

TRIPLE
THREAT

H. L. Wegley

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Dedication

"...terrorists have not used the Internet to launch a full-scale cyberattack, but we cannot underestimate their intent." ~ FBI Director Robert Mueller.

Absolute security necessitates a loss of freedom, but absolute freedom produces absolute insecurity.

This book is dedicated to all the men and women who, while buffeted by capricious political winds, must daily walk a tightrope, balancing American citizens' desire for freedom and privacy with our need for security. I will not try to enumerate all the organizations you work for in federal and local government, but I sincerely thank all of you, though I do not envy you.

Endorsements

Hide and Seek

“The author has done a great job of weaving a very exciting, well written story together that I could not put down until I finished it in one reading. I had to find out what happened.” ~ Thomas H. Hinke, IT/Computing Security

“Mr. Wegley—let’s see more of Jennifer & Lee. Either write faster, or get your publisher to publish faster. I’m waiting!” ~ Kate Hinke, Writer & Editor

“...the story really comes alive and pulls you along for a heart-stopping ride. *Hide and Seek* by H.L. Wegley is a definite keeper if you love suspense with a touch of romance.” ~ Ginger Solomon

1

Because he hath set his love upon Me, therefore will I deliver him; I will set him on high, because he hath known My name. - Psalm 91:14

As Katie Brandt read the printed email message in her hands, the words resurrected a horror from her graveyard of buried thoughts. Once again, she winced and writhed in the water as bullets from the AK-47 pounded her back. But as terrifying as that day five years ago had been, today could be worse. Much worse.

In only a few more minutes, another shooter would open fire with an assault rifle. She read the next line of the message and drew a sharp breath. The printout slipped from her fingers and floated to the floor. The shooter was local...at Seattle Center.

When she dropped to her knee on the computer lab floor to scoop up the paper, the reality of the situation brought an icy chill. Her mom and the twins were three miles away somewhere in the crowd at the big expo...at Seattle Center.

Little Grace and Grady stood in front of her. A gun barrel swung their way and the staccato popping of the rifle—

No! She couldn't allow the scene to play in her mind. A determination so fierce that it drowned her fear gripped Katie's will.

I've got to shut it down.

Still kneeling, she pulled out her cell, hit her mom's speed dial number, and waited. *Come on, Jenn, answer.* Mom...Jenn, she was still deciding what to call her adoptive mother of nearly five and a half years.

Darn it! The call went to voice mail. Riding herd on a class of kindergarteners at the expo, no telling when Jenn would be able to check her messages.

The lab door opened with a sharp click. Whoever it was, she prayed they had driven to the university today, because she needed a ride, and she needed it now. With a little luck it would be a guy. She could use a big, strong guy like...

She grabbed the paper from the floor and looked up into the warm brown eyes of Joshua West, one of the other PhD candidates in the University of Washington's Computer Science and Engineering Department. Josh was perfect.

Katie had previously avoided his friendly overtures, but not today. "Josh, I need a ride, now." She stood, her heart hammering out a driving rhythm.

The soft look in Josh's eyes turned to concern, etching twin lines on his brow. "Kathryn, what's wrong?"

"Don't call me Kathryn. I'm Katie. Josh, did you drive in today?"

"Yeah. I—"

"How fast can you get me to Seattle Center?"

Josh's frown intensified.

"Please, Josh. I need to get there in ten minutes or..." She couldn't finish. Not only were Jenn and the twins at the big education expo, but there were thousands of other schoolchildren. She grabbed Josh's hand and squeezed.

"Oww! That's quite a grip you've—"

"Josh?"

"Yeah. I can take you. But seriously, ten minutes? I'll probably get a speeding ticket...or get arrested for reckless driving."

"I'll pay for it as long as you don't let anyone stop us until we reach the west side of the Center."

"Pay for it? They won't let *you* do my jail time." He shook his head.

"Josh, please." She couldn't help it. She was begging.

Josh's expression changed. "OK. Kath...uh, Kate, let's go. Do you mind telling me why we're in such a hurry?"

We're in such a hurry? Josh had bought in, completely. Katie grabbed his arm and jerked him toward the door. "We need to run. I'll tell you on the way." She yanked the lab door open and sprinted toward the exit nearest the parking area, dragging Josh behind her. "There's a shooter headed for the roof of Key Arena."

"What?" He pulled his arm free, sprinted to catch up to her, and grabbed her arm. "Shouldn't you be calling 911?"

"I will, when we get in your car. But my guess is the help will arrive too late." Or too loudly.

"There's my car, Kate." As they ran toward the late-model Mustang, he unlocked the doors with his key fob. "Why won't the police respond fast enough?"

"This guy's a terrorist. I used my research tools and a little hacking to find him. I just realized what he's up to." She climbed into the car.

Josh slid in on the other side. The look on his face appeared to question her sanity. But, thankfully, he hit

the ignition.

Katie had avoided his question about the police response. Her answer would be inadequate, but she couldn't say that to a guy who already thought she was crazy.

He shoved the car into reverse and squealed out of the parking space, throwing her forward in her seat. When he shifted to drive and hit the gas, Katie's head slapped the headrest as she fished for her cell in her shorts pocket.

"I'm calling 911 now. I don't know if they'll believe me or not, so get me to the west entrance to the Key as fast as you can. My mom and my little brother and sister are there, and the guy's supposed to start shooting at 2:30. That's just a few minutes from now." She keyed in 911.

"So you're going there to warn them? Don't they have a cell?"

"They—" She stopped. If she gave him too much information, he'd probably back out of the whole deal.

Josh's car had a lot of power. In only a few seconds he had run red lights at two intersections and was now accelerating onto 520, racing toward I-5.

The call center operator answered with the standard what's-your-emergency greeting.

Katie needed to circumvent the preliminaries. "In a few minutes there will be a gunman on the roof of Key Arena. He's got at least one assault rifle and he wants to kill—"

"Is this a possible terrorist attack?"

"Yes. We need a SWAT team response, not just a couple of officers. And no blaring sirens."

"What is your name and location?"

"I'm Katie Brandt, and I'm in a car on I-5 near the

520 interchange.”

“Katie, park somewhere now, and I’ll transfer you to an agent at the FBI field office. They’re only fifteen blocks from the center.”

It was actually twenty blocks, but she didn’t have time for quibbling. “I’m not the driver, Ma’am. I can talk. Please transfer me now.”

“All right. Stay on the line until the agent answers. This is a new phone system and new procedures. If you get cut off during the transfer, dial 911 immediately.”

A click sounded, there was a pause, and she waited for the transfer to complete. Katie hoped she got Agent Peterson. She could trust—

“Kate?” Josh’s voice. “Are they going to help us?”

She looked over at him. “They’re trying. Transferring me to the FBI. Their office isn’t far from the Center. I know some of the agents there, so maybe—Blast it! They cut me off. They’re never supposed to—” She drew a sharp breath and reached for the handle above the door as they flew into a turn.

The tires squealed as Josh’s car slid through a curve at the end of the off ramp.

Katie gasped when he ran a red light on Mercer. She tried to take a calming breath. It didn’t help. She let go of the handle and redialed.

A different operator answered.

The car flew down Mercer Street at a frightening pace, but Katie shoved that concern aside to concentrate on the phone call. “This is Katie Brandt.”

“It’s her,” the operator said to someone else.

There was a lot of noise in the background. Evidently, she had stirred things up at the call center.

“Katie, we’re going to transfer you to the FBI field

office, now. You won't be cut off this time."

Josh swerved from one lane to another, dodging cars, flinging Katie side to side.

Her shoulder slammed into the door as he veered left onto Broad Street.

"Hang on, Kate. It's getting a little dicey with all this traffic."

"So I noticed. Are you going down Denny to 1st Avenue?"

"Yeah. From 1st I can get you to the west entrance of the Key. But—" he paused. "What are we going to do there, Kate?"

When someone came on the line, she chose to avoid Josh's question. "Agent Peterson here."

Thank you, Lord!

"Peterson, it's Katie Brandt."

"What's up, young lady?"

"A shooter is up. On the roof of the Key with an assault rifle."

"What? You aren't down there, are you?"

"I'm almost there."

"There's a shooter at the Key and you're headed there? Back off, Katie. You were lucky the last time—" Peterson stopped.

She could hear noises on Peterson's end. He was probably trying to direct other agents even before he finished talking with her.

"Mom and the twins are with the kindergarten class on a field trip with—"

"I know. With twenty thousand other kids at that big expo. Stay away, Katie! We'll handle this."

"I don't think you can." Her words hadn't come out the way she intended.

"What? Who do you think you are?" A loud

expletive blasted in her ear as Josh steered the car around the sharp corner from Denny Way onto 1st Avenue.

"You shouldn't have said that, Kate." The car wheels squealed a final complaint as Josh braked to a stop outside the west entrance to Key Arena.

"I'm going to stop this guy, Peterson. Get here as quickly as you can. We don't have any more time—" she decided to hang up on Peterson before he found a worse word in his meager cursing vocabulary. Peterson's furious voice blasted out through her cell.

Too late, and she had accidentally bumped the speaker phone button.

"Sounds like you're in trouble with the FBI." Josh stared at her.

"It wouldn't be the first time."

"You're not just a student. Who are you, Kate?"

She didn't have time for explanations.

When the car jerked to a stop, Katie flung the door open.

Josh grabbed her arm, trying to stop her. "I don't hear any sirens yet. You've got to wait for the police."

"We'd better not hear any sirens. That would only make the guy start shooting sooner. But, Josh, the SWAT team won't make it in time." Katie motioned to part of the supporting structure near the west entrance to the arena. "Do you see the big arch?"

Josh still gripped her arm like he didn't plan to let go. "Don't even think about that. The roof overlaps it too much. You'd have to run up a forty-five degree arch and jump onto a steep roof eight feet above. You'll slide off and kill yourself."

She pulled her arm free. "Not if you help me. And keep your voice down."

"I'm not going to help anyone commit suicide. Especially you, Kate."

Especially her? She didn't have time to dwell on hidden meanings. Maybe later. If there was a later for her. Maybe Josh was right and this was crazy. No. She couldn't let some deluded jihadist shoot little Grady and Grace...and Jenn. Tears filled her eyes. Katie stopped at the foot of the huge arch and wiped them away, hoping Josh hadn't noticed her weakness.

He ran up beside her and stopped, hands on hips, staring up at the edge of the monstrous convex roof.

She glanced at her watch. 2:25 PM. Five minutes left. She scanned the arch up to the roof of the building. "It's only about eight feet. If I stand on your shoulders, I could get onto the roof."

"That's insane. I would have to stand on a forty-five degree slope and balance while I let you climb onto my shoulders. If I drop you...I'm not willing to risk that."

She stared into Josh's eyes. "I can do this. There are things you don't know about me...just trust me, please...I trust *you*, Josh."

He held her gaze. "Kate, you can't stop this guy. You'll only get killed."

"I told you, there are things you don't—"

"So Kate Brandt is a ninja babe?" Reluctance remained in his eyes, and his hands remained on his hips.

Darn! A tear spilled from her eye. She hated to cry, to appear weak.

Josh's hands came off his hips and reached for her. His reluctance had melted.

Katie pushed her palms at him. She needed his help, not his consolation. "I can handle this. I won't do

anything stupid.”

“Nothing stupid?” His hands went back to his hips. “Then you won’t go up there.”

Katie looked at his athletic build and strong arms. “Please, Josh. If not for me, then do it for my little brother and sister, for my mom, and for all the other kids out there.” More tears trickled down her cheeks.

“Oh, man. How did I ever let...OK. We’ll try it once.”

Maybe tears were good for something.

“But if you slip and fall off me, Kate, so help me I’ll—”

“You’ll what, kill me? You wouldn’t have to. But I’m not going to fall.”

Katie ran up the arch and stopped, crouching below the overhang. She planted her hands and feet on the five-foot-wide support and slowly stood up. Her feet didn’t slide. They *could* do this. “Hurry, Josh. I need to be up there now.”

Josh’s powerful legs drove his body up the arch, stopping beside her.

She pointed at a spot two feet below her. “Set your feet just beyond the edge of the overhang.”

Josh adjusted his feet, leaned into the steep slope, and repositioned them again. “OK. Step on my knee, swing a leg around my shoulders, and sit.”

This was not a ladylike thing to do with a guy, but that wasn’t a concern at this point. Only three minutes until the gunman would start shooting...if his watch wasn’t fast. She moved in front of Josh, facing him, their eyes only inches apart.

He took her hand and squeezed. His look softened. “Please, Kate. Be careful up there when you do your ninja thing. You can’t let him have a shot at—”

“Never,” she said, shaking her head. “Not the likes of him.” She stepped up on his knee. Josh felt as solid as a rock. She pushed upward and swung a leg around his shoulders.

He clasped his hands, forming a stirrup. “Here, put your foot in my hands and step up onto my shoulder. When your weight comes off my hands, step onto my shoulder with your other foot and grab my hands to steady yourself. You should be able to stand up. I’ve got my balance now, Kate. Are you ready?”

“I think so.”

“Then go ahead. I won’t drop you.” Somewhere Josh had found confidence.

Using the stirrup, Katie stood on his shoulders, holding Josh’s hands and teetering to gain her balance.

She let go with one hand and placed it on the roof. Then the other hand. But the roof was still chest high. She couldn’t climb onto it.

Katie peered up at the communication building on top of the Key. That was the only hiding spot for the man until he moved into the open on the east side of the building to start shooting down on the crowd. Hopefully, all his attention would be focused on the other side where the people were. If not...

She needed at least another foot to put her knee on the roof and gain enough leverage to lift her body onto it. “I need you to bend your legs, then jump and bounce me up. If I jump when you do, I’ll land on the roof.”

“How did I ever let you—” Josh grunted and took a deep breath. “Just do it, Kate. But keep your body aligned with the arch, just in case. If you fall, I want you to land on the arch, not the concrete below. We’ll go on three.”

“Wait. When you jump, make sure you jump toward the building. When I push off, I don’t want my feet pushing you over backward because—”

“Yeah, *because...*” Josh growled at her.

“I can see that you understand. You count. We’ll go on three.”

Josh drew a breath. “One, two, three.” He bent his knees and jumped.

She pushed off his shoulders, propelling her body three feet up into the air.

Katie landed spread-eagled on the steep slope at the roof’s edge and clung there, praying she wouldn’t slide backward.

Below her she heard a thud, then the raspy sound of sliding. She looked down. Josh had landed spread-eagled on his back, head downhill on the big arch. He had jumped too hard, but managed to stay on the arch and had stopped his slide.

Was he OK? She gave him thumbs up.

He returned it and was punished for his effort by sliding another foot head-first down the concrete and steel arch. In one quick movement, he swiveled his feet below his head and rolled onto his stomach. He looked up and waved her on.

Good. He *was* OK.

Katie turned and breathed a quiet prayer as she crept up the roof toward the communications facility. On the far side of the structure, somewhere amid the antennas and dishes, a movement caught her eye.

2

When Katie disappeared from view on the arena roof a sickening, sinking sensation dropped into Josh's stomach. What had he just done? Had he really been so caught up in Kate's desperation and the goal of getting her safely onto the roof that he forgot about what would come next? A determined young woman, unarmed, was about to engage an armed terrorist. And he had enabled her to do it.

Josh sprinted around the arena to the side where throngs of children milled about, interspersed by the taller figures of their chaperones.

Too close to the building. He backpedaled to gain visibility of the roof, aware that he could be making himself a target for the shooter. A target, yes. But nothing like Kate. And what would she try to do? And where did she get the...the experience to think she could take on a terrorist, anyway? He'd let the drama she'd used fuel the moment. He was a fool.

Josh sucked a sharp breath when, less than thirty yards away, a figure with both hands on an assault rifle stepped near the edge of the roof. *She's right...there is a terrorist on the roof...*

The shooter pulled a lever on the gun. A metallic click sounded above the murmur of voices in Seattle Center.

High above the man, Kate's blonde hair waved in the gentle breeze as she crept toward him.

The shooter intently scanned the crowd.

Josh shuddered as the gunmen's gaze swept across him. Immediately, the barrel of the rifle swung upward.

Kate bounded with the speed and grace of a cheetah running down its prey.

Josh held his breath, waiting for the popping of the rifle.

"Please keep her safe," he whispered. Who was he talking to?

The shooter's body stiffened. The rifle moved away from the crowd. He had heard Kate.

Still five yards from the shooter, Kate launched her body into the air, legs retracted.

The man swiveled toward Kate.

She delivered a powerful kick to the shooter's upper torso.

He flew off the roof.

His gun clattered down the arch to the concrete below.

The man's body flipped end for end in the air, then bounced where the grass met the concrete around the arena.

Kate landed on her back near the edge of the roof. Her body slid feet first. She wouldn't be able to stop.

"Katie!" A woman's voice yelled from the crowd.

Josh sprinted toward Kate.

She had stopped sliding and rolled onto her stomach, but her feet dangled over the edge. Kate planted her palms down on the roof. Her hands might delay her fall to the concrete fifteen feet below, but they couldn't prevent it.

"Hang on, Kate! I'm almost there."

"Josh! I'm sliding! I'm—"

He stopped underneath Kate. "I've got you!"

Kate's legs swung inward as her body left the roof.

Josh extended his arms and braced himself.

Her body rotated, falling parallel to the ground.

He took her impact with his arms and chest. One arm cradled her head, the other took her thighs.

Kate's momentum drove his back down.

Josh's breath exploded from his mouth when his back slammed onto the concrete.

Kate's head pounded against his biceps, causing the muscle to spasm and her head to remain intact.

Josh sucked hard. No air. Only an asthmatic wheeze. He tried again and wheezed in a bit of air. He had gotten his breath knocked out of him before. On the football field. But never by a beautiful blonde in his arms.

Kate bounced up to her feet.

She was OK.

Maybe he was, too.

Kate scurried to the arch and, as Josh sat up on the concrete, she grabbed the gun.

Josh fought for another breath, and then looked for the shooter.

The dark-skinned man struggled to his knees.

A small, Asian woman ran toward the man and delivered a powerful stomp.

The man's body flew backward, thudding on the concrete.

As Josh stood checking his aching body for any serious injuries, ten yards away Kate knelt, set the gun down, and opened her arms wide.

Two small children ran to her. She wrapped them both in her arms. "Thank God you're OK."

"Did Kaykay get hurt?" The wide-eyed boy asked

as he scanned Kate's head.

"He was a bad man, huh, Kaykay?" the small girl said.

Kate released the two children and stood. "I'm OK, Grady. And yes, Gracie, he's a bad man."

A few feet away from Josh, the small woman, who had apparently put the shooter down and out with her kick, stood over his prone body, prepared for another assault.

Josh studied her. Her eyes were as intense as Kate's and, like Kate, she was extraordinarily beautiful.

Kate walked up to Josh, the two kids trailing behind her, and slipped her arms around him. "Thanks, Josh. I'm so thankful you showed up at the lab when you did. Without you I would've—are you OK?" She pulled her head back and met his gaze.

Breathing a little easier now, Josh's eyes surveyed the throng of people. All eyes seem to be on Kate and him. "Kate," he croaked, "you scared me to death. I shouldn't have let—"

"Yes, you should have. We did what we had to do." She laid her head on his shoulder.

That sent his racing heart somewhere near the red line.

A group of uniformed men, weapons drawn, rounded one corner of the arena. Another group approached from the opposite side.

Kate raised her head, and then turned toward the group led by a tall slender man.

"The shooter's under control," the beautiful Asian woman called out to the men. An FBI SWAT team according to their uniforms.

"Peterson," Kate yelled, "it's about time you got here."