

Chapter 1

Termination Zone

A Landon Jeffers Thriller, Book 2

Adam Blumer

Thursday, March 24

Trader's Hill Campground

Folkston, Georgia

The *zip* of someone opening the large tent's door jerked me out of the bliss of sleep in the dead of night. My eyelids snapped open.

Who else could it be but Gordon Hamilton? Maybe he regretted downing that supersize soda hours earlier and had hustled to the outhouse just in time.

But when I glanced to my left, Gordon lay in his sleeping bag a few feet away, though there was room for up to six people in here. His bearish snore serenaded the Georgia crickets.

"Jade?" I whispered toward the door, rising on my elbows.

No answer from my ex-girlfriend. And yet a shape hulked in the ambient haze just inside the opening. Too big to be her.

Few options remained. One I hated to accept.

The drones, the brain-implant controlled assassins, had come for me.

Tingles dancing up the back of my neck, I glanced at my wireless-signal-jamming watch, Jade's gift, but the dial emitted no glow.

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Dead?

How could my protection over the last four months have suddenly abandoned me? Jade had earlier asked for my watch, offering to replace the batteries. She'd given it back without following through?

My Beretta 9mm handgun must lie there somewhere in the dark, but fingertips brushed emptiness.

Gone too?

No time to search for it now.

Whoever lingered in the dark pounced on me, his fist plowed into my gut; the sleeping bag muted the impact but not by much. Longing to shout Gordon's name, I could barely breathe past the agony.

While the masked man straddled me, something glinted in his hand. A hypodermic syringe glistened in the meager moonlight seeping through the tent's windows.

The assassin hadn't come to kill me but to immobilize me so the puppet master, the person or persons driven to control my life through my brain implant, might claim me. This wonderful reunion with Jade, Henry, and Gordon yesterday had been nothing but a setup. I needed to—

The syringe swung toward my neck, but my mind screamed no. Even while I grappled with the man's powerful arm, the needle inched closer.

“Gordon!” I cried.

The Vietnam vet sprang to his feet and kicked my attacker's wrist. The syringe cartwheeled into shadows. Gordon grabbed the intruder and put him in a headlock.

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We had agreed that I should run if trouble came. Grabbing my backpack, I hurried toward the door, nearly colliding with another faceless shape. The second drone brandished a knife, glittery in the half-light.

I stepped back, but he must have been programmed not to hurt me, because he stepped toward Gordon and swung the blade at him. My friend sprang to the side at the right moment, maintaining the headlock on the first drone and using him as a human shield. Intruder nearly impaled intruder.

“Run, Landon!” Gordon yelled. “Get out of here.”

Indecision stalled me. How could my friend expect me to abandon him with two against one?

Gordon’s fist collapsed the syringe-wielding drone, but the knife brandisher, fleet of foot, sidestepped him just in time.

“Landon, what are you waiting for?” Gordon shouted. “Go!”

They’d claim me once Gordon no longer stood in their way. His selfless act gave me the opportunity to flee.

Exiting the tent, I made a beeline across the moonlit campsite toward Gordon’s unlocked truck. I found the second wireless-jamming watch in the glove compartment, where I’d stowed it earlier for safekeeping. But the screen failed to glow in response.

Both wireless jammers sabotaged on the same night?

They’d been fine yesterday before Jade and Henry showed up at my campsite and surprised me after several months of hiding away. Too much of a coincidence?

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Abandoning the lifeless gadget, I sought my fail-safe backup. Months ago I'd found an old football helmet at a flea market and wrapped it in steel plating. That way if the jammers ever failed me, I had one last resort to block any controlling or tracking signals to my brain.

Fleeing the drones would be pointless until I blocked their means of hunting me down.

I dashed to the truck bed, barely visible in the moonlight. But that image became the last to grace my eyeballs, because just then I became a blind man.

No.

The puppet master had found me. Without functional jammers, he'd claimed control through the implant. Next, he'd terminate every sensory gateway, making escape futile.

Gasping in a panic, I searched the truck bed like a blind man with outstretched arms. Hands seeking but not finding.

C'mon, c'mon. Where is it?

Night sounds ceased. My hearing had been unplugged too. Ice water coursed through my veins.

Hurry!

Using something like an app on his smartphone, my enemy could now still my racing heart. The nightmare would be over for all of us, but then the puppet master would win.

Unacceptable!

Fingertips grazed a familiar cardboard box. Fumbling around inside, I grabbed the helmet. Slapped it on.

Sight and sound returned, and in that instant, the implant nestled in my cerebral cortex ceased broadcasting my GPS coordinates to my enemies.

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Renewed, I spun away from the truck, debating next steps. Other drones—maybe even the puppet master himself—must be on their way here to ensure this endgame concluded successfully.

By no means could I return to Gordon for the keys. Which meant I couldn't take the truck. What better place to hide than in the woods?

Lingering in the cool spring air, wearing nothing but shorts and a T-shirt minus shoes, I scanned the campsite's perimeter for signs of other drones coming my way.

No one.

All those months of hiding in the woods, using a fake identity, and resisting the temptation to contact Jade and my mom—in spite of all those precautions, how had they found me?

Grunts coming from Gordon's fight with his attackers in the tent snapped me back.

Run, Landon. Get out of here. They're coming.

I'd been so happy to see my friends after my months of isolation, but I'd become nothing less than a trouble magnet. Logging as many miles between me and this place as possible would make everyone safer.

Offered no other alternative, I ran.

This concludes your free preview. The e-book and paperback release on November 2. The e-book is available now for preorder [here](#). Buy your copy today!