

Chapter 3

When Jim woke up the eastern sky was bright with the soft red and pinkish hues that precede a fair-weather sunrise on the Great Lakes. He brought the seat up, threw the blanket into the back of the Jeep, and got out to stretch. Smudge jumped out too and Jim said looking down at him "Well not a great night's sleep Smudge, but I guess it was good enough." Together they walked around the marina for a while and soon enough saw Fred again working the cords and lines on the deck of his ferry.

The ferry, loaded with just the Jeep and a large, empty flatbed truck, left the marina just before sunrise, its twin electric motors humming powerfully below deck. When the ferry was out in the calm open water of the Straits of Mackinac, just east of Saint Helena Island, Jim watched the sun rise above the treetops of Bois Blanc Island off in the distance, between the towers of the Mackinac Bridge. It was a beautiful sight. Jim stood with his hands in his pockets at the ferry's front railing tolerating the crisp breeze on his face and thinking about the time he and Rachel had sailed under the bridge.

That was a good day... Every day with Rachel was a good day.

It was a cool morning then too; Jim stood behind the sailboat's wheel while it made about five knots headed comfortably on a close reach. With the autopilot making small steering corrections as the wind came up and went, Jim held Rachel close with his arm wrapped around her waist, his hand tucked into the pocket of her jeans. She stood at his side with her head resting on his shoulder, her arms folded across her chest and her shoulders tensed against the chill. They had made love the night before, in the confines of the small sailboat anchored off the beach in Cecil Bay, and they had slept in each other's arms on a side bunk. It would all have been impossibly uncomfortable if they weren't more enamored with each other than a good night's sleep. Neither spoke as they made their way under the bridge span that cool morning. No words could have added to the moment's perfection.

Jim's attention was brought to the present by a splash of cold water on his cheek. But before the memory of sailing with Rachel was completely gone, his mind hurried through other events of the day. Later, back in Cheboygan where they had rented the boat, they had gotten in an argument about why Jim had to go home, and why Rachel had to go back to Point Pleasant. They slept in separate bunks that night and Rachel rose early and left without saying anything.

Jim put his head down and walked back to the Jeep, Smudge dutifully plodding along at his side.

Before long, the ferry made the crossing and the Jeep was rumbling along what was left of US-31, which followed the Lake Michigan shoreline to Southern Lower Michigan. The roadway was in poor condition and obviously little used; essentially all personal and commercial traffic in the region used the I-75 corridor.

The countryside was desolate, except for the wind turbines. There were no towns to pass through on the way south, no service stations or rest stops, only wind turbines. Thousands of them. Most of the wind turbines in any given vista were turning slowly in the gentle breeze. But some were broken, either not turning or oriented improperly, and a few had damaged or missing blades.

Jim thought about visiting Traverse City on his way south. Traverse City remained a viable tourist destination because it was in easy there-and-back range for electric vehicles using the I-75 corridor. And a high-speed electric rail spur served the city from Grand Rapids to the south. But Jim didn't need to find fuel yet and he still had plenty of food, so he elected to turn south off US-31 and find a route through the center of the state on back roads as best he could. Today would be a driving day. The main obstacle ahead was the massive I-94 corridor which ran east-west across the full extent Lower Michigan. Jim planned to drive until he was just north of the corridor and rest for the night before searching for a way across I-94 and into Indiana.

After driving for a couple hours Jim pulled the Jeep to the side of the road to take a break. He and Smudge climbed out to walk a little in the area. This time, along with some snacks and water, Jim put the gun in the knapsack. "Come on, Smudge, let's see what we can find," said Jim as they walked away from the road. Without his comdev Jim knew to be reasonably careful about keeping track of his whereabouts, but he didn't expect to go far or be out too long. He headed straight toward a wind turbine he could see spinning above the treetops in the distance, and planned to walk straight back.

The forest was not dense. Hardwood trees, mostly maple and birch, prevailed but stands of white pine rose here and there too. There wasn't a lot of brush or undergrowth, and although the ground was soft, it wasn't wet or muddy, so it was pretty easy going on foot. After bouncing around in the Jeep, the woods were most pleasant; it was quiet, except for the wind rustling the trees and the woosh woosh woosh of the wind turbine blades cutting through the air up ahead.

The base of the tall wind turbine was in a small clearing which seemed to have been trimmed down a month or so ago, probably as part of a general maintenance program. Across the clearing, however, Jim was surprised to see a row of large, unkempt apple trees, which were most likely relics of the fruit farming that was once done in this region. Old and scraggly as they were, the trees bore fruit!

Many of the ripe apples had already fallen and were rotting on the ground, but some were still on the trees within easy reach. Jim picked one. He examined it to be sure it was free of pests and took a hearty bite. His palate was rewarded with a crispy sweetness he had not tasted for years. "Smudge," he exclaimed, "too bad you don't taste food! This is the most delicious thing I've eaten in a long time." At that, Smudge looked up from the mound of grass and dirt he was sniffing, but otherwise showed no interest in Jim's delight. Jim took another bite of the apple, then picked about a dozen more.

Jim sat on the cement base of the wind turbine with his back against the tower, finished the first apple and started eating a second, still relishing the taste and the feel of the crisp fruit in his mouth. Apples were not available in grocery stores any longer. After the ag collapse, the Nation's food supply went almost fully synthetic: food became chemistry. And the collapse was the main reason rural Michigan, away from the cities of Detroit, Lansing, and Grand Rapids, was now so desolate. There were no apple farms, no fruit trees, no crop fields or agriculture of any type to support small, rural communities. Land was not used for the production of food, but for the production of energy from renewable resources like wind and solar, and that didn't require people.

Jim made his way back to the Jeep, his backpack and pockets stuffed with apples. Along the way he kept his eyes to the ground to see if there were any other plants he could pick to eat. As he scanned the vegetation under his feet he recalled going out with his mother to pick wild blueberries, blackberries, raspberries, and morel mushrooms. He saw several different types of berry bushes along the way, and mushrooms too, but he could no longer identify them with certainty—and picking and eating berries and mushrooms was risky business, so he left them all be.

Back in the Jeep headed south, with Smudge sleeping on his platform, Jim settled in for a long stretch of driving and got to thinking about the last time he was down this way. He was driving back from Point Pleasant, after he saw Rachel, after the phone call. It was not far from where he was at the moment that he had crashed his car. Back then, before self-driving cars and electrified continuous-drive corridors, it was work to make the eight-hundred-some mile trip in one long day of driving. Today it would be easy. But on that day, Jim had fallen asleep at the wheel and drifted off the roadway into a ditch, where his car rolled several times. A passerby had found him unconscious in the overturned car.

When he awoke in the hospital, memories of the day were disorganized. He could remember leaving Point Pleasant early in the morning. He remembered walking from Rachel's apartment across the damp parking lot to his car, with the sound of klaxon disrupting the quiet. He remembered the door to her apartment was ajar. He remembered leaving Rachel in bed. He remembered seeing the bruises on her neck, and the dread that welled up when he held his cheek near her nose and mouth and did not feel her breath.

Jim reached Interstate 96, a major east-west electric-only corridor that connected the Grand Rapids and its lakeshore suburbs with the Detroit metropolitan area on the east side of the State. In this area of central Michigan the I-96 corridor was not especially built up or busy but Jim stopped at the top of the overpass for a few minutes and watched the vehicles pass underneath.

The electric cars and trucks moved quickly and were surprisingly quiet. Some vehicles were single, but most were bunched up to form tail-gating trains, coupled together by their self-driving systems. As race-car drivers and large, migratory birds know, it is much more efficient to move through the air cooperatively in a group than it is to go it alone.

It was strange to think that no one in any of the vehicles was paying attention to driving. People in the vehicles were probably watching movies, or working, or sleeping. Some were maybe even having sex. But the highways were much safer this way. Since the invention of the automobile, people had proven to be terrible drivers. Now they were passengers, at least on the highways, responsible only for getting their vehicle onto and off of the corridor. Once on the corridor, each vehicle coupled with the roadway's sensor and control system, and with the situational awareness systems in nearby vehicles, and automation took care of the driving. The Nation's busiest corridors were even equipped with power distribution systems that could run the vehicles and charge their batteries while the cars were in transit.

Just as Jim put the Jeep in gear and started down the other side of the overpass he noticed a car heading toward him in the opposite lane of the two-lane road. The car passed and in the rearview mirror Jim saw it turn around and approach rapidly from behind. Then it changed into the oncoming lane and passed again. It slowed a little, as if the occupants wanted to take a look at the Jeep. The vehicle was modern but not new. It was dirty from travel on the back roads, scratched and dented, and its windows were heavily tinted. The car continued on but when it was about five-hundred feet ahead, at the crest of a small rise where both sides of the roadway fell off into deep drainage ditches, the car stopped suddenly and turned to block both lanes.

"Get in the back," as he brought the Jeep to a stop, patting Smudge on the rump encouraging him to move. There wasn't a way around the car ahead, so Jim put the Jeep in neutral and let it idle while he felt around in the knapsack for the gun. He found it just as the driver's-side door of the car opened. A person stepped out and began walking slowly toward the Jeep.

As the person got closer Jim could see that it was a young man, and that he held an energy weapon. Jim glanced at his old handgun to make sure the clip was inserted and that the safety was off. He'd never used his handgun in self defense, but he was ready to now. The young man stopped and made a motion with his hand, a gesture that invited Jim to get out of the Jeep. Reluctantly, Jim tucked his handgun under his shirt into the waistband of his pants and opened the door to comply.

Jim moved slowly and mentally ran through several scenarios of what might transpire. In none of them did he think it likely that the young man would discharge the energy weapon.

When any energy weapon was fired, the energy discharge was detected and the weapon's approximate location was triangulated by nearby comdev network antennas. This automatically generated an alert that was forwarded to local public safety officers. Authorities would also know in the moment, from comdev and vehicle location data, who was

near the weapon when it was discharged. Every energy-weapon discharge left this trace, and all were investigated. So it was unlikely the young man would fire his weapon; unlikely, but not impossible.

"Nice Jeep," said the young man, shifting his weapon from one hand to the other, probably to make sure that Jim saw it.

"Yeah, it's been in the family for a while," Jim replied flatly.

The young man started walking toward Jim again and stopped when he reached the Jeep's front bumper. "Can I look inside?"

"No, I don't want you to do that."

"Why not?"

"I just don't. And my dog is in there; he's not too friendly."

The young man disregarded Jim's warning and walked past him to peer into the Jeep's back side window. "Your dog doesn't look very mean," the young man said with a chuckle.

"Looks can be deceiving," said Jim, who had turned to face the intruder.

The young man walked to the back of the Jeep and gesturing with his energy weapon asked "What's in the container?"

"Gasoline," Jim replied.

"We don't have a lot of that around here... how much would you sell it to me for" asked the young man.

Jim had paid just over \$300 for the five gallons of gasoline in the container, but thinking that it might defuse the situation he replied "I'll sell it to you for two fifty."

“Two fifty,” the young man chuckled, “I don’t have that kind of money on me.” After a pause he said “How about I just take it and let you and your dog go?” And without waiting for a reply, the young man reached for the strap that held the canister to the Jeep.

Jim took a step forward and knocked the young man’s hand off the strap. The young man reacted quickly, however, and shoved Jim, causing him to stumble a few steps backwards and then to fall. When he fell, the handgun slipped from his waistband.

It took a moment for the young man to process what he saw. Jim watched and could almost see the young man’s mind working through the possibilities. A projectile weapon would not register on the comdev network, so if he could pick it up he could use it without leaving an energy imprint. But the handgun was just within Jim’s reach so he could get to it first and use it himself. Evidently the situation had gotten more complicated than the young man had expected, so he aimed his energy weapon at Jim and said “Just stay there old man. I’m going to take the canister of gasoline and we’re going to call it good.”

Without moving, Jim just said “Alright.”

The young man kept his weapon leveled on Jim and unfastened the can of gasoline. He picked it off the back of the Jeep and started to back away. After a few steps he said again “Just stay there, old man.”

After the car drove away, Jim got up, dusted himself off, and picked up the gun. Back in the Jeep, he decided it was best to turn around and drive north to a crossroad and then find another road that headed south again, even though he was pretty sure the thief would not have remained in the area. He drove on for the rest of the day, shaken but not hurt, and around 9 PM, well after sunset, he decided it was time to stop for the night. A partially broken and hard-to-read road sign announced Welcome to Hickory Corners.

Hickory Corners was a ghost town. Jim found a place to park for the night on the outskirts of what was left of the village, parking the Jeep in a clearing that was once maybe used as a ball field. He pitched the tent on soft ground in a small stand of pine trees, got a fire going, and heated water to reconstitute a package of stew and make a cup of synthcafe. Afterwards, he stood in the clearing and looked up at the sky.

It was a clear night. To the north Jim could see at least two familiar constellations—the Little Dipper and Cassiopeia—but to the south the night sky was marred by the harsh white stray light from the I-94 corridor and the food and pharmacy factories in Battle Creek and Kalamazoo. He ran through the plan for the next day. He needed to get fuel to replace what had been stolen, and he needed to find a way across the I-94 corridor.

But there was nothing to do about any of that tonight. Jim passed the next hour writing in a notebook at a small table under the raised back hatch of the Jeep. He wrote notes of his travel since leaving home, as he usually did when he was out and about, but he wrote about other things too, to help clear his mind before sleeping. Eventually he put out the fire and bed down in the tent for the night. Smudge kept watch outside the tent.