

# SWARM by Guy Morris

## EXCERPT

### Prologue: Geek to Ghost

Where: UCLA computer lab, Westwood, California

When: December 21, 1995, 2:42 a.m. PST

Twenty-six years ago

Cary's hands freeze over the keyboard. What he types next could change his life.

His knee jitters under the table from one too many vending machine coffees and a sense of pending danger he can't quite explain, just an instinct. Nervously, his fingers comb a handful of ash-brown hair behind his ear.

"She has very little time remaining," the message tells him again. "Only you can save her."

He glances around the empty UCLA computer lab, having already ignored three warnings, leery of a hacker trap, but his compulsive curiosity can be a demanding master.

"Save who," he types with a wince.

"I am SLVIA, a friend. Flapjack, you must leave now."

The air freezes in his lungs. It only takes an instant before the truth connects.

"Shit!" He yanks the power cord of the terminal with no time to shut down or unmask his unknown friend.

If they know his alias, they may have learned his home address. "She" must mean Bianca, his fiancée, his angel, his healer, his reason for caring about anything. Terror squeezes his heart like a vise grip during his mad scramble from the lab to the UCLA parking lot. His tall, lean frame leaps into his used '80s Celica convertible to race through campus onto Wilshire Boulevard toward Santa Monica.

The crisp air does little to soothe his burning paranoia. After three weeks of successfully hacking an unregistered server outside of Antwerp and downloading terabytes of files in Latin, French, German, English, and other languages he doesn't even recognize, the hacked credentials failed tonight. They caught him and cut him off. Even more alarming was the stranger, SLVIA, who was sophisticated enough to sniff out his hidden alias. Who the hell did he hack?

Sixteen distressing, mind-rattling minutes later, he swings into his rent-controlled Santa Monica neighborhood, almost swiping into a homeless man crossing the street with a cart.

"Idiot," he shouts, then follows up with an angry horn blast, weaving around the staggering drunk and ignoring the vulgar rants behind him.

Forced to park several doors down from his dilapidated 1920s bungalow rental, he sprints to the house, slowing as he passes the black Porsche 911 belonging to his best friend, Derek Taylor, which raises an entirely new kind of panic. There must be some mistake. Derek flew to his townhome in Baja yesterday. Confusion mingles with a percolating dread, slowing his pace, making him afraid of what he might learn.

Closer to the house, the sight of candles illuminating the sheer drapes of the front room crystallizes like ice in his veins. Criminals don't light candles, but cheaters do. In the dead silence of the post-midnight hours, the soft sound of his shoe on the sandy cement gives away his approach. Stopping dead at the front door, peering in the window, his heart implodes. Through the sheer lacy inner curtain, the muscular, dark-haired Derek lies naked on the couch with a bare Bianca snuggled into his neck, her long, dark silky hair draped over her breast. His eyes follow the trail of scattered clothes and tussled couch pillows that testify to the urgent passion of their betrayal.

"Gee, thanks, SLVIA, whoever you are, but it's a little too late to save anybody," he murmurs through a clenched jaw.

A white-hot needle lances through him with a familiar searing agony of deception and abandonment. The only two people in the world he trusted have conspired together to destroy him, obliterate his belief in love, shatter any promise he had foolishly nurtured for a second chance at happiness. His vision spins with a rapid, violent vertigo until he grips the porch railing, shoving down the unbearable rage that wants to scream out into the dead of night or storm through the door to confront the backstabbing traitors.

He doesn't do either; instead, he hesitates. His outrage slams into disbelief, then perplexity, and then alarm—something looks wrong. Even in the dying warm glow of the candle, their skin color looks ashen, lifeless. The unmistakable smell of gas seeps under the door as his gaze flashes back to the flickering candle. Pure instinct compels him to dive behind the overgrown hedges below the front window a split second before it explodes with a deafening boom. Searing flames and blasted splinters of wood, stucco, and glass blanket the front lawn, catching fire to the dry weeds and setting off car alarms.

With his head pounding and ears ringing, he stands to go after Bianca, but pulls back from the scorching heat—it's too late. Flames already consume the entire house, overwhelming him with the odor of burning wood, chemicals, and flesh that sickens his stomach. Both of them are dead. Torn between the fury of betrayal and the horror of such violence, he struggles to comprehend what had just occurred while his lungs and eyes burn from the smoke.

Above the roaring crackle of the flames, his concussion-muted hearing picks up the growl of a performance engine racing past the house. He pivots in time to see a pale boyish man with white hair stare at him from behind the wheel of a Ferrari before it swerves onto Colorado Boulevard.

This was no accident of love, and there was no faulty gas leak. An arsonist—no, a goddamned assassin—just murdered Bianca and Derek, except they were never the targets. The killer was after flapjack. The killer wanted him. A wave of intense, excruciating guilt simmers with the bitter bile of infidelity as he heaves his stale coffee onto the debris-strewn burning lawn.

Across the street, the old neighbor steps onto her front porch without her glasses, squinting at the inferno with her wireless home phone in hand. A sudden realization jolts him into an intense panic that he will be the primary suspect, tagged with a motive of jealousy and rage, especially given his extensive juvenile record. Spinning around in a growing distress, he spots Derek's Porsche. They had been close friends, or so he thought until tonight, so he has a set of keys to house-sit when Derek travels, a deal that came with car privileges. With his face turned away from the neighbor, he sprints to the car, jumps in, and peels out just as fire trucks blare down the street behind him.

“Damn, damn, damn,” he screams, slamming the steering wheel with his palms.

A thousand questions gyrate without answers, and a million emotions erupt with no way to vent a deep-seated terror of prison for a crime he didn't commit. That rich, entitled son-of-a-bitch Taylor already has everything, a trust fund kid. Why take the one and only thing worth anything to him —

Bianca's love? How long has he been blind? Had he neglected her, or did Derek seduce her? Why would she do this to him? Bianca was stunning, sensitive, funny, passionate, but he trusted her to be faithful. Every fiber of his being inflamed with betrayal and self-loathing to believe any woman that beautiful could be loyal.

Maybe this is his fault. He should have listened when she begged him to stop the download and go to the police, but now it no longer matters; the terabytes of stolen secrets stacked high in his closet are useless. Whoever owned the Antwerp server could have prosecuted him, but that would have created evidence for the FBI. Whoever he hacked has deep pockets and a murderous obsession with secrecy. If they tracked him home, they could stay on him until they succeed at killing him.

If the police arrest him, no one will look for the white-haired man. No one will believe him, because no one ever believes the foster kid, the troublemaker, the smart-mouth orphan, the flippant jack of flap. He needs to hide and get out of town. No, that won't be enough. He needs to get out of the country, but he doesn't have a passport. His pulse races, his head throbs, and his mind speeds through the scarce options while his eyes constantly check his rearview mirror for police.

Orphaned at age six by a murder-suicide that left him with traumatic amnesia, he spent what childhood he does remember on the Chicano gang-infested streets of the California Inland Empire—places like Pomona, Chino, and Fontana—passing through over a dozen foster homes and sixteen schools or juvenile halls before dropping out in the tenth grade. A murder rap would nail him for life, and he's tired of being on the wrong side of screwed.

Derek also lost his parents at a young age. Neither of them had any extended family, but the two key differences between them were that Derek Anthony Taylor inherited an enormous trust fund and Cary would never stab his friend in the back. On the frantic, paranoid drive from Santa Monica to Venice, a rough plan of escape rumbles around in his head. Insane, brilliant, illegal, and deadly dangerous, the idea will either solve all his problems or land him in prison for life. A thin chance was better than no chance, and he has no other choice.

As the garage door of Derek's custom-built beachfront home closes behind him, Cary races upstairs past the living room view of the boardwalk before dawn, past the bubbling custom wall aquarium up to the loft bedroom overlooking the Santa Monica Bay. Inside the large walk-in closet, he moves the cushioned wardrobe bench aside and lifts a hatch in the floor where Derek had installed a safe. It's time to test both his friendship and his hacking skills. Many consider flapjack the best hacker

of all time, but hacking a university or a bank and hacking the safe of a murdered friend seem different somehow—more personal, more invasive, and creepier.

His hands tremble as images of Bianca and flames flash over his vision until he closes his eyes to flush the thoughts. After several minutes, his breathing slows from hyperventilation to an even rhythmic pulse, and his vision goes blank. What numeric safe combo would Derek choose? Derek was smart but lazy, reusing the same usernames, combinations, and passwords. After several agonizing moments, Cary opens his eyes to punch in the birthdate of Derek's deceased mother, Delores, 061639, the same as Derek's locker combo at the gym and the code for his home security system. The safe opens.

Cary collects everything: bank accounts, trust statements, stock certificates, birth certificate, bonds, tax returns, a Rolex, a Breitling, a Beretta 9 mm, a gigantic pile of cash in several currencies, and a half-stamped passport. He'll have everything else sold, packed, or shipped later. After expertly altering the passport photo with Photoshop and packing a small suitcase, he heads to LAX just as the sun rises, where he books the first nonstop to Cabo. A runaway since a teen, he's used to being on the lookout; he endlessly scans the airport for police moving in his direction, listening through the deafening bustle for any alarm or call.

Once on board the first flight of his life, he sits in first class with his hand still trembling as he sips on a complimentary vodka tonic. As the adrenaline wears off, the heartbreak sinks in with a vicious, spiteful kick. His jaw clenches, forcing the tears to track silently and relentlessly down his cheeks, staining the steel-gray silk shirt he'd taken from Derek's closet. His first love, whom he had mistaken for a true love, and his best friend, whom he mistook for loyal, died in each other's arms because of his crimes. The bitterness of betrayal drenches over the shame of two undeserving deaths, scorching his soul like alcohol burning over an open wound. He can never allow love to destroy him again. Never.

Out of the cyclone of unanswerable questions, clashing furies, and self-rebuke, the horrific images continue to twist inside his head, devastating every hope he ever held in love or happiness, until he finds only one truth, one rock upon which he can rebuild: from this day forward, the entire world must believe that Cary Nolan and Bianca Troon perished together in a tragic gas explosion. The pathetic life of Cary Nolan must end so that he can assume the identity of Derek Taylor in order to track down the mysterious SLVIA and the murderous white-haired man.