



Hide and Seek

*He expected security breaches, but the conspiracy she uncovers
sends them running for for their lives*

H.L. Wegley



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HIDE AND SEEK

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my wife, Babe, who was the inspiration for the character and personality of Jennifer.

How does a story residing in the heart and mind of a writer become a published book? With the help of a lot of talented people. I want to thank those talented people who helped me.

First, I thank my wife, Babe, who patiently suffered through countless versions of the novel while serving as my main sounding board. Thanks also to my test readers, Duke Gibson, Dallas Mickey, Jill and Brett Lloyd, who endured the pain of reading an unpolished draft of my very first novel.

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Finally, thanks to our Lord, Who revealed Himself to us in stories, and Who gives us the privilege of revealing Him to others in our stories.

1

6:00 a.m. Saturday, March 18

Never practice unwise behavior.

Lee Brandt made that vow as a teenager the same year he swore off dating. Now, here he was thirteen years later parked on a secluded road with a member of the opposite sex.

I really hate irony.

He glanced at the woman sitting in the driver's seat. Jennifer Akihara was the most beautiful woman he'd ever met. She was also the most intelligent. Most guys would die to be sitting here on this Western-Washington mountain road with Jennifer. When he glanced into the passenger-side mirror, it appeared likely that he would.

A vehicle slowed on the highway, and a blast of air left his lungs.

Jennifer's gaze froze on the rearview mirror and she gasped.

Those lights had pursued them most of the night.

The vehicle turned towards them.

That sent his heart racing.

In an instant, their dead-end hideout turned into a trap.

Jennifer cut the engine and Lee took her hand. Despite the rising panic, awareness of their first touch etched an indelible mark in his memory. The early

light of dawn revealed her wide-eyed fear mingled with something he couldn't interpret.

He refocused on her face. He had put her in danger, so he had to keep her alive, whatever it took.

He tugged on her hand. "Slide out on my side, Jenn. Don't leave any obvious footprints. If they think we ran up the road, it'll buy us a few minutes. We're going up the mountain, instead."

Lee released her hand and leaned out the open door. By standing on the door frame, he could peer over a small rise all the way to the highway. Towering above the car, he monitored the progress of the approaching vehicle, still nearly a mile away.

"Wait 'til I'm over the console." Jennifer slid to her right. "I'm over it."

"OK, let's go."

They leaped from the bullet-riddled sedan onto the grass beside the road and ran towards the steep mountain slope. In less than three minutes, the gunmen would reach her car. In another minute, the goons would probably find their trail. Then the race up the mountain would begin.

Lee needed every second of that time to build a buffer that would keep them out of sight and out of gunshot range.

To get his bearings, he glanced towards the southeast shoulder of the large limestone spire perched on the mountaintop. A hidden cave he found there as a kid—one of many caves—would become their hiding place.

Or our tomb.

If it became a tomb, all knowledge of the threat they had uncovered last night would be entombed with them. That was the intent of the terrorists, drug-

cartel members—whoever the gunmen chasing them actually were.

Jennifer, the graduate student Dr. Martin sent to help Lee investigate the computer security breach, was incredible. She was long on brains and beauty. Slender and small, she appeared a little short on what they needed now, brawn. Should he treat her like a little sister, or like—as much as he wanted to, he didn't have time to think about that now.

He offered his hand to her.

She took it without hesitation.

He pulled her through the roadside bushes, avoiding the thorny berry vines now visible in the dawn.

“Be careful, Lee,” Jennifer spoke softly, slightly breathless, as they ran hand-in-hand towards the mountain. “Yanking me off my feet will only slow us down.”

“Sorry.” He'd lost his focus. He adjusted his stride to match Jennifer's. “Tell me if I'm going too fast. But run hard. We've got to get to the trees.”

He dismissed the fear in her eyes. After her gutsy night driving, he knew she was game. She could perform under pressure.

Dr. Martin said she had an Einstein-level IQ. Lee guessed with people like Jennifer self-reliance died hard. Was God-reliance ever born?

They broke through the last of the brush near the base of the mountain and entered the forest. Towering Douglas firs dominated all other vegetation, the trunks providing their only protection. They needed to keep a lot of tree trunks between them and the goons, at least three or four hundred yards. If even one green laser beam reached them...

He shoved the thought from his mind and tried to focus on something positive. But a horrifying video intruded, playing repeatedly. Green beams of light danced all over Jennifer's body.

"No!" he protested.

"What is it?" she huffed.

"Nothing. It's OK." He squeezed her hand. "Just keep running. Don't hold back. When you're tired, I'll help."

"I'm already tired. They chased us all night."

"It will get harder before it gets easier. Don't give up. I know we can make it."

She didn't reply.

That was lame. He'd meant to encourage her.

As the sun topped the Cascades to the east, car doors slammed in rapid succession in the small valley below. He pulled her to a stop.

"How many doors did you hear?"

"Not sure...three, I think." She squeezed the words between heavy breaths.

"Three of them," he concluded, hoping he wouldn't have to make a life-or-death decision based on his unverified assumption.

They broke into a run, but Jennifer struggled to maintain the pace.

Lee glanced back periodically to monitor her ebbing strength.

Over the last several yards, the slope steepened and Jennifer slowed from a jog to a walk.

He needed to start helping her.

"Wait a second, Jenn." He pulled her to a stop again and craned his neck to look up through the trees. They hid the limestone spire. Maybe the trees would also hide them. Maybe Jennifer could make it farther

before he had to pull her weight. Maybe they would make it safely—*too many maybes*.

He gave her as much rest as he dared, and then tugged on her hand. “Come on. We need to get to the first rock outcropping.”

They jogged up the mountainside, but Jennifer struggled on the steep slope.

He wasn’t doing much better. When he tried to speak, his sentences came in staccato bursts of words, chopped apart by gasps. “Jenn, give me...your left...hand.” He reached back with his right and they locked hands around the wrists. “Hold on tight...stay on...your feet.”

“I’ll try. But one of us...must contact the FBI...I’m slowing you down so—”

“Don’t even think that...I’ll help you...we’ll make it.” He began pulling more of her weight.

Jennifer stumbled behind him. “Are you sure this is the best—”

“There are caves up there...I played here as a kid...we can hide...they won’t find us...I’ll keep you safe.” He said the words, but did he still believe them? He glanced at the steep slope. They had about three-eighths of a mile to go. Nearly a thousand feet in elevation to climb.

They needed to run. Even rested he wasn’t in that kind of shape. He hadn’t a clue if Jennifer ever had been. Adrenaline sometimes accomplished amazing things, but with their lives on the line they could use some help from another source, a source Jennifer said she doubted. Her agnosticism was another reason he needed to keep her safe.

They hit the breakpoint where the slope steepened to a few degrees shy of a cliff.

In thirty seconds, the slope claimed his legs. In another ten seconds, it took everything else. He tried praying again, but chase scenes and bullets from the previous evening disrupted his thoughts, becoming reruns of the horror movie they were cast in a few hours earlier. The reruns ended with the green lights dancing on Jennifer's body.

To force the images from his mind, he focused on Jennifer.

If the gunmen gained on them, fear might paralyze her as much as exhaustion.

He needed to keep her calm and confident.

Like me.

"Yeah, right," he mumbled to himself between breaths that grew more labored, raspy, and inadequate by the second.

Below them, cracking brush told him the gunmen had reached the base of the mountain.

They had at least a three-hundred-yard lead.

Not four hundred, but it would have to do.

A jerk on his arm nearly pulled him off his feet. He looked back.

Jennifer had stopped.

He pulled on her arm to continue their climb.

She leaned forward, trying to step ahead, but her legs didn't move.

He stopped pulling. If she fell and twisted an ankle—*I can't let that happen or we're dead.* He stepped close and gripped her upper arm with both hands to support more of her weight. "Jenn...if you...want to live...keep going."

Jennifer moved sporadically and stopped responding.

He wasn't doing much better. His lungs burned, as

his oxygen debt threatened to bankrupt him. This wasn't working. Would he have to carry her?

He needed to concentrate, but his mind went fuzzy. He stumbled to his right, pulling Jennifer with him.

They stood at the edge of a gap in the trees. When he looked down the narrow clearing, he became vaguely aware of the extent of the gap. Far below, he detected movement.

The belching of automatic weapons startled him. Just below them, flying dirt exploded into the air. It created two parallel lines running up the hill, converging on Jennifer.

Two green spots of light moved onto her body.

No!

He yanked her to the left.

She cried out.

They fell in a tangle of arms and legs and rolled into the cover of fir trees.

The lines of death continued up the hillside for a few yards. Then the shooting stopped.

Jennifer lay still beside him, eyes closed. But she was breathing.

He clenched his jaw and looked at her legs. He expected to see blood-soaked jeans, or worse. No blood. He thanked God.

With the force of a sledge hammer, the thought of what had nearly happened drove a spike deep into the pit of his stomach. He pulled Jennifer's body close and held her, as if somehow that would protect her. The shots had missed them, but if he'd remained vigilant, there would have been no shots. "I'm so sorry, Jenn...my fault...won't happen again."

Jennifer replied only with deep, gasping breaths.

As he held her, conflicting emotions mushroomed out of control, hatred for those who'd nearly killed her, and something else—something entirely different.

Please help me keep her safe.

Would she still trust him enough to follow his lead? He held her tightly, trying to protect her body with his for...he didn't know how long. Regardless, it was longer than they could afford.

Her brown, almond-shaped eyes opened, and Lee peered into them, trying to read anything they revealed. He saw fatigue and something else. Was it trust? He couldn't read her well. She seemed to mask things.

"Is your arm OK?" He had jerked so hard he wondered if he'd dislocated her shoulder.

"I'll...survive," she whispered through a deep breath.

"We both will." His voice didn't sound convincing.

She leaned to one side, supporting herself with the shoulder in question.

He pulled her gently to her feet and drew her farther back into the cover of the trees. "If you see me start to do something stupid again, Jenn...just tell me."

She didn't reply.

He took her hand and tried pulling her up the hill.

She didn't respond. Her head sagged forward. Her shoulders drooped. One of her knees buckled, and she almost fell.

Please, not now. It's not that much farther.

"Hang in there, we're almost there." He changed direction, traveling parallel to the slope. Immediately strength returned to the muscles in his legs. Maybe this respite meant they could catch their breaths before

resuming the climb.

His maneuver also disguised his intended destination, the concealed cave. If they reached the spire and slipped into the cave before their pursuers arrived, the gunmen could never find them. If...

After they moved steadily along the contours of the slope for nearly two hundred yards, Jennifer spoke for the first time in several minutes. "I'm OK now. Let's go, Lee."

He tried to give her an encouraging smile. "It's not far now. One more burst of speed and those thugs are toast."

"Me too...of a heart attack," she panted. A faint smile appeared on her lips. Jennifer would never voluntarily give up. "But, Lee...you'd better be right about...where we're going... or I'll kill you."

He squeezed her hand. "If I'm wrong...you won't have to."

That was brilliant, Lee. You idiot!

He led Jennifer parallel to the slope for several minutes.

Her drooping posture soon disappeared. She quickened her pace and moved to his side, putting her hand on his shoulder. "Lee, I really am OK, now."

Stopping for a moment, he glanced through the trees. He could see rocks. Lowering his gaze, he looked into her eyes.

The vibrant, intelligent Jennifer was back. She really was OK.

Full of life again, her gaze drove away the despair threatening to drown him. Hope flowed in, replacing it.

"Then it's time to move up to the limestone formation."

They reached the first limestone outcropping, a hundred yards below the tall spire.

If we're going to lose these guys, this is where it starts.

"We'll be on rocks most of the time, now," he whispered. "There's a lot of moss on them. Don't kick any of it loose. Don't kick any rocks loose, either. They create noisy little avalanches. Avoid patches of bare dirt."

"I get the point, Lee. Make it hard for them to track us."

"Yeah. And we'll change direction a few times to disguise where we're headed. Ready?"

"So, we'll be going more slowly, now?"

"Definitely. We used our brawn to get here."

"What brawn?"

"How much do you think?"

"All of it." She rolled her eyes.

He grinned. "You got that right. But it was enough."

She sent him a warm smile.

He resisted the strong urge to hold her and reassure her. Instead, he turned to look at the spire. "OK. If the brawn's all gone, it's time to use our brains to shake these guys for good."

"Let's use yours. Mine's too tired right now." She smiled again, and trust filled her eyes.

It placed a heavy burden on him, but it also made his spirit soar. Completing the climb bought them precious time. His tension level ratcheted down several notches as their high-stakes game morphed from run-for-your-life to hide-and-seek. All kids knew when they hid they needed to make sure the person counting to one hundred wasn't peeking.

Crashing noises and the clatter of rolling rocks

erupted below.

From down there the goons couldn't possibly peek.

Jennifer grabbed his hand, squeezing tightly. "That sounds close. Are we still OK? They aren't—"

"We're doing fine," he whispered. "They're not tracking us very well. In fact, it sounds like they're moving away from us, to our right."

Soon it would become much harder to see any tracks. Eventually their trail would disappear.

They would hide, and the goons would seek in vain.

At least that's what he planned.

Lee hadn't planned the events of the previous twenty-four hours. Accidentally wandering onto the turf of terrorists, evil could envelop one before one was even aware of its presence.

Though it seemed like everything happened in the last day, in reality, the roots of this deadly drama went back more than four months. From the roots, a story grew. It was a story he would never forget. But he had two questions.

How long would the story last?

And how would it end?

2

November 15, four months earlier

“It’s insane!”

Lee pounded the desk with his fist, knocking his outstanding-performance award to the floor. When he swiveled his chair to pick it up, his gaze caught the brass nameplate on his cubicle wall, Lee Brandt, DEDES System Architect.

It sounded impressive. He thought so, too, until his boss at National Aerospace, Barry Lafferty, had made the announcement a few minutes ago. The Digital Engineering Data System, DEDES, was about to become the Digital Engineering Data outsourced System.

As Lee grabbed his award, Dave Rothermel, a fellow worker on the DEDES project, stepped into his cubicle. “Did I just hear the word, insane?”

Lee studied him.

Dave’s pursed lips replaced his usual smile.

“Yes, it’s insane.” He used what he intended to make the catchphrase of his evangelistic campaign to save the soul of the project.

“If it’s any consolation, I agree with you, Lee. That’s partly why I intend to move on.”

Of course, Dave would bail. Like all hard-core programmers, Dave’s work philosophy was simple, write code, or shrivel up and die. Writing

specifications and doing acceptance testing—that was not Dave.

It wasn't Lee, either.

"Other than being insane, what's your take on the outsourcing of our system, and what do you intend to do?"

"For now, I'm going to stay and try to prevent the management of National Aerospace from selling national security down the drain."

Dave frowned. "Isn't that a bit melodramatic? I'm leaving because I want to write code, not functional specifications. Why all the gloom and doom about national security?"

"We have everything from publicly available data, to proprietary data, and even classified data. Of course, we maintain separate commercial and military environments for the system, but we can't give Bangalore Business Technologies access to all that data."

"No, we can't. But we'll define all of it for them in the functional specs."

"My point is...that's not enough." Lee's voice sounded harsh, even to himself. "You can't develop a working system—one that is so data-driven—from only a specification. To test their code, the BBT developers will need the actual data—all the data anomalies for all categories: National Aerospace proprietary, NOFORN, ITAR, and some of the classified data."

Dave shook his head. "We won't put that data in the development and test environment. We might dummy it up, but we'll never give them the real stuff."

Lee clenched his teeth. "Not until all heck breaks loose, like it's sure to do when the new DEDS fails

acceptance testing. Do you know where the system is going to break, Dave?"

"Probably while trying to process some of our weird proprietary data on the commercial side, or the classified-data anomalies when we host the system on the defense side of the house in their environment."

"You got that right." Lee shook his head and stared at the floor. "When the pressure is on to fix the problems"—he looked up into Dave's face—"what do you think will happen?"

"What else, the CEO will get involved—you know...to rescue the contract—the insane contract that was his idea, as was his misguided outsourcing initiative."

Lee stood. "And that's when security will take a backseat to expediency." Lee stepped towards Dave, and his voice increased in volume to somewhere between forte and fortissimo. "There will be security breaches...mark my words!"

Dave stepped back. "Lee, I know you're frustrated. But you need to be careful, or you could lose your job." He paused. "But you're right about security. Two of our competitors were hit with fines and penalties last year for security infringements on outsourced systems, ones that went to offshore firms."

"See what I mean." Lee's voice dropped a few decibels. "It's insane."

Lee started preaching the gospel of insanity to anyone who would listen. A few days later, when he verbalized his catchphrase to a reporter in the parking lot, it appeared on the front page of the area's biggest

newspaper.

Barry stormed into Lee's cubicle and threatened to remove "System Architect" from his nameplate.

After Barry left his cubicle, Dave stepped in. "Don't forget what I said. You could actually lose your job. Barry's the kind of guy who would fire his best friend if he thought it would get him to the next rung on the corporate ladder. But...I found a job."

Lee sighed. "Don't mind me. It's been a bad morning. But about the job—that's great. Where will you be working?"

"Over at plant three...with the Laser Technology Team. Are you still planning to stay on the project?"

"I think so, at least for now. I'll stay, write specifications, and watch the BBT contractors like a hawk."

Dave extended his hand to Lee. "Well, goodbye."

Lee shook it. "You'll do well over there. Write some code for me."