

# ELIXIR

PROJECT



EVERYTHING CAN BE HACKED,  
EVEN THE TRUTH

KARY OBERBRUNNER

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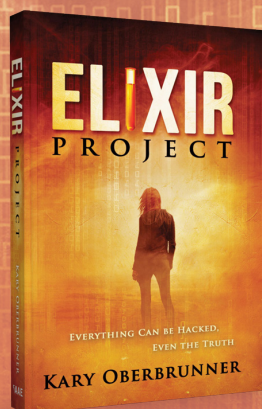
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# CHAPTER ONE

“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 McNulty, 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 McNulty'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 hackers."

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.



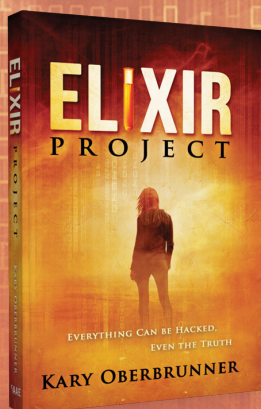
Heat flushes into the junior officer's cheeks. He straightens his belt, then issues a command of his own. "You heard him. Call an ambulance for the old guy." Then his voice drops. "And take those two suspects into the control room."

"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."

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EVERYTHING CAN BE HACKED,  
EVEN THE TRUTH  
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?

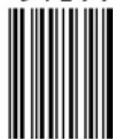
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