

# HOW I SAVED THE CITY

Written by Simon Behling

# CHAPTER ONE

My name is Timothy Schwartz. I live in a town called Benton, and as a social worker, my career is pretty interesting. I mean, all the drama really makes life like reality TV. People are up to crazy antics and crazy conflicts, internal and external, and my job is to help them. It's a pretty fun life.

But on the weekend my hobby is to go for hours-long walks in the park; it relaxes my mind. Fun as social work is, it's still pretty straining on the noggin to think of solutions for five different heroin addicts at once. One of them has five heroin addictions, too. With nine total addictions, thinking of ways to get them to stop doing it is stressful. You'd think they should just stop, but they told me they tried. Walking in the park helps me relax.

Furthermore, I have a friend, if you will, who walks there too. That's the only time I see her, and that's how I met her. Yeah, I'd like to get a date. Amanda, that's her name.

So I woke up one Saturday morning in March, preparing to walk in the park again. You don't have to do the waking up part – sleep-walking is also a valid option – but I prefer it. And, as statistics prove, being asleep reduces your chances of getting a date by 95%. That's a lot.

Anyway, I put on my athletic shoes and set out for the park. It's just two blocks away from my house. I live on a small suburban street, namely Ratner Avenue – so it's not actually a street, it's an avenue – in case you wanted to visit. Visit the street, that is. But it's boring, so there's little

point in visiting. But sometimes there are free pennies on the sidewalk. That's a bonus.

I got to the park, and started walking my laps around the looping trail. One thing I liked about this park was that it wasn't very crowded; it was quite serene. Also, it was close to my house, but that would make two things. Anyway, it was a pretty big park. Probably a couple acres.

I'm kind of rambly and get distracted easily, but walking on that path helps clarify my thoughts. Wait 'til I try meditation! What if I meditate in the park? I could do that. But then how am I gonna get a date? I guess I'll just meditate later.

The scenery was beautiful, with lush grass, flowers, and trees producing wide areas of shade. But some idiot graffitied "Artek" onto one of the trees. The gall of that guy to ruin the natural beauty of that tree! Probably just some stupid kid or something. Or adolescent. Or young adult. Either way, the gall of that guy!

Other than that there was no graffiti, so actually it was better than most public parks. And to get into private parks you have to pay \$200 per visit. That's a big scam, I'd say. Speaking of which, one of my clients once got scammed out of \$200 dollars, and he wanted me to get it back for him. But I couldn't. That guy was foolish.

While I was walking, I had an idea for my heroin clients: just get them addicted to something else, like alcohol or nicotine. That will replace their current addiction. That might work. Those addictions are better, I reckon. I'll see if they like the sound of that.

For a long time I walked, and I didn't see Amanda. I didn't like that. I decided to take a rest. Sure enough, ten minutes later she did show up.

"Hi, Amanda! What's up?"

"I've been walking on this trail for the last hour."

"So have I!" That explained why I didn't see her until I stopped

walking; she was just far behind me the whole time. It's science.

In case you're wondering what we look like, since our very names don't really tell you that much about us (and sometimes they're misleading: my last name is Schwartz, and I'm anything but black!). I was thirty-seven years old, I wear glasses, have black, short, professional hair (okay, maybe not professional, specifically), a beard partially trimmed, I'm a little overweight, I was wearing a T-shirt (T for Timothy) and jeans, and as I mentioned, athletic shoes. Oh, and shortly before my mother died, she gave me some crystal that I've worn around my neck ever since. She said it'll help "protect me" from bad forces or whatever. But I just wear it – under my shirt – to remember her. Did you want to know that much? Probably.

Amanda was thirty-four years old, has light-brown, fairly long hair, is quite healthy looking with a wide body and wide hips, and she was dressed more athletically than me, with sweat-pants and a sweat-shirt, as well as similar shoes to mine. So there, now you can picture us.

Anyway, we talked about our professions – we hadn't done that on our prior encounters – while walking around the trail.

"I'm a social worker. For example I work with addicts, abuse-victims, fighting couples, and the like. I think it's interesting."

"That does sound interesting. I work in marketing: making slogans, jingles, and meaningless but meaningful-sounding phrases; all that junk. It pays well, and it's kind of fun."

"Neat. What slogans have you created?"

"'Emilia and Co. hand-crafted air-fresheners: Our fresheners are the best-eners.' It's stupid but funny. And 'hand-crafted', I made that up, too."

"That explains why I bought all those air fresheners: good marketing. How could I not buy it if it's the best-ener? In the end I bought seven. Never used 'em, but maybe those heroin addicts I work with need some fresher air. It can't hurt."

"You're fun to talk to."

"So are you. By the way, are you hungry? I am."

"A little."

"There's a cafe two blocks away. Would you like to eat there?"

"Sure."

As we walked, air fresheners still on my mind – sometimes that happens – we talked more about our personal lives: our families, nationalities, interests, and other stuff too.

Apparently she, Amanda Sullivan, was Irish. She didn't look Irish to me. And she never said, "Top o' the mornin' to ya, me laddy." And there was a surprising lack of a green hat. And her favorite food didn't involve potatoes at all. But I also didn't seem European Jewish, which I was. And my favorite food isn't bagels. And I only occasionally said, "Oy vey." So I guess it makes sense.

It was now nearly the late afternoon (that means it must be the mid-afternoon now) and we were almost at the cafe.

Before we got there, we ended up passing by a 99 Dollar Store, another piece of "Artek" graffiti, a Discount Apartment building, and a Bottled Water store ("OVER 100 TYPES OF BOTTLED WATER!", including, according to a different sign, Vegan Water, Gluten-Free Water, Acidic Water, Condensed Cloud Water, and water with dihydrogen monoxide added for the nutritional benefits).

Then we got to the cafe.

We got ourselves a table and talked for a while waiting for the waitress (no pun intended).

After 30 minutes, still no waitress came. And we were the only people in the cafe.

So I finally got up and looked for the waitress. I admit that I could have done that earlier – 30 minutes is kind of a while – but the past is the

past. Maybe there's a lesson about confidence and "taking the initiative" in there. Well, I don't care.

The waitress was in the kitchen, standing there.

"Hello!" I said, annoyed at her terrible service.

There was no answer.

"Hello! I'm talking to you! Hello!"

She made some sort of noise at me, a kind of sound you might make in your sleep.

"Could you speak louder?" I asked, to no avail.

Maybe she was just deaf and blind. But that doesn't make sense. You wouldn't hire someone like that as a waitress anyway. And either way she wasn't doing her job. Or anything, for that matter. Unless you count standing.

Her mouth was open and her eyes partially. She was unconscious, I finally surmised.

By this point Amanda had joined with me, and she tried to wake the waitress up. Well, that didn't work.

"Where's the cook?" she asked.

"Good question," I responded.

We walked into the kitchen, to see the two cooks asleep. And we couldn't wake them up either. Oh, and the waitress collapsed to the floor.

So we used the cafe phone to call the police, who arrived quickly.

"I think someone must have drugged the employees here," said one policeman. "There are various drugs that can tranquilize people like that, knock 'em out whether they're sitting or standing."

"That's scary," Amanda said, disturbed.

"I thought they were just lazy," I said.

"No." The cop said grimly.

"Now I'm really hungry," I complained.

"Me too."

"Let's go someplace else, and we'll leave the police to deal with this case."

"Good idea."

"Sorry," the cop told us, "that your lunch was interrupted. But we'll get it sorted out. Thanks for contacting us."

We left. And we were a little unnerved.

"That was creepy," she said.

"Yeah."

We ended up eating at Mama Italia's Pizza ("You can taste the Italy!" a sign said).

Fortunately, everyone there was acting normal.

The food was served.

"So this is what Italy tastes like," I remarked.

She laughed.

"That's one of those meaningless but good-sounding statements they use in marketing," she said. "Here's some that I've used: 100% Pure Quality, The #1 X On The Market, America's Favorite X (I used that for two different brands of hot dog buns), and, of food, Fresh (it's probably a month old)."

"Those are pretty funny."

"Yeah, but they actually work. Even on me."

"Maybe that's why we chose this restaurant: it says '100% Fresh Pizza.'"

"That probably contributed."

"Wait, does that mean that this pizza is a month old like you said?"

"It could be."

"Well I'm hungry either way."

We finished eating, left, and started walking home, but since we lived

in different places, we had to say goodbye.

"Bye, Amanda. This was a fun day. And interesting, what with that cafe situation."

"Yeah! See you. Wait, will you come back to the park tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"I'll see you tomorrow!"

"Bye!" And we parted.

I considered what we had somewhat of a date. I mean, it doesn't really matter what you call things. Like she said, saying something is 100% Pure Quality doesn't mean it is. So a similar principle should work here to.

Nothing much else interesting happened that day. I'm sorry. I know you wanted to hear more interesting things from that day. Maybe more about the cafe or something, but no, nothing.



## CHAPTER TWO

The next morning I woke up and readied myself to go to the park. It had been a long time since I hadn't went to the park on a weekend. And I wasn't breaking routine today, especially since Amanda would be there again.

I walked there – on the way there was a penny on the sidewalk, like I said! – and after fifteen minutes I saw her.

"Hi!" I said.

"Hello, Tim. Or would you prefer me to call you Timothy?"

"Tim sounds good. I think it fits with me."

So we walked around the trail talking again.

"I'm a bit apprehensive about tomorrow," I said. "I have to see one of my addict clients. But I don't have much to tell him. 'Keep trying,' or something. But that's another one of those meaningless statements."

"Not really. And it could help encourage him. But yes, it still won't help much."

"I wish they assigned me different clients."

"Well, good luck."

"Thanks."

"Tomorrow I'll be working to develop a slogan for Christmas Trees International, Inc., even though Christmas is in 9 months. For some reason, they want a slogan now."

"How about 'Hand-Crafted By Santa Claus Himself.'"

"Maybe..."

"Probably not. I don't know much about that stuff."

So we spent around an hour and a half walking and talking, and then we decided to call it a day, and we parted again.

"Bye!"

"See you next weekend!"

And again nothing that interesting happened that night. My condolences.

The next morning, at 11:00, I had to see my client Richard Thorssen to encourage him with his addiction problem.

I left my house at 10:15 and there was tight traffic, as you can expect. Then, in the wall of cars stuck at the light at Berber and Hadley (great street names, I know), someone started accelerating even though the cars in front of him (and all the others as well) weren't moving, crashing into the car in front. That was pretty crazy. What was he thinking?? What a horrible lack of paying attention. What a maniac.

Eventually, my car fortunately unharmed despite some other weird driving practices I saw (like stopping on a green light and going on red, and swerving back and forth – that was weird), I got to Rich's house, wearing my official social worker lanyard.

I knocked.

"Hey Rich, it's Timothy."

He answered. He was sixty-five years old, lived alone in a completely run-down house, looked homeless, and his voice sounded like that too.

"Hey," he said.

"How's it been over the weekend?"

"It's been good. I almost did it [heroin] again, but I managed to stop. That was hard."

"Good job! Good for you!"

"The last time I did it was Wednesday."

"Very good! That means that your 'habit' is declining, slowly. A year ago, you couldn't have avoided it for nearly that long! Keep up the good work."

It went on like that for a while.

Several hours later, I said goodbye and good luck, and I headed to my next clients, Mr. and Mrs. Heller, a dysfunctional couple (less dysfunctional since I've started helping them) with three children. Clark Heller had a big anger problem, exploding over the most minute things. He was getting a bit better, and he realized he had the problem and was trying to improve, but it was difficult.

"Oh, Mr. Schwartz," Beatrice Heller told me, "Clark has been acting quite strange in the last few days."

"What's he doing?"

"He's been really 'out of it' and sedated, and staying in bed for hours, even until the afternoon. He can only give one-word responses to what I say. It's frightening. He's not himself at all."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Should I check on him?"

"Yes. He's in bed right now. I'm really worried."

I gently opened the bedroom door, to see Clark asleep. It was 2:30.

"Hey Clark," I said.

No answer.

"Clark? It's me, Mr. Schwartz."

No answer.

I felt his pulse; he was alive, alright. Good.

I nudged him gently, then not so gently. Then I shoved him. Then I shook him. Then I slapped him. Then I poured water on him.

But none of it worked. I told Beatrice.

"Oh dear..." she said, worried. "Let's get him to the hospital. I was going to wait until today to see if he'd get better, but he's only gotten

worse. Please help me get him to the car, and I'll drive him to the hospital."

We both, the children watching, partially concerned and partially amused ("Don't worry kids; he'll be alright," I said, which was kind of a lie, since I had no idea if he'd be), carried him to the car. That was hard; he's heavy.

She drove him, while I watched the kids. That wasn't so fun. But it was alright.

Hours later, she returned home, without Clark, looking quite upset.

"Mr. Schwartz," she said to me in private, "The doctor said that Clark has suffered severe brain damage. He'll need to be kept there for a while while they try to treat him."

"I'm very sorry, Mrs. Heller."

Tears appeared in her eyes. And I got pretty sad too. I care about my clients. I gave her a consolatory hug.

"Mom," the middle child walked in saying, "I have a headache, and it really hurts..."

"Okay," she said, giving the boy that motherly reassuring look, "Let's get you an aspirin and an ice-pack, and you can lay down." She went with him to his bedroom, which he shared with his older sister.

My head, as it turned out, was also starting to hurt a little too. I didn't know headaches were contagious. Or it's just a coincidence. Or something else.

I asked Beatrice for an aspirin too, and that helped a little, but not entirely.

And then the youngest child starting getting a headache too. Apparently today was Headache Day, or something. That's pretty weird, if you think about it.

So I left shortly after, saying "I'm sorry, Mrs. Heller, and I hope your husband will get well soon. I will see you tomorrow."

"Thank you, Mr. Schwartz!"

And that was it for the day. On Mondays I only have those two clients.

So yes, a lot of weird stuff had been happening that day. And also on Saturday at the cafe. A lot of weird stuff, indeed.

And while driving home, there were more road-antics, like people taking ten seconds to react to anything – causing more accidents – and cars parking in the middle of the road.

What the hell was happening? Why was everyone driving so horribly today? And why weren't the police handing out tickets and fines to everybody?

It doesn't make sense.

## CHAPTER THREE

The next day I had three clients: another heroin addict, some crazy guy who thinks I'm Jesus, and Mrs. Heller again (I'm not counting Clark, since he's in the hospital).

Around 4:45, I arrived again at the Hellers', and I was informed that in the hospital, Clark had shown signs of consciousness after being given medication, but he couldn't articulate a single word. And now the two youngest of the children were acting similar to how Clark was several days ago, 'out of it,' and unresponsive.

Mrs. Heller was extremely worried, starting to panic about the situation.

"Mrs. Heller, calm down. I'm here to help. If you need any other government services, I'll call them on over right now."

"That's okay," she said, crying, "They won't be able to help." She rested her face on my chest, and I tried to reassure her.

I went to check on the youngest son first.

He was laying down in his room, conscious, but every time I'd say something, he'd just say, "What?" slurring his speech. He had no fever; his forehead was at a normal temperature. But he was in a dreamlike state, uncomprehending of anything I said.

I went to check on his brother. His condition was similar. In fact, the same. Beatrice took them to the hospital too, with their sister and I coming with them.

I got to see Clark, laying in his hospital bed, as Beatrice had given the

doctors permission for me to see him.

"Clark?" I asked.

He made some sort of sound.

"It's me, Timothy Schwartz."

He made another sound that seemed to mean "Hello."

The doctor said he was getting better; formerly he was completely unconscious.

Then he did something quite surprising: he sat up!

"Clark, you're conscious!"

He gave me some sort of grateful look. Previously all he would do was lay there.

I turned on the news on the room's television, expecting to hear something about all the weird driving, and the weird illness the people at the cafe and the Hellers were contracting. I don't think it could be a drug.

But the newscaster was just rambling, in a dreamlike state, mumbling, "It's that we don't know how it could be all the day, all the way, because of what's happening, it's just what it is, all a lot, a big thing, what we see..." and so on, making no sense.

The other stations were mostly static, except one other equally nonsensical, rambling news broadcast.

The doctor told me the hospital was full, because of cases like Clark's, the same illness all around town.

"What is it, a new virus?" I asked.

"We have no idea."

"Really?"

"Yes."

By this point, Clark had lied down again.

Despite acting calm, I was actually quite afraid. I mean, if everybody in your town was becoming a zombie, more or less, you'd be pretty

frightened too.

The Hellers' sons were now placed in care, and me, Mrs. Heller, and her six-year-old daughter left. They were quite on edge and afraid, and so I tried further to comfort them.

As we were leaving the hospital, I said I would drive them home, especially with all the crazy driving happening, since I was somewhat more calm than them.

I saw on the ground the graffitied word "Artek" again, near the car. But this was almost twenty miles away from my home... How was this Artek person here? I was astonished, and I mentioned it to Mrs. Heller. She was only mildly interested in it, but she couldn't pay much focus to it, on account of her husband and two sons' condition.

I drove them home, and then drove myself home. There were fortunately very few other cars on the road. That was good.

I called one of my friends who lived in the area, and he didn't answer. I hope he wasn't suffering from the same condition as everyone else.

And Amanda! I really hoped she was alright. I didn't even know where she lived, except for a vague direction. And I didn't have her phone number. Now I was really starting to worry. I was afraid that she'd be turning into a 'zombie' too.

I couldn't fall asleep until 1:30 that night.

The next day, I saw Richard Thorssen again. He had been having migraines, but at least he was acting normal.

And another of my clients wasn't home.

And Mrs. Heller gave me bad news about her sons: as she had expected, their condition was worsening, and even Clark's.

The next day, I didn't see them. And apparently my other clients weren't home either. So I had no work.

I had an idea: I'd check around that hospital to see if there was any



other "Artek" graffiti or anything suspicious.

I indeed found more. In fact, just about every block I'd walk, I'd find Artek written somewhere on the ground, the street or the sidewalk. Or on a building. Or on a tree, like at the park near my house.

I counted eleven "Artek" references in total, not including the two near my house.

I got back in my car and started driving for a while, not a single other car on the road anymore, and I couldn't go a block without spotting "Artek" somewhere. Even miles ahead, it kept showing up.

I drove in a perpendicular direction, and it showed up there, too.

Everywhere I went, I could be sure that Artek was written somewhere around there.

I drove to the edge of town. Even there, it showed up.

"This Artek guy sure is a thorough graffiti artist," I thought. "Unlike I've ever seen."

When I returned home, Artek was written in front of the house across the street from mine. That definitely wasn't there before.

Since I was very worried about Amanda, I picked up a phone book and started looking for "Sullivan, Amanda."

There was only one. Good.

So I called, and got no answer. The same happened when I called two hours later.

Again, I started getting a headache.

"Wait," I wondered, as I was worrying non-stop, "Why am I not being affected by this crazy disease?"

I looked down at my blue crystal around my neck. "My mother said it would 'protect against bad forces,'" I thought. "But I thought it was just a bunch of nonsense. Could it be, that it actually is protecting me?..."

I took it off and put it on the table for several minutes, and my

headache got worse. Then I put it back on, and shortly the headache was subdued again. I tried again, and the same thing happened, my headache getting worse when I took it off, and better again when I put it back on.

"Wow, this thing actually works! That's why I'm still normal!!"

Unfortunately, I couldn't remember what kind of crystal it was. So I couldn't get more. I was really happy, and stopped worrying as much. But I was still worried about everyone else, especially Amanda.

"So some sort of 'evil force' is responsible for 'zombifying' everyone in town. But who? Why? What? How?"

"WHY!?!!" I yelled out of my anxiety. But obviously that didn't help much.

It was now nighttime, and I decided to step outside, to look more at the "Artek" graffiti.

Every hundred fifty yards or so, on the sidewalk, "Artek" was written. It wasn't before, alright.

Then I saw someone at a distance down the street, wearing all-black, bending down, appearing to be writing something on the ground.

"He must be writing 'Artek!'" I thought. "I'd better run after him! He's obviously up to no good!"

I started sprinting down the street toward the person, and he started running too.

But he got in his van and drove off, me unable to get his license number. Because it didn't have one.

"So this bastard is 'Artek!' He has to be related to all of what's been happening!"

I walked back home, out of breath, defeated.

"I have to catch 'Artek' the next time he's writing his graffiti. But for that I'll need to be in my car. But at least gas was free, now that everyone was in a coma."



## CHAPTER FOUR

The next day, I drove around, stole some unguarded cans of gasoline, and realized that everyone in town must have been completely knocked out. I saw absolutely no-one at all the entire hour I drove around. And then I tried to walk into various businesses, but they were all either closed, or there was no-one inside. Or whoever was inside was unconscious. And in the hospital, the doctors were unconscious.

Literally the whole town – except for me – was in a coma.

But if that was so... Then they wouldn't be able to eat. And so they'd die of starvation within weeks, or less. I had to hurry. To save them, that is, if it could be done.

Like I said before, I'd have to follow that 'Artek' guy – actually, I was starting to think that it was more than one person. In fact, it was impossible that there could be one person writing graffiti in every block in town, over the course of just several days. So it was an organization. But either way, I'd have to follow with my car the next person I saw writing 'Artek.'

So I drove around, looking for anyone writing on the street, sidewalk, or anywhere else. Actually, if I saw anyone at all who was conscious, they would probably be related to this conspiracy.

But I couldn't find anyone. I worried: maybe they had already written all of the graffiti they needed. I mean, where hadn't they written it? I contemplated this for a while, also contemplating why they might be doing this in the first place.

Then I had an idea: If I just erased some of the graffiti, and since they apparently need it there so badly, they'll have to write it again. And while they're doing that, I can catch them!

But how do I erase it? With paint! All that 100% All Natural paint I bought sure paid off. Like with the air fresheners, I just bought it because the marketing was good.

So I went out with my black paint to erase every mention of Artek in sight. With style, too.

I ran around the streets with my paint can (don't worry; I put the top on while running) and brush, covering each "Artek" with a square. Or a circle. Or a line. Or something else altogether. One time I wrote my name. Yep; that was my first graffiti. I'm proud of it. This was when my art skills could really shine. But I wasn't that skilled. And I did it in a hurry.

By the end, I probably painted over 80 "Arteks."

Then, as I was about to get into my car (which had my rifle inside) to wait for one of those bastard Artek people to come, my neighbor left his house! In fact, many people were leaving their houses in great confusion.

He looked like he'd had a long, long nap. Because he, like everyone else, was in a coma.

I ran over to him in excitement.

"Gary, you're awake!"

"Tim, what just happened?? Geeze, I must have overslept or something. What time is it?"

Now it was nighttime by this point.

"9:48. Look, Gary--"

"I SLEPT FOR A WHOLE DAY!?!"

"More than that. Let me explain." So I explained to him what had happened.

And then I mentioned that I thought painting over the Artek graffiti

is what revived him from his coma.

I explained, "There must be some link between the graffiti and this coma-inducing weapon – which I'll call the C.I.W. for short from now on – that is, erasing the graffiti breaks the spell on the people nearby. That's why they have to write it everywhere."

Gary was shocked. But before I could say more to him, I saw a white van drive by in the distance, and a man in all black come out, with a sort of small can in his hand that looked like spray-paint.

I raced to my car, confusing Gary quite a lot, and by the time I drove to where the man was, many people talking on the street nearby collapsed onto the ground, and the man had started to take off in his van.

I was following directly behind the van, and what I never thought would happen, happened: a car chase.

I pulled out my rifle and started shooting at the van, us now on a main street, and he started shooting back. Nearly got me, cheeky bastard.

I shot at and popped his tire, and his van shortly stopped. The man got out shooting at me, but I started driving away. Behind me I shot at him, knocking him to the ground.

I drove toward him, his gun out of reach on account of his fall and surprise of what had happened.

I got out of the car, grabbed his gun – I was now holding two rifles – and pointed one at him.

"So I've caught you," I said. "Who are you working for?"

He didn't answer.

"Who are you working for??"

No answer.

"WHO ARE YOU WORKING FOR!?!"

No answer.

Enraged, I shot him in the leg.

"WHO. DO. YOU. WORK. FOR!?!"

"Artek Labs..."

"Why are they putting everyone in town in a coma???"

"It's simple... They've already conquered the town. Look out."

"Huh?"

Suddenly, an army of zombies (well, how I'll refer to remote-controlled humans) started running toward me. Just for good measure, I blew this black-cloaked man's brains out with my rifle.

But now this army of probably two hundred zombies was charging at me.

I had an idea to save myself. I, before they could get to me, ran to the nearest Artek graffiti (I hadn't painted over that one, or it had been rewritten) and shot at it with my rifle, blowing the piece of road that it was on – and thereby the graffiti – into pieces.

Then the zombie army suddenly stopped in its tracks and started asking what was happening and why they were there.

I explained to the crowd.

But then one man in the crowd wrote Artek on the ground, and the zombie army was reactivated again. That man must have been undercover. So I ran somewhere else where Artek was written, while being chased, and I shot at the graffiti again, destroying it. And I shot and killed the man who wrote it last time. Everyone stopped being a zombie again. But now I had no more bullets. Then I felt the sensation of being hit with a blunt object.

## CHAPTER FIVE

The next thing I knew was that I was hanging upside down by a chain in some building. And my glasses and the crystal on my neck were gone. And my chest had "Artek" tattooed on it. And I could really feel the blood rushing to my head. I didn't like that.

"Well hello," said an ominous voice, "Welcome to Artek Laboratories. We'll be keeping you here until needed, at which point you will act as a remote-controlled soldier."

That didn't sound good.

"And we'll be testing that crystal you were wearing, to learn and circumvent that weakness in our technology. You see, in college I studied electromechanics and learned about various ways of transmitting wireless signals, the conventional ones being through very high- or very low-frequency photon waves, such as radio and television, which you are undoubtedly familiar with. After college, I studied further, learning that photonic waves can be used to influence a person's thoughts and brain, but only on a dull level. For example, in 1955, Petr Kavinsky was able to cast the image of an apple, or a cat, or the like, into a person's mind, so that they would see it. And in 1964, Alvin Johnson and Stephen O'Miller were able to project sounds, even voices, into a person's brain, causing them to believe that a thought was coming from their own mind. Here—"

He pressed a button, and suddenly I heard my mind say, "I love Artek Laboratories!"

"Wow, I love Artek Laboratories!" I said. I was surprised; I thought I



hated it. But apparently not.

"I projected that thought into your mind, dullard. But anyway, sadly that photonic technology cannot be used to directly remote-control a person, only nudge them in directions through projected voices. In fact, many so-called schizophrenics are not actually crazy at all. But I digress. So, then, this very year, 2024, my team of researchers discovered a new technique that we call Auditory Radiation Technology. That's what Artek is short for—"

"Ohhhhh..." I said.

"Yes. So this technology uses very subtle sound wave fluctuations combined with electromagnetic frequencies of radiation, plus the power of sacrifices made to demons, to put any person within a hundred forty miles of our Artek Towers and within a hundred fifty-seven yards of an incantation on the ground – or a tree, building, et cetera – saying 'Artek' – and yes, it must be capitalized exactly like that, too – in our control. Covering the ears won't help, since the sound waves still will reach your flesh. For a bit we didn't need anything from our zombies, so we had them just stay in a coma. And yes, it does take a bit of time for a person to be affected. That's why people were acting strange but not yet unconscious for a period of up to five days for some. But if our control is lost and it is resumed again quickly, they instantly become a full 'zombie' again. And I won't tell you how me and my men are impervious to our technology. Anyway, we've already activated everybody in town and tattooed Artek on their bodies so they'll be controllable wherever they go; they're all assembling in battalions for us to take over the next city over – it'll be a breeze – Umbridge."

I worried intensely about Amanda. And my friends. And the Hellers. I worried quite a lot.

Fortunately and finally, the man let me down into a prison, the hook

that was holding my chain mechanically moving over to the prison cell. I was lowered in (the walls were 80 feet tall). At least now I didn't have a headache.

Before the man left, he told me I could call him Doctor Artek. I didn't plan on it, though. And he told me that in three hours my mind would be under control and I would join his army.

Well, I had no idea as to how I was getting out of this. It looked like I wouldn't be. And I was starting to get a headache. A different one. It was hurting more and more, and I started getting really dizzy and tired.

I didn't like that they had tattooed "Artek" on my chest. That wasn't cool. But then I started to wonder: if this technology works through sound waves, what if I disrupted them?

I breathed in deeply, covered my ears, and let out the loudest scream of my life, for eleven full seconds. Fortunately no guard came.

But that really didn't help. And now my throat was very sore. And I was feeling very fatigued.

Then I remembered what I was thinking on Saturday about meditation. That was all I could do now. Maybe I could protect my mind from control by meditating.

So I laid down flat on the floor and started, even though I could barely stay conscious, meditating. I concentrated on my breath, breathing slowly in and slowly out, and I uprooted every thought that came to mind, trying to reach a state of pure concentration and focus. I began to be able to feel some low humming sensation that I realized I had actually been feeling all week. It must be the auditory radiation waves. But I was able to get even that low-level sensation out of my consciousness, and after an eternity of just pure focus and concentration, I felt the sensation of being pulled, of being coerced. It was like a tug of war, between me and some external force.

I concentrated further. The combination of the auditory radiation and my extreme focus (which also was aided by the former) caused my soul to leave my body in a form of astral projection. I could see my body and the prison cell, and even beyond. I could see through my clothes, too, and my skin. Everything was also in 4-D. But it wasn't like what those 4-D glasses I once tried made it out to be; it was a lot cooler. But I couldn't move very far from my body in any of the four dimensions at all.

And as a spirit I could sense some sort of "dark"-feeling energy all around. Well, I knew what that was.

I saw what the problem was: my scalp had some sort of pores – spiritual pores, mind you – through which this dark energy could enter, to infiltrate my brain, which it was doing as I looked on.

I realized that, as a spirit, I could manifest myself various ways: split off pieces of my soul, rejoin them, and mold myself however I liked. Or make myself really big, or really small. And I could transmute pieces of my soul into different forms, including a spiritual glue-like substance.

A spiritual idea popped into my spiritual mind: What if I used this spiritual glue to seal my scalp's pores?

I tried it. The dark energy started bouncing off of my head, instead of going into it.

My idea had worked!!

And then, my mind returning to its normal state, my soul was sucked back into my body, and I woke up. My headache was gone, and so was my fatigue.

## CHAPTER SIX

An hour later, a guard entered, but I pretended to be under mind control, faking unconsciousness. When the guard got near, I single-mindedly stood up. He unlocked the bars and gave me a piece of bread, which I ate, not saying a word. Then he started leaving, me free to go. I walked, zombie-like, down the halls of Artek Laboratories, not really knowing where I was supposed to be going, since I had control of my own mind.

I figured I had to leave the building and get on some vehicle to take me to the rest of the zombie army. And the vehicle probably would have the weapons I would need in it.

When anyone talked to me while I was wandering around the building, I pretended I couldn't hear, like a zombie. Fortunately, everyone was too busy to notice me walking aimlessly for a while. When you're running a conspiracy like this, you don't have time to worry about some schmuck like me.

Finally, I found a door labeled "LOADING DOCK," which caused me to wonder if we were by the ocean, but, no, we weren't, I shortly ascertained. Apparently a dock doesn't always have to be by the ocean. I'm learning new things every day.

The door led to the back entrance of a vehicle – it didn't have anyone else in it! – with a machine gun (I wondered why that white-van-guy had only brought a rifle), three grenades, and a helmet. This made me really excited, since it was assumed that I was already on mind control, and so I

wouldn't need any supervision by guards. That meant no-one would stop me from using these weapons and this vehicle to fight against Artek Laboratories, and save Amanda, my friends, and the Hellers. And probably Rich Thorssen.

I had two choices right here: I could either take the weapons and go back into the building, shooting everyone, or I could drive away and use them elsewhere.

Well, I decided that I needed to first destroy the tower that was sending the Artek waves. Maybe there were more than one, however. Quite possibly, I thought.

I got in the vehicle, closed the back entrance that was connected to the loading dock, and got in the driver's seat. The vehicle was some sort of truck, or maybe even a van. I wasn't entirely sure, but the key was already in the ignition, so I just had to turn it on, and I started to drive.

"Hey, what's that??" I thought. "Oh... It's the Artek tower!" A huge tower with an antenna at the top was right next to the building.

I knew what I had to do. I got out of the vehicle (no-one was watching; they were all too busy) with a grenade, pulled the pin, and a second later launched it at the tower. Then I drove off as fast as possible (and this thing could go pretty fast).

BOOM!!

And most of it blew up, the rest collapsing into a mess on the ground. I saw this from a large distance.

On the road, I managed to find the highway that led to Umbridge – fortunately there were no other cars on it – and I drove, going a hundred twenty-six miles per hour, to it.

Umbridge was eleven miles away, but that was no problem; I'd get there in a few minutes at my speed.

On the side of the highway was a very large, open field, whose

purpose I never understood, but instead of grass, all I could see was fifty thousand confused people holding machine guns, a mass extending for a long distance, as well as their cars.

I got off at the nearest exit and then drove back toward the field.

It took a while, but eventually I had explained to everyone what had happened, and what to do. They were supposed to all (except for one thousand people) start driving very quickly with me toward Artek Labs, and, before they can repair the tower, make war with them and destroy Artek Labs, and to kill everyone involved. Well, they agreed. Good.

Then the thousand people will watch everyone's children here. And I also specified that the following people are by my command not allowed to join the battle, and must wait there: Beatrice and Clark Heller, Richard Thorssen (yep, I am saving him), Andy Sommand and Jeffery Claude (my friends), and Amanda Sullivan. I think that covered everybody. If it didn't, too bad.

And our army was off! To destroy Artek Labs, that is.

I, being at the front, got there first, to see some men working to rebuild the Artek tower. They were almost finished, actually. But before anyone could stop me, I used my machine gun to kill them and a grenade to destroy their new tower. I'm not sorry.

Then I drove away, while my army arrived and did their work. New cars arrived every moment, a constant stream of Bentonites (not to be confused with the clay).

They surrounded Artek Labs on all sides, too, and made their way inward, the front-men getting killed, but overall decimating the probably one hundred Artek men with their guns. They had so few people, since they were betting on the whole town being under their control. But it wasn't. Bastards.

Grenades were thrown, machine guns raining bullets in every

direction. It was quite a sight to behold. Which is why I'm glad I stayed back.

The thousands of angry townspeople massacred everyone inside the building as the ceiling collapsed and the rubble was set ablaze by the grenades. Picture the angriest, most crazed mob you can think of, running every which-way, with machine guns.

The Artek Labs building was demolished, and the men inside were all dead.

Except for "Doctor Artek." Oh, so I did end up calling him that. Suddenly, from the mess of the former building, a sort of pod with propellers shot up, flying away. Everyone, after recovering from the shock, shot at the pod, and eventually someone hit it, and the craft with our head villain's corpse inside crashed down onto the Artek Labs parking lot.

So, yeah, that was how I saved the city, and, probably, the whole of Greenpass County, from annihilation. But definitely the city.

Now it was time to check in on my friends.

So I rushed in my truck back to the field where they were, and in a few minutes I got there.

I drove in the field to where they were, got out and gave everybody a hug, Amanda first.

Clark Heller and his sons were back to normal too. And I think Rich Thorssen, and all the other addicts, weren't addicted anymore, since being mind controlled and then restored made them sober. Yay.

After our victory celebration, I was about to ask Amanda to come to my house with me, but then the mayor, Teddy Richman, showed up.

"Timothy Schwartz," he declared, "I hereby promote you from social worker to vice mayor, a position I am establishing uniquely for you, for your heroic act of saving our asses from Artek Laboratories and freeing our

minds from their control."

He also gave me a ten thousand dollar check and a fancy office at City Hall.

And after my praise had died down, I asked Amanda, "So, would you like to come to my house for dinner?"

"Yes, I'd be glad!" Of course she'd be glad; I'd just saved everyone.

So we drove to my house, and by the time we got there, it was dinnertime.

I told her the whole story of what had happened, and she told me about how she – like everyone else – started feeling bad, then really bad, and then all she could do was lay in bed, until she became completely incapacitated, and the next thing she knew, she was standing in the middle of some field with fifty thousand other people, holding a machine gun. And a few minutes later I showed up.

We had a toast to my success in saving the city, and then we said our goodbyes for the night.

"I'll see you tomorrow!" I said. It was Friday.

"Bye, Tim!"

Over the course of a year, we continued going on dates, and I made a fortune from my vice mayor position. And they built a statue of me, too.

And then me and Amanda got married. And we moved into a much better house than the one on Ratner; it was around four times as big and had a swimming pool, and a nice second-storey balcony view.

Now we all still had our "Artek" tattoos, and it took a lot of money to clean up all the "Artek" graffiti everywhere, but it's better than nothing. I also commissioned a mausoleum for my mother, since if it weren't for her giving me that crystal, we'd all still be remote-controlled soldiers, or dead. So, really, the credit goes to Elena Schwartz for this one. Maybe she had



prophetic insight or something, I don't know.

So that's about it. Maybe you'll hear more from me, and maybe you won't. I got a family to take care of (I forgot to mention I have a son now), and a city to help govern.

Bye-bye!

**THE END**