

ELIXIR

PROJECT



EVERYTHING CAN BE HACKED,
EVEN THE TRUTH

KARY OBERBRUNNER

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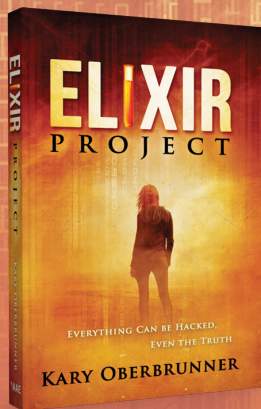
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CHAPTER ONE

“STRIP SEARCH ‘EM,” barks the senior TSA officer to his junior. Then he lowers his voice. “After last week’s events, I’m not taking any chances.”

The younger officer snaps up from his stool. “You heard him. You two, follow me!” he says, scowling at an attractive couple in their mid-twenties.

Both look innocent enough. What set the agents off? I’m not sure if the junior officer’s abrupt tone is meant to impress his superior or intimidate those of us waiting in line. Judging by our expressions, I don’t think either strategy is working well for Mr. Mall Cop.

“You can’t be serious,” the woman says. “I’m not going with you. And I’m definitely not getting naked.”

Her travel companion jumps in. “We’re just tech professionals on our way to meet with a private client in London. Why the search?”

They argue back and forth, and their growing resistance and escalating voices cause other officers to stop their check-in process. Pens freeze midway through verifying a long line of travelers anxious to get through security and one step closer to their anticipated destinations.

The other officers place their paperwork down and shuffle closer to the couple. Easygoing chitchat among the passengers dissipates. Like a thin metal wire stretched taut, the patience in the room is dangerously close to snapping.

"I think there's going to be a problem here," Nick whispers to me, Darren, and Chloe.

"Yeah," Chloe says. "This is starting to feel a little weird."

The senior officer towers directly over the couple in front of us. He looks crusty and weathered, like old leather left out in the afternoon sun too long. His eyes bug out slightly, but oddly they don't blink. He's close enough to smell—a musty odor, a mixture of cheap aftershave and wet dog. I read the lettering on his narrow tan name tag:

Officer McNulty

"Don't give us that 'tech professional' spiel," the irritable officer hisses. "We know exactly who you are. We can either discuss details here or privately back in our control room."

At the words control room, I catch a glimmer in his eye. Maybe even a wink?

The woman's eyebrows narrow. "I said, I'm not going anywhere with you." Her speech drips of a strength that I envy.

Her associate maintains his poise, too, but I'm near

enough to see his fingers twitch nervously. I'm sure he's capable, but the officers outnumber him half a dozen to one.

I want to look at my three friends instead. Maybe they know something I don't? But that would require turning from McNultery, and I'm not sure that's a good idea.

"We have passports and papers," the young businessman says, reaching in his pocket.

"Stop! And keep your hands where we can see them. We know you're linked with a SWARM sleeper cell here in the States."

Time stumbles and spins as I process his accusation. SWARM? Here? Now? A bead of perspiration trickles slowly down McNultery's face.

"Did you say SWARM?" a deep voice growls directly behind me.

A thick elbow smacks my back. I turn to see a large, balding man shaking with rage. His face twists and contorts, seizure-like. Bright shades of red streak from the tops of his ears all the way down to his wide neck and the gold chain encircling it. Tufts of dark chest hair sprout out from his button-down Hawaiian shirt.

He struggles to speak, as if someone has kidnapped his tongue. "Filthy pigs. Y-you murdered my wife!"

He lunges forward, flailing his arms and nearly knocking me over. The close quarters in this crowded line don't offer me much space, but Darren still has the presence of mind to react quickly. His arms catch me, gripping the small of my back, wrapping around my waist, and stopping me from

a nasty fall on an unforgiving floor.

Before I can gather my thoughts or my balance, another voice screams from behind us. “Hackers from hell! You ruined my family,” a petite soccer mom yells. “You stole my identity, our money, and our dreams!”

Several others shout, voicing their disdain. Our once organized line pushes forward, mimicking a Black Friday crowd overly amped about doorbusters waiting on the other side.

“Quit pushing,” an older man with a cane yells, trying to maintain his balance.

“Let security do their job,” pleads a woman to my left.

Without space to stop the force welling up behind us, bodies begin toppling forward like bowling pins smacked by a heavy ball. Anger mounts, the cane falls, and fists begin to fly, in this supercharged, unforeseen escapade.

Scrunching down as low as we can, Darren, Chloe, Nick, and I crawl to the right, hoping to avoid getting caught in the fray.

I catch a glimpse of the large balding man. Using his weight, he knocks over several more bystanders and army-crawls toward the young professional, who must have fallen during the commotion. The balding man sits on the chest of the alleged SWARM member and pummels his face, bouncing his skull off the tile floor with each blow.

His arms pinned under the large man’s weight, the businessman’s only response is a series of high-pitched squawks. This barbaric scene rivals any mixed martial arts competition.

I want to run for help. As much as I hate SWARM, he should be tried in court, not beaten to a pulp. Before I can move, a red dot appears on the balding man's back, and a second later I hear a loud crackling and clacking noise. Blue bolts of lightning dance between the two electrodes at the tip of the senior officer's gun. I watch as thousands of volts of current shoot through his body. The balding man screams and shakes and then goes stiff.

Officer McNulty bellows in a deep voice, "Freeze! Everyone!" Even the other officers stop trying to break up the fights all around them.

The order finds its mark, and silence soon replaces pandemonium. The crowd sheepishly settles down, like elementary school kids caught misbehaving on the playground.

"Get an ambulance for Gramps here," he says.

Two other officers spring into action, helping the elderly man to his feet. Another recovers his cane, which got knocked away during the scuffle.

"What about the guy with the bloody face...and his blond friend?" the junior officer asks. "Better get them an ambulance, too?"

"Not a chance," the older officer says, putting his gun back in its holster. His tone is emotionless.

The junior officer doesn't pick up the cues. "Yeah, but we're not even sure they're associated with the hacktivists."

The weight of the moment closes in on my chest. It looks like McNulty is going to turn his stun gun on his junior officer next. But instead, he tightens his lips and cranes

his neck at an awkward angle. "Take them anywhere other than our control room and you can kiss your job good-bye." He whips around and storms away, huffing as he marches.

Heat flushes into the junior officer's cheeks. He straightens his belt, then issues a command of his own. "You heard him. Call an ambulance for the old guy." Then his voice drops. "And take those two suspects into the control room."

"What should I do with them there?" a middle-aged female officer whispers quietly, but my friends and I can hear her.

"You know what to do," he mutters. "Dispose of them."

CHAPTER TWO

None of us speak until we get through airport security and to our gate. From our seats, we can still see the officers, but at least they can't listen in.

Darren breaks the silence. "Did he say 'dispose of them'?"

I didn't think much of Darren until we did a group project last semester. The girls in my dorm studied him more than the exams for their gen ed courses, often commenting about his wavy ash-brown hair. He is easy on the eyes, but I would never admit it to them—or him.

Darren listens unlike anyone I've ever met. On the surface, some might chalk it up as shyness. While others bumble on about their opinions, Darren stops to ask for mine. After a couple of conversations, I discovered what's truly behind those brilliant brown eyes: sincerity.

"I know," Chloe replies. "Think he was joking?"

"Hope not," Nick says. "They have what's coming to them."

Although it was a callous comment, he does have a point.

Everybody I know has suffered at the hands of SWARM.

“Cai warned us about the potential for high alert during our trip,” I point out.

“Should we still board our flight or head back to campus?” Nick asks.

He doesn’t sound scared, just a little concerned. Nick isn’t the type to get alarmed by officers in the airport or by opponents on the football field. He can thank his running back frame for that extra shot of confidence—muscles bulging out from all directions of his dark mahogany skin. I bet Officer McNulty wouldn’t last ten seconds against him—if he didn’t have his stun gun to help him.

“It only counts as a whole semester’s worth of credits,” Chloe reminds us. “Besides, don’t you think we owe it to Sienna’s uncle after all the strings he pulled to get us this opportunity?”

Nick, Darren, and Chloe stare at me, waiting for my response.

“Sienna?” Chloe says.

“What?” I clear my throat before continuing. “He insisted on hooking us up.”

“I’d say,” Nick nods. “The plane tickets, hotels, and meals...”

“Don’t forget the details between the registrar and the Center for Global Engagement,” Darren adds. “First quantum mechanics majors spending the summer abroad in Greece. Can’t beat that.”

The longer we talk, the better I feel. Conversation creates

distance between the incident and us. Still, I wonder about the blond woman. Did they succeed in transporting her to their control room? If so, she's probably dead by now.

"You boys pick your perks," Chloe teases. "But I've enjoyed our smart-rings the most."

I have to agree. Our smart-rings are the coolest invention I've ever worn or seen. I can't live without mine now, but last October was a different matter. I've never enjoyed receiving gifts. I get anxious thinking about what reaction I'm supposed to have when I untie the bow. Most years I forget about my birthday until the day it arrives. But this year Uncle Cai wouldn't let me. Between those reminders, he dropped hints about an extra special gift he'd selected for my eighteenth birthday. He insisted on giving me matching ones for my friends to help us prep for our trip to Greece. Though he never listens to my pleas of going cold turkey on his gift-giving addiction, I can't help but appreciate his thoughtfulness. For as long as I can remember, Uncle Cai's been the steady presence in my life and the closest thing I have to a father—or mother, for that matter.

I glance around at the other gates. People stand relaxed, scrolling phones and sipping beverages. All signs of what happened only fifteen minutes ago are gone.

The junior officer still flexes his dominance, flitting about to various stations. From this distance, I can't make out what he's saying. His gestures seem overdone, like he enjoys playing the part of the main character in his own personal drama.

I scan the faces of passengers finding their seats. That SWARM couple said they were on the same flight to London. I know Cai is probably busy this morning, but I should call him anyway. He'd want to know.

When I was a toddler, my parents were in an accident. My lone memory of our former life together is captured in a family photograph from my third birthday. Uncle Cai told me it had been taken days before my parents were removed from me and from this life.

Over the years, I've stared at the picture more than I care to admit. Guess I keep hoping to find the truth. Like, what really happened? The details surrounding their death have always felt conveniently cryptic in nature. Fifteen years later, unanswered questions still infiltrate my mind regularly.

Heaven knows I've coexisted with ambiguity for far too long. A couple of years ago, I launched my own amateur investigation about my parents' accident via the Internet. A junior in high school at the time, night after night, I followed every lead in a web of interrelated mouse clicks. But in the end, I failed to uncover an alternative besides the official pronouncement: "an unfortunate accident."

Don't get me wrong. I'm deeply indebted to Cai for adopting me. My father's kid brother wore his protector role well, given the circumstances. Inheriting a toddler overnight is a big responsibility for anyone, much less a single guy highly committed to his career.

Growing up, I viewed Cai more like an older brother than an uncle or legal guardian. Still, I can't shake the

unsettling sensation I have deep in my gut. Something about my parents' accident screams non-accidental.

"What do you like best about the ring, Sienna?" Darren asks, interrupting my thoughts.

"Umm...the ability to talk on it," I announce, trying to look engaged in the moment. I don't want him to think I'm distracted. Chloe calls my habit daydreaming. I call it a part-time job, staying afloat in my deluge of thoughts.

"Agreed," Nick says. "That feature saved all our butts last semester. No thanks to you, Chloe." Nick gives Chloe a flirtatious jab with his elbow.

"The way I remember, you were the one getting distracted. Don't you know you can't watch a playoff game and ace quantum physics at the same time?"

"She's got a point," Darren says. "They say multitasking decreases your IQ—producing the same effect as being stoned."

Chloe grins at Darren. She looks stunning as usual, despite the fact that we're in an airport and barely managed to escape a brawl. She has so much to be thankful for. Her boyfriend, Nick, adores her, and her mom and dad love her. In a weak moment, I could let jealousy spring up and choke out the kindness I feel toward her. Lucky for me, Chloe's loyalty melts any ill will I'm tempted to entertain.

Our friendship blossomed over the past couple of semesters. She was the first girl I met on campus, even before moving in—all thanks to the admissions office. On accident,

they switched our welcome packets. Feeling responsible, they gave me her phone number, and we ended up tracking each other down through text messages.

After straightening the debacle, we chatted in the campus café for the remainder of the afternoon, talking about whatever popped into our heads: class schedules, embarrassing moments from high school, and how to avoid the freshman fifteen. To our surprise, later that day admissions reassigned us as roommates—not a common gesture at our college, I'm told.

Cai had worked his magic at the admissions office. He'd waltzed into Ravenwood Hall and emerged fifteen minutes later with a spring in his step.

"Good news, ladies. Admissions owned its mistake and regrets the welcome packet mix-up. They've reassigned you as roommates and put you in an upperclassmen dorm."

"Wow, Mr. Lewis," Chloe remarked. "You've got some serious pull here."

"Please call me Cai," he corrected. "I'm just happy you've got each other now. Sienna could use a friend like you."

"Thanks, Uncle," I said. "You think of everything, even picking my friends." I winked. "Guess I'll keep you, roomie. That is, if you still want me?"

Nick gets up from his chair. "You guys hungry?" he asks. "I saw they had some protein bars over there."

"No thanks," I respond. "After that latte on the drive over, I'm good."

If only it were true—me feeling good? This knot in my

stomach isn't going to loosen until I talk to Cai. He always knows what to say.

In the tech world, Cai became known as a phenom at a relatively young age. Selling your first start-up while still in college tends to have that effect. He turned the heads of all the major players in the industry, including ELIXIR. No need to climb the corporate ladder when you can take the elevator straight to the top. His key role at ELIXIR and serving on the Senior Board of Clerics, the governing entity for the global organization, come with plenty of perks.

"Sienna, when was the last time you saw Cai?" Darren asks.

I love the way Darren says my name. I could listen to him say it over and over.

I try recalling his question, but I'm distracted again, focused more on his mouth than finding the correct answer.

"Umm...he's been pretty busy with ELIXIR stuff. I guess they're putting the finishing touches on a new Project. But I think we chatted Tuesday...in prep for our trip."

"He's so lucky, striking the lottery by joining ELIXIR when he did," Nick says, still hovering since nobody else wanted any food. Guess he gave up on those protein bars.

"Yeah, I'd give my left arm to work there," Chloe says. "You know I'm counting on you getting me in there for my internship."

"Who said I could get you in?" I tease. "I'm on Cai all the time just to get my résumé in front of the right people."

"Well, don't forget about your friends when the opportunity comes."

Cai joined ELIXIR way back when it was still relatively unknown. About five years ago, it became more popular among those with a taste for technology and innovation. But with the release of their new SWARM-fighting technology and recent stamp of approval from the League of Nations, ELIXIR crashed into the mainstream—definitely claiming the spot as the cool kid on the block.

“Which is it for you, Chloe—revenge or career?” Darren asks.

“What do you mean?” she asks.

“Your motive for working at ELIXIR.”

“Motive? What am I, on trial or something?” she replies with an icy edge.

“It was just a question,” I say. “I don’t think he meant anything by it.”

She stares at the airport floor. Tears well up in her eyes and start rolling down her cheeks and off her chin. I know the source of her sorrow because as roommates, we often confide in each other.

“I’m sure your secret is safe with Darren and Nick,” I tell Chloe, trying to make it easier for her.

“I’m sorry, guys,” she says. “SWARM’s a sore subject for me.” None of us speaks—because it doesn’t feel like we’re supposed to.

“You could say SWARM stole my high school best friend—Amy. Back then I didn’t know how SWARM tricks girls into the human-trafficking industry. They go online and pretend to be a teenage guy. After establishing trust

and chatting for a few days, they ask the girl to do something she'll regret—nothing too big, but still something embarrassing.”

“That’s horrible,” Darren says.

“It gets worse. They record it by hacking the webcam and then use it as blackmail, threatening to send it to her parents and classmates unless she continues down the regretful path. Each day they apply more pressure—upping the ante and demanding more. After weeks of torture, guilt, and self-hatred, victims will do anything to end this toxic cyber cycle. SWARM then offers an ultimatum. If she agrees to meet in person, they’ll destroy the videos. If she doesn’t, then they’ll go public.”

“Sounds like hell,” Nick says, putting his hand on her arm.

“Nobody knew Amy was stuck until she didn’t return home one weekend. After confiscating her computer, the authorities put together all the pieces. For all we know, SWARM is still using her in one of their trafficking rings in some dark corner of the world.” Chloe wipes her tears with her hands. Nick leans in—giving her a comforting hug. “I’d do anything to take out SWARM,” Chloe says.

“Wouldn’t we all,” Darren mumbles under his breath.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot the junior officer and his female colleague huddled around an electronic gadget, like a tablet or something. They both seem animated, maybe even upset.

I turn back to my friends and look down at the new text

on my ring—an alert about boarding beginning in fifteen minutes.

When I first opened Cai's gift, I wasn't exactly sure what it was, so I simply stared at the box instead.

"Come on, Sienna," he prodded. "You don't even know what it is—do you?"

"Well, no." I blushed. But then I went on the offensive. "It looks like a ring, but okay, Einstein. What is it?" I picked up the simple silver band and turned it over in my hands, appreciating the sleek design.

"Try it on."

I slipped the ring on my finger.

"Cortex, call Cai," he said.

His phone rang on command. "Hello, birthday girl," Cai's voice boomed through the ring with crystal clarity.

"Shut up! It's a phone, too?"

"More than that," Cai boasted with as much pride as a new dad showing off his baby's pictures. "Watch this. Cortex, play Sienna's favorite childhood movie."

The ring glowed softly and then more intensely. A bright flash of light ripped through the silver circle. Above us, recognizable images projected onto the flat white ceiling. The surround sound in his home office sprang to life on cue, somehow integrated with the operating system.

Cai spent the rest of the afternoon educating me on Cortex, the new smart-ring he and his ELIXIR team had developed.

The gift opened up my mind to possibilities I never knew

existed. Of course, it contains all the expected features—unlimited access to all things digital, an internal projector with built-in GPS, and Internet of Things integration. IoT connects you to everyone and everything, including your bank, your mechanic, and even your doctor.

Think you might need to change a lightbulb or replace the filter in your refrigerator? Cortex does it all for you, the knowing, the buying, and the shipping—all done by instant drone delivery.

“What’s this?” I asked. “A text informing me to drink a glass of water outside?”

“Oh, that’s Prompts technology,” Cai replied. “Your current level of hydration is low and your cortisol is high—hence the text message. You could use some water and sunlight.”

Only in its infancy stage, Prompts influences brain waves by suggesting new thought patterns. Beta testing found it extremely effective for overcoming addictions to substances such as heroin and nicotine. Parents sang its praises for aiding their children in replacing night terrors with sweet dreams.

“But isn’t it a little...dangerous?” I asked, shifting my weight on Cai’s dark brown leather sofa. I tucked both feet up under my legs to get into a comfortable position.

“Prompts? How so?” He rested his chin on his fist.

“Well...,” I fumbled, trying to form an educated objection. “Thought-influencing technology sounds awfully similar to mind control. Isn’t it risky?”

“Risky? Come on, Sienna. What news feed have you been scanning? Sure, we have skeptics and haters, but think of all the good it can do.”

“Like what?”

“Well...in beta testing, Prompts increased academic scores, decreased anxiety, and raised our propensities for charitable giving. Plus there are privacy settings you can enable. I set yours extremely high, so you have nothing to worry about.”

He sat back in his chair and folded his arms. His blue eyes searched for a smile on my face. We both knew he had me. And although Cai often proves his point, it’s my job to make him work for it.

“Need more proof, Barracuda?”

My speech class teacher in high school gave me that nickname for my “unrelenting perseverance.” Little did she know that before every debate my stomach did half a dozen somersaults.

“Prompts also decreased violence in hostile environments and helped athletes shatter records in nearly every sport. And...” Cai stretched out his next statement for emphasis. “And we need any edge over SWARM we can get. They’re playing for keeps, remember?”

I let silence have its place, filling the empty space between us.

“Okay, okay. You’ve proved your point,” I said. “Prompts might be a breakthrough, but sometimes I worry about all of you at ELIXIR. You seem so busy creating I wonder if

you have time to evaluate what you're doing. There's a price for playing God, you know."

"Well, any time God wants to step in and stop SWARM he can," Cai replied. "In the meantime, we'll do our part."

"Sienna. Earth to Sienna," Chloe says, tapping my shoulder. "That's the third time I said your name. Someone's calling you."

I snap out of my daydream. Tiny orange letters encircle my ring, revealing the identity of the caller. Why would Cai be calling me?

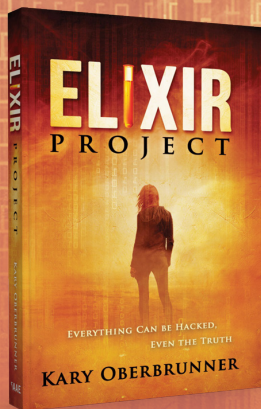
"Sorry, guys. I need to take this." I excuse myself a few feet away and accept the call.

"I thought you were on assignment with ELIXIR in—" But before I even have a chance to finish, Cai interrupts me with unfamiliar urgency in his voice.

"Sienna, whatever you do, don't get on that plane to London."

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EVERYTHING CAN BE HACKED,
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WILL THIS FACT SET SIENNA FREE OR
PLUNGE HER INTO AN EVEN BIGGER LIE?

ELIXIR PROJECT

Sienna Lewis lives in a world constantly threatened by a hacktivist group known as SWARM. After SWARM executes its deadliest attack yet, Sienna and her three college friends learn they have been chosen for the ELIXIR Project—a master plan designed to overthrow SWARM—and participation is mandatory.

As she faces the deadly challenges of the Project, Sienna confronts layers of conspiracies that force her to question everyone she trusts and everything she believes about her friends, her parents' untimely deaths, and herself—all while staying one step ahead of SWARM. In this fast-paced, near-future thriller, will love and loyalty have time to catch up with Sienna? Or will she crack under the pressure of a future already chosen for her?

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