

Dusk Before The Dawn

A Novel by

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David Privett peered through the windows of the Jaguar dealership he'd found, his hands cupped on either side of his face to block out the afternoon Texas sun. Tired of walking, tired of sweating, he has his eye on an XKR convertible, with AC to battle the afternoon heat, and top-down winds to enjoy the cool evenings. Based on the conditions of the roads he had observed on his previous courier trips, he knew he should be looking for a Hummer, or a good ole pickup truck at the least. But he and Julius' other messengers had blazed enough of a trail where he thought a fine English touring car with a Ford engine would do just fine.

The door to the dealership was unlocked, as most of the doors he encountered these days were. The smell of decay that hit him as he opened the door almost convinced him to turn around, and seek other means of transportation. But he had performed these grisly duties before, many times, and he pushed on through the stench.

Out of his well-worn backpack, stained but stenciled with the words "Go Rockets", David pulled out latex gloves and a cloth filter mask for his nose and mouth. A quick tour of the dealership revealed seven bodies, one female and the rest male. They were dressed like car salesmen, except for the young lady, who David imagined must have been cute before all this happened. None looked like customers, meaning it must have been a slow sales day when the disaster hit.

David was sure that he would find more bodies back in the services and parts area, and he'd do a thorough inspection later. If a store, gas station or any other place was to be a sanctuary added to the courier's map of safe and useful places, it had to be thoroughly cleansed. This implied one of the many undesirable tasks the couriers had to perform.

He propped the dealership door open, then dragged all of the bodies into a pile in the middle of the lot in front of the dealership. He moved quickly, almost frantically; other couriers had reported packs of wild dogs that went even wilder with the scent of dead meat in the air. He quickly rummaged through his ever-present backpack, and extracted an aerosol can of Lysol and a lighter. Since all car dealerships kept their own gas tanks (another reason he was investing time at the dealership, he rationalized to himself), he could have taken the time to douse the bodies with gasoline. But the quicker this was over, the better. David said a few quick words over the bodies, praying that their loved ones had been luckier than they were, then held the lighter up to the aerosol can. He sprayed while lighting, creating a portable flame thrower, just like in college. The dried-out clothing on the bodies lit quickly and very soon all was ablaze.

He puked, as he always did, though he always expected the previous time to be the last. What a wimp, he thought. How many times have I done this, but I still can't keep lunch down.

He quickly turned away, wiping his mouth with the back of his sleeve, and strode back into the dealership.

All couriers were selected by Julius based on certain specialized skills: mechanics, pilots, technicians. Most could be classified as your basic handyman, able to fix things up and get them in good working order.

David's specialties were computers and computer networks. As such, the first thing he checked on in a new location was the possibility of Internet access. Other courier's designated or self-proclaimed goals were power systems, or transportation systems or other infrastructural needs. David's passion was the Internet. It was his firm belief that even minimal Internet access between Julius, the other couriers and Julius' "home base" in Guatemala would relieve the couriers from playing messenger boys and free them to get systems back online faster.

Resuscitating the Internet was David's personal quest. At the time of the disaster, David believed the Internet was heading toward its own evolution. Its size in number of connected devices had reached the vastness of the number of neurons in the brain. People were producing and consuming information at a staggering rate, communicating on a virtual level more so than at any time in history. It was surely taking on a life of its own.

David thought it might be mankind's salvation. His friends, when told of this idea, simply called him a geek.

Passing up the salesmen's offices, David found and entered the larger, more private manager's office. This was where the customers were pulled in for the 'last best offer'. Here also was usually where one would find unfiltered Internet access. Small businesses rarely trusted mere employees such as sales people or receptionists with full Internet access, worrying that they would waste company time and resources with personal online activities, or worse downloading porn, gambling online, or other forms of electronic sinning. Full access was always given to the most senior manager, who ended up abusing these privileges more than the underlings ever would.

David pushed the power button on the desktop computer underneath the manager's desk, with low expectations. He was mildly surprised when the green light flickered and the disk drive began to whirl. According to the latest courier update power had been restored to certain sectors in this area; but you never knew how the building infrastructure would hold up after all being neglected.

The computer booted up, and asked for a user name and password. David shook his head, as he typed in the information that was clearly displayed on the yellow sticky note on the side of the monitor. Such are the problems with network security, he reminisced in passing.

Before becoming a courier for Julius (a recommendation he was still not sure whether to thank his brother or not), David was responsible for network security at a local energy firm. His training concentrated in the area of network architecture, building and designing the networks to connect the company's computers, and to connect the company to other company's. But he had been 'drafted' into network security because of problems like people

leaving their user names and passwords on sticky notes in plain sight for all to see; or like people giving strangers on the phone enough information to hack into a critical system, just because 'they asked and seemed nice.' The company had been hacked in this way by a competitor (though it had not been proven in a court of law), and this single act had raised security to the top of the CEO's priority list. David had been reassigned shortly thereafter.

David saw that the network link light on the computer's network card was lit and blinking, indicating the presence of a network. Probably just connectivity within the building, he thought. Still, he pulled up the command line, checked the computer's IP address, and verified that everything looked good.

He detached the Flash Drive from around his neck. In the old days, he had kept it in his pocket, but a certain amount of 'geek sheik' vanity had forced him to get a sleek Rosewood laminated one, still practical for usage with its one gigabyte of storage. The Drive contained the tools of his trade: password hack programs, tracing programs, and others he had collected or written. He even had a self-modified version of a program called 'Satan', which he used to use to attack web sites or email addresses of people who truly pissed him off.

He inserted the Flash Drive into the computer, pulled up a recursive ping program, and entered in instructions for it to start searching a long list of addresses. This ping program would tell him not only if he was attached to other networks, but what, if any, other networks were alive. He turned up the volume on the computer's speakers so that he could hear the audible alert if it happened, and left the manager's office.

He had spotted a fine black Jaguar XKR on the showroom floor, but it had two negatives. First, the color black, the sweltering sun and David's desire to sweat less did not go together. Second, David couldn't allow his 'geek sheik' self to ride around in a coupe; it had to be a convertible. There was no sense owning a Jag if you didn't have a rag top...what was the point?

He left the showroom after finding at the receptionist's desk all of the keys for cars marked 'XKR' from the lockbox, and headed out onto the packed car lot. At the top of his list was the car whose key was marked 'XKR Conv. Antigua Blue'. The color summoned visions of Caribbean beaches that David had visited in

his misspent college youth. While the other Engineering students were studying, he and his buddies were using homegrown robot programs to automatically search for the cheapest fares to St. John's, St. Martin, and the Mexican resorts. At least his new courier 'job' kept him traveling, but the scenery wasn't nearly as picturesque.

The afternoon sun made the black asphalt of the car lot hot enough to fry an egg. David knew this was no urban myth, as he had been forced to demonstrate this during a sophomore Physics class, complete with equations. But he was used to the heat so, wiping his already sweating brow, he began his search.

He immediately spied a white convertible with a tan roof. He found the key amongst his collection, and inserted it into the driver's side door, and left it there. He noted this cars location as a possible second choice, and resumed his quest.

Ten minutes into it, he was seriously considering going back to the white car, considering himself foolish for what he was doing. He was sweating profusely now, and longing for the relief the car's air conditioning would provide.

Then, he saw it, against the far fence that bordered the dealership. Blue with a darker blue top. He hurried over, and saw that it had custom spoke wheels as well, with a tan leather interior and what looked like rosewood trim, to match his flash drive! He walked the perimeter around the car, focused on it. Peering in on the passenger side, the fence at his back, he saw that his dream car had the enhanced sound package, with the Altec Lansing speakers.

He was in heaven, imagining the ride, top down, speakers blaring, when the dogs crashed into the fence behind him.

Scared out of his reverie, he whipped around, and saw the pack of dogs, some throwing themselves at the fence, most frothing at the mouth. He cursed himself for not being more vigilant; most couriers had had close calls with packs of dogs before, and a few had even been mauled by them. They must have been drawn by the smell of the burning bodies, he thought.

He looked up and down the length of the chain link fence. The pack was going to have a hard time getting through right in front of him, but there were gaps in the fence no more than thirty yards in each direction. They were barking and baying now,

having caught the scent of his fear. David felt for his pistol, but realized it was in his trusty backpack, which was doing him no good sitting back in the manager's office next to the computer.

David ran around to the driver's side door, while looking through the sets of keys in his hands for the right ones. Finding them, he clicked the "door open" button on the remote control, pulled up the door handle and slid into the leather seat. Turning the key, he revved the 4-liter engine, and threw it into reverse, knowing the race was on.

As he backed out of the space, he saw in his rear view mirrors that he was right. The dogs had found the holes in the fence, and were now hot on the heels of the Jag. David floored it, racing through the rows of cars back towards the showroom, quickly leaving the dogs behind.

He squealed to a halt beside the showroom door he had just left, driver's door facing the showroom door, and, leaving the car running, jumped out, slammed the door and ran towards the showroom door. He had given himself a good forty yards on the dogs, and made the door with plenty of room to spare. He was through, closed and locked the door before the closest dog was twenty yards from him. He raced to the front of the showroom, and locked the front door, where he had dragged the bodies through earlier.

David leaned over, hands on his knees, panting to catch his breath. Over the sounds of the dogs now barking at him through the glass showroom door, he could hear a faint beeping that he at first could not identify. Straightening up, he followed the origins of the sound back to the manager's office.

The audible alert from his search program was beeping for all it was worth through the small and tinny speaker in the manager's computer.

Sitting down at the old wooden desk, David began scrolling through the list of addresses that his program had found. Amazingly, there was a network still functioning, not only in the dealership, but throughout the city. Though mapping the network addresses to physical street addresses was not straightforward, it was a task he was prepared for, as he had a somewhat recent copy of the registry of IP addresses database that matched Internet

addresses with who registered them. The locations of the registers were not always the same as where the computer would be, but it was the best he had.

After some time, David determined much to his chagrin that ninety percent of the addresses found were physically close by, in and around the city. There was some good news there, in that it hinted at some networking and electrical infrastructure in the city (besides that hoarded in Tooney's compound) was still in working order. But, as he sifted and filtered through the remaining few, he found some that were located elsewhere, some hundreds, even thousands of miles away.

He traced these scant few, and found they had one point in common: a large Internet peering point, north of town. This could only mean that parts of it were still operational.

David the geek grinned from ear to ear.

He restarted the program, intending to check it the next time he was in the area. He packed up everything else into his backpack, except for his trusty USB key. He placed this in his pocket, already thinking about attaching it to the key ring of his new Jaguar.

When he got back out onto the showroom floor, he saw that the pack of dogs had made its way to the front of the building, circling the smoldering pile David had made from the former inhabitants of the dealership. Silently thanking them for that small favor, and for the car, David slipped out the side door, and into the awaiting, running Jaguar.