At the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California—one of the nation’s premier nuclear-weapons design facilities—high-level physicists operate within heavy security to model and test new warhead designs. But politics can be just as dangerous as the weapons they design, and with gigantic budgets on the line, scientific egos, and personality clashes, research can turn deadly.

When a prominent and abrasive nuclear-weapons researcher is murdered inside a Top Security zone, FBI investigator Craig Kreident is brought in on the case—but his FBI security clearance isn’t the same as a Department of Energy or Department of Defense clearance, and many of the clues are “sanitized” before he arrives. Kreident finds that dealing with red tape and political in-fighting might be more difficult than solving a murder.

Written by two insiders who have worked at Lawrence Livermore, Virtual Destruction is not only a gripping thriller and complex mystery, but a vivid portrayal of an actual US nuclear-design facility.

CRAIG KREIDENT #1

Virtual Destruction

Kevin J. Anderson & Doug Beason

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CHAPTER 1

Monday
Gold, purple, and red streamers flowed across the airplane as it soared toward infinity, parting as the jet plowed through the multicolored atmosphere—in total silence. Without a sound, the contour-enhanced streamers sluiced over the swept-winged aircraft, skimming smoothly down the fuselage, skating unaffected over well-burnished seams and rippling over precisely calculated angles.

“Can’t you get the speakers on, Gary?” Hal Michaelson demanded, standing on the clouds.

At the rear of the craft, the streamers lifted off the metal skin, curling up like psychedelic wood shavings, then tumbled together in a growing turbulent vortex wake behind the plane.

Suddenly a screeching, whistling howl roared past his ears, rattling his teeth. “Too damn loud!” Michaelson yelled to his deputy.

Outside the chamber, Gary Lesserec adjusted the volume. Michaelson could just picture him grinning with his stupid gee-whiz expression. “Yeah, but it’s impressive, Hal. The Air Force weenies will love it.” Lesserec’s voice came over a loudspeaker implanted in the wall.

Michaelson stepped into the imaginary airflow, a looming titan intruding on the image. A canary-yellow strand of fluid whipped around his steel-gray hair without disturbing it, enveloping the bearlike researcher in the simulated airstream. At six-and-a-half feet tall, his massive frame took up a large part of the wind-tunnel simulation. But the computers worked around him, as if he were a foreign object in the path of the aircraft.

“You’re sure we’re at max q?” Michaelson shouted out of the chamber. “This the best we can do?”

“We’ve calculated all the other possibilities—”

As usual, Michaelson paid no attention to the answer, battering ahead to see for himself, a jungle guide hacking away at the underbrush with his machete, unconcerned that someone might have already built a road.

Bluntly, he reached into the image and tugged on the nearest wing of the plane, sweeping back the airframe even farther than before. He watched with interest, like a toymaker adjusting one of his creations.

Within seconds the holographic airflow of streamers evolved, tangling like an angry storm. Supercomputers galloped through billions of calculations by the time Michaelson could blink. With motions dictated by a massive three-dimensional matrix of discretized Navier-Stokes equations, the streamers exploded in an unsteady burst, jumbling together and peeling away from the skin of the aircraft.

“So much for that,” Michaelson muttered.

“Hal,” Lesserec said with a sigh, “why can’t you ever just listen when—?”

Michaelson chose not to respond to his deputy’s carping and nudged the wing back to its original position. The aircraft felt flimsy, as if he could punch a hole through the illusion by moving too fast—but the fact that he could feel it at all made the project far
superior to anything else he had ever worked on. As he watched, the colored vortex streamers once again became stable, relaxed to flow smoothly over the airframe.

He grunted in annoyance. “I spotted the delay. It was just a simple modification—I shouldn’t have noticed.”

“Give us a break, Hal. This is a full-up simulation, with over a billion equations solved every second to bring you that flow!”

Michaelson chewed on his reply, but did not spit it out. He knew damned well how much supercomputer time he was gobbling, since he had masterminded the project since its inception. He had railroaded the work, been a slave driver, insisted on perfect performance—but he had to be even more skeptical than the Pentagon and On-Site Verification boobs would be. He wanted no warts to detract from his show. All Lesserec needed to know, though, was that it was slow.

“Oh then, enough kindergarten stuff. Switch away from the wind-tunnel simulation—give me the Nellis sequence.”

Lesserec’s voice came over a babble of other technicians scurrying to call up the new program. “Better strap in, Hal. Use one of the observation seats. We hooked this one up to the accelerometer.”

“I’ll be fine,” Michaelson said, scowling. His pencil-thin moustache, which was supposed to make him look suave, tickled his lips.

“No, you won’t, Hal,” Lesserec’s voice was insistent, vaguely paternal. The thought of red-haired and freckle-faced Gary Lesserec, who looked like chubby Jimmy Olsen with a hangover, being paternal to him made Michaelson want to laugh. “You’re forgetting these Air Force pilots love to make people puke.”

Michaelson grumbled, but he glanced behind him in the Virtual Reality chamber and found a row of seats padded with the currently chic teal fabric. Clicking his safety belt and feeling like a paranoid fool, he wiggled down in the seat, which barely held his large frame.

“Please remain seated at all times,” the voice dead-panned over the intercom.

“Just hurry the hell up,” Michaelson growled. “I’ve got a flight to Washington this afternoon.”

The holographic image of the airplane and the simulated flowlines disappeared like pixels going down the drain into the Twilight Zone, leaving him disoriented in a strange void as the new simulation booted up.

Michaelson felt as if he were lost and falling for a second as the swirled white cumulus clouds vanished beneath him—a powerfully odd sensation, he noted—when just as suddenly, he was transported into the cockpit of an Air Force fighter jet.

The repainted sky was blue and cloudless all around him, like a piece of crockery. An instrument panel magically appeared, complete with throttle, avionics package, and control stick. He reached forward for the controls.

The sky began to spin crazily around him. His stomach lurch as he felt a surge from the jet engines kick him in the small of the back. Just like a ride at Disneyland, but this was so much more, even if the audience wouldn’t grasp the difference. Wrapping his right hand around the control stick, Michaelson tried to steady the aircraft. The primitive part of his brain screamed that he was going to crash!

But his reason took over, as it always did. Doesn’t feel flimsy at all, he thought. Was it the adrenaline pumping through his body, or was the tactile response that much better
in this simulation? He squeezed on the control stick, not too hard, but he definitely felt something solid there. No tactile-response gloves, no fake hardware—he was touching a matrix of electrostatically suspended microspheres, patterned according to the desired shape. It looked the same as some of the other expensive VR simulations, but the suspended microspheres could make you feel anything the computers could draw. It wasn’t real—but his instincts “knew” he was holding a control stick.

Michaelson didn’t have a chance to think any longer on the wonder of the upgraded chamber as a pair of jets roared overhead, just inches above the cockpit. Twin tailpipes, burning white with raw power, disappeared in the blue distance with a sound of fading thrust, like echoes going down a funnel. He flinched in his accelerometer seat as the sound reverberated over him, shaking the cockpit, stereo-adapted and appropriately projected from all directions. The illusion was perfect. He felt the cold, hard rubber of an oxygen mask snug against his face. He felt his jet thrub with the power of his imaginary engines, and the aircraft went into a roll along the programmed flightpath.

His muscles responded to violent curves, slamming him against the seat in tight top-gun maneuvers and screaming descents. Michaelson felt as if his teeth were jarring loose; but he was only 60, and he intended to keep his own teeth for some time to come.

He raised his voice. “All right, Gary. Disengage the accelerometer part. I feel like I’m on the Star Tours ride at Disneyland.”

“Oh, come on, Hal—we’re much better than that!” Lesserec chided over the loudspeaker.

Michaelson’s seat ceased its convulsions, and once again he sat back as an observer inside the fabric of the tactile scenario that engulfed him totally. When he was certain he wouldn’t be thrown off balance by his own misguided equilibrium, Michaelson unbuckled and stood through the image, plowing through the aircraft’s illusory control panel. All around him in the inverted bowl of sky, the dogfight continued to play out—the visual cues were enough to disorient him, but at least he experienced no physical motion to trip him up.

Walking to the center of the chamber, Michaelson raised his voice to be heard over the screaming jets in their air battle. “Okay Gary, now put me ten kilometers over the flight range, large scale so I can get a view from a distance.”

The scene in the chamber flicked and bounced, like a switching channel on a television set.

Michaelson stood miles above the ground, his feet invisible through the clouds below. He had a sudden fairy-tale vision, like Jack and the Beanstalk with his own legs rising from the ground in a towering trunk.

Just above the clouds tiny fighter craft chased each other about the sky, around his ankles. Contrails spewed from their engines. Through torn openings in the blanket of clouds, Michaelson saw splotches of brown desert, barren mountains, and in the distance toward the blurred horizon, a glint of silver civilization where Las Vegas should be.

The spectacle made him reel. Michaelson felt as if he were a god on Olympus, standing above his sprawling kingdom of Nellis Air Force Base. With a few giant steps he could stroll into Las Vegas, or over to the Hoover Dam, like the Amazing Colossal Man.

He drew in a deep breath inside the sealed chamber . . . he thought he smelled faint traces of the pungent JP-8 jet fuel, no doubt sprayed into the air by the new odor
synthesizer package Lesserec had been working on; artificially generated wind blew past him, ruffling his thinning hair. He felt giddy.

He was a god, in a certain sense. He had supervised the construction of this chamber; it had been his idea, his political arm-wrestling with the good-old-boy network that had broken the impasse between the boobs who had no vision left for the national laboratory system and the enthusiastic hydrocode designers who had no worthwhile work left to do.

Without Michaelson’s controversial and unorthodox strongarm tactics, this VR project would have gone the way of his former baby, the Laser Implosion Fusion Facility—an unrealized promise for cheap and clean fusion power, borne on the shoulders of incompetents, a victim of too much talk and too little planning.

The buzzing jets miles below him looked like flies darting among his legs. They continued to twist and roll, executing perfect maneuvers real pilots only dreamed of.

One more test, thought Michaelson. He purposely hadn’t drawn attention to the next phase, working on his own and hoping not to arouse suspicions from Lesserec or the technicians. They didn’t need to know his real plans for the Virtual Reality technology.

He cleared his throat. “Hey, Gary, do you still have access to those outside test sensors you installed at the Lab pool?”

Gary Lesserec’s voice rang over the wind and faint droning of the jets below. “Piece of cake. We’ve got the feed if you’re ready. It’ll be a letdown after this sexy stuff, though.”

“Indulge me.”

“Always do, don’t we?” Lesserec quipped back, just this side of sarcasm.

Again, the universe around Michaelson flickered and bounced, a TV changing channels. This time his vantage placed him standing just above an expanse of too-blue water with black depth lines painted down and coming up the other side of the Olympic-sized swimming pool. He hovered there, invisible to the crowds below, as the sensors piped in a three-dimensional, tactile, realtime simulation. Like Jesus walking on the water, Michaelson thought. It must be my day for delusions of grandeur.

From behind and below him he heard the sound of children squealing, playing a riotous game of Marco Polo. Turning, he watched a slender young woman bounce off of a diving board, arc gracefully into the air, and slice directly through him on her way to the pool. Sparkling droplets splattered in the air around his image, falling back into the water. The children continued to shout, their voices flattened by the water.

The outdoor swimming pool was crowded with employees of the Livermore Lab and their families enjoying a lunchtime swim. Unnoticed and hanging in midair, he stared at where the walls of the Virtual Reality chamber should have been, but saw no break in the image.

“I give up,” said Michaelson. “Where did you hide the sensors? Is this a live feed?”

“We put up six of them.” Lesserec’s voice came to him strangely disembodied in the air around the Lab’s pool. “One at each corner of the pool area mounted on the fence above, one anchored to the bottom of the pool, and the last on a wire strung out twenty meters over the water. They’re so small nobody notices them. The six sensors give more than enough overlap, and we’re getting near real-time smoothing from the computers.”

“Okay, this is perfect. Shut down.”

Before the images sparkled into nothingness, Michaelson groped his way to the
door of the chamber, reaching his hand through two sunbathers to find the right spot. The heavy vault door split from the wall, disrupting the entire illusion as Michaelson left the chamber.

Sterile white fluorescent lights gave the boring cubicles and computer workstations of the T Program trailer complex a washed-out, unreal quality. Michaelson allowed himself a smile, wondering how the catch-phrase would go over in Washington. ‘More real than reality.’ Everyone would compare it to the Star Trek Holodeck, perhaps even be disappointed because they had seen so much flashier stuff done with special effects in science fiction stories. But this was real, done with real technology, the most perfect remote-sensing surveillance system ever developed.

Sunlight from a clear California day splashed through the miniblinds on the trailer windows. The VR chamber’s control room was no more than a large common area of large-screened workstations walled off by low, fabric-covered partitions that a man of Michaelson’s height could peer over easily. He always thought of the movable fabric partitions as ‘illegitimate walls,’” but they were inexpensive and changeable as programmatic needs shifted—and they fostered a closer teamwork atmosphere among the programmers.

A half dozen men and women stood at various workstations in the common area, dressed in blue jeans, unusual t-shirts, and garish Hawaiian shirts, as if in an effort to prove they were all oddballs, which ironically made them all look the same. Everyone wore a bright green Lawrence Livermore laminated badge, complete with obligatory photo and a bright yellow stripe bearing his or her name. Clipped beside each green badge was a homegrown blue badge, also with photo, made by Tansy Beaumont, the administrative assistant down the hall in Michaelson’s main office.

The green badge indicated the employee had a security clearance and allowed access through the guard gate into the Livermore Lab itself; but you needed the special blue badge for access to T Program behind its additional security fences. Not many people had blue badges, and even though it wasn’t immediately obvious why the additional security was needed for a mere image-processing project, Michaelson had convinced the right people. The additional access security allowed him greater freedom for handling classified material and software in the programmatic trailers. Hal Michaelson could be very persuasive when he needed to be.

Gary Lesserec looked up, stepping away from a high-resolution monitor and smiling like a real butt-kisser. Michaelson held a hand to his eyes in the bright fluorescent light, which seemed much harsher than the outside sunlight he had just seen around the employee swimming pool.

Dressed in shorts and a Spiderman t-shirt, Lesserec contrasted with Michaelson’s more formal attire of dress pants and long-sleeve shirt. Lesserec’s chubby body looked soft and white from not being out in the sun; his skin had toothbrush-paint spatters of freckles. His dark, brownish-red hair framed a face with muddy green eyes and an insincere grin, even when he meant it.

“So, are you a believer now, Hal?” Lesserec looked smug.

“It certainly works,” Michaelson admitted.

“And damn fine, too,” chuckled one of the programmers. Katie something-or-other, Michaelson thought her name was. He could never remember all the underlings and simply read their badges when he had to. Katie turned and gave a high-five slap to the
person next to her. “That swimming pool is so real, it’s refreshing just to look at it.”

Though the pool scene seemed lighthearted and ordinary, Michaelson knew it was the most indicative, the most realistic use of the VR surveillance technology that had so interested the President and the Defense community.

But the scene he remembered most was the vision of himself standing up in the clouds, like a titan looming over the world. He actually longed to be back in the chamber, controlling everything that happened, tweaking reality with a twitch of his fingertips.

With the deep importance of the moment, it disappointed Michaelson that he couldn’t switch off Lesserec’s catty grin. Things had been much better in the old days when he had been surrounded with other hard-driving physicists, rather than Yuppie computer whiz-kids who were smart far beyond their social abilities. Of course, some people might have said the same about physicists—but Michaelson worked with the best raw material his budget would allow, and he wrung out results far beyond anyone’s expectations.

Michaelson pulled himself up to his full height so that he loomed over everyone there. He stepped around the fabric cubicle partitions into the control room. Every station seemed to have at least one can of Diet Coke resting uneasily in an open spot among the papers and software manuals, as if it were some sort of official team drink.

“Congratulations—but we’ve celebrated enough. The Pentagon will be slobbering to buy these chambers to replace their current inventory of airplane simulators. That’s an easy sell, so we’ll dismiss it for now.” He waved his hand. “That’s not where I want this project to be heading.”

Lesserec rocked forward in his chair, looking wary. His grin flickered once, then died. “You’re not going to change our milestones again, are you Hal? The DoD sponsored the research behind the VR chamber. I thought they were expecting new simulator technologies.”

Michaelson frowned disapprovingly at Lesserec’s Spiderman t-shirt, but the kid never seemed to catch subtleties. “Don’t worry, the Pentagon will earn their investment back tenfold, but not the way they imagined.”

Lesserec leaned back in his burnt-orange swivel chair. He rubbed his freckled hands together. “So we’ll still have a job even after we’re through with the project?” He picked up one of the pens the Livermore supply mavens had deemed to be the popular pen of the month, a Pentel ballpoint with rubberized grip, and flipped it end over end, clacking it on the table. “Give us a hint about this mysterious new direction?”

Michaelson watched his young assistant for a moment before answering. Lesserec should have known to ask that question behind a closed office door, not in this zoo with every member of the project watching. Michaelson didn’t like to burden his technical team with too many details, but lately Lesserec had been pressing him for information he should not have had to worry about.

Michaelson had kept his upcoming announcement on a “close hold” basis for long enough. It was part of his automatic habit of secrecy carried over from the way business had been conducted at the Livermore Lab throughout Michaelson’s career. He had spent his career establishing the fusion-power Laser Implosion Fusion Facility, then moved to a stint as an on-site disarmament inspector in the former Soviet Union, to the formation of T Program for virtual reality surveillance.

Even now, more than half a century since the first atomic blast out in the New
Mexico desert, the detailed knowledge of the design and manufacture of nukes was highly classified. The entire Livermore Lab infrastructure, and its overlord the Department of Energy, had been predicated upon producing nuclear weapons and keeping that knowledge away from upstart nations. The political bosses were still warming up from the Cold War, not sure what to do with their mittens.

“You’ll need to move your sensors to a new location. That’s the only hint you get, Gary.”

Gary’s eyes widened. “Didn’t like the swimming pool? I could move the sensors to the women’s locker room if you want.”

Michaelson ignored Lesserec’s statement. “Our plutonium processing facility will give a more realistic test of how the VR chamber is ultimately going to be used. The Pentagon will want statistics on VR surveillance, reliability, and resolution. Just plan to have another demo up and running within the next few weeks.

“I’m leaving for Washington this afternoon, but I’ve already worked it out for you to have access to install the test sensors in Building 332. Our Associate Director promises his ‘fullest cooperation.’” With a change in the tone of his voice he emphasized the last two words.

Even Lesserec snorted, and Michaelson resisted a smile at his deputy’s reaction. Everyone in T program knew how much Michaelson despised his de facto boss, Associate Director for Tech-Transfer/Defense Conversion, José Aragon.

Lesserec caught the rubber-grip pen he had been flipping and looked up with his muddy eyes. “I still think those Pentagon dudes would rather fly the jet simulator any day. What’s the rush?”

Michaelson crossed his arms over his broad chest, feeling like a schoolteacher in front of the group. Why couldn’t Lesserec just shut up and do what he was told?

“If you haven’t noticed, we are no longer in the bomb business. Defense conversion. Technology transfer.” He lowered his voice. “Scrambling like panicked chickens to find something important to do before the budget goes away entirely. Somebody’s got to look ahead. We’ve got to respond to market conditions now.” He focused on Lesserec, ignoring the others in the common area and knowing that was the best way to get them all to pay the most attention.

“Look, I’ve got the President’s ear on this. I’m not at liberty to say exactly what we’re going to be involved with, but it’ll make your little airplane simulator look like a piddly Nintendo game.”

Lesserec tossed the pen across his desk where it clattered against an empty Diet Coke can. He flashed his insincere smile again. “Don’t sell the videogame business short, Hal. The entertainment market is growing bigger than the weapons business. Maybe it’s already bigger.”

Michaelson sighed. “Just watch my news conference tomorrow afternoon. I don’t think the networks will broadcast it, but CNN carries everything. I’ll be back from Washington the day after tomorrow—by then I want you to have a plan for installing an entire suite of sensors in the plutonium building.”

The telephone in Lesserec’s private cubicle rang, giving Michaelson a chance to depart as the young deputy went to grab it. He slipped around the fabric dividers as Lesserec waved for him to wait. Got to have a reason for everything, Michaelson mumbled to himself. What ever happened to the concept of group leader?
“Hal—hey, Hal?” Lesserec called, the slim black telephone pressed against his ear.
“Aragon’s on line two. Tansy transferred him down here.”
Michaelson felt a sour feeling in his stomach. “Tell him I’ve just left.”
“He says it’s urgent.” Lesserec held out the phone, blinking his eyes innocently. He looked like a Cheshire cat. “I told him you’d be right on.”
Michaelson set his mouth. Aragon thought his hangnails were urgent. Not saying a word, he looked around for a phone on one of the computer tables, knocked a few manuals and Coke cans aside, and picked up the phone, punching the flashing button pad.
“Michaelson here.”
“Hal, how are you? How is—”
“I’m in hurry, José. I’ve got to catch a flight to Washington.”
“Ah, yes. Important business, I suppose. Well, this will just take a moment, my friend. You know, I think you’re health would be much better if you slowed down a little, took the time to enjoy—”
Your own damn health is going suffer if you don’t hurry the hell up. But it was no use arguing with the boob. “What is it, José?”
“Ah! Your Virtual Reality chamber—I hear that you’ve met your milestone with the tactile response?”
“Been there, done that. I briefed the Director last week, José. That’s why I’m heading out to D.C.”
“Hmm, I wasn’t at the Director’s staff meeting, and—”
“José, can I call you later? I’ve really got to head out to the Oakland airport.”
Aragon sounded patronizing. “No problem, Hal. I’ll catch up on the details some other time. But since you’ve obviously already met the milestones, I need a big favor. Really means a lot to me. I’m going to bring a high-visibility tour group through the VR lab tomorrow. The Northern California Coalition for Family Values—Fred Unteling’s old group?—bringing a bunch of physically challenged kids to see the simulations. Show them something exciting. Great PR. Newsline will even run a story on it. You’ll love it.”
“Tomorrow?” Michaelson shouted into the phone. “Thanks for the warning! We’re making the IVI announcement tomorrow, José. For God’s sake—”
“Well, I’m sorry I didn’t let you know ahead of time, Hal. I did tell you we were planning to open up more of the site to visits from community groups, and this is our olive branch. Your chamber would be the highlight of their tour. Let these poor children see things and go places they could never manage on their own. And remember, Livermore Lab is community sensitive now.”
Michaelson started to retort, but he decided against it. Unteling’s name closed the discussion. “Tell you what, I’ll turn it over to my deputy—but make sure the kids don’t touch anything.”
“I knew you’d understand, Hal. Say, by the way—”
Michaelson slammed down the phone with an unsatisfyingly hollow clack and turned back to Lesserec. He saw the technicians watching him, their own eyes wide but seeming to mask their amusement at his bluster. “Did you hear what I said about getting the sensors ready?”
Two of the programmers mumbled and turned away. Lesserec grinned at him, rocking back in his chair and folding his hands behind his head. “So, what’s Aragon got to say?”
“Every time Aragon opens his mouth, something stupid falls out. Call him and get the details yourself.” Michaelson felt his heart race; he’d have to watch his temper. He was on his way to an appointment with the President, and José Aragon wanted to play tour guide. Fucked up priorities. No wonder the Laser Implosion Fusion Facility went down the toilet once Aragon got in charge.

Michaelson whirled for the door. The last thing he heard was Lesserec’s chirping voice. “Hey, have a nice trip, Hal. See you on TV.”

CHAPTER 2

Tuesday

NanoWare Corporation
Cupertino, California

Dressed in casual but no-nonsense uniforms—dark suit, deep-red tie—Craig Kreident and the four field agents stepped through the mirrored doors of NanoWare Corporation. They wore brittle smiles on their faces.

As soon as he was out of the bright California sun, Craig snapped off his dark sunglasses and blinked to focus in the indoor lighting of the lobby. He pushed the sunglasses into his suit pocket and reached in to take out the folded piece of paper inside the white envelope. Unconsciously, he used a palm to slick down the sides of his short, chestnut-colored hair, straightening the premature wings of distinguished gray. Always neat, always presentable. A professional.

At the fake-marble front desk the security guard sat up and greeted them with a cautious smile. “Good afternoon, gentlemen,” the guard said, moving his glance like machine-gun fire down the line of agents. “What can I—“

Craig slid the folded leather badge case from inside his jacket and flipped it open. His companions did the same. The guard reeled back at the barrage of IDs.

“Federal Bureau of Investigation. We’ll be visiting some of your facilities this afternoon,” Craig said. “Thanks in advance for your cooperation.”

The security guard gaped like a stranded fish and reached for the telephone. Craig intercepted him by slapping the search warrant on the gleaming marble surface in front of the guard.

“You’ll see here that we have a search warrant duly signed by a magistrate of the U.S. District Court. I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t use that phone, sir.”

His smile inched up a fraction of a degree, cool, cordial, uncompromising. He scanned up and down the corridors of NanoWare. Apart from the neutral carpeting—charcoal gray and sterling silver tweed—everything gleamed with white and chrome, high-tech with a vengeance. The curved halls had no sharp angles, like a 1960s science-fiction vision of the year 2000.

“I believe the IC processing labs are down there,” Craig pointed. “Is that right? We can find them ourselves.”

“But wait,” the security guard said. “You can’t do that. Mr. Skraling is out of town until tomorrow and I don’t have the authorization to—“