept their teachings. After all, weenies like Wermlin were as frightened by those who were “different” as anyone could be, since each anomaly represented a failure somewhere in the system and a threat to what he thought was stability.

The pause was just long enough for a few murmurs to fill the room and for Erik to note a few things. The shrill voice once again echoed. “The administration is taking this matter very seriously. All of the guidance counselors will be available if you need them.” *They’re about the last thing I need right now*, thought Erik.

“In addition, we are fortunate enough to have a professional teenage crisis counselor on hand for the rest of the week, and we are also in communication with representatives from a special pilot program of the Department

of Homeland Security.” *Okay, that is REALLY the last thing I need right now.* Erik glanced toward David, who looked a bit uneasy. His fear could not turn into anger as quickly as Erik’s did. Henry looked indifferently annoyed, and Johnny seemed to be somewhere else entirely as the principal continued.

“To prevent another situation like yesterday’s, the Department of Homeland Security rapidly put together its School Safety Initiative, which will integrate various components as the program is worked out.”

“Rapidly my ass,” Erik grumbled to those around him, “They’ve had plans for this kind of thing for years. They always do.”

“At this point, I’d like to introduce our special counselor, Ms. Fikner.”

Erik glared at the fat female energetically stalking toward the microphone. She gave a quick look around and started blabbering.

“I’m sure this is a tough time for all of you. The community of a school like yours was shattered yesterday by gun violence. I’m sure you can feel it here too, in your own community.”

“What the hell is this crazy bitch trying to tell us?” wondered Erik aloud.

“Remember that at every crisis, a community must come together as it never has before to include all of those who have been left out. In this way, hard times can make us stronger if we pull together. It is when people feel isolated that they turn to desperation and guns. I will be here to help you as long as it is necessary, but you too need to help by working to include those who have isolated themselves, thinking they can be stronger alone when they really need to be part of something bigger than themselves.”

She might have gone on, but Erik stopped paying attention. *Part of something bigger than myself? What the hell is that supposed to mean? That I’m not good enough unless I ditch who I am to join them? And why is she blatantly demonizing guns like that? And what the hell is this community she keeps talking about? A bunch of people forced into a hive together for seven hours shouldn’t be called a community.*

Wermlin returned to the microphone. “With the guidance of the School Safety Initiative, we are renewing our efforts to keep weapons and other violent influences out of our school. The most immediately visible result of these efforts will be a series of posters reminding students of the consequences that they will face for violating this policy. Remember, we will be watching for warning signs and taking them seriously.”

Wermlin then announced that he would “now be taking questions.” With a mind full of questions Erik raised his hand. He could see the principal look directly at him, then turn to acknowledge another student. Henry and David also noticed Wermlin ignore their friend while quickly answering the few other questions being raised.

“I don’t think Principal Douchebag wants to hear anything from you,” Henry said.

Erik nodded. “Yeah, and do you know WHY?” he started raising his voice. “Because he’s a WORTHLESS TYRANT!” Erik yelled directly at Wermlin, who was doing a bad job of pretending to not notice. “A WASTE OF LIFE!”

Erik’s friends and some other people nearby started laughing, some more nervously than others. Mrs. Miller rolled her eyes and began moving toward Erik. Wermlin muttered something to Johnson.

The bell rang and everyone was sent to their homerooms. Erik’s day had just begun.

Chapter Two

Erik's first class was history, and not surprisingly, the teacher wanted to discuss current events. Since he didn't want to bother getting involved, Erik sat in the back of the room. He did want to hear what stupidity would arise from the discussion – at least until he was removed from class, something he expected would happen during the day.

Mr. Edsel and some students discussed yesterday's shooting for a while. About halfway through the period, Edsel began a seemingly endless monologue. He stood nearly motionless as he droned on about how the music that the shooter was reported to listen to was probably a bad influence, and his fellow students should have noticed something was not right with him how he dressed like that and was such an outcast and didn't contribute to his school and...

"I don't think it was the music that was so much a problem," said one student during one of Edsel's long pauses. "He was influenced by violent things like weapons and stuff. I think we really need to make people know that weapons are not an option for dealing with problems today, and maybe people shouldn't be allowed to have guns as much either."

“And how would you enforce that?” blurted Erik. “I’m guessing it would be at the point of guns in the hands of government *supermen*.”

“What would *you* propose, Erik?” Edsel asked, surprised that Erik was doing something other than drawing in his notebook. “How do you think madness like this can be stopped?”

“Well,” Erik started, “I’m sure there are a lot of things that could be done to take care of whatever problems contribute to people going on rampages like this. But they’d probably all take a while and you still can’t eliminate the possibility of random nuts attacking people. I think the simplest solution is to recognize what nature always shows us, which is that, well, being helpless always makes you less safe. People need to take responsibility for their own safety.”

“By doing what, Erik?”

“Humans have always relied on tools to do things they can’t do with just their bodies. I say it’s time to stop denying the part of our humanity that makes us users of weapons.”

“*Are you saying that we should all carry guns?*” People were looking at Erik very strangely by now.

“I’m saying that we should all be *allowed* to, sure. It doesn’t take that much self-control to not shoot innocent people.”

“Then if someone attacked the school, there’d be bullets flying everywhere...”

“Well, first, it would be a lot less likely for someone to attack a building that could be filled with armed people, and second, even if a few stray bullets hit someone that’s still better than just letting some nut go on a rampage and hoping the police come in time with *their* guns and don’t hit any bystanders.”

“Okay, *that* sounds pretty nuts,” a student said.

“Yeah, I don’t think we should really let anyone have a gun,” another said, “We just need to get better security and get messed-up people some help.”

“And by messed-up, you mean?” Erik asked.

Edsel interrupted, “Okay, let’s not let things get out of hand here. Erik, what you need to realize is that life is unsafe, and yes we need to deal with that with things like police and uh, those ID’s you always complain about, but be realistic here. Isn’t letting anybody carry a gun a bit extreme?”

“Look, you just said life is unsafe and we need to deal with it, right? Well, *I* am dealing with it in the most realistic and direct way possible. You are ignoring it, not dealing with it. You just want to hide from violence and weapons and have someone else protect you. You want to be locked away from the reality that this can be a harsh world and people might try to kill you. The only ‘solutions’ you can come up with are more of the same garbage that hasn’t worked in the past!”

“Well, that’s just your opinion.”

“Seriously, lecture me about being realistic! You can’t make a notebook give off light no matter how hard you screw it into a lamp or how many volts you put into it; you gotta use a lightbulb. All this ‘let’s get someone else to protect us’ crap isn’t going to do anything no matter how hard you screw people or how many rips you put into the Bill of Rights.”

BEEEEEP!

None of the students were listening to Erik by this point. They were too busy packing up their bags, gossiping about how crazy he was, and rushing into the hallway.

“Erik, can I have a word with you?” Mr. Edsel asked.

The two stood amongst the chaos of the rush from the room. It gradually became quiet as students left and they were alone.

“Look, I don’t want to make you late to your next class but we need to talk about some things.”

“Ohhkay.”

“You really need to take it easy. I understand your nerves are high at a time like this, but you really need to tone down your language and behavior. I heard that you were acting very disrespectful during today’s assembly and you weren’t so stellar in my class either.”

“It’s the only way I get heard around here.”

Students began filing in and sitting in their places for the next period.

“Well maybe you would be understood if you could be a little understanding yourself sometimes. Nobody wants to be yelled at or treated with disrespect.”

“I’ve tried life that way and all I got for it was disrespect.”

“And it should go without saying that in this day and age, talking about guns in school is a touchy subject, so you should really be careful what you say in class.”

Erik didn’t fully grasp what was going on inside Edsel’s mind so he remained silent. To Edsel, guns were inherently wrong and bringing one to his sanctuary was a sin no matter what the purpose.

“That’s all. I hope I didn’t make you late.”

Erik did not hurry to health class. He didn’t expect to be late, and didn’t really care if he was.

He did not know that as part of the School Safety Initiative, Suburban Regional’s attendance program had just been modified. Now teachers were able to check various “threat flag” boxes next to the names of students in their roster. Edsel had just checked the boxes for “discussion of weapons,” “discussion of bringing weapons to school,” “hostility toward fellow students,” “hostility toward staff,” and “general disrespect for authority.”

Attendance at the school was taken by having teachers check off names in a computer program that was linked to a central database in the school offices. If a student’s name did not appear for a class it was supposed to, the program would draw attention to it and a staff member would probably investigate whether the student had cut. It was an obscenely expensive and often unreliable system. However, it was justified on the grounds that it helped the administration keep track of all of the school’s students for their safety. Who would argue against keeping “the children” safe?

Suburban was the only school in the area to have such an attendance system, which many praised as the way of the future. This gained the at-

tention of the local Department of Homeland Security Field Office, which sent one of its technical experts to explore the possibility of testing future surveillance systems in the building.

One component of the School Safety Initiative was a plan to use a program similar to Suburban's in every school, but with the addition of threat flags that teachers could highlight. The program would alert the administration whenever a student talked about weapons or managed to raise ten other threat flags. In the future, it might even be linked to radio frequency identification tags that would allow the program to automatically record when a student entered a room. The teacher's only duty would then be to mark threat flags when necessary. However, due to glitches and general incompetence, the program was not yet compatible with the school's central database, so no threat flags could be viewed.

"What the fuck?" Erik stumbled upon another component of the School Safety Initiative: "informational posters."

**CARRYING A KNIFE?
WE'LL WRECK YOUR LIFE!**

These words stuck out in blazing red boldface from the black poster, which also prominently featured a pair of handcuffs on top of a folding knife. A little logo at the bottom showed a pair of eyes overlooking a classic schoolhouse building, and proudly identified the work of art as a production of the "DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY – School Safety Initiative."

I don't believe this shit! Erik quickly looked around and saw nothing but empty hallway. In one ferocious motion, he ripped the poster off the wall, crumpled it in his hands and dropkicked it down the hall. *These sure came out fast!*

It was bad enough for the government to make propaganda posters to courteously remind people how short their leashes were, but it really pissed

off Erik when they had to include some catchy rhyme as if they were coaxing children to stay on the path. “Click it or ticket!” “Don’t lie for the other guy.” They were all ridiculous and Erik hated them all.

His classroom was right around the corner and he entered the room just as the bell rang. He was angry as fuck and wasn’t about to talk to anybody.

“Okay class...” Erik was slowly drifting away from his surroundings as the teacher began talking. He noticed how nervous some looked were when he entered the room. *There must be something I can do about all of this.*

Again, what? He heard the name of the infamous high school. Maybe we need security guards, a student said. Others argued against that. The teacher thought having more cameras was a good idea. It didn’t seem to matter that cameras and guards didn’t stop yesterday’s tragedy. The security guards ran away and the cameras just made the videotaped deaths more profitable.

Erik withdrew further into his mind. *God I hate this place.* The others droned on. *Got to be something I can do.* We need to do this, one said. We need that. We have to do more.

To Erik it was more of the same. *We, we, we – it’s always we – and whenever they say “we,” they really mean “I think everyone should be forced to...”*

“Anti-social.” “Angry.” “Paranoid.” “Problems with authority.” All of these buzzwords and scare-phrases were now being thrown around the room as much as they had just been thrown at Americans by politicians, anchors, and assorted “experts.” *Do they even have brains? They say lots of things, but the words I hear are all someone else’s.* One of the “good students” repeated a passage nearly verbatim from a prominent expert’s speech, and the teacher nodded approvingly. *I guess you don’t get good grades by thinking for yourself.* Erik had recently noticed that what passed for intelligence in the system was usually just the ability to repeat facts as

closely as possible to how they were given to you. *Just press record then play; that's all we do here.*

The teacher's voice caught his attention. "Well maybe school uniforms aren't such a bad idea. I mean, they might help people realize that we aren't so different from each other just because of what we buy."

But we ARE different, asshole! Erik wasn't going to bother talking after the way he had been received in his last class. *People are different, and only a conformist asshole like you would think that denying our differences could make life better! People get pissed when the way they are isn't respected, and what could be a more authoritative way of saying 'fuck you' than making someone wear a stupid-ass costume? People do, buy, and wear what they do because of what they like. It reflects your personality. I guess this guy thinks we'd all be so happy to have our personalities picked out by our enlightened masters. I'm supposed to learn from this jackass, too.*

By now Erik wasn't even hearing what was said in the room. He just waited for the bell to ring. They weren't saying anything he hadn't already heard anyway. He looked down at his desk. A smooth slice of wood reflected light at his face. It just had to be written on. Erik put his pen to the desk and scratched out his mark in angular letters.

Why do I have problems with authority?
Because it's always had a problem with me.

He looked up at the wall. As his eyes drifted over the rows of glossy white cinderblocks, he thought that this was what these rooms were made to turn out: foundation-building blocks as uniform as possible.

Could one bad block make the whole wall crash down?

That word was being said again. "Antisocial!" *What kind of society am I supposed to be opposing again?* Erik thought for a moment and resumed vandalizing the desk.

An antisocial man may be all that you see
but it aint my fault society's anti-me

With a devious smile he looked around the room. *I kinda like being the bad block around here.*

Words were still being flung around the room and Erik didn't really care. His mind focused on mayhem and metal songs.

"Safety! We! Security! Community! Safe environment!"

Erik was still tired of the bullshit, but he could fight it. He could leave his mark on the world.

"Guns! Violence! Anger! Rage! Anti-social! Leather jacket! Everything's different now!"

BEEEEEP!

Erik walked into the hallway thinking of ways to bring the place crumbling down. Maybe he and David could think of something during lunch – just three more periods to go. He took an indirect route to his next class and walked proudly with a mind in rebellion.

Three boring periods later, Erik was on his way to lunch. At least he did not have to hear about the shootings as much in those classes – just a few comments here and there. He strolled down to his locker to switch the books in his backpack to his after-lunch load.

He was walking down the stairway when he saw Liz start climbing them.

"Hey!" her face seemed to brighten as she looked at him. "Johnson get you yet?"

"No," Erik smiled, "I guess he isn't done getting together the army he's gonna need."

"Hahaha...I'm surprised he didn't have one waiting for you after the assembly."

Erik looked at the wall, then at her. "Oh...yyyeah I was kinda pissed."

“Well haven’t you heard? You’re going to shoot up the school pretty soon. All the people who matter know so.”

“Really? Why haven’t I been told? Well, actually, I guess I kind of have.”

“Whatever – stupid people can’t run your life.”

“They sure try.”

“Yeah! I believe it. Anyway, I’m probably gonna be late to class.” She slowly started climbing the stairs again.

“Aren’t you always late?”

She continued up the steps, both of them turning to keep facing each other. “mmmmm...yeah, but I’m starting to get in trouble with Stretch for it.”

“I hate that guy.”

“Everybody does. See ya!”

“See ya!”

Erik walked out of the stairway. He never seemed to be aware of what he was doing when he talked to Liz. *I’m never fully here in my mind.* He walked up to his locker. *I can’t talk to people here.*

He pulled his locker open. *It’s not just her.* He held his backpack in front of him and unzipped the main compartment. After getting what he needed, he slung his bag back onto his shoulders. The bell rang. Erik wondered if Liz got to her class on time as he made his way to the cafeteria. The teacher watching the door gave him a dirty look as he stepped into the room with a clenched face staring forward. He walked toward his usual seat.

“Oh shit! Erik freakin’ Shylding! Run for your lives!”

“Hey Mark,” Erik said, thinking he found Mark funny. He sat down two seats away, across from David, who was munching on a sandwich by himself. There were a few people in this lunch that Erik thought were okay, Mark included, but the only person he talked to much was David. Maybe he was just used to talking to David outside of school. Maybe they had a lot in common. Whatever it was, Erik was glad David had lunch this period.

“Hey Erik.”

“Hey.”

“So, you get a lot of shit today?”

“A little here, a little there. Yourself?”

“Well, not really, I mean, I am the quiet guy, but I’m not the one who is ‘just like’ the guy who went on a rampage yesterday, which you apparently are if the crowd’s to be believed.”

“The ‘crowd’ should never be believed. It just repeats whatever fuckin’ lies are yelled at it the loudest.”

“Yeah, definitely. Anyway, in my chemistry class, people were talking about the school shooting and some moron was like, ‘You know who kind of scares me? That Erik kid – the junior who’s always wearing like a leather jacket and army stuff and weird shirts.’”

“What a dumbass.”

“Yeah really, then Bill Walker was saying stuff like ‘yeah, why does he dress like he’s gonna shoot up the school?’ and I looked at him and asked how the hell a person *dresses* like he’s gonna shoot up the school and he just kind of gave me one of those dumbass looks he always does.” Erik sighed loudly and pulled a water bottle from his backpack as David continued. “The worst part of it though was Patty said right after that, ‘I guess Erik needs attention that badly and breaking rules doesn’t get him enough,’ or something stupid like that.”

“Are you *serious*?”

“Yeah.”

“Wow I hate that fucking bitch! Seriously, what the hell is wrong with her? If people think that someone who doesn’t look like them wants to kill them, that’s not my fault. I’m not going to shape my life around whatever stupidity is in today. And I’m not going to shoot a bunch of unarmed people like a *fuckin’ fed* or something.”

David laughed a little.

“And if I’m gonna kill someone, it’s only gonna be to keep ‘em from killing me...or some other innocent person.”

David swallowed a piece of sandwich then spoke. “Maybe yesterday’s killer thought he was sacrificing himself for his ideas by shooting a bunch of people before he killed himself.”

“What ideas are those? That he’s a pussy who can kill random people?”

“Well, we don’t actually know if it was random. That’s just what’s being reported now. Maybe he had a reason for everyone he shot.”

“I doubt it. Besides, what changes after shit like this?”

David shrugged. “School gets even suckier. Maybe another law or two.”

“Yeah, so if this asshole was trying to sacrifice himself to enslave his fellow humans, he’s probably gonna do a good job...with the help of scumbag politicians and ‘unbiased’ reporters.”

“I guess if you really hate everyone else and you want to die in a way that will make them miserable, a suicidal act of terrorism is the way to do it.”

Erik paused, looking at some breasts in the distance. He sighed and said, “You know, it seems like what changes most after things like this is it gets easier to be made a scapegoat, and harder to live as one.”

David nodded. “And new buzzwords are made that’ll be used to justify attacks on our freedom.”

The two of them ate in silence for a few minutes. Erik got the last dregs of jerky out of his bag, chewed a little, and started talking again.

“I noticed something recently...we’re taught that intelligence means repeating what we’ve been told. Have you ever noticed who are called the ‘smart kids’ in school? The ones who can transmit ideas from their ears to their mouths or pencils as quickly as possible, with little thought to slow it down. I just can’t see how learning like this could foster anything resembling intelligence.”

David nodded, his eyes slowly getting more intense behind his glasses. “And we’re given the message that there would be no learning without school – learning outside the classroom just means doing homework

and jumping through other hoops they set up for us. They act like if we don't want to learn exactly what they teach us when they teach us, then we don't want to learn at all. And if we don't want to do things their way, then we're forced to do it their way. And of course, the real lesson in all of this is that there would be no *anything* without it being forced on people."

Erik grunted in agreement. "Without government there can be no learning. Without force there can be no morality. Without obedience there can be no order. And there's no need to prove any of this since no reasonable person could doubt it."

"Exactly heh heh heh."

Erik continued. "Individual action and responsibility don't exist for some people. They say 'we could do this' when they mean they want the government to force people to do something. They say 'people should' when they think people should be required to do something."

"Whoa! Haven't you heard? Individual *anything* is undesirable! They discourage the antisocial practice of Ownlife whenever they get the chance. All day we're confined to an assigned area and we need a hall pass to go anywhere – because, *obviously*, being by yourself means you must be up to no good. And see how much it'll help you to put things like walking, shooting, or reading under "activities" for a scholarship application. They don't want to hear about what you do to improve yourself as a person! They just want to know what clubs or teams or other approved groups you're a part of. 'Cause, ya know, smoking weed with the soccer team means you're a better person than people who just run or hang out with friends or something."

"And you're supposed to act like you're better than those kinds of people, too!" Erik drank more water. "Yeah, don't worry about it, though... we got all kinds of thought cops ready to stamp out whatever won't help the great people's utopia! They're so good they can do shit like that *and* preach about how we need to respect everybody *at the same time!*"

"Well, don't forget that only *desirable* behavior is to be respected. If you do something they don't like, you're disrespecting them and yourself!"

A bottle cap bounced off the table.

“HA ha ha! And don’t forget those pep rallies!” Erik kept ranting while throwing Mark’s bottle cap back at him. “God they fill me with so much school spirit that I *really* want to go out and crush the enemy of all of us...whoever it happens to be this time!”

“Yeah man! Know what else I just *love* sitting through? Endless lectures on why some drugs are horrible by some moron who wouldn’t even be able to talk if he didn’t have his latest caffeine fix! I especially love that if we don’t sit still through them we might be told to take *other* drugs until we can.”

Erik nodded, both amused and angry.

“Ahhh...bitching,” said David, “Isn’t it great?”

“No, what would be great is if we got rid of the things to bitch about.”

“Yeah, well I don’t have any idea how to do that. Maybe you can think...”

BEEEEEP!

“...of something.”

“Oh *I will*.” Erik arose from his seat with an evil laugh. *Sooner or later*.

The two were lost in the clamor of students filing through the doorway of the room, the watchful eyes of teachers and administrators hovering over them. These eyes were especially focused on Erik.

Erik experienced the usual emotional letdown after leaving his friend for the cold hallways full of unfriendly faces. As the minutes of his life ticked away in the classrooms, he wished more and more to be outside of the walls around him – somewhere he could actually learn about himself and the rest of the world. He began to grow increasingly annoyed at everything that was happening.

Erik took a seat in the corner of his study hall. This was some of the most useless time in his life.

I have no classes right now and I've finished my homework, he kept thinking, *why do I still have to be in this room?* He couldn't read in a setting like this. The annoying fact that he was *here* simply because this was where he was assigned to spend time between his classes was too much of a distraction for him to get anything done. He slumped in his chair and stared at the clock. *Why even have school? There's nothing I've learned here that I couldn't have learned better without being detained all day.*

He looked around the room. The teacher watching the study hall was busy grading assignments. Erik saw that most of the students were paying little attention to him. He looked at the box of markers to his left and wondered whose they were. *Gotta be either the school's or Mr. Stretch's. He's the only one who normally uses this room.* Either way, Erik felt totally justified in taking a few for his own use. The school would steal seven hours of his life today and Mr. Stretch was a complete asshole who used his authority to steal Erik's freedom whenever he could. The least Erik could do was get a few markers out of it. He grabbed a couple.

I gotta put these to good use. By now he was sure there were more School Safety Initiative posters somewhere. *Kinda dark to write on...and the bright stuff isn't big enough.* Erik wasn't going to let a color scheme ruin his fun. He pulled a blank page out of his notebook, folded it, and shoved it into a pocket. He managed to find a pack of gum in his backpack too.

He walked toward the teacher on duty. She looked up at him.

"Can I go to the bathroom?"

She looked to see if the hall pass was on the desk. "Yeah."

Erik took the magic key that let him pee and headed into the hallway. He then shoved two sticks of gum into his mouth. *I wonder how old this shit is.* He walked past a bathroom without seeing any posters. *Where are you fuckers?* Finally Erik saw one conveniently located directly across the hall from a boy's room.

Erik's nostrils were assaulted by stale cigarette smoke as he walked into the bathroom. Someone was at the sink so Erik pissed while he waited. The other guy walked out of the room as Erik turned around. Since he

couldn't hear anybody coming, Erik pulled out his paper and wrote his own rhyme upon it. He left the bathroom, took a quick look around, and pulled the gum out of his mouth, splitting it into two wads.

Gonna ruin my life, eh? he asked the poster as he stuck his salivated gum to it. He slapped his message on top. Now everyone who looked at the poster would see "I HATE THE STATE."

Erik strolled away with a smile. *I bet only about five people will actually notice that before it's taken down.* Still, it was a small victory. Not only did he just wreck another one of their stupid posters, but they would know at least part of the reason he had for doing it. Plus it made him feel good, which was at least as important.

School safety! Who's really safe in a police state like the one they're trying to make? Certainly no one with principles. If you're able to stay on authority's good side, you just might live long enough to see your brother murdered as a scapegoat for the shortage that's starving your children.

Erik walked back into the classroom and put the pass on the teacher's desk. He slouched back into the corner, occasionally taking sips out of the water bottle he wasn't supposed to have outside of the cafeteria. *Sometimes all it takes is enough people to stand up and say "enough of this shit!" And somebody needs to get them going.*

Five more minutes until he could leave.

I think that somebody's gotta be me...I need to do something big.

Chapter Three

Erik headed for his locker when the bell rang. *One more fucking period to go.* He wanted to be ready to get out of the building as soon as possible. His last class was boring and he didn't like the teacher, but there must have been more that bothered him about it than that. Maybe it was that he didn't like any of the students in it. Maybe it was that he could learn more from reading the textbook than from going to class. Maybe it was just the last long annoyance he had to endure before leaving his confinement for the day. Maybe it was everything – whatever it was, he hated that class and the thought of going there sickened him.

As he gathered everything from his locker that he wanted to bring home, Erik envisioned the boredom of the next class. He thought of the way he was treated earlier in the day and slammed his locker door. *I am so fucking tired of this...*

“Easy, psycho,” a voice of stupidity interrupted Erik's thoughts. He turned to see Brian Mellon standing with two other douchebags.

“FUCK YOU!” Erik started toward them. Part of him was really hoping to dent some lockers with their heads.

“Uhhh-oh. I think he's mad.”

Erik stepped between the douchebags he didn't know and got a couple of inches from Brian's face. "You wanna shut the FUCK up? Or are you gonna do something?"

Brian made the mistake of trying to push Erik away. Erik's body moved back a few inches, then he recoiled, planted his feet, and gave Brian a shove he wasn't expecting. The moron's torso moved backwards faster than his feet could compensate and he toppled against a wall. The back of his head hit the wall hard.

"Holy shit!" one of Brian's comrades said as he rushed toward his fallen friend.

"He really is fucking psycho!" the other said.

"Come back here if you wanna see how fucking psycho I'll get!"

The two toadies helped Brian to his feet and they quickly left Erik alone with his anger.

I should have punched him in his fucking face! Erik was full of rage that was now building up instead of being released at the bodies of his insulters. *I've had just about enough of this shit!*

BEEEEEP! Erik was late to class. The halls were empty. *I'm getting out of this place.* He looked down at the tag dangling from his neck. Clutching the card, he pulled the tube over his head, looped his arm in a circle, and slung the offending adornment down the hallway. *Winston Smith was a pansy anyway.*

Erik headed to the exit of the school which offered the best chance of escaping undetected. It was a long walk home but at least he would not be *here.*

I'm gonna rip that fucking camera right out of the wall! Most of the cameras watching the exits of the building were attached to the outside wall. Erik presumed that this was so students wouldn't see them as often and might forget how much they were under surveillance. However, at the exit Erik planned to use, the camera was inside the stairway it led to, which Erik figured was to keep students from smoking in this little-used part of the building. He sometimes wondered when there would be cameras in the

bathrooms for that purpose. A railing ran directly underneath the camera in the hallway, which Erik thought he could balance on long enough to do his deed.

By the time Erik was near the stairway, he had calmed down just enough for reason to take greater control of his mind than anger. He remembered he still had three sticks of gum in his pocket, which he promptly put in his mouth. Rather than trying to tear the camera off the wall, he would get underneath it and stick the gum onto its lens. By the time someone arrived to investigate the blacked out screen, Erik would probably be long gone.

Erik opened the door to the stairway and quietly descended from the second floor. As he reached the bend in the stairs, his heart pounded with excitement. He scanned for sounds of approaching feet. With the camera in view, he continued down the stairs, keeping his body close to the wall. He really didn't know if this was going to work, but he'd deal with the consequences later. What mattered now was getting out.

Erik was almost directly under the camera. He put the wad of gum in his left hand. He placed his left foot on the rail and bent his right knee. Springing upward with his entire body, he swung his left hand onto the eye of his oppressors. *Holy crap, I think I did it.* The lens was entirely covered.

Erik slowly opened the outside door and felt the sunlight hit his face. He cautiously looked around. Seeing nobody, he casually walked fifty feet to the woods. A few feet into the brush, he bolted down a small path. He had walked home before simply to avoid the hated bus, so he knew this path connected with a creek he could follow to the railroad tracks into Edgegrove.

Erik brushed aside thorny branches that sometimes clawed at his clothes. Rocks and roots made obstacles that his feet overrode. Breathing quickly but lightly as he sprinted, Erik thought of nothing but avoiding the hazards in front of him. He jumped over a fallen log and ducked his head as he landed, narrowly avoiding a thorn to the eye.

The school was no longer in sight when he splashed into the shallow creek. The water did not reach the laces of his boots. Erik stopped and looked around. *I did it.* A smile crossed Erik's face but his mind was still

locked in a mix of excitement and dampening anger. Mud splashed onto his pant legs as he walked downstream next to the flowing water. Sunlight shined through high tree branches onto the budding weeds and bushes on the forest floor. The motions of Erik's body became automatic. His mind was somewhat aware of what was happening around him, but it was still focused on today's events.

The school was less than a mile away from Erik, but it might as well have been a hundred miles. His mind was no longer fixated on trying to escape the situation he was in. It was alive and awake. The change in environment took some adjustment before Erik could be fully functional.

Damn, I can't even think straight till I've been out of there long enough. Not like we're taught to think either – the rules matter more than logic and if you don't like it that's "tough." Fuck that shit.

The land began to gradually slope downward. Erik could nearly see the railroad tracks through the distant trees in front of him. A quick gust of wind brought Erik to his senses. He wondered if someone would find his ID and turn it in. Someone in the administration would have recognized his picture and maybe he would get in trouble for using a fake ID or something. *Fuck it, Erik decided. I'm tired of being tagged like cattle just so we can be conditioned to show our papers on demand.*

Erik walked with the bitter contentment of someone who didn't care anymore. He was tired of their games, and he would see how many rules he could break before it was game over.

Scapegoating and stereotyping are what the game's all about, he thought, slowly getting more bitter. When the government fucks something up big enough its groupies always find something to blame – music, drugs, immigrants, guns, low taxes – it doesn't matter. And as long as you're not the one being blamed you have it pretty easy...unless maybe you're just a rational person with a conscience. Erik hated bullshit games and if he was going to be forced to play one, there was no way he was going to play by the rules.

By now Erik's initial elation from being out of school was almost entirely worn down into the anger of knowing he would face it again. In school or anywhere else they could reach him, nothing was going to change. They would blame "people like Erik" and everything he liked for things like yesterday's shooting. Regardless of how they said it, he was sure to get the message.

Erik walked up to the row of thick hedges separating him from the railroad tracks. As he put his backpack on the ground, he looked around him at the fresh greenery of renewed life. The forest was beautiful. He knew this, yet he could not feel the effect of beauty at such an ugly time. Erik pulled his hat and a water bottle out of his backpack. Drinking slowly as he put on his hat, Erik thought it might be a good idea for him to relax a little before he went home.

He shoved his water into a pocket and put on his backpack. A hole in the hedgerow allowed him to get onto the tracks. If he walked this way for another hour he would be near the patch of woods where he liked to sit and think.

The walk energized Erik's brain. His thoughts wandered as he did. So many times he wished they would just let him live the way he wanted, seeking knowledge where he found it and pursuing his own interests and thoughts until they led him to his true place in life. But they wouldn't. He was lost within a maze of other people's dreams, stumbling into dead ends as he tried to avoid the clutches of those who had their own plans for what he should do with his life. What little time he had to sort it out was almost all absorbed by the necessary distraction of fighting them off. He could never be what he wanted if they made him never be.

As the stones crunched under his feet, his thoughts turned to Liz, to songs he liked, to old memories, to what the future might bring him. He looked down the tracks. The horizon could not be seen because the trees and bushes along a turn in the tracks obscured his view. Around that turn could be cops, deer, or a train wreck for all he knew. He wondered if he was approaching a turn in his life that kept him from seeing what was coming.

Erik walked around the gradual bend, trying to stay balanced on the rails. Just when he was having a good streak of walking on them, he noticed a couple of people ahead and wobbled off the rail trying to get a good look at whoever they were. As the figures neared he could see that it was a staggering Henry and a cautious David, who seemed to be carrying a backpack. Erik waved and David returned the greeting.

“Where the hell did you go?” asked David.

“Oh, I decided to walk home.”

“Like immediately after last period?”

“No, kind of at the start of it really.”

“Why did you take the risk of cutting class when you only had one period left?” David wondered.

Erik shrugged. “I felt like it.”

Henry laughed and almost fell over. “Erik aallllways fee-els like it...” he slurred.

“Jesus man, what the fuck happened to you?” Erik asked.

“Ai! You wanna fight?” Henry started rotating his fists at Erik then tripped over a rail and fell on his face.

“Uhhh yyyeeah,” David tried to explain, making sure Henry wasn’t too hurt, “we found these instructions for making the ‘ultimate’ Molotov cocktail on the internet, and we were like ‘we gotta try that!’ So drunk-ass here had the great idea to just finish off a bottle of whiskey he had so we could use that and well, you see the results.”

“What’s so ‘ultimate’ about it?”

David looked around them and saw nothing but tracks and trees. “Well,” he said, moving his pack in front of him and unzipping it, “you can see that it’s totally sealed, so nothing spills out. The cap is screwed on and a gasoline soaked tampon covered in burnable plastic wrap ignites the concoction after the glass breaks.”

“I see. We had always just stuffed a rag in the opening and left it capless.”

“Yeah, I mean, I don’t know why we didn’t think of that. The glass is supposed to break on impact so why leave the bottle open?”

“Makes sense. Where did you get the tampon?”

Henry was back on his feet. “I ask’d my girlfriend if she ‘ad extra,” he slurred.

Erik laughed. “Was it like, ‘Can I have one of your tampons to make a bomb with?’ ‘Sure honey?’”

“Pretty much.”

“Wow what an awesome lady you have! First she outdoes you with her porn collection, now this!”

“Heh heh yyyeaah man.”

“Anyway,” David said, “We’re going down to The Pit to test it out. Want to come?” The Pit was a small valley littered with part of an old rail line, abandoned traincars, abandoned cars, and other scrap in which Henry and David often had misadventures.

“Hmmm, I don’t know, I kind of had stuff to do...”

“You mean you’re *not* in the mood for a fiery explosion?”

Erik sighed, “Well I am but I really need to think about what I told you when we left lunch.”

David thought for a moment then remembered what Erik was talking about. “Okay, you go think of something while we do this. I’ll let you know how this goes tomorrow and I’ll be waiting to hear what you say.”

“Alright.”

Erik’s friends were out of view when he reached the path he was looking for. He walked through thick brush, and passed trees he probably would have climbed if his mind wasn’t preoccupied with war. Yes, it was war between him and Suburban Regional.

Erik wished it didn’t have to be this way, but wishing would accomplish nothing now. The best thing to do was confront the problem and either live with it or destroy it. Erik could no longer live with the way things were, so he now focused on destroying the system that was trying to ruin him.

He used to hide from the world in hopes of escaping the harsh things that dwelled in it. He had turned inward, but had not seen what was truly inside of him. Nor would he look at the outside world he had turned his back upon. He had run from everything only to arrive at nothing. But he was too old for that shit now. He was not going to imprison his soul any more. The institution would die, or he would die.

Erik ducked under a young tree's branch then stepped into a small clearing around a massive oak. This tree had been here about a century and would stay for another. Erik put down his backpack and sat in a comfortable gap between the oak's exposed roots.

He gazed at the layers of brush in front of him. The temperature was just warm enough to make him sweat a little. Sunlight shined through the branches and buds above, casting a web of shadows upon Erik's legs. Birds chirped and squirrels rustled in the distance.

Erik was growing calmer. He liked the woods. Nobody told him what to do here. Though Erik could not choose the conditions, he alone decided how to react to them. The forest was where he had learned to appreciate life and to look at what the world offered him.

So how am I going to get rid of things to bitch about? Erik's thoughts wandered around this question. He knew there were people who thought about the world the way he did. But where were they? And why did it seem like there were so few around him? Sure, David often agreed about things, but he was one person out of how many? *Maybe everyone else who cares has just given up. They might not like what they've been given, but do they see anything else to get? Thinking they're incapable of changing anything might keep them from looking for alternatives.* Hell, sometimes it even seemed to Erik like he shouldn't bother.

A cardinal landed on the ground in front of him. It pecked its beak into the soil a little then jerked its head around and flew away.

Maybe I just take everything too seriously. Was the institution just an attention-hungry child waving crisis in the face of people who otherwise

wouldn't care about it? Or could it be a fatally wounded animal in its death throes?

Well I'm certainly not going to just wait for it to die. As long as enough people see no alternatives, none will be realized. People will just keep distracting themselves as much as they can from the only reality they think can exist. And anyway, if it has the power to make people dislike learning, then it has the power to do nearly infinite evil.

Erik sensed the forest around him, but he saw only memories. Times he'd been ridiculed and told he was wrong, then later proven right when almost nobody was still paying attention. Times when idiots held seemingly infinite power to make him comply with asinine rules. Times he felt powerless. And then came the thought of the incredibly thick wall of armed people with badges that stood between him and freedom - the same wall that all tyrants hid behind. His heart slowly pounded more and more intensely and his breathing got heavier.

I've had ENOUGH! The institution, that beast of ultimate evil, was making its final offensive. It hoped to destroy whatever individuality was left within its corrosive grip. Erik would ensure that it would fail. His life and countless lives yet un-lived depended on his success. To fail was to let them kill his self, his soul - the most dreadful kind of death. Erik swore by the boiling blood in all his veins that he would never let that happen. He would never be a dead shell of a man existing for the alleged good of others to which he owed nothing. He was pissed, and he was going to do something about it.

"FUCK IT!" he yelled to the forest. "Some serious shit needs to be done if this is gonna stop...and it's gonna stop right fucking now!"

In a more littered patch of woods about a mile away, David held his creation in his gloved left hand as the flame of his lighter burned through plastic. When the gasoline vapors ignited, he threw the bottle at the side of a rusty old boxcar. The glass broke, igniting a mixture of motor oil and gasoline. Flame stuck to metal.

Erik leapt to his feet and began pacing. *Okay, so I'm going to do something, but what?* Since he was too angry to sit still he grabbed his pack and walked through the brush. As he pushed thorns and sticks aside, he tried to keep his anger away long enough to come up with an idea. He thought of the assembly this morning, how it was almost just like a pep rally. Today they were rallying against him – the supposed reason for the misfortune in their “community.” Yea, school spirit!

I should make my own spirit day. April 19, the day of the shot heard round the world, was coming up soon. *Now there's a day worth celebrating – people tired of the king's bullshit fighting back when his lackeys tried to pile on the last straw. Everyone wear a tri-cornered hat and bring a revolutionary flag and gun to school.*

Erik stopped in his tracks and dropped his jaw. *That's it! That's fucking it! Bring a gun to school day – April 19th. Keep yourself safe and let the king know it's time to fuck off!*

This was what he would do. He would make flyers for a new spirit day, a day celebrating the spirit of liberty. Bring a Gun to School Day. Erik wasn't sure what would happen after they hit the walls, but it would do something. It would at least show that not everyone was learning the “right” message, that there was a better way to stay safe, and that since the bastards had already crossed his line, he was going to walk all over them.

Erik walked proudly in the direction of his house. The institution was big, but he was smarter than it. He was going to live up to what he was meant to be.

Erik had enough time between now and the nineteenth to wait for the hysteria to die down a little. He wondered if he should. Perhaps people would then be more receptive to his message.

No, I shouldn't wait. Politicians, HomeSec, and plenty of media assholes are already milking this tragedy for all it's worth. The time to counter their bullshit is now, before this is forgotten and something else grabs everyone's attention. People are thinking about this now...well, maybe they

aren't really THINKING about it, but at least it's on their minds. Who knows, maybe this little stunt will even find its way into national news.

Erik walked onto an empty road that led to his neighborhood. *Besides, if someone publicly punches you in the face, why wait until nobody's looking to beat the shit out of him?* Unable to think of a good answer to this question, Erik began planning his strike.

When he got to his house, Erik saw that his parents were not home. This was good. The only printer in the house was in the living room, and Erik really didn't want to spend the time and effort it would require to convince his parents that he was doing the right thing. He shoved his key into the lock then opened the door and entered. He quickly dropped his backpack in a corner and started the computer in the living room. While he waited for it to boot, he put an Amon Amarth CD into the stereo and cranked the volume.

He sat in the chair and rolled up to the computer. The forceful sound and brutally honest words coming from the speakers got Erik moving. He was often motivated by metal. The powerful sound helped him through hard times and made good times rock even harder. It made him feel strong enough to destroy any problems that he couldn't deal with by thrashing around like a maniac. And now it was time to destroy.

Erik had never made a flyer before. He figured it wouldn't be too hard to put some words together and make them look decent. He opened a word processor and went ahead.

BRING A GUN TO SCHOOL DAY

April 19th

The safest people are those who are free to defend themselves. They do not need to rely on the wills of others to protect them. This April Nineteenth, show the world that the spirit of liberty that prevailed at Lexington and Concord is still alive. Refuse to trade your freedom for promises of security that can never be delivered.

Erik smiled and listened to the music blasting behind him. It didn't matter what they would try to do. He would be himself and crush whoever tried to suppress him.

Erik excitedly read the text of the flyer. He laughed at how much this would scare deserving people. After centering and resizing the text, Erik was satisfied with his work. He looked at the clock. 5:20 – he had better hurry up and print them before his mother got home. He hit the print button and watched the window. The CD player continued to pound out deathmetal, energizing Erik.

“Oh shit!” He saw his mom pull into the driveway. No way could he risk losing what he had done. Only one copy had printed. He hit “cancel.” The second copy was ejected half completed.

His mother's car door slammed. “Fuck!” Erik turned off the printer and closed the program. It asked him if he wanted to save his work. “Yeah, right,” he said as he clicked “No.” He grabbed the two pages, shut the stereo off and ran upstairs. Halfway down the hall he heard his mother open the front door. He entered his room and put the copies on his desk. *That was close.*

Erik had to decide what to do now. Ditching his plan was out of the question. He would need to make some photocopies. There was a copy center about half an hour from his house. He could make copies there.

If I go now, my mom might get suspicious. Do I really need to do this now? Let's see...today is Wednesday...yeah, Wednesday. Would it have the same effect if I did it on Thursday? I don't know...but I guess some of the effect would wear off over the weekend. Fuck it, I'll copy it today. Who knows what could happen tomorrow anyway?

Erik walked downstairs. “Hi, Mom.”

“Hello,” she responded from her spot on the couch, “I guess you heard about that school shooting.”

“Heard about it all day, actually.”

“I guess you ought to be careful how you dress and act for a while.”

“Yeah, I know,” Erik said as he picked up his backpack. “I don’t really wanna talk about it any more.”

“Yeah, you’ve probably heard enough about it for a while, huh?”

“Yup, how about you?”

“Well some people at work were talking about it a little.”

“Oh.”

Erik’s mother picked her newspaper up again and Erik went upstairs with his backpack. He sat at his desk, smiling at the flyer he made. He figured he should wait a little to see if his mom left her spot. He didn’t want her to see him leave the house with anything she’d ask questions about.

He had already decided that it would be best to post the flyers on his way to lunch. This was the easiest time to do things without being noticed. Erik normally wouldn’t take such precautions, but he figured what he was doing was risky enough already. Besides, he relished the thought of all the administrative pukes frantically trying to figure out who did it.

Now he visualized the best places to put them. He scribbled ideas down on the half-printed sheet. Fifteen copies would be more than enough to create an incident. Being caught with extras wouldn’t be a good thing to do anyway. He made sure he had enough tape that he could use.

He heard his mother walking up the stairs. This would be a good time to go. He dumped the papers out of a folder sitting on his desk and put the flyer inside it. His mom went into the bathroom. Erik walked downstairs and out the front door. He opened the muddy door of his black Jeep CJ-7 and put the folder in a clean spot on the floor. The temperature was dropping, so he went back inside to get a warmer shirt. His mother was walking down the stairs.

“Hey, I was gonna go drive around a little.” This was a common thing for him to say in the weeks since he got his driver’s license.

“Okay – isn’t gas pretty expensive to be doing that?”

“Yeah, but a lot of fun things cost money.”

“I guess. When will you be back?”

“An hour or so.”

“Alright. Dinner should be done about then.”

“Cool.”

Erik went to his room. He didn't want to be wearing anything too black or metal-looking while on this mission, so he put on a green hoodie. He walked back out to his Jeep.

The hardtop was on and it was warm inside. Erik opened the windows after he got in. He stepped on the clutch and turned the key. The old straight six under the hood rumbled to life. The sound brought a smile to Erik's face. He put the beast in gear and slowly backed down the driveway into the street.

Erik took back roads to the store. He enjoyed driving on interesting roads. This one would of course be more interesting if it wasn't paved.

Wind blew through the noisy Jeep. The cool 50mph wind calmed Erik as it washed over his face. He laughed when he thought about how the school administration would react to his posters. He decided to try to get as few fingerprints on them as possible just in case his enemies got really serious about catching him. And it was entirely possible they would. If people like them suspended ten year-olds for pointing their fingers and saying “bang,” and went after guys for holding guns in MySpace pictures, what would they think of Erik's move?

Erik suddenly began to wonder if they had meant to call him to Johnson's office during the last period. *No use worrying about it now.*

Asphalt passed underneath the sturdy vehicle. The road got smoother and came to an intersection. The copy center was on the other side. Erik watched the traffic pass by as he waited for the light to change. At green, he went through the junction then hit his right turn signal. The Jeep cruised into the parking lot. *Time to do some business.*

As if his Jeep had anything worth stealing in it, Erik closed the windows and locked the doors. He grabbed the folder off the floor and slammed the door behind him. His boots made little noise against the parking lot. When he got to the building, its glass doors parted to let him inside.

There were few people around the self-service photocopiers. Erik chose a black-and-white copier away from the other customers. *How does this work?* He noticed a bunch of little forms on the table next to him. He looked one over then lifted the lid of the copier. He placed his flyer on the glass and pushed the proper buttons. The machine spat out fifteen copies. *Excellent!* They came out perfectly. Erik took the small stack between the knuckles of two right fingers and placed it into the folder. He then put the original on top of them and closed the folder. Using one of the pens laying around, he scratched “15” into the sheet and went to the cashier. She pushed buttons and a price popped up. Erik handed her a five dollar bill. He took the change she gave him, dropped it into a pocket and strolled out the door.

When he got back into his Jeep, Erik looked at his work with the appreciation that a person might feel when handling a weapon he expected would save his life. He felt a sense of accomplishment as he put the folder on the passenger seat. As he started up his CJ he wondered what Liz would think of what he was going to do. *Probably think it’s kind of funny.*

The drive home was just as enjoyable to Erik. He took different roads for the different experience they would provide. He kept the Jeep under the speed limit because he didn’t want any obstacles to come between him and his goal of putting words on the walls.

A little over an hour after Erik left his house, his meaty tires again rolled up the driveway. He put his folder under the passenger’s seat and went into the house. He ate dinner with his parents soon afterward.

Shortly after they began eating, Erik’s father brought up the Kansas shooting. His mother spoke a little. Erik didn’t say anything until he was asked what people in school said about it. He told his parents that he only heard people say the same things that were said on the news, and that he was tired of hearing about it.

“Well you should definitely be careful what you say in school,” his mother told him. “You wouldn’t want anyone thinking you’re going to be the next one to do something like this.”

“Yeah I’ll be careful.”

“And you probably shouldn’t wear your jacket to school for a while.”

His father disagreed. “Come on, it’s just a jacket! How many people wear things like that who *haven’t* shot up a school?”

“I know, but it never hurts to be cautious.” This was the last they spoke of the subject that night.

After dinner Erik sat at the computer in his room and looked at things on the internet. He was especially interested in the dreaded School Safety Initiative. He typed the words into a search engine. One mouse click later, thousands of possible sources were placed in front of him. He found the project’s official site. Trying his hardest to not put his fist through the screen, Erik filtered through the sickening propaganda on the site to try to get a feel for what it was saying. *They sure managed to get this crap up fast.* He clicked on the “About Us” link.

Recent events have highlighted the urgency of securing our children’s safety. The Department of Homeland Security has quickly put together a School Safety Initiative to ensure that this goal is given all the attention it deserves. The following steps are being explored and tested for eventual use in all of our Homeland’s schools:

- Computer networks that will integrate the latest methods of identifying troubled students and allow teachers to instantly record threatening behavior.
- An information campaign encouraging students to avoid the dangers of violence and other anti-social activity.
- Improved security and identification systems at all schools.
- Fostering communication and cooperation between school administration, counselors, and local law enforcement agencies.

- Making sure that troubled students receive all of the counseling they need to ensure a safe and happy future for them and their peers.

In all of the above steps, DHS SSI will utilize the latest technology and law-enforcement methods to provide our children with the safety they deserve.

Guess what jackass, I ain't your child! Fuck you and everything you stand for. Erik knew most of the codewords. "Safety" meant surveillance and oppression. "Our Homeland" meant the authoritarian fantasy-land of the HomeSec thugs, not an America where inalienable rights were treated as such. "Troubled students" meant anyone seen as a threat to the system. "Violence" included peaceful possession of weapons. "Anti-social activity" meant anything the fearful leaders didn't like. "Improved security and identification systems" would make nothing more secure except for the government's hold on the people's reins. "Counseling" usually consisted of brainwashing and drugging to try to eradicate natural behavior. *And of course "our children" is there to imply "If you disagree with us you want our kids to die."*

Erik had enough of that shit so he looked up what other people said about the shooting for a while. When he was done with that he listened to music, did a little homework, showered, and went to bed.

Be careful? Sure I'll be careful. Erik thought about what happened today and what he was going to make happen tomorrow. *I guess today didn't suck so much after all.*

Sometimes you just gotta throw something into the mix and see what it does. Who knows what could happen tomorrow anyway?

Chapter Four

Six fifty-five a.m. That goddamned noise shattered Erik's sleep again. As he slapped the alarm's "off" button, he remembered what he had to do today. He sat up in his bed, at first nervous. *Should I really do this?* He thought of yesterday, the pep rally, the arguments, Brian, the SSI website. He thought of what they wanted to do to people like him – what they were going to *try* to do to him.

"Fuck it." He stood up. "Today is a good day to die." He thought of his time in the forest, that moment of clarity when it all came together. He remembered the pride he had felt from knowing what to do.

Erik gave out a brutal grunt and dressed for war. *They give me no alternative. There's nowhere to run to but death.* He pulled on some camouflage pants and a ruthless Slayer shirt. *I've had enough of their shit already.* With his combat boots on, Erik left his room.

After eating quickly, Erik opened the door to his Jeep. He put the original copy of his flyer under a seat, then shoved the folder into his backpack. The street was deserted when he walked into it. A foggy sky drizzled onto his hat and the shoulders of his leather jacket. Remembering that his iPod was in one of his pockets, Erik decided to listen to some Vader to get

ready for the day. He would face all the hatred, paranoia, and disapproval they could direct at him, and he would destroy it.

Erik stood at the bus stop. The asshole who usually waited for the bus here was nowhere in sight as the ridiculous yellow vehicle came into view. Its stupid lights started flashing as the brakes squealed loud enough for Erik to hear over his music.

The bus driver gave him one of those “What the hell is wrong with you?” looks. Erik walked down the aisle to an empty seat. He did not make eye contact with anyone and figured they’d call it a threat if he did. The bus chugged off to the school. Erik heard nothing but Vader as he saw all the paranoia around him. *Yeah, I’m definitely going to do it. It’ll let em know I’m not changing my life because of what’s in the news.* For the rest of the ride, he mostly thought of stuff he could do with his Jeep.

The bus squealed to a stop in front of the building, a gloomy site on a gray morning. Amongst the cargo it disgorged was a determined Erik Shylding. He saw Henry and David walking toward the building from another bus as he put away his iPod.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

“So,” Erik wondered, “How’d your toy work out yesterday?”

Henry grinned as David answered. “Oh, it was pretty sweet.”

“Gotta love the Internet.” Erik opened the door to find fearful faces ahead.

“Yup. See ya.”

“See ya.”

Henry and Erik walked into the cafeteria and sat in their normal spot. Erik took off his hat as Henry started talking.

“You gotta help me convince David that we should all go to the range today.”

“Sounds good.”

“Yeah, he’s worried that maybe we shouldn’t do it now that it’s so soon after the shooting.”

“Why does he worry now after what you did yesterday?”

“Well ‘cause nobody saw us and that Kansas kid didn’t use any Molotovs.”

“There he goes again, thinking rationally when he’s trying to think like his enemies. When will he realize that nothing makes sense about them?”

Henry and David had been shooting together since David’s family moved to Edgegrove. After David’s father died in a car accident, his mother trusted her twelve year-old son enough to let him have three of his father’s firearms. David would always treasure the Marlin 81, High Standard Sport King, and Smith and Wesson Model 1917. He could never predict what he would feel when he picked them up. Sometimes it was the happiness he felt the first time his father let him pull the trigger on an empty gun. Sometimes the same memory saddened him and he tried to figure out if he believed he’d see his father again. Sometimes handling the guns just made him feel like shooting stuff.

Henry had his own collection. He had been making zipguns and similar devices for years. He bought a Swiss K31 carbine shortly after his eighteenth birthday. Later he got an old Marlin Model 60. Like he had done with almost anything containing moving parts since he was able to work a screwdriver, Henry had disassembled and obsessed over these pieces of machinery until he thought he knew all he could learn about them. He thought of the power such machines gave people – life or death in the movement of a finger. Mastering machines was an ancient human tradition that Henry was glad to carry on.

Of course, now that Henry was eighteen, he and David were able to go to real shooting ranges without their parents, instead of just David’s large backyard. They always let Erik shoot whatever guns they brought as long as he pitched in for ammo. They knew he’d do the same for them once he was old enough to legally purchase all the firepower he was saving up for.

“Did you decide which shotgun you were gonna get?” Erik asked.

“Probably the Benelli. I should be able to get it in a couple of weeks.”

“That’ll be sweet.”

“Yup.”

Erik looked around. A few people definitely looked afraid of him. Mrs. Patty cast a disapproving look in his direction. Erik wondered what it would be like to be so pathetic – afraid of a jacket and worried that someone who seemed different would kill you.

“Looks like no Johnny today,” Henry noted.

“Yeah – wait, there he comes.”

Johnny came cruising toward them. For some reason this made Erik remember something.

“Hey, did you and David get those chains you were talking about yesterday?”

“Oh no, shit, we totally forgot...I was really wasted and he kinda helped me sneak back into my room to sleep it off.”

“There he is.” Erik looked at Johnny.

BEEEEEP!

“Oh, time to go.” Johnny said.

They left the room. On the way to his locker Erik ran into Chris Thompson.

“Hey,” Erik said.

“Errrik,” Chris responded, extending his hand, “I’m gonna have to compliment you on your attire today.”

“Thank you,” Erik chuckled as he shook hands with Chris.

“Yeah, keep up the good work...scaring people and shit.”

“I will,” Erik replied as he walked away.

He put his coat in his locker and got what he needed for the next few periods. He made sure to put his iPod in his backpack since he didn’t trust the locker that much. Another school day was beginning.

Finally it was time for lunch. Erik was getting pumped up for action. He took a long route to a bathroom near his first targeted wall. There were few people in the hallway by the time he got there. The bathroom was empty. Erik heard the bell ring as he squeezed all he could out of his bladder. Slowly washing and thoroughly drying his hands, he felt his heartbeat get faster. *This is gonna be so fucking sweet!*

He pushed the wooden door of the bathroom open and walked into the empty hallway. Nobody in the classrooms appeared to see him. He walked into the stairway and climbed upwards. Nobody was around. *Good.*

Erik took a roll of tape out of his backpack and shoved it into his right pants pocket. He then took the flyers out of the folder and put them in a notebook, which he figured wouldn't look as suspicious to carry around.

Just as he slung his backpack on, Erik heard one of the first floor doors open. *Fuck!* Erik didn't want anyone to know he did it yet, so he quickly walked up the stairs. By the time he was near the top he heard the second floor door open and the footsteps cease. *Okay, good.* The first flyer was to be placed by a bend in the stairway where anyone looking forward would see it. Erik managed to get a sheet out of the notebook by pushing with his knuckles and holding it between his fingers. He held it to the wall with the back of his hand and took similar precautions with the tape. He had no idea if they could really get his fingerprints from such things or if they would even try, but he was hoping to get a lot of amusement out of his enemies working hard for no results.

The page was stuck to the wall and Erik quickly walked away. The third floor hallway was completely empty. The sound of Erik's footsteps could not be heard over the voices of teachers who did not see him. He put up two more in the hallway, one of which went right over a stupid SSI poster. He then walked to the other side of the floor, where he knew there was a low risk of being seen. By the time Erik had finished making his rounds, he had put up thirteen flyers and left the remaining two on top of a row of lockers.

Erik left his backpack in his locker, hoping this would make him look somewhat less suspicious when entering the cafeteria twenty minutes late.

He shoved his water bottle into a pocket and made for the entrance. A couple of people Erik recognized from lunch were walking ahead of him on their return from the bathroom. He got close enough behind them to hopefully deflect the attention of the teacher at the door, but not close enough to creep them out.

Ms. Cleveland was too busy blabbering about something with another teacher to notice the three of them enter. Erik walked around the edge of the cafeteria and took his seat by David.

“Where the hell were you?”

Erik looked around. It didn’t seem like anyone else would hear them. “Well...I kinda put up some of my own school safety posters.”

“What did they say?”

Erik leaned closer to his friend. “Mainly that April nineteenth is Bring a Gun to School Day.”

David froze. “What?”

Erik chuckled. “Yeah, that was the best thing I could think of yesterday.”

David couldn’t imagine how such a stunt could make anything better. “Dude,” he said, “What the hell were you thinking? You know they’re going to come after you hard now. What’s the point of being reckless just for that?”

Erik shrugged. “Yeah, I might have been a little reckless, but it’s a lot more irresponsible to act like you can avoid risk by pretending life isn’t dangerous, and refusing to *be* dangerous when you need to be.”

“But to be so confrontational *now*?”

“We always hear how ‘in times like these’ we shouldn’t say certain things, but times like these are when it’s most important to say what needs to be said. Now I’m not sure what’s going to happen next, but if we’re afraid to take chances, then we’re afraid to take action. Yeah it’s usually good to minimize your risks, but sometimes you just gotta throw the cards down the hall and see where they land. Do what you must and let fate take its course.”

David looked like he was hearing something he thought was right, but just couldn't bring himself to agree with.

"Besides," Erik continued, "running from danger will only tire you out. This is about self-preservation. Do you really *live* when you're a slave? Sure, your heart pumps blood, but is it really *yours* if your mind isn't free?" He paused. "What could be more reckless than failing to take action when self-preservation requires it?"

David was a little stunned, but managed to find some words. "I know you too well to ask how free your mind can be in prison, but can you really be free when you're dead?"

"One day I'll find out. Until then, I'll do what I do."

David nodded nervously. "Well, did anyone see you?"

"I don't think anyone saw me put 'em up. I'm sure someone in a classroom saw me in the hallway at some time, but I'm not too worried."

"I see."

Erik started drinking some water. David noticed he had no food with him.

"Hey I didn't eat this cereal bar," David said. "You want it?"

"Sure."

"Yeah I understand what you mean about being dangerous...I'm not sure I totally agree but it does make sense."

Erik nodded. "I actually think school helps make people fearful, weak, and dependent. We do get punished for defending ourselves."

David made an awkward smile "For who are we to disrupt the social order?" he said sarcastically. "Not to mention anyone showing interest in weapons is called a threat."

"Yeah, the schools aren't failing – that's for sure. They're doing exactly what they were meant to do – keep people from rising to their true potentials as strong individuals. What do strong individuals offer to those interested in power?"

David, feeling more comfortable discussing principles instead of action, livened up. "And this 'one-size-fits-all' approach encourages kids

to lose their sense of the uniqueness of each life. Especially in the lower grades, everyone is expected to learn the same lesson in the same way at the same speed. Learn slower and you're called 'disabled' and probably drugged. Learn faster, and you're either told to help your less fortunate classmates, or you're placed in an advanced class and told to do more work you're not interested in."

Erik nodded.

David continued. "You know all the controversies about what's taught in 'our' schools. It's all about shaping the future by stamping values on as many young minds as possible. Those who battle for control of what's taught are battling for control of our minds!"

"And those who died the other day in Kansas are just the latest collateral damage in that war for control of man's future."

David nodded. "Yeah, man. You better be careful or you might be the next collateral damage."

Erik laughed. "Let's hope not."

After a few minutes of silence, Erik remembered something. "Oh yeah," he said, "Henry says we're goin' to the range today."

"He did, huh? Well, we'll see."

"You know you want to."

"Yeah, but I don't know if it's a good idea today."

"We'll see."

The bell rang and everyone rushed out of the room. Erik stayed excited, anticipating the fury that would later erupt over what he did. He got his backpack and took a route to his English class that did not go near any of his posters.

As much as he tried, Erik could not pay attention to Mr. Matterson. The teacher's words went over his head as he thought of the face Johnson would make when he saw one of the posters. *Probably won't be quite as funny as the look on Wermlin's.*

Disciplinarian Johnson was going through papers at his big metal desk. In the adjacent room, Agent Richie of the School Safety Initiative Tech Team was messing around on Johnson's assistant's computer, trying to figure out why the threat flag system was not working. Johnson had no idea what the guy was doing, but he could tell it was something that made the agent curse a lot.

"I just don't get why this damn thing won't work!" he whined.

Johnson only had a few students to yell at today and they were all pretty easy. This was good, because he needed to catch up on some paper-work. He just wished the guy from DHSSITT or whatever the hell it was called would finish his project already.

All in all not a bad day, Johnson thought. Then Ned Hamilton from Social Studies came in with some bad news.

"Vlad!" Ned glanced at the weird looking guy at the computer as he walked into Johnson's office. "I need to talk to you right away."

"What is it, Ned?"

"I found this on the wall on the third floor." He handed Erik's work to Johnson. About twenty-five minutes had passed since this one was stuck to the wall.

Johnson looked at the paper, blinked hard, and looked again. "I don't believe this!" He immediately got on the radio to his assistant, who was watching the parking lot at the time.

"Ray? Ray, I need you in here right away."

The radio crackled out Ray's acknowledgement.

"Thank you Ned. I'll take care of this."

"Okay, good luck," Ned said as he turned to leave.

"Thanks."

Agent Richie looked up from the screen. "What's going on?"

Johnson walked over and showed him the flyer.

"Wow," Richie said.

Johnson put away his papers and started thinking about what to do. Ray Slaughter soon entered the room.

“Ray,” Johnson said, “We’ve got a problem.” He looked at Richie, who quickly passed the paper to Slaughter.

“Oh shit,” Ray muttered.

“Can you go around the building and get all of these off the walls? I’ll get more people to help you in a minute.”

“Sure.”

“Do what you can to figure out who did it, but right now the main thing is taking them down, okay?”

“Alright.” Ray turned and walked quickly out the door.

“Sir,” Richie said, removing his glasses, “I might be able to-”

The phone on Slaughter’s desk chirped loudly. “Hold on,” Johnson said to Richie as he picked up the phone. “Disciplinarian’s office...Uh huh...Okay, just keep it there, I got Ray going around to remove them and we’re just getting on it...okay, thanks.”

Johnson hung up. “Another teacher found one outside her room. What were you saying?”

“Well, some of our people are still setting up the School Safety Initiative, and they have a lot of discretion as to what specific roles their offices will play. If I gave our field office a call I bet I could get an expert on things like this to help you.”

Johnson’s mind was racing. “Yeah, sure, call them up, but don’t get it too big.” He quickly began notifying the rest of the school administration about the situation. He did not pause to think about what kind of expert Richie was going to call.

Matterson looked like he was about to finish up. Erik just realized that he hadn’t got in trouble for leaving his fake ID on the floor yesterday. *Well I guess that’s one less thing to worry about.* Students started packing up their stuff. The period was about to end.

BEEEEEP! A smiling Erik stood up and got his stuff together. He took the most direct route to his study hall and tried to conceal his excitement.

The hallway was a maze of students weaving around each other and stopping to talk or opening lockers. Erik kept his ears to the crowd.

“...these posters,” a short guy was telling his friends, “about bringing a gun to school for America or something...”

Well someone's seen them, Erik thought. He couldn't imagine anything else the guy might have been talking about.

There were only a few students in the room when Erik got to his study hall. He sat at his customary spot in the corner and opened his history book on the desk. The excitement he had gained from making a bold move was giving way to the nervous uncertainty of trying to guess what would happen next. He had a feeling he wouldn't quite get away with it.

People were entering the room. Ms. Andrews sat at her desk and got ready to take attendance.

“Yo, did you hear about those posters they found?” Some sophomore was trying to make a big deal of himself.

“I *saw* one,” a girl told him. “It was like ‘bring a gun to school day’ or something. What’s up with that?”

“Is it someone just trying to scare everyone?” another chimed in.

“It had some other stuff on it but I didn’t read the whole thing.”

“It’s just a stupid prank, guys.”

Erik made no visible reaction. *Maybe I did put too many words on it. After all, four sentences is just SO much to read.*

“Ms. Andrews,” someone asked, “Do you know what’s going on?”

“I heard about it,” she said, “It sounded like some kind of poorly-timed political statement.”

Erik could tell this was difficult for some of them to understand. He just hoped that someone would get what he was saying. A sense of crisis hung in the air as Ms. Andrews took attendance.

Erik had just started trying to read some history when Slaughter appeared in the doorway.

Chapter Five

Agent Darryl Stuvell walked through the empty hallway in his black suit and sunglasses. He followed the directions to Johnson's room he had received in the front office. The local DHS field office was temporarily housed in a county government building about twenty minutes from Suburban Regional. Like most bureaucracies, a prime goal of SSI was to expand. Stuvell, the regional SSI director, was hoping that a high profile success would elevate the program's status, increasing its funding and sending him up the career ladder.

Stuvell was the kind of asshole who tried to dominate every situation he was in, and every person in it with him. Leadership wasn't the right word. This was something else. Some said he lusted for power more than he did for women. He lived on the unacknowledged assumption that everything would be better with him in charge. A special agent trained in psychological operations, counter-terrorism, community relations, and youth outreach, he was definitely the man for this job.

This must be it, he thought, turning into Johnson's office. He saw Agent Richie get out of his seat.

"Hello," Johnson said.

“Hi,” Stuvell replied as he removed his sunglasses, “I’m Special Agent Darryl Stuvell, regional School Safety Initiative director.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Johnson said as they shook hands, “Too bad it couldn’t be in better circumstances.”

“Could be worse.”

Slaughter escorted Erik to the disciplinarian’s office, an event that wasn’t unusual.

“So what did I do this time?” asked Erik.

“We’ll see.”

Ray Slaughter was relatively nice – especially for a guy named Ray Slaughter. Normally on these strolls he would give Erik good-natured counseling on how he had to “stop messing up so much.”

Erik figured this was about his paper strike. He had no idea if they actually had some evidence it was him or if they were just guessing. He decided a while ago that he would not tell them he did it. This was war, after all, and wartime enemies get lied to. To do otherwise was just stupid.

They got to the disciplinary office. Erik noticed the waiting area was unusually empty. His pulse started rising.

“Wait here a second, please.” Slaughter stuck his head into Johnson’s office then turned around. “Mr. Johnson is ready to see you now.” Slaughter waited for Erik to enter Johnson’s room, then returned to monitoring the halls for posters and suspicious activity.

Erik slowly stepped into Johnson’s office. The square room was full of hostile faces. Johnson sat at his normal spot behind the desk. That special counselor whose name Erik couldn’t remember was sitting on Johnson’s left. In the corner of the room to Johnson’s right stood two grim looking men in suits.

Erik sat in the only available chair, which was much shorter than Johnson’s. *So the fuckers are trying to intimidate me*, Erik thought.

“Miiisster Shylding,” Johnson said.

What a douchebag.

“Now I would have called you down yesterday,” the big asshole bel-
lowed, “but frankly, I have more important things to worry about right now
than someone trying to get attention by yelling inappropriate comments.”

Erik sat motionless. The bigger suit-and-tie did one of those facial
contortions that stuck-up pricks do when they want to show both amusement
and scorn.

Johnson continued. “Do you know anything about these?” He put
the flyer on his desk so the younger man could read it.

Erik leaned over, squinted his eyes at the paper, then said “No” as he
leaned back. One thing about Johnson – he was really easy to lie to and you
never felt bad for doing it.

“We have reason to believe you might be involved in this.”

“What are the reasons?”

“Well I can’t tell you now but if you have something to say, now is
the time.”

He has no clue. He’s just trying to pressure me into saying something.

“Well I got nothin’ to say.”

Now it was what’s-her-face’s turn to speak. “Erik,” she said, “We’ve
been looking over your history. Why do you isolate yourself from your
peers?”

“Uhh...I don’t.”

“We’re really concerned about the way you conduct yourself. Why
do you shy away from involvement in your high school community?”

Erik had enough of this shit. “Because your ‘community’ doesn’t
want me...”

“We all want to include you.”

“No, you want to include my body in your vision, and you can only
do that by killing my mind – by killing me.”

The interrogators seemed shocked at what Erik just said. His posture
was now slightly more aggressive, but he was still nearly motionless.

Johnson broke the moment of silence. “That sounds a little paranoid
to me.”

Erik looked at everyone as he replied. “You’re the people who act like any teenager who wears black is going to kill you, and you’re calling *me* paranoid?”

“It pays to be cautious,” the fat counselor said.

The bigger suit-and-tie looked at Erik and spoke. “You ought to be cautious yourself.”

“Wha-”

“Erik,” Johnson cut him off, “Why do you think school shootings happen?”

Erik was still trying to figure out what the prick in the corner was trying to tell him when he realized he’d been asked a question. “Oh, uh...well I guess the same basic reasons most terrorism happens – something bad is done to someone and his mind isn’t sophisticated enough to do the right thing about it. He either associates the innocent people he kills with the problem or he thinks it’s okay to kill them if that might somehow help him.”

The special counselor asked him if killing is sometimes okay.

“Well yeah if it’s the only way you can keep someone from taking an innocent life. I bet you all think killing’s okay sometimes too – why else would the Gestapo brothers back there be carrying guns?” The bros sneered and snorted at this question.

“I don’t believe it’s ever okay to be violent,” the counselor replied.

“Then your life is always going to be controlled by people who do think so. But maybe if I was you I wouldn’t think my life was worth defending either.”

“WHO ARE YOU TO-”

“Erik,” the bigger agent interrupted, “You said killing is okay if it protects your life, and you said the school community is trying to kill you...”

“No, I’m not saying I’d shoot up the school if that’s what you’re trying to insinuate.”

“Nobody said anything about shoot-”

“Yes you did! And I’m not going to play your stupid Gestapo mind games. I’m only going to say it once: what’s trying to kill me isn’t the bodies of anyone in this building, but the filthy, stupid ideas you all carry in your disgusting minds. And I *am* sophisticated enough to know the difference. I just hope you all are. And if I’m being investigated I want a lawyer present.”

Johnson was riled. “You don’t get a lawyer here!” he yelled. “And your behavior just earned you an extended detention on Monday! I’ll be talking to your parents too. And *if we find out* this was you,” he pointed to the flyer, “you’re going to *need* a lawyer. Now go back to class. We’ll call you later if there’s anything else.”

Erik left the room with pure rage pumping through his veins. His breathing became growls as he stormed down the hallway. *MotherFUCKERS!* He slammed the stairway door against the wall. *So this is it. Extended fucking detention on Monday for acting like I have rights. God, I hate them! Those were HomeSec thugs I bet. I hope they all hang.*

He had calmed a little by the time he got back to his study hall. He sat in his corner and stared forward. Twenty-eight minutes left. There was nothing for Erik to vent his anger on, so when he had spent nearly all of it thinking about his enemies, he began attacking himself for not being good enough when he went against them.

Did I let them scare me? I don’t know. Fuck it. I should have told that bitch that you can’t join a lava flow when she asked why I don’t join her airhead community. It just takes the parts of you that can flow in it and makes smoke out of the rest. Why can’t I think of things to say when I need to say them?

Erik breathed deeply. He felt nothing but bitterness now and was trying to find something to be happy about. *They’re gonna go after me. They’re gonna bitch at my parents. They gave me detention...but god damn,* he smiled, *I sure fucked ‘em up. And let’s see them try to prove it was me. They don’t know shit. They’ll be watching me, sure. But what the fuck are they going to do?*

Johnson, Fikner, Stuvell, Richie, Wermlin, and a school counselor sat around a large table in the conference room to decide what they were going to do. The four that talked to Erik were fresh off interrogating two other students known for wearing excessively black attire to school. Neither of them seemed nearly as likely to do the poster atrocity as Erik did.

“Well,” Wermlin squealed, “Thanks for coming so quickly. I’m sure you know how seriously I’m taking this incident. I just got off the phone with Superintendent Hoover, and he agrees with me that we need to act fast on this. You don’t know who did it yet?”

“No,” replied Johnson, “But we think it might have been Erik Shylding.”

“Shylding,” Wermlin shuddered. Erik scared the hell out of him. “What’s the basis for this?”

“Well, it’s not enough to take disciplinary action – although I did give him extended detention for his behavior during our interview with him and during yesterday’s assembly. Right now we have little to go on with the posters. Knowing Erik’s history we decided he would be a likely candidate. When we tried to talk to him he started going off on how people are trying to kill him and all sorts of crazy stuff. Certainly something he should be monitored for.”

“Agreed.”

“We did talk to two other students who seemed suspect. But, though they act in strange ways for attention, it does not seem that they’d try to pull a stunt like this, unlike Erik, who’s always getting in trouble for things like this.”

Stuvell took control of the conference. “Erik also seems politically inclined.”

Johnson wasn’t convinced. “Now I agree that Erik is a prime suspect here, but I don’t think someone ought to get in trouble for his political beliefs.”

“Yes,” Stuvell said, “But this may not have been a mere prank. It appears to be some attempt at a political statement – and the kind of person who would make such a statement is the kind of person that Erik appears to be.”

“What kind of person is that?” Wermlin wondered.

“The statements on the flyers are similar to those voiced by anti-government extremists and some right-wing terrorist groups. The way Erik talked about society trying to kill him, the way he glorified self-defense, and the way he referred to federal agents as ‘Gestapo’ fits in with the kind of things that many people like this say.”

“Well that’s certainly something to keep in mind.”

“Also,” Stuvell continued in a much louder voice than necessary, “The date April nineteenth is important to people like this. Not only is it the date of the Battle of Lexington and Concord, which these self-styled ‘patriots’ just can’t get enough of,” he sneered, “but it’s also when the Branch Davidian compound burned down in Waco, and the date of the tragic bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City.”

“Okay,” Wermlin said, “maybe we should check on students involved in radical politics. It’s a little late today, but I’ll call together an emergency faculty meeting tomorrow morning and this is something I’ll tell teachers to look for.”

“Good.” Agent Stuvell approved. “Also, tomorrow morning our office will be in possession of new software for your attendance system that will be compatible with our threat evaluation program.”

“That could be a big help,” Wermlin said. “Thanks. In the meantime, Erik is still the prime suspect here.” He turned toward the guidance counselor. “James, what can you tell us about him?”

Erik just stared at the wall for the rest of the study hall. At some point he decided he should destroy his original copies of the flyer. Those bastards sounded serious about trying to get him. The Homeland Security

thug seemed to be trying his hardest to find a reason to arrest him on the spot.

When the bell rang Erik immediately got up and took a very long route to his locker. He felt a sense of triumph that was periodically overwhelmed by worries of impending doom. He got everything he needed from his locker. As he put his jacket on, he noticed Liz walking up to him.

He turned around and smiled. "Hey!"

"Hey Erik."

Erik could tell she wanted to walk with him. He put his backpack on and the two walked down the almost empty hall. Liz took a quick look around and leaned toward Erik.

"Did you do it?" she asked.

Erik was a little surprised. "Do what?" he said.

"Bring a Gun to School Day. You must've at least heard about it by now."

Erik had already decided he would probably tell Liz, but first he wanted to know something. "Why do you ask?"

"Well I know you told me you take different routes to places to break up the routine, but it was quite a coincidence that the only time I didn't see you before sixth period this week a crisis unfolds shortly after."

Erik nodded.

"Plus," she continued, "I actually saw one of the posters and it seemed like something you would do."

"How so?"

BEEEEEP!

"The message on it is the kind of thing I never really thought about, but it definitely makes sense, which is like a lot of things you say. And doing something this bold right now is definitely your style. Plus you seem to be really into guns."

Erik smiled. "Yeah," he said, "It was me."

Liz looked nervous. "Why? Don't you think they're going to make life really hard for you even if they don't find out?"

“Well,” Erik shrugged, “Sometimes you just have to do *something* and see what it does.”

The two of them paused at a hallway intersection where they would need to turn opposite ways.

“I guess,” Liz sighed, “See ya, crazy man.”

“See ya.”

The brief conversation made Erik feel better. Liz seemed to be above all the crap that went on around her. No matter what happened, she just kept enjoying her life however she wanted. Erik wondered if this made her freer than him. Maybe it just meant she was more tolerant. He wondered if he would ever be able to balance fighting his enemies with the rest of the things he wanted to do with his life. *If so, it's not going to happen anytime soon.*

He was smiling as he walked into the classroom just before the teacher called his name. He took his usual spot in the back corner and waited for school to end.

Class wasn't so bad today and the teacher didn't ask Erik about his absence the day before. Erik was just about to leave the building when he heard a vaguely familiar voice call his name. He turned around. It was Mary, a good friend of his ex-girlfriend.

“Hi.”

The two walked out of the building as Mary started talking. “Amy said that some counselors and scary-looking guys were asking all these weird questions about you!”

“Really? Like what?”

“Like stuff about your relationship and your personality...and your political beliefs and what kind of music and movies you like. And they asked if you talked about weapons and death a lot.”

Erik was stunned. They had broken up more than a year ago. Why were the feds bothering her now?

“Really?”

“Yeah. She said she told ‘em you’d never hurt anyone who didn’t do anything to you and they just kept asking more questions. She said they told her not to tell anyone, but I could tell you if I wanted.”

“Thanks...I’m glad you told me.”

“Are you in trouble or something?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, good luck. I’ll see you later.”

“Thanks...see ya.”

Mary got on her bus. Erik saw Henry as soon as she left.

“We goin’ today or what?” Erik asked.

“Well, David doesn’t think it’s such a good idea to go today since someone put up some threatening posters or something. We were just going to play some GTA Four. You wanna come?”

“Sure.” Erik got on the bus with him. Henry sat next to David and Erik sat across the aisle from them.

Henry and David started talking as Erik looked out the window. So it was extended detention for trying to exercise his rights. Not to mention an investigation he wasn’t supposed to know about. All for telling the truth in an unapproved manner.

No, the schools aren’t failing – yet. But I’ll make them fail.

The bus shook as the driver started the diesel engine.

Am I just paranoid? Well maybe I’m a little paranoid, but there’s more to it than that. Besides, they’re a lot more paranoid than I am. Erik thought about the Homeland Security thugs he’d met today. *Tyrannical slime who would think nothing of busting in your door and hauling you off somewhere to die.* He hoped it would never come to that, but he was running out of hope. *There comes a time when asking to be left alone just won’t work. Ideas are powerful things, but they can’t stand on their own.* They had gone way too far for Erik to even consider letting them win.

As the bus pulled out of the parking lot, Erik talked to his friends a little. None of them mentioned the posters, David and Erik because they didn’t want anyone to overhear them and Henry because he didn’t really

care. The freshmen in the back of the bus were talking about Erik's stunt but they weren't saying anything new.

In David's clean and neat bedroom, the three friends took turns playing Grand Theft Auto Four. As he watched Henry shoot people and drive stolen cars all over the sidewalk, Erik wondered if this was the kind of thing Amy had been asked about. *I'm sure they'd rather us use our violent tendencies for something that benefited THEM.*

Agent Stuvell slowed the dark blue Impala. "This the place?" he asked.

"73 Adams Street," Richie replied. "Gotta be it."

The two agents looked at the Shylding residence across the street. An average aluminum-sided house stood on an average lot in an average neighborhood. Next door a hairy old man was walking back into his house with a handful of mail. The man gave a mean glance over his shoulder at the agents in the idling Chevy.

"Want to take a look around?" Richie wondered.

Stuvell flexed his knuckles on the steering wheel. "No," he frowned. "Looks like someone might be home." Erik's Jeep was in the driveway and he had forgotten to turn off the light in the living room. "That kid was trouble. You know the big stink the guys in Nevada got in over a couple of warrantless searches. I don't want to start this unit out on negative publicity."

Rain again fell on the windshield as Stuvell slowly eased his foot off the brake. "Besides," he said, "tomorrow we'll have the software that will let the school see threat flags. I'm sure that kid will have something racked up by then that we can use as probable cause."

Erik walked home from David's house in a light rain. He wondered if Johnson really did call his parents. *What should I tell them if he did?* Plenty of people he knew routinely lied to their parents, but he didn't want to do that now.

By the time he got to Adams Street, the rainfall was increasing so he quickened his pace. Erik decided he would tell his parents the truth unless it appeared they would turn him in for doing so. He figured that a person who sided against his own son in favor of those trying to destroy him certainly deserved to be lied to.

Erik's mother was watching TV when he came in. Some commentator was telling her what she should think.

"...to the music they listen to. See the games they play. Look how they act. Kids today believe in nothing."

"Oh, Erik!" she turned off the television.

"Hi." He stood there dripping water onto the carpet, which distracted her from what she was planning to ask.

"Where were you?"

"David's."

"I would have given you a ride home."

"I know. It's wasn't far, though."

"Uhh, okay...the school counselor called me today and asked some strange questions."

"Oh yeah?"

"He said that they found some disturbing posters on the wall and you acted inappropriately when they asked you about them."

Erik sighed, "Yeah, well they weren't exactly being friendly about it."

"Please don't get into any more trouble, okay? You get such good grades it would be a shame if something like this kept you from getting into a good college."

Erik nodded. She appeared to be done so he went upstairs to put on some dry clothes. *Fuck college.*

As he was changing he heard the TV on downstairs again. He couldn't really hear what was being said, but he thought about what he heard when he came in. Things like that had a special way of irritating him. *This guy's*

never even heard of me and he acts like he knows so much about 'kids' like me. Like someone my age is really a kid anyway.

Erik was tired of busybodies acting like they should have a say in what he listened to, played, and did. *Life has a lot more to it than happy-go-lucky love stories where everyone makes everyone happy in the end. Why shouldn't music have more to it than that?*

They tell us we believe in nothing if we don't believe their bullshit. As if their opinions are the only ones that count. Kind of like people who say we don't want to succeed if we don't want to do what they want us to.

He sat at his desk and read stuff on the internet. He heard his father come in the house and talk to his mother. Apparently he did not get any phone call from the school so Erik's mother filled him in. His father asked if she had talked to him about it. She said she had and he hoped that he'd be alright.

When they ate dinner his father brought up the unpleasant topic and told Erik that he should be more respectful. When Erik told his father that they had given him no respect, all he got in response was a standard "Two wrongs don't make a right." He sat there wondering how it could be wrong to treat people the way they deserved regardless of what positions they held. Neither of his parents asked him if he actually did put the offending posters on the wall.

In his room later that night, Erik got a chance to dispose of the original copies of the flyer. He took out an old metal ammo box and emptied it of the knives, tools, lighters, and other objects a young man ought to have. He put the box next to his window, which was open behind closed blinds. He crumpled the aborted second copy and put it into the box. Then he crumpled the original, placed it next to the other paper, and put his copy center receipt on top of them. Making sure his door was closed and his parents weren't walking around the hall, he set the papers on fire. A light smell of smoke wafted through the room by the time they had burnt to ashes. Not wanting to take any chances, Erik waited for the smell to clear then got two wads of

toilet paper from the bathroom, moistening one of them. He scooped up the ashes in the dry wad and wiped the inside of the can relatively clean with the damp one. He then threw all the paper into the toilet, pissed on it, and flushed it to oblivion. *See you in Hell* he smiled as the evidence swirled down to its watery grave. He was glad that he had to make the copies outside of home. Now the only physical evidence he could think of that could link him to the posters might be a few careless fingerprints nestled in with everyone else's on a poster or two.

Normally he would have lifted weights today, but there seemed to be an elevated risk of something crazy happening tomorrow, so he didn't want to be tired or sore. He went to sleep early.

Chapter Six

Six fifty-five AM. The morning routine began again. After hitting his alarm off, Erik got some clothes on and ate breakfast. He wondered what would happen today, and how much of it would happen to him.

There were no clouds in the sky as Erik walked jacketless to the bus stop. That asshole was there this time. He stepped back as Erik came to the corner and showed a lot of effort in pretending not to notice him. That ridiculous yellow vehicle flashed its stupid lights as it squealed to a stop. Erik got on and sat in his usual place.

Stuvel and Richie were already at the school working on the new program while Wermlin and Johnson talked to the faculty about the situation.

“All right,” said Richie, “This shouldn’t take too long.”

“Good.” Stuvel approved.

Erik and Henry sat in their normal corner of the cafeteria. Johnny was skipping the day of school to get high with some friends. Henry quietly rested his head in his arms on the table. Erik watched Patty and some other

teacher scurry around like the caffeine addicts they were. Finally Mr. Stretch came into the room and said something to them.

Here we go, thought Erik.

“May I have your attention PLEASE!” Patty yelled over the crowd. The noise quickly faded out. She saw that it was time to continue.

“As many of you are aware, YESTERDAY, someone put up posters on the walls of this building that said April nineteenth is ‘Bring a Gun to School Day.’” Her head bobbed side to side at each syllable of the evil day.

“This was an act of TERRORISM!” she shrieked. “Whoever did this is preying on the fears of the school community to get attention for himself.”

Her aggravating voice was loud enough to make Henry pick up his head and moan “Shut uuuuup.” Erik felt the same. He noticed she said they didn’t know who did it, but they knew exactly why it was done. *As if every person thinks the same thing about every action. And here I thought preying on fear was authority’s job. I guess they hate anything they think is competition.*

“They intentionally used a date known for terrorist attacks in Oklahoma City and Columbine,” Patty said grimly, “and used the atmosphere of fear created by the attack in Kansas to try to manipulate us.”

“Uhh,” Erik said, “Wasn’t Columbine on the twentieth or something?”

Henry wasn’t falling asleep anyway. “Oh, and you said David thought too rationally.”

“The school administration is taking this matter as seriously as the situation demands. The perpetrators will be caught and prosecuted. Letters are being sent to all of your parents. In the meantime, new guidelines have been created to help us ensure your safety.”

She picked up a piece of paper. Erik knew this part was going to suck.

“The school staff will be better monitoring the halls for any suspicious activity. We will make sure all students understand the right lessons of

the history of our homeland. We will ensure that troubled students receive the support they need. All school regulations that are in place for your safety will be strictly enforced. But we cannot do everything ourselves,” she read, “We need you to help us keep Suburban Regional a safe environment. Please be courteous and understanding while following new and better-enforced guidelines. Hall passes are to be used at all times, including lunch, and you will sign your name in the log. If coats or hats are worn to school, they are to be removed immediately upon entering the building. In addition to clothing containing violent or harmful messages, clothing with heavy metal logos and camouflage clothing will also be not allowed next week.”

“Looks like you’re shit outta luck, pal,” Henry told Erik.

“Well at least the ladies are in luck. By June I’ll be walking these halls bare-assed naked!”

“OH!” Henry high-fived Erik.

“Starting Monday, you will notice tightened security measures at the school. Although they may seem inconvenient, we ask for your full cooperation with these necessary measures. They are entirely for your safety.”

Erik wondered what kind of “measures” she was talking about.

“We would also like to ask for your help in identifying those among you who need assistance. There are a lot more students than staff at Suburban Regional, and only you know certain things about your peers that we might not. If you know of someone attracted to violence, weapons, or other anti-social influences, please let one of us know. Watch for peers who don’t relate to anyone in a positive manner. Watch for peers obsessed with defiance or with violent events in the past. Remember, we are here to help you. But we can help you best if you help us. By working together, we can be safe together. Thank you.”

The bell rang. Erik went to his locker. Henry waited for the bus that would take him to the vocational program until eleven.

On the way to his locker Erik passed an old English teacher.

“Hello.”

“Morning, Erik.”

Mr. Martin was a good guy. The school system was full of good people, but they could not prevent the system from being rotten. The only thing to do with rotten fruit is throw it away – which was exactly what Erik was trying to do.

Erik got everything he needed for the next few periods and headed to history.

“Okay,” Richie said, “I think we’re ready.”

Stuvel smiled, “Alright, I’ll get Johnson in here and we’ll see how this works.”

In a couple of minutes, Johnson returned from the meeting and sat next to Richie at Slaughter’s desk. Stuvel stood behind the two of them with his arms folded.

“Well, gentlemen,” Johnson said, “Let’s see what we have.”

Richie smiled. “We have the program working. We’ll be able to install it on as many computers in the building as you like.”

“I know Principal Wermlin has a list of machines he would like to have it,” Johnson replied.

“Okay,” Richie put his hand on the mouse, “This has several modes. It can scan by student name or ID number, it can show attendance, but I guess right now we’re most interested in the threat flags.”

Just as he said this, the three of them noticed a blinking red flag in the corner of the screen. Richie’s eyes widened.

“What is that?” Johnson pointed to the graphic.

“That,” said Stuvel, “Means that someone has received ten threat flags on his record – considered a high-risk subject.”

Richie double clicked on the graphic.

“We’ve only had threat flags since Wednesday!” Johnson said

The screen showed “Subject 1 of 1.”

“Erik Shylding!”

“Sixteen threat flags!”

They went down the list.

4/4 – Hostility Toward Staff

4/4 – Threatening Behavior

4/4 – Discussion of Weapons

4/4 – Discussion of Bringing Weapons to School

4/4 – Hostility Toward Fellow Students

4/4 – Hostility Toward Staff

4/4 – General Disrespect for Authority

4/4 – Alienates Self

4/4 – Threatening Behavior

Yesterday – Alienates Self

Yesterday – Threatening Behavior

Yesterday – Threatening Behavior

Yesterday – Hostility Toward Fellow Students

Yesterday – Alienates Self

Yesterday – General Disrespect for Authority

Yesterday – Threatening Behavior

“And this doesn’t even count our interview yesterday!” Johnson said.

“Or anything that he *wasn’t* caught doing.” Stuvell added.

“And we saw his record yesterday,” Richie noted, “that kind of data can be put into the system in the future.”

“Discussion of bringing weapons to school!” Johnson was amazed. “Why did nobody report this directly?”

Stuvell was quick to provide an answer. “Sometimes small things or casual references don’t raise too big of an alarm – but put together they are enormous. That’s exactly why programs like this are so critical. The Department even hopes to use them outside of schools in the future.”

Johnson nodded. “Even if this kid didn’t do the poster thing, which it looks like he did, we really need to get him out of here.”

Stuvel was interested. “What we have in front of us right now, combined with his behavior during the interview *and* the fact that a terrorist threat was made yesterday gives us probable cause to make an arrest. DHS officials have a lot of discretion in matters of terrorism. We can go right now and-”

“I think that for the safety of the other students we should bring him down here before arresting him,” Johnson interrupted. “He’s down here a lot anyway so he won’t suspect much. We’ll have him cornered *and* isolated from other students. I don’t want to put any kids at risk if I can help it.”

“Sounds fine,” Stuvel said, “Get him down here and we’ll handle the rest. Let me just notify the office for a minute.”

“Okay.”

As Johnson radioed Slaughter from the other room, Stuvel spoke on his phone to the field office. He was told to go ahead with the arrest. His proposal to have a TacTeam simultaneously raid the Shylding’s house was approved. Even though Stuvel knew he could handle this punk himself, the Field Office Director sent another TacTeam to the school in case anything went wrong, as well as to provide DHS-friendly photo-ops. No need to let the local cops get any credit. As Stuvel knew, TacTeams always traveled with a Department camera operator. Their footage would contribute to the celebration of this high-profile success, which would bring more publicity, glory, and funding to the office. His request for a helicopter to film the triumphs from above was also granted.

Erik sat in the back of the classroom. Since Edsel was out today they were watching a video. This one was about Woodrow Wilson’s involvement in the First World War. It followed the normal formula of presenting the greatest presidents as the ones who killed the most people or expanded state authority most successfully. Since Wilson had done a whole lot of both, he was given a hero’s treatment in this film. Glorious music played in the background as his ship cut through the Atlantic waves. The man looked out into the horizon as the narrator described how forward-thinking his political

ideas were. The necessity of American involvement in the war was unquestioned and the negative consequences unmentioned.

Erik thought about his next move in the war he was in. *Time to escalate this shit*, he decided. *Maybe I can write "FUCK ZERO TOLERANCE" on a replica pistol and leave it somewhere. I'll have to see how the poster situation blows over first though.*

Ray Slaughter appeared in the doorway. "Erik," he said, "Could you please come with me?"

The substitute teacher watched without interest as the two of them disappeared from sight.

Erik wondered why they wanted him downstairs again. Could someone have noticed he was in the hallway when the flyers appeared? Or was there something he was not even thinking of?

Chapter Seven

TacTeam 36 rolled up in front of the Shylding house, their arrival hastened by the lights and sirens on their vans. With a display of unnecessary force that was typical of HomeSec misadventures, six masked and armored men with submachine guns moved swiftly into the empty house after the door was breached with a battering ram. Similarly armed men followed the entry team to occupy the “cleared” rooms behind them. An agent with an AR-15 rifle went around the rear of the building with two shotgun-armed agents. Another man with an AR-15 and one with a scoped Remington 700 watched from near the vans with an armored cameraman. When they were satisfied the house was “secure,” they called the local police to tell them what they were doing. The Field Office Director wanted everyone to know that this was his show.

Something felt different. Erik could see it in the way Slaughter walked. He could feel it inside himself. Something was not right about this visit to Johnson. As they closed in on the office, Erik felt his heartbeat rise. An uncomfortable warmth spread over him as the back of his neck tingled. Sure he was paranoid, but something was just wrong here.

They walked into the waiting area in front of Slaughter's desk.

"Mr. Johnson will see you now."

"Uhh okay." Usually Slaughter told Johnson when he was here or told Erik to have a seat and wait. Now he was just standing by the doorway.

Erik walked towards Johnson's office with heightened senses. Johnson came into view. The smaller agent was behind the disciplinarian and slightly to his left. Erik saw the yellow plastic chair in front of Johnson's desk. Where was the other agent? The chair was turned so it would be easier to get into it from its left – Johnson's right. Erik walked slowly. He was about to clear the doorway. Johnson narrowed his eyes. *But what if I-*

Erik stepped with his right foot into the room at a sharp angle toward the right of the chair. He saw a human shape to his right and quickly leaned forward. The wires of a Taser flew just centimeters over his back. *Fight!* Erik stepped forward with his left foot, turned his right, pivoted at the waist and sent his left fist for Stuvell's throat as he came out of his crouch. The man ducked and tried to put his hands up. Erik's fist hit him on the bottom of his nose and top of his mouth. The blow was massive enough to make Stuvell see a flash of white as his legs gave way.

The responses of Johnson and Richie were hampered by falling over each other to avoid the darts of the Taser. Once Stuvell went down, Johnson jumped onto his desk in an attempt to get at Erik quickly. Erik squatted and grabbed the gun out of Stuvell's right-side belt holster with his left hand. Richie reached for his gun. As Erik rotated his body to face the other agent, he turned the gun in his left hand to place the grip in his right. Richie's gun just cleared kydex. Johnson saw the gun in Erik's hand that looked like it was pointed at him. He shifted his weight while in the middle of a jump off the desk, sending his body at the doorway instead of at Erik. Time slowed in Erik's mind as he brought the gun across to Richie, who was less than a second from shooting him. Closing one eye as he had practiced, Erik put the front sight on Richie's torso and pressed quickly on the trigger. The gun spat flame and copper-jacketed lead. Though the sound deafened Johnson right before he flew out of the room, Erik barely heard it because of the

auditory exclusion the situation put him in. He fired again as the shock of the first round sent Richie's body reeling against the wall. The second hollowpoint shattered ribs as it entered the agent's body and immediately began expanding, opening a deadly hole in his chest. It tore into Richie's heart and stopped before penetrating the muscles in his back. He would not live long enough to regret going without body armor for most of his career.

Erik turned toward Stuvell as he took his finger out of the trigger guard. Stuvell grabbed at something in his jacket pocket. Disoriented from the blow to his face, the loss of his gun, and the deafening roar of the two quick shots, Stuvell was too slow to prevent Erik from clubbing his temple with the muzzle end of the gun's frame. All went dark to him.

Erik grabbed the magazines out of Stuvell's belt pouch, shoved them into a pocket and ran for the door. He didn't know where he would go, but he would try escaping through the woods he had traveled through on Wednesday. He did know that DHS agents had emergency buttons on their radios that would summon all kinds of hell if they were hit, and it seemed that Stuvell was doing just that before his last blow to the head. What Erik did not know was that TacTeam 35 had just pulled into the parking lot and were now deploying.

Although TacTeam 36 had found nothing linking Erik to the poster attack, the jackbooted men immediately loaded boxes of "evidence" into one of the vans. This included all the computers in the house, the fireworks and loose cash they found in Erik's room, and most of the scribbled-on papers that were laying around there. They also removed several "books of interest" and gun magazines. An old copy of *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* and a shot-up target of Hitler saluting above the words "ALL IN FAVOR OF 'GUN CONTROL' RAISE YOUR RIGHT HAND" were also taken and soon reported to the press as "Nazi paraphernalia." This would help HomeSec associate the newest Enemy of the People with as many bad things as possible. Most of the mainstream media would jump all over it.

That N word was the most shocking four-letter word they were allowed to use, so they flocked to it like flies to shit.

Agent Barnes was watching Agent Nelson load a box into the van when he heard a scratchy voice yell out from behind him.

“What the hell you doin’ o’er there?”

Barnes turned to see a stocky old man with shoulder length grey hair and a chest-length grey beard standing in the driveway of the house next door. *This could be trouble* was his immediate reaction. The man was wearing a blue shirt, silly multicolor shorts and-

Barnes grabbed the grip of the MP5 that hung across his chest, “SIR,” he yelled, “WHAT IS THAT ON YOUR BELT?”

The old man, “Hairy” Harry Bartram, didn’t move as he answered, “It’s a forty-five. We can carry however we want on our property around here.”

Barnes didn’t release the grip on his gun. Another masked agent joined him in staring at the man. Suddenly they received Stuvell’s emergency call. All of the agents now scrambled around, the two watching Harry backing away then turning when they got closer to the others. One of the agents with an AR-15 kept watching Harry in case he tried anything. A GPS receiver in the vans told the agents that the signal was coming from Suburban Regional. Two of them stayed with the evidence van and kept a close eye on Harry and the Shylding house.

Harry went back inside his house. *What the hell were those guys doing? Does it have something to do with the car yesterday?* He knew Erik was an odd-looking guy – maybe the kind of person that professional terrorist-finders would go after in the wake of Tuesday’s shooting. *Were they arresting Erik? Maybe they all went up to the high school. I can’t see that boy going quietly.*

Harry only had one way to find out. He put on a loose grey sweater, which concealed the big automatic on his hip. He grabbed a small police scanner he had tinkered with before walking outside. Without looking at the

agents next door, he started up his old Monte Carlo and headed for Suburban Regional.

Johnson ran for the closest door, which was at the front of the building. Nothing mattered but getting away from that killing machine named Erik. He wasn't going to challenge a guy with a gun. *Almost there! Almost out!*

Erik was on his way to a different door. The adrenaline rush and shock of the sudden combat made him lose the feeling of running. He felt like he was being moved ever faster down a narrow tunnel. He heard Wermlin announce a Code Red situation – everybody was to huddle in the corner of their rooms and hope the cops came in time. Of course Wermlin would soon get the hell out of the building.

Erik reached the door. He pushed it open and-

Fuck! They got a helicopter after me! He heard the rotors cutting the air. Could he make it to and through the woods?

Johnson had got out of the closer door just seconds earlier. The light from the sun blinded him. Squinting, he could barely see-

Yes! The SWAT team is here!

Johnson's senses and thoughts were dulled by Erik's gunshots, fear, and now the sudden light change. The men with guns were yelling something at him. He slowly walked toward them.

All that TacTeam 35 could see emerging from the glare off the windows was a large white male with short hair – just like the suspected terrorist they were after. The subject had run out the door and now continued to walk toward them in a menacing manner.

Agent Sommers had no way of knowing that a cramp was the reason Johnson suddenly reached under his jacket. The disciplinarian's chest was in his sights. He squeezed the trigger, let off a three-round burst, then released it. Two other agents did the same.

Johnson felt the searing pain and shock of bullets tearing into his body, then nothing. He was dead before his bleeding face hit the concrete.

Before Erik had a second to decide if he could outrun a helicopter, he heard gunfire from outside. *Shiiiiit!* He ducked back into the building. The question of how they were on him so quickly got no consideration before Erik thought about how he could win. *The cameras!* Perhaps he could see what was going on outside by getting into the main office and viewing the surveillance system. Could he find somewhere to hide from the helicopter?

The shots Erik heard were all fired at Johnson on the other side of the building. The helicopter crew did not see him. Not only did Erik have little experience in pinpointing the location of gunfire, but he also had no idea that there could be anybody else they would shoot at.

David was sitting in the corner with the rest of his class. *This is bullshit*, he thought. *They're probably just searching our – what the hell was that?* Gunshots outside. His classmates screamed. Mrs. Mercury was trying to calm them down as David went to the window. He could only see the advancing TacTeam from the angle he was at.

“DAVID, SIT DOWN!” the teacher yelled.

“I’m just trying to see what’s going on here.” *I don’t believe in just hiding in corners and trusting the authorities to save me.*

“We don’t want anyone to know we’re in here until the police come! SIT DOWN!”

“It’s probably Erik Shylding!” Someone said, “I heard the FBI was after him yesterday and he came here to shoot it out with them.”

“No way!” David said, *but they probably are after Erik. Should I go help-*

“DAVID SIT DOWN!”

Erik was winded by the time he got to the main office. The room was deserted. The images from the video cameras rotated through two television screens.

Fuck! The camera angles did not allow Erik to tell if any of the exits were completely clear. He could see armed men behind ballistic shields in two of the shots. *What the hell am I going to do now?*

He sat in a secretary's computer chair. *Let me at least look at this gun I have.* It was still in his right hand. He rotated it to the side. It was a smaller gun, but not extremely small. There were letters on the slide. "SIG SAUER P239." *At least that shithead had a good gun.*

Erik just noticed that his left hand was throbbing from the blow to Stuvél's face. He rubbed it with the back of his right hand, which still held the Sig. Erik took the gun in his shaky left hand and looked at the bottom. There was some blood on the frame. Erik wiped it on a coat that was hanging next to him. He took a full magazine out of his left pocket and held it with two fingers as he ejected the one in the gun. He put the full mag in the gun and shoved the other into his right pocket. *Now what the hell do I do?*

Chapter Eight

“GET OVER HERE, DAVID!”

No, don't do it, he thought, my friend needs me. He started for the door.

“DAVID NO!” Mercury came after him and reached at his shoulders. David spun around.

“GET AWAY FROM ME, YOU IDIOT!” She jumped back in fear. “I’M GOING TO FIND OUT WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON, NOT WAITING HERE TO DIE WITH YOU!”

David slammed the door so hard that students in nearby classrooms thought it was a gunshot. His heart pounded. He had no idea what was happening and he had just shouted defiance into authority’s face. It was unfamiliar territory for him, like being dropped into a foreign war zone.

He looked out one of the windows of the third-floor hallway he was in, making sure to stand far enough from it to make it hard for them to see him. There were emergency vehicles and armed people all over the parking lot. There was at least one helicopter. Something big was going on. *This has to be about Erik. They talked about it this morning. But where the hell is he?* Seeing no sign of Erik on the third floor, David quietly walked down

the stairs. *If I die today, at least I'll die doing the right thing.* He could feel pulses in his temples like someone was pounding on his head with rubber mallets. *Maybe Erik is already dead?*

But Erik was breathing heavily in the main office. *How are they going to attack? What happened in Kansas? They were outside for a while. Maybe I have time, but what can I do with it?*

He looked at the computer in front of him. *The Internet!* He could post some messages and email a few organizations and media outlets. At least someone would know what happened and why. Although he certainly didn't expect a popular armed response, maybe doing this would help get him out of this jam.

The computer was in standby mode. He moved the mouse around and was greeted with a prompt. He typed his student username and password and hit "enter."

"error – user does not have access to machine"

"Oh, shit." He tried again and the same message came up. *Are there any machines here that'll work?* A quick look with the Sig in his waistband revealed that he would need to type his password into all of them.

He needed to go to the library. Erik checked the television screens. Nothing had changed. With the gun in his hand he quickly but carefully made his way to the library.

The emptiness of the hallways was eerie. Besides an occasional scream, there was no sound other than the hum of the ventilation system. All the classroom doors were closed and the rooms were dark.

The library was on the second floor. Erik did not go near any of the windows in the hallway. He made sure the area around the library was clear with the muzzle of the pistol following his eyes.

Okay. He walked up to the library door and looked through the glass. He couldn't see anyone, but there were probably people outside his view in there. He took a half step back and put his left hand on the doorknob. He squeezed it and –

Fuck! It was locked. *I should have remembered to check the office for keys.* Erik was not going to hurt himself trying to barge through the door. He walked around the corner and took a fire extinguisher out of its case. The door was in front of him again. He put the P239 into his waistband and smashed at the doorknob with the fire extinguisher. Within fifteen seconds he was able to push open the battered door.

His arrival in the dark room was greeted by screams like he never could have imagined. It hurt his ears more than the gunshots did.

“ALL RIGHT!” he yelled, “JUST SHUT THE FUCK UP!” Few complied.

He started towards the computers, then turned back around. He pulled the gun from his waistband and pointed it skyward.

“I GOTTA WRITE SOMETHING. JUST GET THE FUCK OUT OF HERE!” A couple of the frightened students started moving. “GET THE FUCK OUT! NOW!” The crowd started leaving. “OUT!”

When they all left Erik sat at a computer. He faced the entrance of the room but was close to the cover of a pillar. He put the gun next to the keyboard and started typing. This machine did accept his username and password. As it booted up, the only sound in the dark room was the hum and click of the computers. Erik quickly got online.

Suddenly the machines all went silent. The change made Erik jump and grab the gun. He noticed the emergency lights were on. *Oh shit!* They had cut the power.

David heard screams around the corner. He froze and looked down the hall with wide eyes.

“Fucking Erik, man! Fucking Erik!” There was a crowd of people running for the stairs. Women screamed and tough guys all tried to out-curse each other with shaking heads and hands. The librarian was among them. *That must be where Erik is.* David walked down the hallway they came from. He could feel his pulse in the palms of his sweaty hands now.

Erik had just left the library when he heard footsteps around the corner. *Oh shit!* These were not panicked running footsteps, but cautious ones. He crouched in the hallway and pointed the captured handgun at the corner.

David realized that it would not be good to sneak up on Erik. The door to the library was right around the corner. He backed against the wall. He could feel his throat contract as he inhaled deeply.

Erik heard the footsteps stop. There was just the ventilation system. *But it sounded like just one person. Who could it be?*

“ERIK!” he heard. “ERIK, YOU THERE?” The voice surprised him. That sounded like-

“David?”

“Yeah man, it’s me.”

“Uh, okay, I’m right around the corner. Come here.”

As soon as Erik could tell that nobody was with David, he lowered the gun.

“Holy shit, man,” Erik said, “What the hell are you doing?”

“Finding out what the hell you’re doing.”

David was slightly calmer now. He may still be doomed, but at least there was someone to share the danger with now. Someone to help make sure this was all real.

“So what are we doing?” he asked.

Principal Wermlin was horrified. He had just seen his friend Vlad Johnson covered in a body bag and loaded into an ambulance. *And who knows how many people Erik’s killed by now? How could this be happening?* Although there were more cops and federal agents surrounding Suburban Regional than Wermlin thought he’d seen in his life, they were still not entering the building. *Isn’t protecting the innocent what they always brag about doing?* All they had done so far, besides shooting Johnson, was detain a few students who had left the building. They hadn’t even let Wermlin talk to any of them yet, only Fikner and some of their agents.

Wermlin was growing impatient. Concerned parents were already behind the police perimeter, alerted to the crisis by calls their kids made to them with cellular phones they weren't supposed to have in school. The principal walked over to the man who made it clear he was in charge of the scene, Field Office Director Albers.

"Excuse me," he tried to interrupt the man barking commands on his radio. "Excuse me!"

Albers looked up. "Yes?"

"When are you guys going inside? I've got over a thousand kids in there that I'm not comfortable leaving in danger like this."

Albers didn't like it when people tried to tell him how to do his job, especially clueless civilians, or "double-charlies" as he liked to call them. "All my personnel are professionals," he snapped. "We're working with the local guys to secure the perimeter, and we're almost done with that. Raids aren't like you see on TV. They require proper previous planning to ensure the safety of the officers and hostages."

"Hostages?"

"Yes, judging by Erik's profile, we can expect him to have hostages. He probably forced Mr. Johnson out of the building to delay us. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a lot to do right now."

This didn't comfort Wermlin a bit. He turned away from the Director and walked toward people he knew.

Ray Slaughter was shaken up, but coherent. He tried to give Wermlin a reassuring face, but didn't quite manage.

"Ray, you said you ran to us after Vlad yelled Erik had a gun, right?"

"Yeah, I know, I know, I should've done something. I just wasn't prepared for something like this. Vlad ran and I didn't know what to do so I-

"It's okay, Ray, really, it's not your fault. You did exactly what you should have. Who knows what would've happened if you didn't alert us?"

Anyway, the Field Office commander says Erik probably forced Vlad out to delay us.”

Slaughter twitched in surprise. “I don’t know. Maybe. The last I saw of him was when I ran out into the hallway toward your office. I don’t know what happened to him after that, except...”

“Okay, is that what you told the agents who talked to you?”

“Yeah, well, I gave them all the details, but that’s what I told them.”

“Okay, thanks. I guess I have to tell the parents something now.”

The parking lot was total chaos. Armed men from various agencies were running around. Official vehicles entered through roadblocks that prevented traffic and pedestrians from using the road in front of the building. Enough lights flashed to give you a headache. *Well*, thought Wermlin, *Albers must know what he’s talking about. This is his job, after all.* He wished that it could be someone else’s job to tell the parents what was going on. To look someone in the eyes and tell them you don’t know if their child is alive or in the hands of an armed maniac was not a pleasant task. The fact that Wermlin held some responsibility for the students’ safety made it even worse. He had a feeling that he wouldn’t be able to say anything to make it better no matter how hard he tried.

They came into view. *So many already!* Wermlin walked across the police barricade to address them. *What to say? What to say?*

Agent Ross saw the principal about to speak and picked up a radio. “Sir,” he told Albers, “one of the school officials appears to be making a statement to the crowd outside the roadblock.”

“He couldn’t have told me?” Albers responded. “Well let him do it but make sure he does it right.”

“Understood.” Ross stood by Wermlin as he addressed the crowd.

“Ummm,” Wermlin stalled as the crowd got quiet, “As I’m sure you know, we have a dangerous situation on our hands. We have reason to believe that one of our students resisted arrest by Homeland Security agents and is now armed and still in the school. No students are known to have

been harmed. The Department of Homeland Security has the situation under control and should be entering the building shortly.”

The crowd erupted in screams, yells, and movement.

Agent Ross quickly yelled through a bullhorn. “May I have your attention please? You can be assured that your children’s safety is in the hands of the best trained and equipped law-enforcement agents in the country.” He did not say “counter-terrorism agents” because this was not a time to scare people with the T-word. “We understand that some of you may have been in contact with your children. We would like to use any knowledge you may have of the situation inside. Please line up by the rear of the black SUV on your left if anyone inside the building has contacted you.”

People moved all around parked vehicles on both sides of the barricade and were being even noisier than before. The police officers there had their hands full trying to take reports from those in contact with their kids, and keep people from crossing the perimeter. Agent Ross had his hands full trying to tell them all what to do.

Suddenly the sound of honking vans rose above the noise. Television vans and reporters’ cars weaved through the people and stopped vehicles. Reporters and cameramen jumped out, some trying to interview the police at the barricade, others adding to the chaos by trying to cross it.

“Get them back!” Ross ordered. “Only Department cameramen in the danger zone!”

There was way too much going on for anyone to notice a hairy old man slipping into the forest.

Erik and David sat in a windowless classroom near the library. Even though the room had only one exit it was the best place they could think of to ambush a raid team entering the library, the last place Erik was seen.

“They’re probably going to shoot us no matter what we do,” Erik said after telling David about the failed arrest. “Or at least shoot me. You might still be able to get out. The way they tried to arrest me – there was no ‘put

your hands on the desk' or anything like that. Just a Taser to the back. And especially now after I've killed one of their own."

"And they probably don't want anything but the official story to survive."

"Yeah, I know. That's why I was in the library. I wanted to send out my story but they cut the power before I could. I'm fucked now. You can still probably go though. I just have one gun anyway."

David sighed. "I know. I didn't really have to come and try to help you...but I felt like I had to," he said forcefully. "The last time I went shooting with my dad...he told me...told me that there would be nothing good in the human world if it weren't for people who risked everything to do what was right because that was all they wanted to do. This is what I've wanted to do with my life since then...risk everything to do what's right. But I was never much of a risk-taker. I never lived up to what my dad said...until today. This is my chance to redeem the failures I've lived before today."

Erik blinked. An awkward moment of silence passed before he inhaled deeply and started talking. "No, you've never been a failure. Look at all you've been through and you're still here. You never let them get your mind or soul. You stayed true all along. Your life didn't change direction today – it just made a giant leap in the direction it was headed. Don't say you were a failure just because you weren't yet able to live up to your ideal...after all, you're a man, not a god."

David smiled. "Then let's be gods today. Time to stop saying 'liberty or death' and start living it."

"Yes, today we'll be gods on Earth. Now let's use our powers to figure out how the hell we're gonna get out of this with one pistol. I won't ask you again if you want to get out. They're probably gonna shoot us no matter what we do."

"Yeah, probably. But you forgot about our most powerful weapons...our brains."

Neither of the guys would have been talking the way they did if they didn't feel like they had one foot over the abyss of death. With minds fixated on making their enemies pay, they put their most powerful weapons to use.

More reporters were arriving. The police were able to keep them behind the barricades. HomeSec cameramen made sure that only footage most favorable to The Department would be seen.

It had been a while since any students left the building, so Albers let the media make use of Fikner for a while. By now the identity of the shooter had been revealed. It had also been discovered through cellular phone calls that there might be another student helping him hold the school hostage.

"This should be a lesson for all of us about how important it is to act fast when safety is at stake," Fikner said. "Antisocial youth who get their satisfaction from violence are using the fear created by Tuesday's shooting to gain attention for themselves. Everyone should do their best to give everyone positive attention so nobody feels the need to seek negative attention where they can find it."

One of the faces behind a microphone got Fikner's attention. "Can you tell us anything about the alleged shooter?"

"We discovered that Erik had a very abusive personality and was very antisocial. He enjoyed distancing himself from, and threatening, the Suburban community. He had many strengths that he could have used for his community's benefit, like by joining an athletic or academic team, but he chose not to take part in the most important community in his life. Someone like that is always someone to watch."

Further questions were asked of her and anyone else willing to spend time with a reporter. Slaughter gladly followed the suggestion to stay away from the media. Wermlin was too worried about what was going on inside the school and too busy being on and off the phone with Superintendent Bradley to bother with them.

The regional office, based outside of Suburban, was abuzz with activity. They were trying to reach everyone with children in Suburban by

phone. Every school in the county was dismissed early, with the students bussed home under a noticeable police presence.

They did not call Erik's parents before his mother happened to hear the news on the radio at work. Shocked, she went online and found out that her son was the alleged shooter. There were even pictures of Homeland Security agents in full SWAT gear standing in front of her house. She immediately called her husband with the bad news.

Erik and David had come up with some ideas. Where they were now was clearly under their enemy's control. To fight here would not be desirable. The best thing to do was escape to more advantageous terrain.

"Okay," David said, "You know your way from here to The Pit. That car that Henry got running a while ago probably still works. I'm sure I'd remember how to hotwire it pretty quickly."

"I would too."

"So we somehow gotta get from here to there."

"We need a diversion."

"Exactly. I bet the intercom still works. Maybe you can do your Wermlin voice and tell everyone to evacuate the building and go to the football field like in that drill we had. Maybe we could slip out through that."

"Yeah, but they'll probably check ID's."

"Yeah, but I made some fake ones last night."

"Really?"

"Yup. Good thing I almost forgot to bring them today. Otherwise they'd be in my backpack instead of in my pocket."

David pulled out the ID's he had made last night and handed Erik the one with his picture on it. Erik looked at it then glared at David.

"Ein Grande?" he asked. "Is anyone going to believe *that's* my real name?"

David dismissively waved his hand. "Don't worry about it. These guys are all stupid. Besides, they're going to have a lot on their hands with a

thousand panicked people running out the doors. Plus, ID's are part of their system for controlling us. Who would question their system?"

"I do still look like the kind of guy who's supposed to shoot up the school."

"Hmm true. Maybe you can kind of fit into my overshirt."

Erik took off the black tee-shirt he was wearing and put on David's plaid shirt. It just barely fit on him.

"Now we're probably going to get searched anyway," David said, "so you should leave the gun in here. You don't have any real ID's on you or anything, right?"

"Nope."

"All right, then."

"Wait," Erik said, "What if there are enough cops out there that they watch where we go after they frisk us? There will definitely be people outside who know who we are. How are we going to get out of that?"

"Shit, I didn't even think of that." It was unlike David to not think ahead.

"Another diversion."

"Yeah, do you know how to do that?"

"No."

Erik stroked his chin. "We gotta somehow direct their attention away from the woods we're gonna escape through. I know a way onto the roof. Last I was there it wasn't even locked. Maybe we could get someone to start yelling stuff at them from above. If he just acted like a panicked victim I doubt they'd shoot."

"Yes, direct their attention up and away from where we'll go. The helicopter will probably be dispatched to this problem."

"Yeah...you know anyone who'd do that for us?"

"Mmmmaybe? I have no idea where they are right now, though."

"Same here. Shit."

The two of them sat another minute trying to think of something else. Both doubted they'd be able to get outside the perimeter without a

second diversion. Erik was considering the possibility of using someone's cell phone to make the police think he was coming out the front, calling the evacuation, then sneaking out the back. It didn't seem too likely to work.

David interrupted his thoughts. "I'll do it," he said.

"Do what?"

"I'll go on the rooftop and act like a panic-stricken student. By the time they realize I was full of shit you'll be either burning down their HQ or a state and a half away making them look like asses."

"But what about you?"

"I'll probably go to jail for a while. But I'm not worried. It's better than serving the state. Besides, I'm sure someone'll get me out eventually."

"You sure you want to do this?"

"Yeah. There's no turning back now."

"Okay."

Outside the building, Albers was coordinating the raid preparation. The two TacTeams and the county Special Operations Group would enter the building at three different points. Uniformed police officers would follow them and escort frisked and freed "hostages" out of the building and secure the area behind the entry teams. TacTeam 36 would focus on the library, the last place the terrorist had been reported seen. Anyone leaving the building without a police escort would be detained. The attendance program would be used to determine if all students were accounted for. The three teams and their supporting officers were then sent to their points of entry, awaiting the signal. Snipers and helicopters were dispatched to the outer perimeter.

Chapter Nine

“Okay,” Erik said as he pointed with his empty left hand, “This ladder goes up to the roof. See how there’s no lock on the door up there?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay then, I guess you wait here and climb up when you hear the announcement or see panicked mobs running.”

“Wait, why don’t I just leave from the office?”

“Why? That’ll just waste time and I won’t know if you’re up there.”

“Yeah but we don’t even know if the intercom will work. And we’ve got no communication if we’re separate and something goes wrong.”

“The intercom must be on the backup power.”

“Why?” David asked. “Wouldn’t we just leave if there was a power outage?”

“I don’t know, but how would we know to leave if they can’t tell us?” Erik said. “Fine, just come with me then.”

The two made their way to the main office, Erik with gun in hand and David acting as his second set of eyes. They both used a water fountain then kept going.

The office was just as deserted as Erik had left it, but now darker.

“Okay,” David said, “You ready?”

Erik inhaled and looked around the room. “Hold on,” he said as he noticed a gym bag lying on a table. He opened it up and put on the sneakers, gym shorts, and green Suburban Wildcats hoodie he found inside. “Now I look like a teenager is supposed to. Nobody will suspect a thing.”

David smiled.

“Here we go,” Erik said.

“TacTeam 36 in position.”

“Roger, 36. 35 report.”

“35 getting into final position, stand by.”

“Okay. County SOG, what’s your status?”

“County SOG in position, sir.”

“Sniper team blue, what can you tell me?”

Erik pressed the button to transmit. It had taken them a little searching to find.

“May I have your attention, please?” Erik started.

David grinned in excitement as he heard it echo through the empty halls. *He is way too good at this.*

“This is Principal Wermlin speaking. When this announcement is concluded, all students, faculty, and staff are to evacuate the building in an orderly fashion and meet on the varsity football field. Please exit the building now from the nearest door available.”

Immediately Erik and David heard the stomping of footsteps as frightened students and faculty ran for the doors. The fashion was anything but orderly.

“All right, let’s GO!” Erik put his hood up over the tube that held his fake ID and ran for the exit, mixing himself with the crowd of students rushing for the door. David followed closely behind. He would soon depart from the crowd to head for the roof.

“Sir, we have a large number of students exiting the building, please advise!” Similar radio messages were coming at Albers from every door of the building. He could see crowds running from the front of the school.

“All stations halt students for search and identity verification! Suspects must have sent them out to delay entry attempt. Entry teams, can you deploy?”

“Negative sir.”

“Negati-”

“Negative, sir, entry is blocked by too many students.”

“Okay then keep anyone from getting away! Assist officers with managing the crowd! We don’t want this guy to escape!”

By now there was total chaos at every door. Albers was losing his command of the situation. Officers were desperate to carry out his orders against the floods of students trying to carry out Wermlin’s orders. Although many cops yelled through bullhorns, a lot of students could not hear them over the screams of the crowd and their own panic. Some ran towards the football field. Most of them were grabbed screaming by officers or deflected by ballistic shields. Some were put down with the use of Tasers. Some students tried to run as far away from the school as possible. Many of them were dropped with less-lethal 12 gauge rounds. Fortunately for them, they did not fit the suspect description enough to be dealt with by the recently deployed Department snipers.

At the back door where Erik hoped to leave, the few officers there were quickly overwhelmed. For every student who complied with their command, five ran and only two or three of them could be caught.

“Sir, we need backup at station five!”

“Station five,” Albers said, “hold your position, backup will be on the way. Snipers observe where everyone runs. Do NOT engage unless they appear to threaten friendlies or innocents or exactly fit suspect description.”

Only one officer noticed a hairy old man push his way through the crowd and duck into the doorway. He notified Base.

Base, of course, was a frantic Albers trying to keep a handle on the situation. “Just take care of whoever comes out!” he screamed. “This guy could be a member of Erik’s terrorist organization! If you keep that perimeter sealed we can get these guys when the kids are out of the way!”

Erik and David were just about to split up. The minute that had passed since their announcement seemed like thirty. The crowd was almost to the door.

Suddenly Harry appeared between them. “Guys!” he yelled. “There’s no way you’ll make it out alive!”

Erik and David stopped in their tracks. Harry’s words brought screams to the evacuees around them.

“What the fuck do you mean?” Erik asked.

Students with nothing on their minds except getting as far away from here as possible sprinted around them.

“Well I figure you think you can slip out through the woods, but they got the place surrounded by snipers. I barely made it through the woods without gettin’ shot, and I heard on my eavesdropper here that they’re gonna shoot someone ‘exactly fitting the suspect description.’ Here, have a listen.”

The old man pulled two earphones out from his hair and handed them to the younger guys. He turned up his homemade listening device so that all three of them could hear.

“Station five secure. All subjects now being detained.”

“Sir, this is sniper team orange. Subject has stopped running and is huddling next to tree. Please send uniformed officer for apprehension. No shots fired or contact made.”

“Sniper team alpha, sir. No subjects have reached position.”

“Air three, sir. Subjects in woods now all neutralized. Repeat, the forest is clear.”

“Okay, keep an eye out for the suspect. Remember the rules of engagement. Do whatever you think is necessary to stop the terrorist.”

They handed the headphones back to Harry. “How many snipers are there?” Erik asked.

“A shitload. I don’t know how they have so many but I know you ain’t getting through. And since there’s almost nobody *but* snipers in the woods, they only have one way of stopping someone who looks like you.”

“What the fuck do we do now?”

“Well what *did* you do?” Harry asked.

“I put up these posters yesterday that said April 19th is Bring a Gun to School Day and talked about being armed and free. The feds treated it like an act of fucking terrorism and just attacked me this morning. Seriously, they didn’t even try to arrest me peacefully. They just tried to Taser me and I fought back and now we’re here.”

“So this whole thing is about a bunch of *posters*?”

“Yeah, they didn’t even say anything threatening either. Just ‘Bring a Gun to School Day’ and a short message.”

“Goddamn.” Harry said, “Best thing to do now is probably turn yourselves in and use this circus to really get your point across.”

“Just *surrender* like that?”

“Well, uh, momentarily surrender-”

“You don’t understand!” yelled Erik. “This is fucking *war*! They want to eradicate our kind and they’re starting with me! Surrender to what? Certain death and infamy?”

“I ain’t sayin just give up!” Harry’s deep voice drifted through layers of facial hair. “Think of it as a tactical maneuver – luring your enemies into putting you where they’re most vulnerable. You call it war, but it’s a new generation of warfare we’re talking about here...ain’t so much about holding territory as it is about ideas, and people are pissed at the government now more than ever. They’ve gone too far too quickly and without a major crisis to justify it until now. Turn that crisis against them for once. Don’t die to be concrete in the foundation of their lies. Live and let your words be the cracks

in their pillars. I know a good lawyer who'd be very interested in your case. She'll find a way to beat the bastards. The eyes of the world will be on your acquittal and freedom wins big time. They were just about to raid the place when your diversion got 'em. If you don't survive to tell your story, others are gonna have to tell it for you. And how do ya think you'll look in it then?"

Erik looked at David, who said "I don't know what else there is to do now."

The importance of his decision weighed heavily on Erik's mind. What else could he do?

"All right," he said. "But I'm only turning myself in to the local cops. None of those HomeSec freaks."

"Okay," Harry said, "Follow me."

The three of them walked toward the door. Erik looked at David and asked if he was sure this was what he wanted.

"This is the best I can see," David replied. "They'll know sooner or later that I was with you during the standoff. Walking away now won't help"

By now the crowd was outside. The three men heard shouts coming from the other side of the door.

"You guys wait here," said Harry. "Get out of view and let me talk to them a minute." The two of them complied and Harry opened the door.

Several guns were immediately trained on him.

"That's the guy who ran inside!"

"Put your hands behind your head!"

Harry put his hands up then yelled in a voice that commanded attention from everyone around. "Hold on! I just talked to the guys you're after and they're ready to come out."

"Keep your hands where we can see them!"

"Sir," one of the officers radioed Albers, "The man who entered says the suspects are ready to surrender."

Harry continued, "They said they're not dealing with the feds - only local cops."

The officer on the radio interrupted Albers' response to give him the news. Immediately the leader of TacTeam 36 joined the radio conversation. "There was an old man who threatened my guys with a gun. Be careful with this guy."

Erik and David could hear the yells between Harry and the police. They wondered what was going to happen. Erik thought that he should have gone back for the Sig.

Chief O'Connor quickly arrived at the standoff and spoke to Harry.

"How many are there?"

"Two. The Shylding guy you're after and his friend."

"Will the suspects come outside to be apprehended?" *Please just let this be over!*

"Yes they will, but they had bad experiences with Homeland Security and want only local police to arrest them."

O'Connor looked around him. There were about twenty officers with various weapons standing nearby. All of the evacuated "hostages" were by now brought to a more secure area.

"Just wait there a second!" he ordered Harry. He then picked up his radio. "Sniper team red, can you see all of the windows surrounding my position?"

"Affirmative."

"All right, keep your eyes open. I'm gonna get this guy to bring the suspects out."

Albers was furious. "O'CONNOR! This man *is* a suspect! He's probably armed and working with the terrorists! He could be the guy who threatened my men earlier today!"

O'Connor had been a cop way too long for this out-of-touch macho bureaucrat to sway him. "Sir," he said, "With all due respect, I would like to end this with no further bloodshed if possible. I'll forgive this guy's carrying a weapon on school grounds if he can help us do that. And frankly, I've seen

enough of your men to know they always feel threatened and I bet that has something to do with why these kids are refusing to deal with them. I don't want anyone else killed here."

O'Connor turned down his radio to muffle Albers' shouts.

"Everyone take ready positions!" he yelled as he drew his Glock 22. Officers crouched behind ballistic shields. Handguns were leveled at the doorway. Submachineguns, shotguns, and carbines were taken off safe and pointed at the doorway and nearby windows. Armed men watched from helicopters overhead. Snipers and observers watched from the woods.

"Sir!" he yelled at Harry, "Keep your hands in the air and go inside to get the suspects." Harry complied.

O'Connor was sweating heavily. *What if I'm wrong? What if this is more than it looks like? Oh God, don't let anyone else get killed.*

A few seconds later, Harry emerged again with raised hands, this time with two other people behind him.

O'Connor had a bullhorn now. "Keep those hands in the air!" he yelled. "All three of you on your knees!" The three did as they were told.

"Clemens. LeMat."

"Yes sir?" they both answered.

"Cuff the boys. Let me talk to the old man."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. He hasn't done anything wrong and might have just saved us from a shootout."

"Uhh okay, Chief."

Erik and David were searched then had their hands pulled behind their backs. Erik cringed as he felt the steel being slid around his wrists. O'Connor told the officers to escort them into two nearby cars with tinted windows. They were to be brought to the county jail in a heavily armed convoy once patrol vehicles could be dispatched to the roads leading there.

O'Connor walked to Harry. He was still kneeling with several officers around him, some of whom pointed firearms at his body. The old man

looked up at the chief with calm gray eyes that looked like they concealed so much knowledge.

“Is there anyone else in the building?” the chief asked.

“Not to my knowledge, no.”

O’Connor extended his empty right hand. “Sir,” he said, “You can get up but we need you to stick around and answer some questions until they clear the building.”

Harry stood and shook the chief’s hand. “Well thank you, sir. What do you want to know?”

“First of all, who are you?” One of the officers took out a pen and notepad and began taking notes.

“I’m Erik’s neighbor. I saw the DHS guys wrecking up his house like a bunch of animals and wanted to find out what was going on.”

“So you came here?”

“Yeah, I figured with all the tough talk about getting serious about school security it was only a matter of time before they started going after whoever stuck out the most.”

“Why do you think Erik was targeted?”

Henry was not going to lie, but he didn’t want to give away what Erik had just told him without talking to his lawyer first. “Well the way he dressed was just how that Kansas kid dressed and Erik was always the confrontational free-spirit kind of guy. The kind who gets in trouble with the government these days.”

“I see. How’d you get to the door?”

“Sneaked through the woods.”

“Really?”

“Yep.”

“How’d you convince the boys to surrender?”

“Well, to explain that I’d have to go into details that their lawyer might not want me to talk about yet.”

“Understood. Could I see some ID, please?”

“Sure.” Harry noticed a few of the officers tense up as he reached into his right pocket and pulled out his wallet. He handed the chief his driver’s license.

“Nice picture.”

“Thanks.”

O’Connor handed the ID to the officer who was taking notes and told him to write down the name and address on the card. He then told another officer to have someone look up the name in a patrol car’s computer.

The radio crackled again. “First floor clear; searching floor two.”

A federal agent told O’Connor that Albers wanted to speak to him. The chief told Sergeant LeMat to escort Harry through the roadblock and media when the building was all clear. He then thanked Harry for helping to prevent further bloodshed and went to see Albers.

Agent Stuvell, finally regaining consciousness, was brought to a waiting ambulance on a gurney. Agent Richie was pronounced dead and brought to the morgue for an autopsy. Frightened students and staff were reunited with their families, relieved that their waking nightmares had ended. However, for many, the ordeal was far from over.

Chapter Ten

Erik hadn't seen David since the two had been put in separate cars hours ago. Since he had no way of keeping time, the monotony of the cell made it seem like days had passed. The feds tried four times to get him to talk to them without a lawyer. Four times he refused, just as he knew David would.

He could tell he was getting to them. "Well *Erik*," the short one snarled, "We weren't going to do this but if that's how you want it we *will* give you a grown-up trial and lock you up for a long time with some real bad boys. Your *friend* was a lot more cooperative." The two tough guys with rolled up sleeves stared at him for almost a minute trying to get a response.

Eyes full of hatred were all that looked back. By now Erik was on the brink of lashing out. *Walking bags of meat* was all he could think of when he looked at the excuses for men trying to impress him.

The two meatsacks stomped out of the room and slammed the door. Erik was again alone in the room of white bricks and metal. *Fuck those assholes. I hope they die painfully.*

The agents threatened David again. "Well, *Dave*, we weren't going to do this but if that's how you want it we *will* give you a grown-up trial and

lock you up for a long time with some real bad boys. Your *friend* was a lot more cooperative.”

David looked back, feeling as if he was a world away from the life he knew. *There's no way Erik would ever cooperate with these guys.* “I told you before. I’m not saying anything without a lawyer.”

Harry had called his lawyer friend as soon as he left Suburban that day. She met with the distraught parents of the suspects an hour later. They agreed that she would be a good person for the job.

She waited in the lobby of the jail and looked forward to defending the two young men from the state. Childhood memories of her father facing down the Klan with a shotgun made firearms and defiance personal matters. Sure a gun was no substitute for a rational argument, but nor would reason alone suffice when a gun was needed. Bad people know nothing like they know force, so force is often the only way to persuade them to not harm you.

The problem was knowing when to use force. Jane wasn’t sure whether or not Erik knew the answer to that question. Regardless, he and his friend deserved a fair trial like everyone else.

“Jane Edison?” a guard called out. “You may see your clients now.”

Over the weeks that passed before the trial, Jane would come to know the whole story as told by everyone involved who was still alive. Of course, Agent Stuvell, who had largely recovered from his injuries, portrayed Erik as more aggressive and dangerous than others had described him.

HomeSec never forgave Harry for challenging their authority, and they tried to have him arrested for a variety of offenses. A judge threw out their charges of threatening federal officers after they kept changing their story to the point of absurdity. The judge also threw out the charge of carrying a weapon on school property after Albers finally admitted that there was no evidence that Harry had done so.

For this, O'Connor was not forgiven. Someone in the Homeland Security office pulled enough strings to have the chief forced into early retirement. O'Connor soon became friends with Harry and learned Erik's story from him. Though he would never accept Erik's actions, he came to understand why he chose them.

The media was naturally all over the story. Although HomeSec released only the portions of their tapes that made them look good, a reporter managed to get his hands on the security camera footage that showed Johnson dying in a shower of federal bullets. This was played on the evening news across the country until the networks were asked not to show it "out of respect for the victim's family." The video could still be viewed all over the internet, and DHS spinsters were in top gear trying to assure the public that Johnson's death was entirely Erik's fault.

Interviews of students and others following the arrests were often overflowing with fear and resentment directed toward the suspects. However, they received a surprising amount of support.

"I don't think Erik wanted to hurt anyone," a junior was quoted as saying. "He just wanted to be left alone."

"I really doubt David would plan something like this," one of his classmates told the world.

However, the overall portrayal of Erik in the media made him look like the most evil creature on Earth. Although the Nazi allegations were quietly dropped after it was discovered he might have had a Jewish accomplice, there were still a few Bad People Types to associate Erik with. He could be an attention craving loner whose prank went wrong. He had nearly every mark of a "school shooter type." His style of dress, his preferences in music and movies, his tendency to spend time alone, and his interest in firearms were all blasted at viewers and readers as if Erik had no personality other than these things.

Once it was discovered that he had friends, the media noted that David had firearms and "speculated" that Henry might have agreed to purchase additional guns for them. The three of them were called "a clique that often

went by the name of The Freak Militia” despite the fact that they all had other friends and only a handful of people, one of whom happened to be interviewed on television, ever called them The Freak Militia.

Of course, Erik and his friends also had the broader “Dangerous Gun Nut” label pinned on them. HomeSec made sure everyone knew that Erik had lots of information about guns on his computer and many books and magazines on the topic. He had even taken notes about a few of them. Authorities reported finding “thousands of rounds of ammunition” in David’s room. They had actually found about 1,200 .22’s and 300 .45’s.

The meanest looking “assault weapons” and handguns that the suspects had shown interest in were incorporated into graphics used in hundreds of stories and commentaries. One creative use of this device found its way into a television talk show. A FAL carbine was superimposed over a shot-up “school zone” sign with the title “SCHOOL VIOLENCE – *Is YOUR child safe?*”

Firearm manufacturers, record companies, and bands were all interviewed about how responsible they felt for terrorism. Television specials played their answers over pictures of weapons, bloodstains, album covers, and subtitles of violent lyrics.

To some religious organizations and leaders, Erik and David personified all that was wrong with “the ongoing plot to secularize our schools.” The two were alleged to worship Satan and do all the nasty things that worshipping Satan entailed. “When God is expelled from our children’s lives,” one fundamentalist raved, “what do you think will fill the gap?”

Agent Richie was portrayed as a hero who died protecting the nation’s children from evil. Television specials and opinion columns commemorated his life of service to the nation.

Henry was investigated due to his association with the suspects, but no connection to the “conspiracy” was found. When the investigation of Henry was closed, it got much less attention on the news than the fact that he was seen purchasing a shotgun the week after Erik’s arrest. They also rarely mentioned that Henry thought it would be a good idea after receiving several

anonymous death threats, something the about-to-be-retired O'Connor had told them.

Henry quickly decided that it would do him no good to speak to the press. The last time reporters showed up at his door, he made it clear that he never wanted to see them again. A talking head had stuck a microphone in his face and said, "Why don't you-"

Henry cut him off with an angry "Why don't you and your hair get the fuck out of here!"

Before they left, the news team did get some footage of the outside of Henry's house and a nearby shed. They made sure to show it in the way that made the property appear as run-down as possible. This would help feed the impression of Henry as a backwards redneck who would kill your children.

Henry had never taken life very seriously before. Humor helped him deal with unpleasant facts that he sometimes wished he wasn't aware of. Now there was no way around them. Tyranny had forced its way into his life, attacking and imprisoning his best friends. Questions rained in his mind. He wondered what he would have done if he was there. *Would things like this even happen if people like me took things more seriously? What could I have done?*

Amy also refused to speak with the media. She could not deal with the attention she was already getting and did not want to add to it. Rumors that Erik had abused her had circulated since Fikner told the press he had "a very abusive personality" in her first interview. Amy thought it wasn't fair for Erik to be treated as he was, but she didn't think she could do anything about it.

Liz was never asked for an interview, and she did not seek one. She figured they would just portray her as a stupid girl with a crush on a killer.

Harry and the suspects' families refused to say anything to the press before the trial was over.

Schools in the area did not reopen until Tuesday. The atmosphere was tense and police officers were frequently seen in the buildings. Rules

concerning attire and speech were strictly enforced. Rumors flew. Although all schools were open on the nineteenth, attendance was low. This was particularly true of Suburban Regional, where it seemed like there were more cops than students in the building. Presumably there was supposed to be some kind of message in all of this.

The federal government threw all they had into the trial. Even the president publicly stated that he hoped “terrorists will get the message that their crimes against humanity will not be tolerated, and the American people will not let our freedom be attacked.” An aggressive prosecution team piled charges onto Erik and David. They wanted to have the defendants convicted of as many crimes as possible, and figured that if the jury acquitted the murderers on a few of the charges they would still somehow be put in prison as a victory in the war on extremism. The killing of one of their own, the humiliation of their department, and the hopes for an expanded role in protecting the American public made HomeSec particularly interested in the outcome.

Erik didn’t pay much attention to the trial. He had already done his part, and he knew that Edison could handle this part much better than he could. He listened intermittently to what was happening.

The head prosecutor was in the middle of his opening statements. “These angry young men intentionally stirred up fear in their own school, trying to manipulate the feelings of their fellow students to gain attention for themselves and for their anti-government views. When they were about to be arrested for this crime, they committed a more heinous one. Erik Shylding viciously attacked defenders of the public, murdering one and leaving the other one wounded on the floor. Linking up with his accomplice, the two endangered an entire school – *over a thousand innocent children* – in their efforts to elude authorities. As if this was not bad enough, the evidence overwhelmingly shows that they were planning for some kind of attack on

their school and nearby law enforcement facilities using handguns and assault weapons, which they were preparing to acquire.”

Erik squinted. *That’s all news to me, motherfucker. I thought I was just suspected of saying the wrong thing and got attacked by some supercrat feds and kicked their asses.*

When the prosecutor was done, Edison made her opening statements, which reflected Erik’s perspective but put it a little less crudely.

The first witnesses for the state were all selected for their ability to make the jury not want Erik and David around their kids. Brian Mellon gave a sappy speech about how Erik beat him up. A neighbor of the Shyldings testified about the loud scary music and violent video game noises that came from Erik’s house. He even described a time when Erik and some friends smashed an old television in the Shyldings’ backyard, an event he described as “frightening.”

The prosecutor made sure it was clear that a person fitting David’s description was present for these activities, associating the quiet younger subject with this “violent anti-social behavior.” Wermlin testified some bullshit about how horrible the two of them were. Fikner did the same concerning Erik, with the added benefit of her “expertise in the field of adolescent psychology.” Since Erik’s personality was more likely to upset peoples’ sensibilities, the prosecution team focused on him and tried to make David look bad by association – he was that quiet smart guy who had a bad habit of hanging out with the wrong people and giving them ideas.

Edison did a good job of tearing apart their testimony. Witnesses were made to look like paranoid cranks who were afraid of things that many young adults did. Asking Erik’s neighbor how many other people he had seen the defendants with during their “antisocial” activities made the jury see that these were acts of socialization rather than alienation. She also put Erik’s encounter with Wermlin and Fikner in better perspective. The jury was made to consider the stress and persecution felt by the defendant at the time, and were told that showing rudeness and anger was a natural response

to the situation that Erik was put in, and not the threatening behavior of a mad terrorist.

The trial dragged on for weeks. Erik and David were not given bail because they were considered too dangerous. They passed the time reading and exercising. Edison advised them against reading too much violent or “subversive” literature, so they mostly read other things. David always seemed much more attentive in the courtroom than Erik did.

Ray Slaughter was called to the stand and told the court what he saw happen in the disciplinarian’s office. Straightforward answers to the prosecutor’s questions made Erik appear more aggressive than the feds. Straightforward answers to Edison’s questions did the opposite.

Then Agent Stuvell took the stand. He looked down at everyone but the judge as he took his oath. There was still a prominent mark on his head where he had been clocked with the Sig. Before going to the courthouse, he had made sure to rub the area to make the mark stand out more than it normally would.

The prosecutor began by asking Stuvell about his credentials. The special agent tried his hardest to prove that he knew more than anyone else in the room about terrorists and how they operate and think. When he was finished, Stuvell was told to recount the investigation that led Erik to their attention. He described the discussions with school officials, which were undertaken “according to current Homeland Security guidelines on community involvement.” He then talked about how he decided that Erik warranted further investigation while watching Johnson and Fikner talk to him. He described the threat indicators found on the computer as a final condemnation of Erik, which the disciplinarian who knew “the subject” personally had agreed with.

Agent Stuvell spent a great deal of time describing Erik’s “aggressive entry” when he walked into the disciplinarian’s office. This aggression by a “known extremist” combined with the risk of injury to “civilians and innocent children” made a quick arrest necessary. His size, personality, and

interest in weapons made the suspect even more dangerous, and Stuvél's "years of experience as a federal agent, trained counterterrorism operator, and law enforcement official," made his decision to use a Taser an appropriate use of force. Throughout his testimony, Stuvél made sure to use as much technical and tactical jargon as possible.

Edison took her time cross-examining Stuvél. She wanted to show that the investigation of Erik was unnecessary, his arrest was unnecessary, and the force used in the attempted arrest was entirely inappropriate and led naturally to resistance. A great amount of time was spent trying to pin Stuvél down as to why he held a Taser in his hands as he waited for Erik to come through the doorway (once he finally admitted how he was standing). She even had a big guy mimic Erik's "aggression" according to Stuvél's description, and asked the jury "If you were wearing body armor, carrying several weapons, and backed up by three other men, one of whom was armed and another one very large, would you feel threatened enough by this person to inflict paralyzing pain on him just because he walked through the door he was told to?" By the end of the cross-examination, Stuvél looked like a loose cannon who thought ambushing high school students was appropriate conduct for an officer assigned to protect the public. The prosecutor's redirect did little to restore what was damaged. The DHS couldn't remove the egg from its face. Stories about aggressive law enforcement grew more common in the mainstream media just as Erik and David's "crimes" were starting to lose their shock value.

A good day was just what Edison needed. This was one of the most stressful trials she had ever been involved in.

Knowing that she was doing the right thing made it easier for her to deal with those who disagreed, but it was still difficult. Every few days a handful of nuts would gather in the street by her house holding signs like "DON'T DEFEND SATAN," "Lawyer\$: profits before morals," and "TERRORIST SYMPITHIZER!!" The ridiculous crowd reminded Jane of nuts on the street who shout nonsense at passersby. She had already received one death threat that was signed "The Parents of Suburban Regional."

That kind of attention was not as bad as what she endured from her cousin. The last time they had spoken, she told Jane that “Your kids haven’t been out of school that long where you should forget what it’s like to be a parent! I have to live with the fear that when my kids leave for school in the morning it might be the last time I see them alive! You’re just making it harder for schools to deal with nuts like Erik and that other kid!”

The final witness for the prosecution was yet another terrorism expert from the Department of Homeland Security. After analyzing what Erik and David possessed and did, he presented the conclusion that there was evidence of an anti-government conspiracy among the two that was getting increasingly violent. The two fit the profile of school shooters that was based on years of research by numerous public and private entities. In addition, David had guns since an early age and “was known to train others in their use.”

The cross-examination of this genius wedged another crack in the state’s case. Edison demonstrated that even this guy had no clue what the alleged “conspiracy” was. All that they had found to indicate one was the pair’s everyday behavior, their interest in firearms, some books and magazines in Erik’s room, and records of Erik looking up SSI and prior school shootings on his computer. Edison asked if “every pair of friends who are involved in activities some adults don’t like are part of a violent conspiracy?” She also asked “Since when did seeking information regarding the government and possible threats against one’s life make a person a terrorist?” Another question the expert could not readily answer concerned the exonerated member of the originally theorized conspiracy, Henry. He owned firearms and could buy more at his age. His parents also owned several guns, including handguns, which the teens could have stolen “if they were truly the criminal masterminds the state is claiming they are.” So why was Henry not a part of the conspiracy? The expert offered several possible explanations for why this could be, but none were very fact-filled or convincing. His insistence that the defendants fit a certain profile was also attacked.

“Could you estimate how many students who fit the ‘profile of a school shooter’ have never planned a violent attack on their schools?”

“Well the profile lists a series of characteristics whose possession marks a person as more likely to be involved in such an incident.”

“So you do not know how many people your profile would say are likely to be involved in such an incident have never planned an attack.”

“No we do not.”

“You mention the defendants’ interest in firearms as if this helps prove that they are terrorists. Yet millions of Americans own firearms and enjoy using them. Even the Boy Scouts are known to train young people in their use. How is this information significant to the case?”

“Well, it does make them more capable of committing such a crime...”

Chapter Eleven

The next day, the defense began with audio recordings of Albers' radio transmissions during the standoff, which had taken an incredible amount of time, paperwork, and legal threats to acquire. The jury was presented with the aggressive nature of Albers' orders, and was told that this was the attitude that Erik was attacked with.

Former Chief O'Connor then took the stand. His testimony was meant to reinforce the impression of HomeSec agents as violent loose cannons. He explained how his decision to allow Harry to bring out the defendants peacefully, a decision based on years of experience in law enforcement, brought him nothing but hostility and threats from Albers even after the standoff had ended without further bloodshed. He explained that Albers had seemed to try everything in his power to provoke more violence, which was something the chief was not willing to do.

The prosecutor made a big deal of the fact that O'Connor had not known who Harry was or if he had any weapons. O'Connor responded by saying that nothing the old man could have hidden under his coat would have been a match for the massive firepower arranged outside the door, and that a

dynamic entry could very well have provoked resistance and put officers in needless danger.

Harry, with a well-combed beard and ponytail, defended Erik's character, but his primary role was to recount his experiences with the guys on the day of their arrests. The old man easily deflected the attacks that the prosecutor made during his cross-examination.

The next witness was a student in Erik's social studies class. She testified that she was present when Erik allegedly discussed bringing weapons to school, and that the only context in which he mentioned doing so was for people to use them defensively. She said that Erik's comments in class made her start thinking differently about the issue, something crucial to real learning. The cross-examination of this witness mainly focused on Erik's behavior and tone of voice when he was "talking about bringing guns to school."

A terrorism expert and history professor at an Ivy League university analyzed the message that Erik's posters contained. He said that the only events the poster referred to were the Battles of Lexington and Concord, and described how these events related to Erik's message. He also said that there was no threat of bodily harm on the poster, "whether or not one agrees with its message." The prosecutor attempted to talk him into corners about whether Erik's posters represented "a declaration to take up arms and fight a bloody battle in the schools," and made a big deal of implied threats to safety, security, and the government that were supposedly contained in the message.

Chris Thompson was called to the stand to destroy the false history of threats and alienation that HomeSec had invented for Erik. The jury learned that Erik only made threats when he was fighting, "what we generally call 'talking shit,' which most guys do when threatened," as Chris put it. Chris, a varsity football player, made it clear that Erik was not a clique kind of guy, but was friendly to anyone who treated him like a fellow human being. The cross-examination of Chris centered around certain things that Erik was known to have said. At one point the prosecutor read what Erik had told

Fikner and asked if it sounded like it would be said “by someone as nice as you claim Erik is?”

Chris answered, “I always thought the nicest thing we could say is the truth and Erik wasn’t afraid to do that.”

“Some truth!”

During the trial there were more questions raised in public discussions and the media. It was becoming obvious that not everyone bought the official conspiracy theory, even with the scant media attention that was paid to other viewpoints.

The heavy-handedness of the arrest attempt was commonly discussed. A syndicated radio host famously said that the methods Stuvell used “are simply an illustration of a deeper problem - government is out of control. It demonstrates how they view us, really. If this is how people can expect to be treated by authority, we should not look harshly upon anyone who acts like Erik and David.”

A shocked listener later called the station to ask the host “Are you trying to say that the government is at fault here, and not the terrorists?”

“Well Mike, first of all they’ve only been *accused* of being terrorists, a pretty dubious accusation to begin with. We also know that the government treated everyone like a suspect when they tried to leave the school. Is it that much of a stretch to say that they started the whole thing when they attempted a heavy-handed arrest of Erik based on their ‘guilty until proven innocent’ mindset? Combine that with recent actions of the government, and is it any wonder the guys acted the way they did?”

A television newsmagazine interviewed some Suburban Regional students. As the emotional and mental trauma died down over the weeks, more began to hold the government responsible. “This whole thing just proves how paranoid the system is,” one student said, “I saw the posters that were put up. They didn’t make any threats. They just challenged what we’re supposed to believe. And for that the feds tried to arrest Erik, who didn’t threaten anyone.”

“I was so scared during the standoff,” another SRHS student blogged, “I’m starting to think it might have been HomeSec’s fault. They seem to do whatever they can to scare us.”

There was still an obnoxious portion of the population that wished for fire and brimstone in the guys’ near future. This attitude could be seen in a Jersey Star editorial that ran during the early days of the trial:

While we have all been busy worrying about external threats to our safety, there is a cancer eating up America from inside. It is more commonly known as ‘gun culture.’

Erik Shylding talked about guns in school many times before he was taken seriously. Not surprisingly, he also had a history of behavioral problems that the school administration was well aware of. Many people within the Edgegrove and Suburban Regional communities knew about this and other anti-social activities he and David Halberd committed with their peers.

The question that we must ask now is: Why did nobody do anything for so long? It took a national tragedy for people to realize they needed to act against the boys. What would have happened if they were not arrested when they were?

Another question we must all consider is how many more Freak Militias are there in this country? Will anyone take the time to find out, or are we all too busy to look after the safety of our own children? We all know that ‘it’ can happen, but we must realize that it can happen to US if we fail to act.

For too long, Americans have let gun ‘culture’ go unchecked in our own backyards. There is no need for private citizens to be armed so heavily just for the macho kicks they get when they need reassurance of their masculinity. We have seen Waco, the Militia Terror of the nineties, Oklahoma City,

Columbine, Virginia Tech, countless shootings of children and law enforcement officers, and now Suburban Regional. Only in America, where guns flow without oversight from hand to hand, do we have to live with this kind of fear. Its time Americans realized what merchants of death and the NRA have done to us, and its time to do something.

We all must act together to teach our children that guns are not the answer. Nobody should be able to own a gun – *any gun* – without the approval of the police for each weapon. We should raise the age to purchase firearms and ammunition to twenty-one, as a way to keep them out of the hands of high-school children. We should also keep guns out of the entertainment we provide to our children.

Children are our future. If we take sensible steps now, we can ensure that they enjoy a future free of the contamination of gun culture. It is time we cleansed our social organism of this disease.

Weekly Newsmag expressed similarly genocidal sentiments in several issues. A dark illustration of the defendants' faces had already been on the cover under the title "TEENAGE TERRORISTS."

A television network presented a new TV movie they said was "based on a true story." Its ridiculous plot involved three teenagers who called themselves "White Steel" taking hostages in the school they attended in order to get attention for a bizarre political message.

The case was of course a popular topic on the internet. One article defending the suspects was forwarded until it became as widely read as national newspaper commentaries on the subject. After discussing the arrest and trial it concluded that the case "demonstrates that the state is nothing more than brute force dressed respectably. It could not respond rationally to what Erik said on the posters so it characteristically resorted to oppression and obscene flag-waving that would make the Founders spin in their graves.

It would like to keep oppressing the young men for the rest of their (possibly short) lives to make examples for the rest of us, a more modern approach to leaving the bodies of the executed festering in public squares. Let's hope humanity has learned something in the past 600 years and the honest men will be given the freedom they deserve."

An expulsion of an Illinois student for wearing an "Erik and David Fan Club" tee-shirt reached national news. Students and others who lived near the expelled teen founded a group called "We Are All Victims." It quickly grew into a large organization describing itself as a national campaign of students against gun violence. The organization's website said that gun crimes are committed not merely against those who are shot, but against society. "As our communities, and therefore ourselves, have been harmed, we must work together to protect ourself," its website said. WAAV would soon become a prominent voice calling for suppressing the rights of gun owners and young adults. It soon invited Fikner into its ranks. Erik, David, and Henry were the portraits of everything WAAV opposed.

The prosecutor was making his closing statements, which sounded to Erik like the same bullshit he had said all along. Already on edge, Erik thought he'd get visibly angry if he listened too closely, so he tried to distract himself.

Edison then made her closing statements. The fact that Erik had assaulted Stuvell and killed Richie was not disputed. The defense had focused on attacking the reasons for the attempted HomeSec arrest and attacking the methods used by the agents. Erik heard his lawyer talk about how HomeSec had taken a "warfighting mentality to our streets and schools, forgetting that one of the foundations of our way of life is the principle that everyone is innocent until proven guilty. The methods used in the attempted apprehension of Erik and later orders to shoot on sight went far beyond the limits of self-defense, and were completely out of line with what public safety required."

She spent time emphasizing that the accused did surrender without resistance to a more reasonable law enforcement approach.

“It was not the defendants that endangered over a thousand innocent children that day,” Edison said, “it was the disastrously inappropriate methods used by the Department of Homeland Security. Erik and David had countless opportunities to attack students and teachers, but federal agents were the only ones there who attacked innocent people. Self-defense is not a crime no matter who the aggressor is...”

The state’s rebuttal was the same hate Erik had experienced for years. The words were different, but the message was the same: he and David were a deadly cancer that had to be removed.

The jury went into deliberation. Erik waited. David waited. Their lives were in the hands of twelve strangers. What would they do if they were convicted? What if it was for life? What if it was for five years?

Jane Edison was confident that her clients would at least be acquitted of the major charges. They drew strength from her confidence.

Five long hours later, the jury had reached a verdict. Everyone returned to the courtroom. Erik’s throat tightened but he showed no outward signs of tension. *Fear is what they want to see*, he thought. *Show them none.*

The judge asked if a verdict had been reached.

“Yes, your honor.”

“Please hand the verdict form to the bailiff. I direct the clerk to read the verdicts.”

Erik could feel his pulse in his temples. He leaned forward and stared at the clerk.

The clerk wet his lips, reset his glasses, then looked at the verdict form and spoke. “We, the jury find the defendant Erik Shylding *not* guilty as charged in the indictment.”

Erik’s eyes widened. *Not guilty on ALL counts!*

“We, the jury find the defendant David Halberd *not* guilty as charged in the indictment.”

A rush of joy shot through Erik. He smiled and looked towards David, who had a pleasantly surprised look on his face. Erik saw him slowly rise from his chair as if a giant weight slid off his shoulders. The two of them poured gratitude upon Edison. Commotion filled the courtroom as the two were released from custody into the ecstatic arms of their families.

They left the building and immediately saw Henry, Johnny and an army of reporters, photographers, and camera crews.

There were protestors too. Among them were two pre-teen brothers holding signs. One said “KEEP ME SAFE FROM GUN VIOLENCE,” and the other said “KEEP ME SAFE FROM PEOPLE LIKE ERIK.” Their mother, who had brought them, said in an earlier interview that “We need to remember what’s at stake here.” The boys told the news that they weren’t interested in politics at all, but felt a duty to serve their communities by standing up for safety.

Before the reunited families could fight their way through the mob, an especially zealous reporter managed to catch the attention of the infamous duo.

“What are you guys going to do now?” he yelled.

Erik grunted as he smiled. “Go home, hoist the yellow Gadsden banner, and blast “Don’t Tread on Me” loud enough for every jackbooted thug in the state to hear it.”

David grinned. “Liberty...that’s what I’m going to do. Start living it.”

Erik leaned toward the microphone again. “Everyone knows the good guys win in the end. Well *their* end is here and *we win.*”

“What do you think your lives will be like now?”

Just then the sight of Liz standing on the other side of the street caught Erik’s eye. She smiled at him as he gave the reporter the only answer he could think of.

“Better.”

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