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Jeff
Somers

Designated Survivor

A Novel

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Author's Note

Designated Survivor came out of a meeting I had with a film producer who was looking for novels that could be simultaneously published and adapted into film and television properties. They had the basic idea of a low-ranking member of the President's cabinet being trapped in a secure facility during a coup or revolution, but left all of the details up to me.

This was a long time ago, but even then this wasn't exactly the freshest idea—it had certainly been done before, in different ways. But I was intrigued by the challenge—could I come up with a way to make a fairly common trope (modest nobody suddenly becomes President of the United States and/or must fight for their lives) into something interesting?

Also, I'd never really written a straight-up thriller, so it was a challenge in that sense as well. And I deary love a challenge.

Whether you've been reading along all year or you've been waiting for this full eBook to drop, thanks for your interest! I sure hope you enjoy(ed) this story. See y'all next year when we'll do it again.

Jeff

1.

Thirty seconds before they came for him, John Renicks, Ph.D. was sitting on his front porch wondering if it was too early to start drinking. As he watched the trio of black cars barreling down the road towards him, he decided it probably was. But only just.

The cars were equipped with built-in flashers and cherry lights; all of them firing. He thought of his phones, all three of which had been ringing every few minutes for the last hour. He'd decided to let them ring, because he wanted some peace and quiet before The Speech. Watching the cars, he thought perhaps that had been a poor decision.

He'd assumed it was his staff calling with some crisis. Or perhaps the White House, with a minor edit to the fifty-three words — a better term, or some statistic that needed confirmation. In an hour, he knew, he would be back on his best behavior. In an hour he would be alert and well-groomed and responsive, tapping away at his phone and putting out all the little fires. In a little more than an hour he would be pinned into his most sober-looking suit, the one reserved for funerals and press conferences, and applauding on cue like a good cabinet member. In an hour. For the moment, for the next few moments, he was engaging in a small protest at the yawning chasm of futility he felt his job was becoming.

His eyes went to the trio of cars. He thought of Uncle Richie. Richie stubbing out an unfiltered cigarette, immediately lighting a new one. He'd said, never worry about cops out front of your

house with their lights on, shotguns in their hands. If cop cars are swarming up to your house, relax, they're serving a warrant. If they're coming to arrest you, they don't bulldog in with a lot of noise, they sneak in the back with Kevlar and hand signals.

The lead SUV turned smoothly and jerked to a stop in his driveway. The second SUV stopped in the street. The sedan was coming too fast behind it and turned suddenly, bumping up onto his lawn. All three vehicles idled. No one killed the engines.

These weren't cops. The cars were brand new domestic models with Federal plates. Three doors opened simultaneously; the passenger-side doors on the SUVs, the driver's door on the sedan. Three men in dark suits climbed out. The one in the driveway was a thin man. Younger than him. Renicks thought his suit was decent but not showy, and while it fit well it had not been tailored; it was off the rack. His haircut was the buzz favored by ex-military, and his sunglasses were the mirrored aviator style apparently handed out at police academy graduations around the world. A tiny, flesh-colored earbud in one ear. His shoes were modest square-toed dress shoes, not new, that had been recently shined to an unnatural sheen.

The thin, younger man stood for a moment scanning his surroundings in silence. Renicks looked at the other two.

The one by the other SUV was a little older and had a belly that was ruining the line of his jacket. He was the funhouse mirror image of the first guy. He spun slowly, scanning the neighborhood. It was easier to tell that he had a gun holster jammed under his shoulder, because the jacket bunched up a little.

The one by the sedan was a little different: Longer hair, a

more relaxed, casual posture. He wasn't scanning the neighborhood. He was scanning Renicks; eyes locked on him. He didn't look away when Renicks noticed him, either. Just stood there by the car, studying him. His thin black tie was slightly askew, the knot hastily done and off-kilter.

"Secretary Renicks?" the man in the driveway shouted, walking around the front of the SUV and approaching the porch.

Renicks nodded. "I pay a kid named Jimmy fifteen dollars a week to keep my lawn the award-winning shape it's in," he said. "Your driver there owes me fifteen bucks."

The younger man glanced at the sedan for a moment just slightly longer than casual or polite interest would allow. Like he was staring the driver down. For his part the sedan's driver shifted his weight and frowned.

Then the first man turned back to Renicks and started up the stairs. "You will have to file a claim with our office. The paperwork is kind of extensive. You are John No Middle Name Renicks, Secretary of Education?" he said, extracting a device with a screen on it and holding it up between them. Comparing him to a photo, Renicks thought.

He nodded, picking up his coffee again. "Call me Jack."

"Secretary Renicks, I am Special Agent Gorshin of the United States Secret Service." He pushed the device back into his pocket as he gained the main level of the porch. "Under the specifications of the revised National Security and Homeland Security Presidential Directive, you have been selected as the Designated Survivor for a period lasting the next eight hours." He nodded. "Please take five minutes to pack essentials and report to Agent Darmity for transport to the Secure Facility."

Renicks blinked. The kid was used to being obeyed, he thought; he'd already moved on to the next thing on his to-do list, and he'd issued his orders in the maddeningly polite manner of someone secure in his own authority.

He shook his head and sipped some coffee. "You're mistaken, son," he said, liking the way the word *son* got a twitch of the shoulder from Gorshin. The dim side of being a hotshot was being treated like an asshole by everyone who had a decade on you. Renicks looked past him at Darmity, still glowering by the car. Like him, he decided, pissed off to have someone five years younger bossing him around. He looked back at Gorshin. "I'm not holding the bag on this. It's Flanagan. The Attorney General's spending the night in the mountain."

Gorshin made a show of checking his watch, an immense stainless steel thing strapped to his wrist. He had the physicality of someone in excellent shape; efficient movements that bunched his suit in a burly way. Renicks decided he wouldn't be challenging Special Agent Gorshin to any wrestling matches. "Negative, Mr. Secretary. Attorney General Flanagan suffered a heart attack this afternoon." He paused for a moment, and when he continued his voice had softened slightly. "I am very sorry to report he's passed away. Per circulating memorandum, you are next on the list. Please pack your essentials, sir. We must be on the road in four minutes to rendezvous with local PD for highway escort."

Renicks looked down at his coffee, picturing Gerry. Fat old Gerry with the jowls that seemed to jiggle every time he moved and the sharp legal mind that snagged on every jagged point in an argument. Gerry, who was exhausting to debate, untiring in

his ability to find new tactics when trying to win a point. He'd had plenty of debates with Gerry, who thought his politics naïve and soft. Dangerous, even. Renicks had liked Gerry without having any affection for the man. And Gerry had been Grant's attack dog these past two years, carrying the President's water without complaint — with, Renicks thought, an enthusiasm that had been remarkable. But then all the men and women closest to Grant, his inner circle, were like that. To them, Grant was never wrong, and whatever directive he issued they pursued doggedly, without question. Renicks reflected that he'd never felt that kind of bond with Grant. Had always felt a disconnect with the man.

“Jesus,” he said. “Gerry Flanagan.”

“Yes, sir,” Gorshin said crisply.

“Did he have any family?”

Gorshin appeared to be maintaining his composure with some effort. Renicks thought it was almost comical, if the man wasn't someone he suspected to be a trained killer formerly of some elite military unit. “No, sir, we haven't been able to locate next of kin. Mr. Flanagan was a widower, with no children.” He waited the barest of beats. “I am sorry, sir, but we have to move in —” he glanced at his big watch “ — two minutes forty five.” He paused, and then offered Renicks a little shrug. “We have been trying to contact you for the past forty-five minutes, Mr. Secretary.”

Renicks didn't move. He'd known since accepting the post of Secretary of Education eight months before that this might happen. After sitting through a hurried confirmation hearing in front of the HELP committee there had been an orientation, just as perfunctory, and this had been part of it. At the time he'd

thought the orientation all wrong; instead of impressing on him his essential role in the Continuity of Government program, they should have advised him of the frustration level of being in the cabinet of a President enjoying an approval rating of thirty-seven and dropping. The orientation should have prepared him for the fact that after working for months on proposals and recommendations for the President's final year in office, turning in a book-length report complete with interactive Power Point presentations, videos, and endless documentations, he would see all that work boiled down to fifty-three words in the State of the Union Address.

Fifty-three words. President Grant hadn't even told him personally.

Renicks sipped his coffee and remembered the President — whom he sometimes, when the moment was right, called “Chuck” — telling him not to worry about being divorced. Because no one knew who the Secretary of Education was anyway. At the time that had sounded friendly and charmingly blunt. For a moment he'd felt like he and President Grant might be friends. Then he'd wondered if that wasn't just Grant's crazy charm, which felt like a physical thing when you he spoke to you. Compelling you to like him, to trust him.

President Grant's assessment now comforted him. Anonymity would be to his benefit when Grant lost his bid for re-election later in the year. His traditional resignation would be accepted by an incoming administration, and no one would ever remember he'd been Secretary of Education.

Agent Gorshin was still absorbed, tapping out a message on his phone, his face a ruddy mask of concentration. Renicks did

not like being rushed, under any circumstances, and purposefully glanced at Gorshin's wrist without making any effort to stand. Gorshin's watch was huge, shiny, and looked like it had a million little features. Endorsed, he guessed, by Navy Seals and Special Ops types. Renicks decided Gorshin wanted people to know he was ex-military.

He finally stood up, but couldn't resist tweaking Gorshin one last time with what he assumed was unaccustomed insubordination from a civilian. "Do you or your team want some coffee?"

Gorshin blinked. Renicks categorized his expression as *amazed* and enjoyed it immensely. Then Gorshin shook his head, all business. "No, sir. Do you need assistance packing?"

Renicks shook his head. "I've got a bag." In his orientation he'd been handed a thick manual of emergency procedures and other Federal arcana, and he'd read it in one evening with a bottle of Glenmorangie 10-year for company.

The manual stipulated everyone in the Presidential Line of Succession were required to have a travel bag ready at all times; in the event of dire emergency the entire government might be evacuated to a secure facility — there were several around the country. So, he'd packed one. He called it his End of the World Bag. A backup laptop, a change of clothes, a pocket bottle of Scotch, his eBook reader stocked with every book he'd ever read, a shaving and toiletry kit, the old chrome Zippo his Uncle Richie had given him when he'd graduated college, a minimal survival kit including matches, fishing line, a small-game snare, water purification tabs, a few other things he wasn't certain of, and a Kimber stainless 1911 pistol with spare magazine. He felt a little

silly about the Boy Scout Survival Kit, as he thought of it.

He felt sillier about the Kimber, sometimes.

He would rendezvous with his office desk and take a USB drive that contained backups of his office and home computer hard drives that were only a few hours out of date.

As he walked into the house he wondered if the Secret Service agents would search his bag for any reason. If the gun would be an issue. He had a permit for it in New Jersey, but he'd never thought to update anything about it when he'd moved to Virginia, and he knew Jersey and Virginia were not reciprocal on concealed weapons permits.

He decided to take the chance. It was an End of the World Bag, after all. If he had to use it, the world had ended, and if the world had ended, he suspected he might need a gun.

Three minutes later, he stepped back on the porch with his bag slung over his shoulder, his business cell phone in one hand and a large travel cup of coffee in the other. He nodded at Gorshin, suddenly eager to get away.

“Let's go.”

2.

Seven minutes before threatening the driver, Renicks glanced up from The Brick and studied the back of his head. The car felt substantial and safe. It glided along the highway like it was on a pocket of air, almost perfectly silent. They were doing eighty-five, weaving through traffic with police cars around them, red and blue lights swirling. The agent behind the wheel knew how to drive. More importantly, he knew how to drive in formation, keeping an impressively steady distance between his own vehicle and the police escort. Renicks thought the man had experience driving under pressure situations, but wasn't comfortable in the driver's seat. He looked hunched and tight, and kept turning on the windshield wipers by accident. Renicks thought he was used to driving bigger things. Hummers, trucks. Ex-military, maybe, or ex-contractor in a hot zone.

Renicks smiled at his own vanity. Or maybe he'd been a garbage collector, he told himself. Like Emily said, you don't know *everything*.

He turned and stared out the window. Emily and the kids were just a few minutes away. Watching the other cars flash by, he was pierced by a sudden yearning to see them all. Even Emily, who would be unsmiling and unamused at an unannounced visit. When gripped by the darkest frustrations earlier in the day he'd fantasized a form of pleasant professional suicide wherein he skipped the State of the Union and spent the evening with Emma and Jen, watching bad television and eating cereal.

The last time he'd had the girls he'd listened to their chatter

about friends at school and the swim team and shows on television, and realized he didn't know most of the names they tossed back and forth, didn't know most of the activities they discussed. He was losing his girls. he'd been too busy, too preoccupied, too *divorced* to stay on top of things.

He suddenly felt like he was being driven away from them, not just to an unpleasant professional task.

Gorshin and the other SUV had peeled off the moment the cops had taken them on for escort, and they were heading off the big main highways onto the smaller rural routes, heading towards County Road 601. Renicks thought they were going too fast; the police cars were struggling to keep up. He didn't think it was necessary, but it was another thirty minutes to their destination, and he didn't want to spend it having a pissing match with his driver.

He looked back down at The Brick. It looked like a smartphone: A small screen, a stylus, a power button. It was lifeless and hadn't responded to anything he'd done. Gorshin had called it The Brick like that was supposed to mean something. Told him it would remain inactive until the emergency succession of the Designated Survivor inside one of the fifteen Secure Facilities that formed the United States' Continuity of Government system. The Brick. Renicks figured it was some sort of Secret Service jargon.

"It only accepts a signal on a specific channel, and only a single instruction is accepted: Activate," Gorshin had said as they'd walked towards the car. "If the worst-case scenario happens, Mr. Secretary, you'll find everything you need here. Eyes-only, the President of the United States — which will be

you, sir, if this thing turns on.”

He turned The Brick over; the back was embossed with the Great Seal of the United States, in fine detail, every feather of the eagle clearly etched. Renicks was amused. He was wearing khakis, a wrinkled old white Oxford, and running shoes; he was showered but not shaved, and as he worked his way through coffee cup number six he became increasingly aware that he should have insisted on a bathroom break while he'd been executing his smug little End of the World plan. He did not feel like Acting Presidential material.

At the moment, The Brick was basically a paperweight. He slipped it into his bag and returned his attention to the driver. Renicks sat there staring at the back of his head, his shoulders, his hands on the wheel.

The back of the driver's neck was red, the square back of his haircut sharp and immediate — a recent cut. His suit was old, the collar showing some signs of fraying, the shoulders shiny. One of the mock buttons on the right sleeve was a mis-match, a slightly different shade of gray from the others. When he'd climbed into the driver's seat, he'd spent thirty seconds struggling with the steering wheel, adjusting the angle, grunting in frustration as he worked at it. Renicks recalled the lingering look Gorshin had given the driver back at the house, and concluded he was a recent addition to the detail — perhaps just that morning, after Flanagan had passed away.

Christ, Renicks thought. There would be a funeral. He remembered Gorshin saying *a widower, with no children*. He pictured Gerry again and felt a surprising pang of grief. They hadn't been close, hadn't known each other long or well. But

Gerry had been funny, and for all his one-note dedication to Grant's policies he'd had his own mind and had a tired, sloppy series of facial expressions that made him seem like an exhausted grandpa more than a powerful man whose political beliefs differed sharply from his own.

He looked at the driver's wrist. His watch was more subtle than Gorshin's; instead of a macho monster, it was a simple old face, silver, analog, a wind-up model. Heirloom, probably inscribed on the back. A graduation gift or something. Not an anniversary as there was no ring, although Renicks had to admit that wasn't reliable. He glanced down at his own wedding ring, still there after five years, and smirked at himself.

His eyes shifted a little. The driver's knuckles were scabbed, as if he'd been in a fight recently.

As he considered this, his cell phone rang. Fishing it from his pocket, he glanced down at the screen. Stan Waters. He was thinking that it was probably best to let it go to voicemail. The driver looked up at the rear-view mirror.

"You shouldn't answer it."

Renicks looked up, noted with surprised irritation that the mirror had been angled so that it showed him, not the road behind them, and felt a stab of the old familiar defiance. *This is what got you into fights in high school*, he thought as he tapped the screen and held the phone to his ear.

"Stan."

"How does it feel to be sixteenth in line for the presidency, *mi amigo*?"

"I think I just got a taste for how little respect the position gets me. What's up?"

“I’m calling to put in an early bid on being named ambassador to someplace cool when you come into power. How about Fiji?”

Renicks laughed. “Considering the only way I’m *coming into power* is if the world goes boom tonight, Mr. Waters, you might want to reconsider your definition of *someplace cool*.”

“Oh, I know it. We’re Bunker Buddies tonight, buddy. I’m in the goddamn Situation Room under the Capitol, all set up just in case only *half* the world goes boom and POTUS has to hide down in the basement for a while. Sometimes I think the CIA can kiss my ass. When they recruited me in college they never said anything about sitting in a damn *basement* all night, playing solitaire.”

“They probably did. Based on the stories I heard — from *you* — about being found in the bathroom with your head lodged in the toilet, I’m not surprised you don’t remember everything.”

“Ha! Every time my roommates came in to try and get me to go to bed, I said *no, I don’t want to drink any more!*”

Renicks laughed. “Maybe you’ll get lucky and there’ll be a disaster just big enough to entertain, but not big enough to keep you down there for years, eating army rations.”

“Holy Christ, RTEs! That’s a nightmare. You’ve given me nightmares tonight. Congrats, Jack.”

“Consider it payback for all the times you’ve used me as an unofficial, unpaid linguistics expert in your Field Reports.”

“Your code name is *Bastardo Gordo*.”

Renicks laughed. This, he thought, was the price you paid for making friends with a guy from the CIA who specialized in languages. He’d met Stan at a convention, spent it drinking in

the hotel bar with him having conversations in several languages at once until they could no longer speak. He pictured him: Shaved head, ears sticking out like wings, sarcastic smirk. Laughed again.

“I should go. Listen, you do what the CIA does best, champ: Absolutely fucking *nothing*.”

“Remember: *Ambassador* Waters, okay?”

The phone went dead. Renicks reflected that Stan Waters was the only person he knew who ended phone conversations like they did in the movies: He just hung up.

The driver was still studying him in the mirror. Renicks set his phone to silent with a few practiced moves of his thumb.

“You want to watch the road?”

The driver’s eyes remained on him for a long moment. Renicks stared back, feeling an unwarranted flush of temper, until the driver looked away. Renicks kept his eyes on the mirror for a moment more, then returned his attention to his phone. He should call Emily, he thought. The divorce had receded enough that courtesy had become important, and he didn’t know if he’d be able to make calls once he was installed underground. He might be out of contact for several hours at minimum on a night she expected him to turn up on television in his best suit. He hit her autodial and put the phone to his ear, his eyes jumping back to the driver.

Voicemail. Emily’s familiar twang. Her outgoing message far too long, as always, rambling on and on.

His eyes flicked from the driver’s collar to his hands on the wheel. White knuckled. He glanced past them at the speedometer. They’d hit ninety-five.

He rattled off a quick, no-nonsense message and ended the call.

“Slow down, please,” he said.

The driver’s eyes in the rear-view again. He didn’t say anything. Looked away. The car didn’t slow down.

Anger surged. Renicks controlled himself and fished in his memory for the man’s name. Found it and fell back on the old psychological trick of *using* it. Letting him know he knew it.

“Agent Darmity,” he said evenly, “slow *down*.”

The eyes in the mirror again. The car didn’t slow down.

“We’re on a schedule,” the driver said.

Renicks stared back in irritation. Reminded himself that he only had to deal with this man for a short while; then he’d be ensconced in a bunker, probably with a whole other bunch of irritating Secret Service Agents. He dropped his eyes back to the phone. Pretended to work it.

“You know I fill out QA forms every time I have a Secret Service assignment, right?” he said flatly.

The driver said nothing. After a moment, Renicks glanced up. No eyes in the mirror. The car hadn’t slowed at all. He swayed this way and that as they dodged through traffic. He looked at the steering wheel again. The man was gripping it like it was the only thing keeping him from crashing through the windshield, sailing off into space.

Renicks hesitated another moment. He heard Emily’s voice, telling him to *leave it alone*, telling him that his insistence on being *minded* always got him into trouble. Then he reflected that Emily had divorced him, and put him on a schedule to see his own daughters, and that meant he was done worrying about

what she thought of his behavior. He nodded and held up his phone. “Agent Darmity, during my orientation after confirmation, I was given several 24-hour emergency phone numbers. One of them will connect me to the local field office of the Secret Service wherever I am. Via GPS. Ease your foot off the *goddamn* gas in the next five seconds or I’ll be on the phone with your Field Supervisor in another five discussing your career. You understand?”

The eyes returned to the mirror, and Renicks held them. His heart was pounding, making his head ache. He didn’t enjoy being a hard ass. He’d found you had to be, sometimes, and he’d gotten good at it ever since rising to the President’s Cabinet: Washington was like High School, sometimes, with people almost eager to snub you if you let them, eager to demonstrate their power over you. He didn’t know if the driver was having a bad day or what, but he knew he didn’t want to be the first person in the line of succession to die *on the way* to the bunker.

Two seconds clicked by. The eyes flicked away. The car slowed down.

“I apologize,” the driver said. There was a beat of silence. Two. Then: “Sir.”

Renicks sighed, slipping the phone into his pocket. He hoped the rest of the day got easier.

3.

Ten minutes before the Detail arrived at the Secure Facility, Special Agent Marianne Begley was riding the elevator up to the surface. The ride up took twenty-seven seconds. Twenty-three seconds going down. There were fifteen buttons on the panel, but only two worked under normal conditions; the others could be used to enter codes to modify the behavior of the elevator. There were escape panels in the ceiling and floor of the cab that could be released manually; the outer doors of each floor were wired into a numerical keypad on the inside of the elevator shaft and would open in response to the correct code.

Agent Begley knew this because she had ridden the elevator, based on her own bitter calculations, over one-thousand times.

She was a slender twenty-eight year-old woman with clear skin the color of light coffee, her dark hair in a neat bun carefully pinned to stay up under even the most physically stressful conditions. She held a tall cup of coffee brewed in the huge, industrial kitchen on the ninth level, light and sweet enough to make most people gag, and a thin tablet computer containing all the files she would need for the day's work. Most of it had to do with the Secure Facility itself, and she didn't need any of those files, really, because in the thirteen months since she'd been assigned to Continuity she'd spent most of her time getting to know the old bunker complex better than she'd ever wanted to. It was huge, it was empty, it was a place designed for a series of events every sane person in the world fervently hoped would never come to pass.

It was like working in a sewer: No one ever wanted to think about how it worked or who was down there, making the magic happen.

Thirteen months. She'd spent fifteen months working vice, out of the academy. It had occurred to her how unfair it was that any female cop with a BMI under 25 almost automatically been assigned to vice in the mid- to large-sized cities, condemned to walk around in hot pants enticing middle-aged men to proposition them, or go into clubs wearing something short and skimpy, trying to make drug deals. But at least there had been a clear timeline: Vice was unpopular, and thus everyone got a tour through it for a time, usually one year. Then she'd spent three years working Major Crimes in Baltimore, which was like seven years working Major Crimes in any other city. Then she'd been recruited into the Secret Service and she'd seen herself running alongside Presidential limousines, smashing counterfeit rings, a good mix between easy posts and real action.

Instead, she'd gotten Continuity, and she'd been underground ever since. She'd had three live Survivors stay a total of sixteen hours in the facility, stuck with them down in the suite. All the other thousands of hours had been spent studying the place inch by inch. Ostensibly so she would know the place better than anyone, so she could do her job better. In reality it had been a desperate attempt to stay sane.

The elevator doors snapped open and she stepped into the bland, short corridor leading from the elevator bank to the entrance of the above-ground complex. She glanced down at her tablet to check the time and started walking briskly. Too soon, but people were, shockingly, sometimes a little early.

Today was number four: The Secretary of Education, a man she'd never thought about much until she'd gotten her Alert Bulletin four hours ago. John Renicks, Ph.D., who had gotten about as much attention as any previous Secretary of Education, which was to say none at all. She liked his photo, was impressed by his C.V., and sincerely hoped he was not a chatty person. Bunker duty with the Designated Survivor was bad enough without hours and hours of small talk.

She also hoped he was not the type to make passes at women required by their jobs to be in an enclosed space with them. She would hate to be reprimanded again because it was apparently not acceptable to put cabinet members into submission holds until they apologized for things. That had probably bought her a whole second year of Continuity. She didn't want to buy a third.

Her shoes, comfortable flats that, she hoped, straddled some indefinite line between style and utility, made no noise on the cold cement floor as she walked, thumbing through screens and noting last-minute details. There were already five more emails since she'd last checked before stepping onto the elevator half a minute before; the Service did not like it when things changed at the last minute, even if the change was due to an Act of God like a heart attack.

At the end of the corridor was a steel maglock door with a keypad mounted on the wall next to it. A blast door. Thick steel. Lock bolts embedded deep in the concrete and extending into the door itself. Impossible to open once engaged. She absent-mindedly entered seventeen digits into the keypad and the door unlocked with a deep thunk she could feel through the soles of her shoes. Passing through the doorway, the air temperature

dropped a good five or six degrees as the sense of constricting space fell away. Behind her, the door swung shut on spring-loaded hinges and melted back into the wall, invisible to a casual glance and difficult to detect even under intense examination. The building that housed the only entrance to the lower levels was small, covering just about a thousand square feet. It had a few offices, a lavatory, and a storage closet, and a large lobby area with a front desk. Anyone who did find their way into the building, which had no sign on the outside, would be politely directed wherever they were actually going by the smiling person behind the desk.

Or, if the small unassuming building turned out to be their intended destination, arrested.

The lobby was nothing special. It had high ceilings and a large piece of modern art hanging against the back wall, but otherwise was just an oversized room with a reception desk. Standing in front of the desk, apparently staring out into space, was Director of the Secret Service Martin Amesley.

“You’re early, Agent Begley,” he said without turning to look at her. “I like that.”

She nodded and said nothing. His presence at Continuity Events was not common. He might like promptness, but he did not like *her*, she knew. Evidence being her continued purgatory in the bowels of the bunker, cataloging air ducts, shortcuts, corridor lengths, and the long list of empty, unfurnished rooms. She’d even taken a few trips to the old mine shafts the complex had grown out of, a century old and smelling like rotting garbage. Amesley was taciturn and gruff and was well known to be of the opinion that the world in general, the United States of

America in particular, and the younger agents of the Secret Service in *specific* had long been in a lamentable decline. She had the impression that no success on her part would convince him that she was not irreparably a member of an inferior generation. Inferior to his own, of course.

They stood in awkward silence.

The Secretary of Education was not considered a volatile asset by the Service; Begley wasn't sure why Amesley was there, and it made her nervous. Normally the Director of the Secret Service would be with the President at the State of the Union, overseeing the security detail. Amesley had a reputation of trying to be unpredictable to keep his people on their toes, though. Whatever the reason, his presence made her anxious.

There was a flash on her tablet, and she glanced down at her alerts. "Seven minutes, give or take."

Amesley grunted.

The front doors opened, and three maintenance workers started to enter. There were dozens of them crawling around the complex, engaged in what seemed like an endless retrofit. Trying to bring the systems into the current century. The workers noticed the two of them standing there, paused in surprise for a moment, and then backed out apologetically. She watched them go, keeping her face impassive. She felt uncomfortable with all the workers, for reasons she found difficult to articulate. They had all been cleared by the Service, so perhaps it was the invasion; as much as she disliked admitting it, she owned this complex. It was hers. She knew everything about it, and she ran the show when a Designated Survivor was assigned. The workers were contractors, not under her authority, and were delving into

her secrets. Her property.

They settled back into a stiff silence. Director Amesley checked his watch, crisply.

She went through a mental checklist. The Executive Suite on the Twelfth level had been prepared. The one-way lock on the door was operational and she had the current code, generated on her own tablet and input by her own hand. She'd cleaned and rebuilt her weapon the night before, it was loaded with a full magazine and she had a second mag in her pocket. She had her ID and access card.

Outside, police cars and a black sedan pulled into the circular driveway.

Begley watched the scene unfold. The cop cars idled, lights still flashing. The driver's side door opened and an agent climbed out. She didn't recognize him; he was short and burly and kind of unkempt, like he'd been sweating for a while. She thought it likely that Director Amesley would have something to say to him about the grooming and appearance guidelines issued by the Service.

Before the agent could open the passenger door, it opened on its own, and the Secretary of Education stepped out. She recognized him immediately from his photo, and while there would be several identity checks while working through the protocol, she reminded herself that the initial visual confirmation should never be discounted. It was easy to over-rely on technological checks when your gut was usually right.

She watched Renicks through the glass. He and the agent spoke a few words to each other and it looked a little heated based on the body language: Renicks stiff and unbending, the

agent with his shoulders ducked like he wanted to tackle him. Then the cop cars were pulling away and Renicks was walking towards them. She approved of his packing: He was wearing a dress shirt, a pair of tan pants, sturdy-looking shoes, and a sports jacket, and carried a single manageable bag, deep and square. They sometimes arrived packed for a six-month trip to a deserted island, and she certainly hadn't signed up for the Service in order to be a bellhop.

Renicks and the agent entered the lobby simultaneously. The agent let Renicks move ahead of him, glowering behind as they advanced. The Secretary stopped a few steps away from her and dropped his bag, extending his hand to Amesley. She ignored the fact that he automatically introduced himself to the man first. She was used to ignoring such things.

"Jack Renicks," he said. Begley realized he was chewing gum, and allowed herself a slight smile.

Amesley looked down at the hand for a moment just shy of rude, and then took it in his own and shook. "Secretary Renicks," he said, his voice deep and authoritative, gruff from the thousands of packs of cigarettes even ten years of not smoking couldn't erase. "This is Special Agent Marianne Begley. She will be your In-Suite Agent during your time here."

Renicks shook her hand with a smile. "I'll try not to be any trouble," he said, sounding friendly.

She nodded. "You won't be."

He tilted his head a little, still smiling, and then nodded, turning back to Amesley. "Director, do you have a moment?"

Behind him, Begley noticed the agent redden, his hands twitching at his sides. Something had happened on the drive

over. She let her eyes linger on the driver for a few seconds. She didn't like the look of him, and wondered how he'd gotten this detail. Amesley personally approved all assignments for Continuity, and he didn't look like the sort of man Amesley would put his trust in.

Amesley looked at his watch. "Actually, things are running behind, Mr. Secretary. The refit of this complex — that is why there are so many workers running about — I am sure you understand. I will stop by the suite later, however." He gestured at Begley. "Right now, if you don't mind, I would like to validate you as John Renicks, Secretary of Education, Designated Survivor."

Begley jumped, but before she could speak, Renicks was talking.

"Validate?"

He was smiling a little. Begley liked his smile. It was kind of crooked. His teeth were good, but not perfect; he had a chip in one of his front incisors he hadn't bothered getting filled. For some reason she decided not to explore, she found this charming.

Amesley smiled back, disconcerting Begley. He was a man who'd been born already fifty years old, scowling owlshly around the Delivery Room, and never meant to smile.

"Mr. Secretary, we employ a dual validation process to ensure that you are, in fact, Secretary John Renicks, and thus the duly appointed Designated Survivor today. A matter of DNA — a pinprick on your thumb — and a voice print analysis. Agent Begley can —"

Begley cleared her throat loudly. Amesley was her boss's

boss's boss, but the Secure Facility was her pond, and she was not going to let him piss in it.

“Director, I must insist protocol be followed. The DS is not supposed to be validated until installed in the Executive Suite and confirmed safe. The reasons for this precaution are —”

Director Amesley turned his smile on her. It was a terrifying husk of a smile, something that hadn't been too healthy to begin with and should have been carried away and buried. He was a short man, wiry, his head too large for his body. His hair was a brilliant white, cut short against his scalp. He wore large, thick glasses that sat on his small, slender nose like he'd accidentally taken the wrong pair at the gym or something. The glasses seemed to be part of him, as if his eyes had grown out of his face, forming a bony framework that *looked* like glasses.

“Agent Begley is, of course, correct,” he said. The icy tone of his voice made his lingering smile even more horrifying. “I should know, I helped *write* the protocol. You'll find her to be very dedicated to the *letter* of the protocol, Secretary Renicks.”

Renicks grinned at her. “I wouldn't want my Doppelganger running amok in here either.”

Begley nodded, glanced at the glowering Amesley, and thought, *well, that probably bought me another three months down here.*

Renicks suddenly gestured at Director Amesley. “I *love* your tie, Director,” he said.

Begley kept a frown from her face by force of will. In her limited experience with Martin Amesley, she predicted this conversation was not going to go well. Amesley had old-fashioned ideas about — about just about everything, she

thought. Men's suits, the quality of younger generations, *women* working field details, and certainly, she thought, about the proper look and behavior of a member of President Grant's cabinet. Begley was certain of two things: One, Renicks did *not* fit Amesley's requirements for the position, at least not visually, and two, in Amesley's opinion that was not President Grant's fault. Director Amesley thought Grant's election was the sole beam of light during the country's otherwise disturbing decline.

Thinking it was too bad for the old man that the rest of the country increasingly disagreed with him, she smiled noncommittally at Renicks.

"What?" Amesley appeared to ponder the situation for a few seconds, frowning, and then fingered his tie. It was dark blue and had red lines criss-crossing it. "Ah, yes. Ah, thank you."

Begley glanced at Renicks and he winked at her. She blinked, startled, and then settled herself. A joker, she thought; just what she needed. She downgraded him from *charming* with a little regret. It was going to be a long night.

"If you'll follow me, Secretary Renicks, I'll get you situated."

Amesley and the other agent followed them, which Begley didn't like. She could think of no legitimate reason to exclude them from the elevator ride down, however, and so silently waved her magnetic ID card at the hidden door in the rear of the lobby, enjoyed the slight gasp of surprise it elicited from Renicks, and stood aside as the three men entered the small elevator cab. She checked the hall behind her before entering the elevator, and let her eyes stick on the floor and ceiling of the cab for a moment, looking for anything unusual.

She didn't find anything, and let the doors slide shut. She

pressed the lowest button on the panel, an unmarked white piece of plastic, and the elevator began moving.

“By the way,” Director Amesley said in a quiet, almost gentle voice. “I understand this was supposed to be a vacation day for you, Agent Begley. I’m sorry you had to come in to work this detail.”

She blinked at her blurry reflection in the stainless steel elevator doors. Unsure how to respond, because she was unsure of her own motivations. Her first vacation in years scheduled, booked, double-checked, paid for. Her, delighted to be free of the mountain for a few weeks, to actually miss a State of the Union Continuity Event! Delighted.

Then Murray landed in the hospital. Car accident, intensive care, random flex of the universe, and the scheduled In-Suite Agent was off the roster. When she’d seen the alert, she’d volunteered to cancel everything and go back to the mountain. Volunteered. Scrambling to cancel two flights, two hotel rooms, a rental car, a bikini wax, a half-marathon she’d already paid for, and six separate lunch and dinner dates with parents, stepparents, siblings, stepsiblings, and two college roommates.

Volunteered. She didn’t want to think too hard about her motivations. Didn’t want to imagine that the Secure Facility had become her home, that it had gotten a hand on her.

She looked at Amesley without moving her head. Murray had been one of the Director’s Favorite Sons, one of a group of agents the Director tended to assign to his own details over and over again. She imagined Amesley hadn’t been pleased to see her name slotted in for the evening instead, too late for him to make any other arrangement without jeopardizing preparations.

Maybe made the Director angry enough to use harsh language. The idea of Amesley cursing amused her, and she struggled to contain a smile. Amesley had seemed irritated at her presence all day. No sense in making things worse.

“That’s all right, sir,” she replied with careful politeness.

“That’s the job.”

“Well,” Renicks said cheerfully as the elevator began dropping into the earth, “that makes two of us: I’m not supposed to be here, either.”

4.

Thirty seconds before he got off the elevator, Renicks was trying to do three things at once.

One, he was purposefully avoiding looking at Agent Begley, who was so attractive in her perfectly-tailored, sober, gray suit the idea of spending several hours locked in a room with her was terrifying. Two, he was picturing the teams of workers outside the building and trying to pin down what bothered him about them. Three, he was formulating his approach to speaking with Director Amesley about Agent Darmity, which, based on his impressions of Director Amesley, was probably a bad idea.

Despite his efforts, Begley floated in front of his thoughts. Well-off, he thought. Way above her pay grade, at least; her suit was Chanel and had been tailored to fit her perfectly. Her watch was modest and not decorative at all — a serious field watch, nothing fancy. But her shoes flashed bright red soles when she walked, and the slender gold bracelet around her other wrist was expensive stuff. She was either from a rich family or she had thirteen credit cards in a block of ice in her freezer. She had the impassive expression of someone very used to keeping their thoughts to themselves, and had not looked at Director Amesley once since he'd walked into the lobby. This is someone who doesn't want to be here, he thought, and blames her boss for it.

He knew perfectly well that he had to be validated; it was clearly stated in his orientation docs that he was required to

submit to DNA and voice print analysis (and any other validation process offered by duly appointed representatives of the Secret Service, The Central Intelligence Agency, the White House Staff, the United States Congress, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, or their duly assigned proxies — and, he assumed, just about anyone else who happened to have a fingerprint scanner and a copy of his voice print file).

He found himself thinking of Agent Begley's neck as it emerged from the fabric of her flattering white blouse, and forced himself to study Director Amesley intently while the elevator sank.

Amesley was older, past the mandatory retirement age, but he carried it well. He was short and slender, his thin white hair cut almost to a crew-cut, his scalp pink beneath it. He wore huge plastic glasses with thick lenses, a man who did not have vanity but wanted you to *know* he had no vanity so he underscored the ugly, perfunctory fashion decisions he made. Behind the lenses his eyes were brown and flat, without warmth or humor. He spoke in the declarative, short bursts of a man used to being obeyed — a type Renicks thought he might as well resign himself to meeting over and over again that night. Amesley's suit was sober blue and invisibly normal, modest without being cheap, new in the sense of not having been worn much. He did not wear a watch, which Renicks found strange, but held his cell phone in his hand in a casual way that hinted he *always* carried his cell phone in his hand, because he was that busy. His shoes were old-fashioned wingtips, in good shape but also not new.

Based on the fact that his suit was at least four or five years old but still fit perfectly, Renicks assumed the Director was one

of those small, wiry men who had not changed much physically since their school days. He would probably still fit in the various uniforms of the private schools he'd attended as a boy.

There was a tiny American Flag pin on Amesley's lapel, and Renicks studied it. He wasn't sure what conclusions to draw from an American flag pin, aside from the fact that Director Amesley considered himself a patriot, and wanted everyone to *know* this as well. He looked at Amesley's tie – phenomenally ugly – for a moment before turning to Agent Begley and smiling.

Begley ignored him, but glanced at Amesley. A glance which should have frozen the Director into an ice sculpture. Renicks found himself wishing the Director would be staying with them in the suite, simply for the entertainment value. He wondered if the time had come to date again. The divorce was five years old, the girls were in junior high. Maybe too soon to have a live-in, sure, but a few dates? He watched Agent Begley for a few seconds, pondering the possibilities. He liked the way she smelled. He didn't know the perfume, but he knew it was expensive.

Based on her carriage — shoulders back, ramrod straight, balanced and easy — he figured she was the sort of girl who walked around abandoned parking lots without a moment of fear.

He was impressed at how well the entrance to the elevators was hidden, but he didn't give the building a very high score for secrecy. It was too small. You walked in, the lobby was eighty percent of the place. You had this nifty reception desk, but there was no room for offices or anything. If you thought about it for

ten seconds you realized everything that made this building necessary was underground, and if you thought about *that* for ten seconds you realized the entrance to the Secure Facility, as the agents were fond of calling it, had to be inside.

He'd made sure he was behind everyone in the elevator, and studied them. Darmity stole a glance back at him and then snapped forward, red in the face again. Renicks had decided to hold off trying to complain about Agent Darmity; he looked like he was having a *terrible* day and Renicks had sloughed off the earlier tension and was willing to let bygones be bygones, for the moment. Maybe Agent Darmity had woken up to a personal hell and was barely holding it together. He'd had bad days himself, as an ex-wife would gladly attest.

The elevator ride took no time at all. His stomach pressed up against his diaphragm for a few seconds, his ears popped, and then the doors snapped open and he was following Agent Begley down what looked like a hallway in a nice hotel: Thick carpet, red and blue striped wallpaper on the walls, brass sconces every few feet. They walked in a muffled silence, the carpet absorbing every noise. He noticed the little black bubbles every few feet on the ceiling; cameras, probably aimed in order to eliminate any possible blind spots. At the end of the hall was an impressive set of double doors. They were plain white metal doors with big polished nickel handles like huge staples inserted into them; a larger black bubble was mounted at the center of the lintel, a keypad with an astounding number of unmarked buttons was mounted in the wall to the left — not simply a plate screwed into the studs, either, but actually part of the wall as if it had been

manufactured as one sheet and installed. Renicks guessed it would be very difficult to cut into the wall to get at the wiring of the keypad. Above it was a small video screen which was displaying the Great Seal of the United States in flickering faded colors.

“How is the retrofit going?” he asked in a tone of idle conversation as they approached the doors, thinking about the teams of workers up above when he’d arrived with Agent Darmity, men and women wearing blue overalls.

Director Amesley turned slightly as he walked, so that Renicks had his profile. “This facility is undergoing renovation and retrofit. Nothing to be alarmed about! The facility is fully operational and security systems are all green and online. The workers are actually leaving the premises right now, as per protocol.”

The cheer in the Director’s voice felt forced to Renicks, but he couldn’t be sure if this was because the Director was lying when he said *nothing to be alarmed about*, or because cheer was an expression that did not come naturally to him.

Begley turned slightly to smile back at him. “It’s been more than a decade since the last upgrade of systems here. That’s pretty much *forever* in terms of computer systems and security measures.”

Renicks nodded, picturing the workers he’d seen, chewing over the memory. Nine men, three women. Too clean, though maybe they hadn’t started working yet. Every single one of them carrying what looked like identical tool bags, brown canvas, but not a tool to be seen, everything tucked neatly away — no hammers in loops, no screwdrivers in back pockets.

He was being paranoid. CIA everywhere, because he was, for one night only, next in line to become President of the United States. Emily, had called it his “always on” mode; he got distracted — obsessed — by little details and kept circling them. Emily had always told him this made her want to slap him in the face, and that had been when she’d still told him *I love you* on a regular basis.

At the double doors Begley stepped forward and punched a complex series of the unmarked buttons. A pattern, Renicks figured. No numbers or letters to remember and divulge. More like a combination to a safe. It had to be changed on a regular basis, so he was impressed with the easy, automatic way she entered it. There was soft click, and she immediately pushed one of the doors inward and stepped in, blocking the entrance for a moment as she scanned the interior. Making sure nothing had changed, that there was no sign of trouble. After a moment she stepped back out, pushed the other door inward, and gestured them in.

“The Executive Suite,” she said as he stepped past her. “Basically a panic room. All communications and control can be routed here in the event of an outer breach of the facility. Eleven hundred square feet, designed to house eight people comfortably and twelve uncomfortably.”

He looked around. It was like a pricey hotel room. There was a small foyer marked off by white tile on the floor and tiny table pushed up against one wall, a set of the saddest fake flowers he’d ever seen in an unremarkable blue vase. The tile ended three feet in and became more of the deep, industrial carpet: A living room. Two couches, a deep, plush-looking easy chair, a coffee table

facing a wall of bookshelves with a mid-sized flat screen television hanging between. The wall opposite the TV, behind the couches, sported a glittering bar, piled with bottles and glassware. Renicks considered it the suite's most attractive feature so far. A set of curtains covered the far wall. Renicks was certain he would find cinder blocks and mortar if he pulled them aside, but they supported the illusion he was in a Holiday Inn somewhere for a convention. He was certain he would discover a mini bar in the main bedroom.

He glanced at the doors again. The handles were the same as those on the outside. If Uncle Richie had been with him, he would have said they were perfect for slipping a broomstick or metal rod through if you wanted to keep people outside. Renicks thought there was plenty of technology doing that job, but wondered for a second if those kind of emergency considerations had been part of the design. Security of the Last Resort, Richie would have called it.

Begley walked in like a Realtor. "Full kitchen through there. Two full bathrooms, though I have to warn you the fixtures are old and the showers both flood. Ten years is a long time between refits. Two other small bedrooms, and the office."

Renicks nodded, dropping his bag on one couch. "Twelve people?" he asked, turning to look at her.

She smiled. The first genuine smile he'd gotten from her, he thought. "I said *uncomfortably*," she reminded him.

He winked. "You sure did."

Amesley cleared his throat. The space felt dry and tight, sealed off.

"If we can, Mr. Secretary, we need to have you validated in the

Continuity system prior to the speech.”

Renicks nodded. He felt cheerful. He'd been dreading the speech: Standing and sitting, applauding constantly, keeping his face blank when Grant got to the education paragraph, probably whittled down to *forty*-three words by now. Given enough time he assumed The President would get that down to simply pointing at him and giving him a thumb's up, no words needed. The thought of being able to sit in this gloomy bunker with a cocktail, trying to impress the pretty Agent Begley with his witty remarks was undeniably more attractive.

Amesley smiled a twitchy smile and gestured at Begley, who stepped forward, tapping her tablet.

“Mr. Secretary — ”

“Call me Jack.”

“ — we will perform the voice print analysis first,” she said without breaking stride or looking up from the screen. She was good at ignoring men, he thought. “During your orientation you supplied a pass phrase which was digitized and kept on file. If you cannot remember — ”

Renicks recited, “John Renicks. Above all, we must realize that no arsenal, or no weapon in the arsenals of the world, is so formidable as the will and moral courage of free men and women. It is a weapon our adversaries in today's world do not have.” He shrugged, looking around the room again. “Ronald Reagan.”

There was a soft happy *ding* from her tablet, and Begley glanced up at him with a raised eyebrow. “You have a good memory, Mr. Secretary.”

He nodded. “It's easy. There's only six individual concepts in

the phrase. The rest is unnecessary modifiers and grammatical artifacts.”

Her eyes shifted to the side as she considered that. Then she offered him a bland smile. “I’m afraid we’ll need to validate your DNA as well. A blood sample and simultaneous injection of a temporary transmitter into your bloodstream. The complex employs a simple biorhythmic algorithm to establish your presence or absence from the site.”

He remembered this from the orientation, but hesitated anyway. “My bloodstream?”

She nodded. “Don’t worry. It will be flushed out of your system in a few days. It doesn’t closely track your movements.” There was a beat. “That’s *my* job.”

He eyed her tablet for a moment. “So you won’t be able to see if I try to slip out the back, huh?”

She smiled again. “It’s not that precise. The biorhythmic tracking is mainly used to determine that you are *inside* the complex. If you become Acting President and this complex goes online, it will check for your presence on a constant basis. If it fails to detect your vital signs, it will assume you have died and go offline, transferring authority to another complex, or back to the White House, as appropriate.”

“Agent *Begley*,” Amesley complained. “Can you please continue Dr. Renicks’ education *later*?”

She looked at the Director for a second, then back at Renicks, still smiling. “That clear?”

He nodded. He thought, *she’s pissed*.

She held the tablet towards him, and he saw a slight indentation in the top of it, the perfect shape to slide his thumb

into. Without any further prompting he did so. After a second there was a click, a sharp pain, and then another happy *ding*.

Begley took the tablet back and glanced down at the screen, nodding as he pushed his thumb into his mouth and sucked. “Very good, Mr. Secretary. Congratulations,” she added, looking back at him with a smile he decided was friendly. “You are now officially the Designated Survivor for the next seven hours.”

He winked again. “Call me Jack,” he said around his thumb.

5.

Fifteen minutes before checking the video screen installed above the keypad, Begley sat in one of the overstuffed easy chairs across from the couch, working her way through her Inbox, half-listening to the TV. The usual bloviating from commentators speculating on the State of the Union. She was not politically minded, which made her typical of the Secret Service. Disinterest made it easier to risk your life for whoever had the job that week.

She looked up at Renicks. He was sitting on the couch with his shoes off, talking on the landline phone — there was no cell signal at all once you went underground — while he watched the TV. She tuned in his conversation from time to time without really meaning to.

“I don’t know. A few hours. I brought plenty, but I’m playing hooky. Don’t tell anyone.”

It was strangely cozy. The suite had a sealed feeling, cut off from the world. It always reminded her of her parents' basement when she'd been a kid. She would sneak down to sit on the musty old couches and watch the ancient television, separate. Sometimes she'd pretend the world had ended and she was living in the basement, and she'd catalog her survival strategy: Water in the boiler. Big bags of dog food piled up. She'd even kept a cache of dolls and books hidden in the basement, in case she ever had to shelter there.

“She is, actually. It’s stressful, being on good behavior. There probably is, but that’s not a good idea.”

She glanced at Renicks again as the fanfare began on the TV. *Mister Speaker, The President of the United States!* She was surprised by how relaxed he was, compared to some of the previous Designated Survivors she'd had. He wasn't barking into the landline, going through cell phone withdrawal. He hadn't yet treated her like a flight attendant or waitress. He didn't seem filled with self-importance, and not only hadn't he tried to impress her with all the people he knew on a first-name basis, including, of course, President Grant himself, he had not actually spoken much to her at all.

Turning back to her tablet, she surreptitiously brought up Renicks' background file. She was already pretty familiar with it. She just hit the highlights. Mother killed in botched robbery at a supermarket when he was eight. Father had been a small town doctor, dead of a heart attack when Renicks was nineteen. Some indication of a small-town scandal indicated by a flurry of footnotes attached to the main report, but she didn't drill down into them. If she'd been doing the profile she would have flagged him as a possible risk for foreign recruitment: Bright, no close family ties, no clear political beliefs.

Tunneling down some links, she found that an on-the-ball agent had in fact flagged this, but further reports had minimized that concern.

Father's brother Richard Albert Renicks, a.k.a Richie The Rail, was the only dark spot in the family tree: Ties to organized crime, sixteen arrests, a total of fifteen years served in various state and federal prisons. Thief, mainly, although a person of interest in two homicides. Black Sheep of the family, certainly, but there were clear indications the Secretary had maintained a

friendly relationship with his uncle up until the latter's death in East Jersey State Prison.

Madam Speaker, Vice President Mallory, members of Congress, distinguished guests, and fellow Americans.

She glanced up at the screen in time to see a brief flash of the Vice President. Elizabeth Mallory was a regally tall black woman. She looked fantastic in a sober dark blue dress, her hair up in a businesslike bun. Begley always had the impression that Vice President Mallory would be a terrifying boss.

“Hey sugarbooger! How was school today?”

Begley glanced at The Secretary. *Sugarbooger*, she thought, smiling slightly. Renicks had the dopey smile of the doting father. She glanced at the door, at the small video screen next to it. The door was locked but not sealed, and could be opened by any authorized key card. That was protocol; you only sealed the suite in the event of imminent threat inside the facility. She couldn't make out the video screen from where she was. She considered getting up to visually check the hall outside — four agents were on duty at all times by the doors — but decided it could wait a few minutes. She looked back down at her tablet.

Education started getting impressive after his father's death. Degree in English from Rutgers College. Masters from Johns Hopkins, Cognitive Science with a side program in Education Administration. Doctorate shortly after, his dissertation on the subject of language techniques to aid in absorption and comprehension in children from low-income backgrounds and challenged school systems. The dissertation had been widely published and made a stir in the sorts of circles a 300-page document with that sort of subject matter might actually be read.

He'd also published an article about Esperanto's potential as a universal documentation markup language that had gotten a bit of attention in academic circles. Begley spent a few seconds trying to think of something more boring than Esperanto, and failed.

She glanced at the TV. President Grant, white hair, tan skin, white teeth. She'd forgotten just *how* unnaturally tan the man was.

Renicks stood up and placed the receiver back in its cradle, pushing his hands into his pockets and standing near the television. She looked at him for a moment, then closed her open apps and put the tablet aside.

"Disappointed you're not there?"

He smiled a little without looking at her. "Absolutely not in the least." He turned to look at her. "What about you? Disappointed that you're *here*?"

"Disappointed is the wrong word."

I do not stand before you tonight unaffected by these past few months. I do not deny the challenges this administration, this country has faced. But I do tell you that a change is at hand.

He nodded. "You want to be kicking in doors and hauling in counterfeiters. Babysitting politicians is not what you want to be doing."

She cocked her head and kept her face blank. No sense in doubling down on being an open book. "No?"

He hesitated a moment, and then ducked his head, pursing his lips. "You're efficient and very good at your job. You stick to protocol like its a flotation device after you've gone overboard. And every time any little detail goes wrong, your first reaction is

superficially identical to *excitement*. I think you wish something *would* go wrong, so you could have some fun.” He shrugged. “Besides, you use weak modifiers when you describe anything having to do with this bunker or your duties. You use strong modifiers when you talk about anything else.”

She made her smile very bland as she tried to recall the words she'd used when going over everything earlier. He was right, and she didn't like it, being read so easily. “You're kind of smug, aren't you?”

“Smug — or right?”

It should have been irritating, but he said it with such obvious cheer she smiled. “All right,” she said. “I'm bored to death in this tomb. What's your excuse?”

“Fifty-three words.”

I stand here tonight and tell you, we as a country remain —

They both paused. There was a second of perfect silence from the television, and then shouts of confusion. She turned towards the TV in time to see a glimpse of people moving around the president, and then the TV went to snow with a pop.

For another second, they both stood there.

“Did you see that?” Renicks asked.

She spun away, heart pounding, and crossed to the door. She ran her protocol in her head. *Check your perimeter. Contact your upteam. Be sure of your weapon.*

She reached across herself and patted the holster snapped to her belt. Didn't draw the weapon. You only drew a gun when you expected to fire it.

At the front door she pulled her transceiver from her pocket and toggled it as she leaned in to the video screen.

The hallway outside was empty.

There were supposed to be four agents outside at all times. The gray, empty hallway on the screen was all wrong.

“Station One status.”

There was a moment’s white noise, then an unfamiliar voice. “This is Station One. All green, Station Gold.”

She froze for a second. Weighed the possibilities. She had not seen anything explicit on the TV, but there *had* been a disruption. The TV had lost signal. Something was wrong. And there were no agents outside the suite.

Her transceiver crackled into life again. “Agent Begley, this is Director Amesley. On my way to you. Stand by.”

“Director, what’s going on? Why is the Hallway Detail gone from their posts?”

There was no response. Just the white noise of an open receiver.

She stared down at the tiny walkie-talkie, so small it fit in the palm of her hand. *This* was a complete deviation from protocol. It was also a direct instruction from her superior. For a second she stood chewing her lip, unsure. Heart pounding. She could not reconcile *all green* with Director Amesley making a personal visit to the suite.

A single blast of an alarm, a deep angry buzzing, made her jump. Flashing emergency lights came on immediately after, silent and yellow. On the plush chair where she’d left it, her tablet beeped insistently.

“Holy shit,” Renicks whispered.

She turned and looked at Renicks. He was standing right where she’d left him, alert and attentive. Watching her. The

Designated Survivor. In her charge. They stared at each other for one, two, three seconds, the only sound the sterile clicking of the emergency lights.

She nodded to herself. Protocol. “Stay back.” Turning back to the door, she reached up and tapped seventeen buttons on the keypad, rapidly. The magnetic locks on the suite’s only entrance slammed into place. She felt their impact through the floor, through her shoes. She took half a step back before catching herself.

Calm down, she thought, furious. *You’ve been trained for this*.

Except it had never been live. And in her mind, it had never been like this. Protocol broken, nothing proceeding according to the clear path outlined by the Continuity Plan. Which she had memorized. In her mind, in all the exercises, if nothing else the first *step* of the protocol — making contact with the Hall Detail and securing the Portable Nuclear Arsenal — had always been executed.

Instead, she had seen — what exactly *had* she seen on the television? A second’s confusion, nothing more. A second’s confusion, then a loss of signal. And then the Executive Suite had come online. Which only happened if the Continuity of Government program had been activated.

Which only happened if every single person in the line of succession above the Designated Survivor was believed to be dead. Which made Secretary Jack Renicks the Acting President of the United States.

Turning around, she tried to look confident and calm. Behind her, Director Amesley toggled the intercom again. Renicks raised an eyebrow.

“Are we okay, Agent Begley?”

She took a breath. *Boil it down to basics*, she thought. *What’s your core mission? To keep him safe.* “Until we know what’s going on, Secretary Renicks,” she said slowly, “we have to keep you in this bunker.”

6.

Twenty minutes before Director Amesley ordered Agent Begley to open the door to the Executive Suite, Renicks stood in front of the television, frozen.

Begley was a whirl of motion, none of it involving him. She disappeared back into the office area. Emerged moments later, made calls on her walkie-talkie. Received no responses. Attacked her tablet computer, hand making sharp, impatient gestures. Disappeared into the office again.

He didn't know what to do. This was unusual. In his everyday life he was either considered the Expert in the Room by the people around him, or thought of himself as the Expert in the Room privately. Emily had cited this attitude many times as one of his most objectionable personality traits. Most of their late-period arguments had ended with her sarcastic refrain, *Well, you know everything, Jack.*

He didn't know everything. He'd had that sudden epiphany thirty seconds before, when the emergency lights started flashing.

Stepping forward, he examined the television, which was still pouring snow into the room with a muted buzz. The only way to combat shock and ignorance was to investigate. He found the recessed panel of buttons along the top of the TV and pushed up on his toes to get a good view of them. Pressed the MENU button. Navigated using the volume and channel buttons until he found the INPUT screen and scrolled through all the choices. None of them resulted in any picture on the screen.

He was still feeling slow and buzzed. *Shock*, he thought. Endorphins and adrenaline dumped into the bloodstream. An automatic reaction to perceived danger.

Stepping over to the wall, he picked up the phone. There was no dial tone. He couldn't remember the last time he'd even seen a landline, but the amusement he'd felt towards it when speaking on it before had disappeared. He put it back in the cradle. Pulled out his cell phones. Just being thorough; he didn't expect a signal and wasn't disappointed.

Begley stormed in and out of the room within a ten-second period. He had no idea if he could offer her any help, and left her alone.

He considered the possibility that he was actually the Acting President of the United States. It was impossible to believe, because he was standing by himself, locked in a place that felt like a pricey hotel room. Ever since receiving the Continuity orientation after his confirmation hearing, he'd occasionally imagined actually becoming the Acting President. In his imagination there had been a whole team of people. He'd actually wondered how he would handle Generals and Admirals, CIA Directors — men and women with vast experience and expertise who would push him one way or another. How he would handle strong personalities who knew much more than he did about every situation. How he would assert himself and avoid being a puppet.

Not once had he imagined he'd be standing in a room by himself, trying to get the fucking *television* to work.

Renicks shook himself and started moving.

He stayed in the living room for the moment. He sensed he

was in Begley's way — it was not a comforting thought, but he trusted it and decided the best thing to do, at least for the next few minutes, was to let her do her job. He stepped sideways and ran his eyes over the bookcases. The top shelf held the government of the United States in written form: The annotated Constitution, the most recent congressional record, the entire United States Code in gorgeous leather-bound volumes, The Code of Federal Regulations.

The rest of the shelves were filled with DVD-ROMs. The first two replicated the entire first shelf in digital format. He scanned the others: State law codes, Supreme Court transcripts. Encyclopedias. CIA Fact Books going back to the 1960s.

He pushed himself into the small gap between the end of one bookshelf and the wall. Tested the gap between the back of the shelves and the wall. Tried to push the bookshelf. He didn't expect it to move and it didn't. He didn't expect secret passages, hidden niches, a battalion of soldiers hidden in a crawlspace below the floor.

The emergency lights clicked on. Clicked off.

He checked the other bookshelf. It was also firmly attached to the wall. Turning to the coffee table, he examined the decorative glass baubles sitting on top. Weighed them in his hands as potential weapons. Pictured the scene like a panel from a comic book: Acting President hurls paperweights at Captain Socialism, locks himself in bathroom.

Grimacing to stifle a peal of inappropriate, shock-induced laughter, Renicks knelt down and pulled open the small drawer set into the table. It was empty. He shut it and knelt there for a moment.

Agent Begley entered the room again. She was frowning. The way she held her hand up to her face and twisted her mouth to the side made him think she'd had long hair up until recently, and had been in the habit of chewing on it when thinking. Their eyes met for a second. She nodded and put her hand up, miming *give me another moment*.

He nodded back. Decided Begley was someone whose advice he could take.

They stood there, ten feet apart, for another few seconds. The emergency lights clicked off. Clicked on again. Then the intercom on the front door *dinged*, and they both jumped a little.

“Agent Begley.” Director Amesley’s voice, tinny and small.

Begley crossed to the door immediately. Leaned in to peer at the tiny screen. Toggled the intercom.

“Director Amesley,” she said.

“Agent Begley, I need access to the Executive Suite. Something’s ... happened.”

Renicks frowned. *Something’s happened* seemed like the least appropriate phrase possible.

Begley hesitated, then turned away and looked back at him for a moment.

“Secretary Renicks,” she said. “Join me in the office for a moment.”

A thrill of excitement shot through him. He hurried after her. She led him into the office and turned to face him.

“First,” she said immediately, with an air of authority he liked, “let’s establish we’re on the same page. As far as we know based on the data available to us, something has happened to trigger the Continuity Program and therefore we must assume you have

been elevated to Acting Commander in Chief.”

She stared at him. Her face was impassive. After a second he realized she was waiting for him to say something. He nodded.

“Sure,” he said. He immediately felt foolish. *Sure*.

She nodded. “My role here is to interpret the security status of your person and your immediate area, apprise you of my assessment, and then await your instructions. Do you understand?”

He nodded again. “I do.”

She started to pace. “I don’t like this,” she said flatly. Sounded irritated. “We have no information. The agents that *under no circumstances* are ever supposed to leave their post are not in the hall. Right there, protocol states I keep this suite sealed until we have more information.” She stopped. Turned. Looked back at him directly. She had beautiful green eyes. “My recommendation is that we keep the suite sealed for the time being. Not even Director Amesley gets in.”

He studied her face. Forced himself to think for a moment before responding. Behind him, he could hear the muffled, flimsy voice of Amesley through the intercom. “What do you think is happening, Agent Begley?”

She shook her head immediately. “I have no idea. This may be an exercise, for all we know. What’s our data? What did *you* see on the TV?”

He thought back. “I was only half-watching. I saw motion. I heard a yell. Then a crowd noise, when a lot of people get excited all at once. Then people were moving around Grant. Secret Service, Senators, someone else — I don’t know. Then the screen went blank.”

“We don’t know *anything*. Except something happened and the Continuity Program was activated. And my team has broken protocol. Dr. Renicks, we profile everything. We simulate everything. We have terabytes of data about every conceivable scenario, so that every agent will at least have some plan of action no matter what happens. I can’t cite a specific simulation, but I *can* tell you that under the general category of *your team fails to follow protocol*, every single simulation starts off with sealing the Executive Suite and maintaining control of your asset — that’s you — until you *do* know what’s going on.”

He thought about it. It made sense. The second the TV had gone to snow all the old rules had been suspended. The protocol was in place to provide new rules when that happened. If the protocol had been ignored, he thought, she was absolutely right to assume all rules were off.

“I agree,” he said. He tried to make it sound firm and resolute.

She nodded and stepped past him. He followed her back into the main living area. The intercom buzzed as they entered, and Director Amesley’s voice sparked into the room.

“Agent Begley, I am ordering you to open these doors immediately.”

Begley took a deep breath. Glanced at Renicks. He gave her a quick nod, and felt like they were in conspiracy together. He liked the idea, being teamed with her.

She toggled the intercom, hesitated a moment, then paused again, leaning forward suddenly to peer intently at the video screen. The intercom open, capturing her breathing. Then she snapped to attention, looking down at her shoes for a second.

She saw something, Renicks thought. *Something that bothers her.*

Finally she looked back up and leaned forward again. “I’m sorry, Director Amesley,” she said clearly. Slowly. “I am afraid I have to disobey that order.”

7.

Fifteen minutes before figuring out that they wanted him alive, Renicks was digging through his bag.

Behind him, he could hear Agent Begley having a heated, half-shouted conversation with Director Amesley via the intercom. He listened with half his attention as he searched his bag for the palm-sized Brick Agent Gorshin had given him. He could hear it buzzing.

“Agent Begley,” Amesley’s tinny voice, warped by the small speaker, “this is a direct order: Open the suite’s doors!”

“I’m sorry sir, I must refuse that order,” she repeated, her voice even. “Until I am certain that this facility is secure, my responsibility is to the DS and his safety.”

Amesley started to shout something, but was cut off mid-sentence. He heard Begley moving. She disappeared into the office again. He watched her in his peripheral vision.

The emergency lights clicked on. Clicked off. Begley returned from the office.

“Secretary Renicks,” she said briskly. “Come with me, please.”

“One second.”

He picked up his bag and turned it upside-down, dumping the contents onto the couch. The TV was still spilling snow and white noise into the room. The Brick and gun both bounced onto the cushions. The Brick’s screen was bright. It danced a little each time it buzzed.

Picking up The Brick, he followed Begley into the short corridor that led to the bedrooms, bathrooms, and office. He

was shaking a little. He told himself it was excitement. He found her in the office, typing on the keyboard embedded in the large desk. The desk was placed up against the far wall; behind it were a half dozen large flat screen monitors. Five were blank and dark; the sixth displayed a standard kind of computer desktop with a dock along the bottom and shortcut icons littered everywhere. Instead of a mouse there was a trackball embedded into the desk's surface. A headset was plugged into a bank of inputs at the back.

Along the other walls were two smaller computer work stations and a small table on which a fax machine and hi-speed laser printer sat, blinking placid and green.

"I don't have any connections to the facility," she said as he stepped up behind her. "That's impossible."

"That word gets overused. You mean *improbable*."

She didn't turn away from the desk. "This suite is a panic room. It's meant to be the Alamo if things go very badly wrong — like, an army-at-the-front-door wrong. When the Continuity Program activated this facility and this suite was sealed, all authority and communications should transfer *here*. So the President or Acting Commander In Chief will have complete control over all networks. The power lines are designed to be redundant and uncuttable. The communication fiber is designed to be redundant and uncuttable." She tapped a final key, muttered a curse, and turned to look at Renicks. "When I sealed this area, Secretary Renicks, we should have immediately gone live and superseded the control center of the facility."

"But we're cut off."

She nodded. "Somehow. It's imp — improbable, but somehow

I have no tunnel to the outside world from here.”

He looked around the room. Seeing a phone extension mounted to the wall, he stepped to it and picked up the receiver, pushing the TALK button and placing it to his ear. There was no dial tone, and he shook his head.

“Agent Begley,” he said, replacing the phone in its cradle. “Walk me through it.”

She turned and leaned back against the desk, looking down at his shoes. She took a deep breath, her arms crossed over her chest. He liked that. No rushing, no panic. She *was* panicked, he could tell, but panic was like fear: Everyone experienced it. How you reacted made the difference. Her reaction was to slow down, to think for a second. He was impressed when she looked up at him, her eyes clear, her voice steady. He was trying to decide if she was going to be someone he could rely on. He wasn’t sure, yet. His own heart continued to pound, and his hands were still shaky; he needed to be able to rely on her, because he didn’t know squat about the bunker or the facility or what might be outside the doors.

“I don’t know the details, but the Continuity Program of this facility has been triggered. This facility is online, and you have been elevated from Designated Survivor to Acting Commander in Chief. Protocol states that the four agents outside this suite exchange pass-phrases with the In-Suite — that’s me — and I would grant two of them access to this area. One of them would be carrying the football — the Nuclear Football, the remote launch interface — and you would formally assume control. After that, protocol ends, really. You would be considered the CIC, you would make contact with other entities and

departments. Depending on the responses you received, we would proceed from there.”

“But something’s wrong.”

She nodded. He could tell she was thinking this through as she spoke, and that was why he was asking questions, letting her talk, letting her work it out. This was her home field.

“Something’s wrong. The other agents on this detail broke protocol. Director Amesley broke protocol. *Something* happened at the State of the Union Address, something that triggered the Continuity Program. This program has been in place in its current form since 1963 and has never been triggered before.” She looked around. “That means you are the acting President, Mr. Renicks —”

“Jack.”

“— and you should be in complete control. But you’re not.”

He glanced down at The Brick. He remembered Agent Gorshin telling him it had no way to connect to the outside world beyond its activation signal — it wouldn’t be able to access any networks, even if there were some to be found.

Begley stared at him, her eyes steady. He felt her weighing him. She’d known him for an hour, but she had his entire life as sussed out by the best investigator’s in the business at her fingertips. He wondered what kind of impression he’d made.

“All right,” she said in a tone of clipped decision. “When I went to the door earlier to deny Amesley’s request, I saw something. The picture’s pretty grainy, but you get a good view of the whole corridor. Everything looked OK. Amesley looked like he always did. Big glasses, blank face. I don’t know the agents on detail but they looked right. They had the football with them.

Except ... way down where the hall turns at a right angle towards the elevator. The way we came up. I thought I saw something.”

“Something?”

She frowned. “Movement. It’s hard to make out details on that old screen, but I saw something move. It was as if ...” She looked up at him and shrugged. “As if someone was hiding around the corner. As if someone knew the field of the camera and was purposefully standing in the blind spot.” She looked back up at him. “If I was on the spot I would say it looked very much like a man holding a weapon.”

He thought about that. It felt unreal. Like this was some sort of academic exercise, a spitball session during *Paranoid Delusions 101* or something. He was lightheaded and could feel his whole body humming. *This is mania*, he thought. *This is how religious delusions happen. You get worked into a state of delirium with adrenaline and terror, and you start believing things.* “Maybe waiting for the door to be opened. Because everything right in front of you looked *right*.”

She nodded, then suddenly took a deep breath. “Then you have to follow the logic. They’ve triggered the Continuity Program. They’ve broken protocol. You break protocol because it’s the only way to protect your asset, or you break protocol because you’re *not* protecting your asset. Which it is?”

“Maybe I’m supposed to be dead too.”

“No. If that’s what they wanted, don’t break protocol. I let them in once we exchange pass phrases, they murder us. Or kill you when you walk in the door. They wanted you to be activated as acting CIC. Why?”

Renicks weighed The Brick in his hand. “Like I said, I’m

supposed to be someone else. *You're* supposed to be someone else. We both get pulled in at the last second, they can't have expected us. Maybe the people who were *supposed* to be in here were part of this."

He looked up and they stared at each other.

"You have every power of the presidency," Begley said. "They have launch codes and chart books outside."

"Jesus."

"You could transmit coded orders to any number of people. Mobilize armies. Scramble fighter squadrons. Order the FBI to detain people. Issue executive orders."

Renicks pulled one of the workstation chairs over and sat down, his knees almost touching Begley's. "They want me alive because they want me to do something."

Begley shrugged. "The system wouldn't know if the Acting President had a gun to his head."

"Jesus."

They sat for a moment in silence. There was such an absence of sound Renicks' ears began creating white noise, an imaginary sizzling. Renicks held up *The Brick*.

"The Secret Service Agent in charge of my pickup handed me this. Everything the new Acting President needs to know in one handy phone-sized device."

Begley smiled thinly. "It used to be six binders of documents and fifty-four CD-ROMs."

"Progress. I'm going to see if there is anything useful on this. You try and think of any way we can contact the outside world, or at least hook into the bunker's communication lines."

She nodded distractedly, tapping her cheek with one finger as

she sat. He glanced up. Her profile was fine; he admired it for a second and then sat forward.

“Hey.”

She looked at him without moving her head.

“We’re not supposed to be here, but when we dropped into place, they didn’t cancel anything.”

She didn’t react.

“They must have considered the possible ways everything could go off the tracks, right? Amesley’s the Director of the Secret Service, he must have considered the possibility you’d seal the suite.”

“Probably. Amesley would have known you were being substituted for Flanagan about twenty minutes after the Attorney General died.”

Renicks leaned back in his chair. “If I were him, I’d have thought about how I’m getting in here.”

She considered. “There’s an override code. Only I know it; I set it myself this morning.” She frowned. “If you don’t have that, you’re shit out of luck. You can’t cut those mag locks easily. There are twelve of them, and you have to cut them all to get that door open. He’d need some serious hardware to do that.”

There was another beat of silence, and then a sudden strident, keening noise erupted. They both flinched. Renicks realized he was crouching with his hands curled into fists as the noise penetrated his skull and drilled down. He grit his teeth and forced himself to straighten up as Begley dashed out of the room. One hand on the butt of her still-holstered gun.

He followed at a run, almost crashing into her back in the common room of the suite. She was standing in the midst of the

couches, staring at the reinforced steel doors of the entryway. A rain of bright white sparks spewed into the room from the upper left corner of the doorway.

“Cutting the maglocks?” Renicks shouted.

Begley nodded, once, and said nothing.

He watched her for a moment longer. Her facial expression wasn't hard to decipher: *Pissed off* was more or less a universal thing.

“How long?”

She looked up at the low popcorn ceiling for a moment. “If we assume they have the best possible tool! A few hours!”

Renicks watched the sparks. He already had a headache from the unrelenting noise. He ticked off the situation: No communication, no way of issuing orders, two handguns between them, and a few hours of time. Not exactly what he'd expected when he woke up this morning, irritated at his fifty-three words.

Begley looked at Renicks, her face an impassive mask. She stepped over to him and leaned in, her smell clean and soapy. “The Acting President has to be in the Secure Facility as long as the emergency status continues,” she whispered fiercely. “If you leave the Secure Facility, you will be logged out of the system and authority will pass to the next link in the Continuity chain.” Stepping back, she took a deep breath. “Secretary Renicks, we have to get you *out* of this bunker.”

8.

Five minutes before he saw it, Renicks was walking through every square foot of the suite. Trying to notice everything. Cataloging resources, familiarizing himself with the layout.

He started in the office space, where Begley had wriggled under the main desk with a small toolbox. Working the plates free from the wall, stripping the wiring of insulation. Trying anything that might patch them through to a live connection. It was a good use of her time, since she obviously knew the wiring and how to manipulate it. He left her to it.

The office was easy enough. Aside from the furniture and computer equipment, there was paper in the fax machine and printer, and a few basic office supplies in the desk drawers. A shallow closet in the back of the room also contained a large plastic toolbox and a set of walkie-talkies in a charger, all operational. He wondered if they were on the same frequency as the one he'd seen Begley use earlier.

There was a loud bang behind him, and then a stream of profanity. Without turning to look, he exited the office. Directly across from it was the small kitchen and one of the bathrooms. The kitchen was a claustrophobic square; full-sized oven, fridge, sink. Insufficient cabinetry. A toaster and microwave ate up half the counter space. Unattractive. Greasy white laminate, blond wood trim. The oven's finish had been scratched and had lines of rust forming a pattern on it. The floor was tiled in huge, twenty-four inch stone tiles, light gray. The tile had been laid without gaps or grout, right up against each other. The huge tiles just

made the room feel smaller.

He opened everything. The cabinets contained a variety of dried and canned food: Vegetables, noodles, pasta, beans. Powdered milk. Powdered drinks of all kinds. Canned meat, sausages and SPAM, tuna in foil packets. There was a full set of dented and rusted pots and pans, chipped plates and dull metal cutlery. Everything you would need to prepare horrifying meals of salt and sugar and botulism, he thought.

The oven was empty. He regretted opening it. When he opened the fridge he paused for a moment, staring at dozens of bottles of wine, water, and beer, placed inside with care, using every available inch of space.

He shut the door slowly, thinking that if they hadn't figured something out in two hours or so, he was coming back to have one hell of a party.

The bathroom was cheap-looking. It was a standard three-piece: Sink, toilet, plastic shower stall. The medicine cabinet was empty. There were two sets of towels and washcloths, white and thin, laundered a million times. He took one of the towels and tucked it under his arm. Towels, he thought, were always massively useful things.

When he stepped back into the narrow hall, he could still hear Begley cursing in the office, even over the keening noise of the locks being cut. Passing through the entry room, he glanced at the sparks flying. Noted they had shifted downward about six inches. One lock down, he assumed.

On the other side of the suite were the two bedrooms and second bathroom.

At first glance, the bedrooms were identical in size and

crammed with bunk beds. Six beds in each room. The beds were modular and could be separated and, he assumed, stored elsewhere. He wondered why the default configuration was to assume he would be bunking down with eleven people, why they wouldn't leave the extra beds somewhere else until needed. The beds were all made up, with sheets and blankets and thin, unhappy pillows. There was nothing else in the bedroom on the right. No dressers, or chests, or decoration of any kind.

The bedroom on the left had a closet. It was shallow and not very practical for storing clothes in the standard way. Which he assumed the designers had realized, since it was filled with automatic weapons. Rifles. Magazines. He didn't know anything about automatic rifles, and they seemed to glow with a negative black light, shiny and perfect. Maybe never used. He closed the closet door and wondered if he should report his discovery to Begley. Then realized she must know, this was her house. She'd probably been trained on them. Could take them apart, put them back together.

Then he thought they shouldn't trust anything they found in the suite. They'd brought something to cut through the door with. Maybe they'd thought to empty the magazines, too. Or replace them with blanks.

He glanced at the towel. Considered it. Then shrugged.

The second bathroom was exactly the same as the first, with the addition of an exciting mold smell. He compared towels and decided to keep the one he had.

Back in the office, Begley lay on the floor under the desk, grunting and cursing. She was pulling plates off the wall and yanking wires free. He rolled the big desk chair a few feet away

from her and sat down. Pulled the Brick from his pocket. It lit up as he touched it, coming to life.

“Are you always this calm?”

Renicks glanced over at Begley. She had pushed her head out from under the desk at an uncomfortable angle. Glaring at him. He imagined she was used to contorting herself just to glare at people. He reflected that all the women in his life accused him of being too calm.

“This isn’t calm,” he said. “Should I be running around? I don’t know the systems here; you do. So you’re tearing wires out of the wall. I’ve got this,” he held up the Brick, “which only I can access. So I’m looking through it to see if there’s anything here that can help. There must be *something* in the classified documents of the President that can help.”

She snorted, pulling herself back under the desk. He allowed himself to admire her lower half for a second.

“I’d feel better if you were running around,” she said.

He nodded and returned his attention to the Brick. It was a remarkable device. It was palm-sized and about as thick as a small paperback book. It was all screen. There were no buttons. No obvious power source. All interaction was through the touch-screen.

When he put it down, it went dark. When he picked it up, it came to life automatically. Somehow it knew when he was holding it.

The interface was graphical, the screen filled with tiny icons. There were no applications that he could see. Just documents and folders. Hundreds, thousands. Maybe *tens* of thousands. There were dozens of folders, most marked with mysterious

acronyms or single words he assumed were codenames. He thought of Amesley and the team of people that would normally be at his disposal. People who could explain everything to him. The Brick was just to ensure he had access to the information the Acting President might need. It didn't clarify anything.

He thumbed his way through the list of folders, ignoring the unsorted documents. He scanned quickly; despite Begley's assertion that it would take hours to cut through the locks on the entrance, he was impatient and worried. He didn't think it was likely that Begley would have some brilliant inspiration and connect them to rescuers.

Two folders jumped out at him almost immediately. The first was named ELIRO. The all-caps title caught his eye and he stared at it for a moment. Hesitated because he thought he'd seen the acronym before. He spent a few seconds running the letters around his mind. He had the buzzing sense that their meaning was locked away in his head. That at any moment it would be illuminated. Maybe a memo he'd seen, or a project he'd discussed with the President.

He opened the folder with a tap of his index finger. It expanded to fill the screen. Contained a single text file, also called ELIRO. With a tap he opened the file. The first line was in English:

History will forgive me.

He scanned the rest. The first words in were *dum tre longa tempo nun*, and it continued from there, nonsense. Or a code.

He closed his eyes for a second and imagined the words. *Dum*

tre longa tempo nun. He'd always enjoyed codes and word games, but these remained meaningless. Thinking that if it was a code there might be a key, so he closed the file and then the folder. With a growing sense of urgency he pushed his eyes past the icon and kept searching, eventually stopping with a start on a folder marked CONT_EX_STE.

Vowels were luxuries. He quickly translated this to *continuity executive suit* and with a sharp jab of his finger the folder swelled up to take up the entirety of the small screen. It contained a dozen or so subfolders with inscrutable names, and a single unsorted text file called NSDD_E1.

He glanced at Begley's legs. Tapped the file open. It was a short document, containing just three paragraphs of text in plain English. The first two he skipped quickly. They were legalese. Long sentences citing authority, precedents, and routing procedures.

The third paragraph was only three sentences long. He read it twice, heart pounding. Then he looked up at Begley's lower half.

"I know how to get out of here."

9.

Fifteen minutes before he sprained his ankle, Renicks stood with Begley in the kitchen, staring down at the floor.

“Here,” she said.

He shrugged. “According to the document, yes.”

She looked down at the tile floor. Back up at him. “Ronald Reagan ordered an escape tunnel installed in the kitchen of the Executive Suite in the Secure Facility.”

He nodded. “Yes.”

She stared at him for a second or two too long. The shriek of the magnetic locks being cut was muted, a low buzz. “You realize this would defeat the *purpose* of a panic room, right?”

He nodded again. “Are you suggesting a President can't make fucked-up decisions? He'd be in here with his family, if the worst came.” He pointed back over his shoulder. “He imagines the Russian army or some shit crashing through the front door of this place. Corridor fighting, Marines against ... against whatever. Bloody, brutal fighting. The slow retreat, the attrition of forces. Then they're outside the door. Cutting the maglocks, like right now. One lock every fifteen minutes, gone. Your wife, your kids, hugging your legs, screaming.” He shrugged again. “Hell, I can see why you might think a secret escape tunnel wasn't such a bad idea.”

“But — ”

He smiled. “You didn't know about it.”

“What?”

He liked her cocky posture, the jut of her hip, her arm

akimbo, her back ramrod straight. “You’re worried about the security risks. But if I read this right, this was installed *decades* ago via executive order using one-time contractors, but you don’t know a thing about it.” He gestured at the floor. “It’s been here for *decades*, and this is the first you’ve heard of it. Sometimes, security through obscurity works.”

They stared at each other in silence. He could tell she was fighting the urge to smile.

Without a word, she spun and stepped out of the kitchen. He watched her go, then looked down at the floor again. The big tiles, twenty-four inches by twenty-four inches. Huge. Available by special order, certainly, at any home improvement store, but not *normal*. He studied the pattern. There was a center tile, if you discounted the bottom cabinets. Perfectly center. They must have cheated a little under the cabinets. Half an inch, maybe. Enough to get a perfectly straight line in the center of the room.

A sound made him turn. Begley strode back into the kitchen, lugging the black plastic toolbox from the office closet. She dropped it on the floor and knelt, popping it open and pulling a flat blue crowbar from it. With a shove she sent the toolbox skidding across the floor, crashing into the base cabinets. She stood up. Looked at him, hefting the crowbar like she’d broken into a few cars in her time. Silently, he pointed at the center tile. She nodded and knelt down, pushing the sharp, thin end of the crowbar into the line that separated the middle tile from the one to its left. Tapped the curled top of the bar with her palm a few times, pushing the blade down into the almost-invisible gap.

Renicks admired her efficient, no-nonsense manner. A lot of people, he thought, would have spent a lot of time talking,

arguing. Instead of just trying it and putting the matter to rest.

She took a breath and pushed on the bar, giving it just a little force. Frowned. Cocked her head. Then put her back into it with a grunt, and the tile popped up a half inch or so.

“Damn,” she said in a tight, low voice. “It’s *heavy*.”

He circled around to the other side and knelt down next to her. Put his hands on the bar over hers. Her skin was cool to the touch, smooth. He eased his weight onto the bar and the tile rose upwards. Beneath it was a square opening, about an inch smaller all around. A damp, cool breeze rushed up from it.

“Can you hold it a second?” he asked.

She considered, studying it, then nodded. “For a second.”

He eased up off the bar, hesitated for a second. When she held the tile up, he moved fast, getting his hands under the lip they’d created and pushing. He tipped it up and over. It crashed down onto its top side, cracking the tile under it. The center tile was made of steel, with a coating on top to make it resemble the rest.

Panting, he knelt on the floor and peered down into a narrow tunnel leading straight down. After a second Begley leaned in close as well, producing a small flashlight. With a click it snapped on a bright bluish light, revealing a smooth metal tube that widened out slightly once you got past the twenty-two by twenty-two opening under the tile, with ladder handholds bolted down one side. It looked just wide enough for a man of average build to climb down. Anyone overfond of cheeseburgers was going to have a hell of a time. Renicks and Begley looked up at each other simultaneously.

“You’re not an *I told you so* type, are you?” she asked.

He sat back and leaned against the base cabinets. “Normally, I am. But I have to confess I didn’t really believe it myself.”

“Right.” She stood up and tore her jacket off. Her white blouse was crisp and neat. Her holster rode high on her hip. She dropped the jacket on the floor, sat down, and swung her legs over the lip of the hole. She looked at Renicks. “Stay here.”

He started to say something, but she put the small flashlight between her teeth and sank down into the shaft, catching a step with one foot and then disappearing from sight.

“Bossy,” he muttered, and stood up.

He walked into the living room. The sparks were halfway down one side. The noise was, if anything, even louder, and he winced, putting his hands up to his ears. Turning away from the door, he picked up his bag and quickly scooped all of his possessions back into it. Picked up the Kimber and stuffed it into his waistband, feeling foolish. Moving quickly, he went back into the office. He pushed the Brick and the towel into his bag, then went to the closet and retrieved two of the walkie-talkies, pushing them in on top of it.

In the kitchen, he opened the refrigerator and pulled four bottles of water out, adding them to the bag. Then he dropped the bag and stood over the tunnel entrance. He wondered what he would do if she never came back. He tried to imagine an existence without the constant, high-pitched wine of the maglocks being cut and found it impossible.

She emerged a few minutes later, her hair coming loose from its clips. She was pink and sweaty, and sat on the floor with her legs dangling in the shaft.

“Jesus, it’s not even hidden,” she said, breathing hard. “It

leads right into a service corridor. A door, marked Access Corridor. *Access Corridor*, for god's sake."

"You know the service tunnels?"

She nodded, looking up at him. "I know every damn inch of this drafty, stinking place. Or thought I did." She paused, and suddenly reached out, snatching the Kimber from him before he could react. She studied it for a moment, then looked up at him from under her eyebrows. "My goodness, Mr. Secretary."

Renicks tried to hide his surprise and embarrassment. "It was a gift from my uncle," was all he could manage to say. He wanted to snatch the gun back, but felt this would undermine his dignity even further. He didn't know what to do with his hands.

She felt the weight, her eyes on his. "Have you ever fired a gun, Mr. Renicks?"

He smiled. "A few times. On a range."

She stared up at him for another moment, then handed it up to him. "Keep the safety on and don't try to shoot anything while you're moving, okay?"

He took it back and tucked it back under his belt. "Thanks."

"One minute." She left the kitchen. Returned a moment later with her tablet, handing it to him silently. He slipped it into his bag. Pulling her jacket towards her, she threaded one arm into the sleeve. Paused, looking at him. "And don't point it at *me* under any circumstances," she said. "Come on. Keep your jacket. It's cold as hell."

The descent was claustrophobic. He could barely extend his arms enough to grasp each small rung in the ladder, and his bag slung over his shoulder cramped him even further. The rungs were slippery and his feet kept sliding free. And Begley was right:

It turned freezing just a few feet below the lip of the tunnel. He started shivering almost immediately.

“Just how paranoid do you have to be,” he heard her say breathlessly from below, “to install a *panic tunnel* in your panic room?”

Renicks chuckled. He was breathing hard, and thought if he’d known what his future held he would have started working out long ago. He’d always thought himself in reasonable shape. He was beginning to question that assessment. “Maybe it’s a series of panic rooms and tunnels,” he offered. “Panic rooms all the way down. Eventually we end up back in the Executive Suite.”

The only light sources he had was the diminishing fluorescent glow leaking down from the kitchen and the scattered, weak bluish light leaking up from Begley. The walls of the tunnel were steel plate. The rungs of the narrow ladder were cold to the touch and his hands were going numb from constant contact with them. He wondered why a panic tunnel out of a panic room would lead directly back into the facility, instead of outside. He broke it down in his head as he worked his way down. A way of distracting himself from the sensation of being stuck, his bag wedging against the wall of the shaft, a surge of tight terror filling him every time.

The answer was simple. If the President is in the Executive Suite in the first place, the worst has come. Nuclear war, massive terrorist attack, plague of some sort. *Outside* would have to be assumed to not be an option. The escape from the Panic Room, created in secret and not even shared with the group of people charged with protecting the President — the Secret Service itself — was meant to be used in the instance of a revolt. A coup. If the

President or Acting President found himself under assault from *his own people*, he would need a way to regain control of the facility. A secret. A surprise attack, from the rear.

Renicks heard a hissing noise and looked down in time to see Begley slide the last few feet of the ladder, just letting the sides of the ladder slide through her hands. She dropped lightly to the floor.

His left foot slipped from the rung below him, and his legs sailed out into the air. He squawked, a barking noise deep in his throat. Held on with one hand, his right arm wedged suddenly between his body and the wall of the shaft. He held on for a second. Then his numb hand slipped free and he was falling.

It was only a dozen feet or so. Somehow he avoided knocking his head against a rung. He slid down the shaft like he'd practiced it, training for the moment, one arm pressed against his side, one arm raised up. He felt the walls disappear and for a second he was aware of open air, and then his feet hit the floor. His left ankle rolled under his weight, pain shot up his leg, and he fell over, cursing. Landed hard on his ass. Leaned forward and grabbed his ankle, wincing.

Begley was there immediately. "Are you okay?"

He nodded. The pain had already receded to a dull throb. "Help me up."

She put her shoulder under one armpit and lifted as he pushed himself up. Standing with her for support, he tested the foot. Wincing again. But was able to stand. He looked at Begley and nodded in response to her unspoken question. She looked down at his shoes. They were good walking shoes. Sturdy. Comfortable. Were dressy enough for emergencies. No ankle

support whatsoever.

They were in an actual tunnel now. Bare rock. Not much light. A damp, sour smell in the air. Cold. He pulled his jacket tighter around him and limped after Begley. Ten steps and she opened a door, dim light flooding in. It was a regular-looking door, the frame set roughly into the rock wall. Begley inspected the hallway beyond it for a second and then nodded, stepping through.

He tried to walk normally. His ankle hurt like hell, but he managed to avoid more than a nominal limp. He wondered if it was pride or the simple urge to not hold them back. Tabled it for later examination, when he wasn't fleeing from unknown forces.

The corridor they emerged into was lit by a single fluorescent bulb that flickered and buzzed. The silent, yellow emergency lights blinked on and off every six feet. It had been finished in a perfunctory, industrial way. Cold concrete floor. Unpainted drywall on the walls. A thick yellow line had been painted on the floor. About forty or fifty years ago, by the look of it. There were other doors every few feet, some unmarked. The ones that were marked weren't very helpful, as far as he was concerned. They had signs like CORRIDOR A15 or MECH ACCESS 2.

Jargon Shields, literally. Jargon was designed to keep the uninitiated — the outsiders — in the dark. Signs were usually written in ways that conveyed all necessary information to those who knew the jargon, but kept everyone else mystified. It was passive-aggressive, in a way. Looking around, he thought this facility might just be the most passive-aggressive place in the world.

Begley turned to shut the door behind them. "All right," she

said. “We have an advantage, then.”

He nodded. “They think we’re still in there.”

“Right. We’re deep underground, and in order to get *out*, we have to go *up*, through the complex. We don’t know anything. We have no idea what we’d be walking into.”

“We know they’re armed. We know they came prepared. We know they want *me*.”

She was in charge. He could sense it. Whatever equality had existed between them in the Suite, whatever hesitation she’d felt was gone. She was in her element, and he suspected he would be taking orders from her for the foreseeable future. He didn’t mind. He had to admit she knew more than he did, had been trained for this. All he would be able to do was comment sarcastically on the quality of the signage. He was content to let her lead.

Begley nodded. “And that’s the sum of our information. Come on.” She turned right and started walking.

He fell in behind her. The ankle felt weak and stiff, but he could walk on it, for now. Shock. Adrenaline and endorphins. It would swell and start to ache, become tender, if he didn’t stay on it constantly. He remembered his father, teaching him the “hurry cases” when he’d been in the Boy Scouts. Serious Bleeding. Internal Poisoning. Stopped Breathing. Heart Attack.

He particularly remembered *heart attack*, because the only instruction had been to make sure the victim was comfortable and wait for an ambulance to arrive. So much for first aid.

“Where are we going?”

She didn’t turn around. “To gather intelligence, Mr. President.”

10.

Twelve minutes before they ran out of things to say, Begley was impatiently picking her way down another concrete corridor, nervously squinting at every sign posted on the walls. Renicks struggled to keep up, limping more noticeably as they progressed. She was willing to grade him a solid B prior to the fall. He didn't have any training. But he'd remained calm, had thought ahead. Had helped more than he'd hindered. Now he was slowing them down. It maybe wasn't his fault, but she blamed him anyway.

"Agent Begley," he said.

She could tell by his voice he had fallen behind, and stopped. "Call me Begs," she said, turning to look back at him as he caught up. "That's what my friends call me. And for the foreseeable future, Mr. Renicks, you are my best friend in the whole world."

"Your only friend," he corrected, smiling. "And call me Jack. No one does, but I'm trying to start a new trend."

She couldn't resist smiling back. She nodded her chin at his foot. "How is it?"

He looked down at it. "Swollen like a balloon and throbbing, but I'll live. Where are we headed?"

Begley realized he hadn't been pestering her with questions. Had just followed her lead. Had assumed she knew what she was doing. She liked that. It was a rare personality trait to admit you didn't know better.

She resumed walking, holding back her pace a bit. "There's a redundant security office down on this level. Meant to be used

when the main one is being refitted, or if it's damaged in some way. Hasn't been touched since the *last* refit twenty years ago. I doubt anyone up there knows it exists." They haven't been living in this dungeon for a year like me, she thought. "If it's still functioning, we should be able to get some idea of what's going on in here."

The corridor branched off again, offering three choices. Forward, left, right. She turned left without hesitating. Walked another ten steps, then stopped outside a substantial-looking metal door. The plastic sign read SEC CON SITE D. The letters had once been sharp black, but had faded and chipped. There was a now-familiar unmarked keypad mounted on the wall next to it. She stood for a moment, thinking. The sequence was encrypted on her tablet's hard drive, but she hesitated to power the tablet on. Even if she prevented it from connecting to the facility's network its radio might show up on the security matrix.

Renicks waited behind her. Said nothing.

She was surprised at herself; she normally had a good memory for things like this. But she was coming up blank. She had three tries. After three incorrect entries, the keypad would lock up and the door wouldn't open for twenty-four hours unless the security grid was reset. That would mean an alarm, and the redundant security office wouldn't be a secret for much longer.

She took a deep breath. Didn't want to admit to Renicks that she couldn't remember. Didn't want to admit to herself that she cared what he thought. She prided herself on being the ultracompetent one in the room, and had always feared moments like this.

She closed her eyes, reached out, and let her fingers work.

Muscle memory. The pattern was in her head, she just needed to access it. Seventeen buttons, and when she heard the light *ping* of success, she opened her eyes and pulled the door open without looking back at Renicks.

The air inside the room was stale and dusty. It wasn't a large room. The wall on the left as they entered was filled with a bank of instruments and monitor screens, similar to the setup back in the Executive Suite but older, more outdated. There was a thin slab of desk and two large office rolling chairs. Everything was under a sheet of yellowing plastic which had at one time been taped to the floor with blue painter's tape. The tape had given up long ago and clung to the plastic as it rippled. The plastic and the floor were covered in a thick layer of yellow dust. She decided not to think about what, exactly, formed *yellow* dust.

There was an old yellow phone mounted on the wall. She snatched it from the wall and placed it against her ear. Heard nothing. She shook her head at Renicks and put the phone back in its cradle.

"Internet?" he asked.

She shrugged, eyes slowly wandering the plastic-covered equipment. "I'm sensing a pattern here. But one way to be sure."

A gray metal panel on the wall contained the circuit breakers. She pulled it open and shoved the master over to ON. The single bulb in the fixture on the ceiling exploded with a loud pop, and a deep humming noise permeated the air.

"You sure they won't notice that power-on?"

She wasn't, but saw no purpose in saying she was *reasonably sure* it wouldn't be. Nodded crisply as she tore the plastic sheet away from the console. Leaned in and started turning the

monitors on, one by one. LED lights were glowing green. She leaned in as one screen resolved into a black and white command prompt. She typed into the keyboard embedded in the desk. Hit return. Glanced up at the screen again and shook her head. Tried to keep the anxiety out of her voice.

“No gateway,” she said. “Let’s see what kind of signals are getting fed to the screens.”

The monitors all began displaying black and white images as they warmed up. Each was split into four smaller screens, with an overlay of white letters at the top right corner identifying the feed.

Most of the images were eerily still. Empty rooms. Empty corridors. Two of the screens showed motion.

The first showed the corridor outside the Executive Suite. The sparks and flashes of light from the door overwhelmed the screen’s contrast balance. The image would resolve to a glimpse of people gathered around the double doors for a second. Looking like a rugby scrum. Then it would flash to white, all the details lost. In one flash she recognized the agent who had driven Renicks to the complex, standing back a little from three others working the doors.

The second showed another control room. Much larger. Filled with monitors and banks of equipment. Filled with people. She recognized Amesley immediately. Standing at ease. No indication of stress, of being a prisoner. He was part of it, whatever it was. There were four other people in the room. Begley couldn’t be sure, but she thought one of them had been among the workers swarming over the complex, sans uniform. *Observe*, she thought to herself. *When collecting intelligence never*

discount your own observations. She pushed her eyes around the screen, trying to take in every detail.

She froze. “Oh, *shit.*”

She felt Renicks sink down into the seat beside her. Appreciated the fact that she’d forgotten he was there for a moment, because he was not screaming, or barking orders, or twitching with some horrible nervous tic. He was blasting *calm* into the air.

“What is it?”

She pointed at the corner of the screen, where something that appeared to be a suitcase sat on one of the consoles. It was open, the lid standing up at a ninety-degree angle. On the screen it was impossible to see in any detail what was inside.

“That,” she said slowly “is the Portable Nuclear Arsenal Authorization and Deployment Platform. Otherwise known as the Nuclear Football.”

Renicks sucked in air. “Shit,” he spat out. “They can’t *launch* anything, can they?”

She shook her head. Moved her pointing finger a precise number of inches to the left. “But look at that.”

She was pointing at a console where two women leaned down close to a pair of monitors. A blur of text scrolled down one screen. One of the women appeared to be working the keyboard. One was working something out on a pad of paper.

Renicks leaned forward. “They have the launch codes,” he said slowly. “Those are in the briefcase, right?”

She nodded, slightly impressed. “They are. Although some Presidents have chosen to carry them on their person.”

“But not Grant.”

She shook her head. “Not Grant. Grant was a stickler for tradition. Weird about it, actually. Kind of a mania.”

“So what are they doing?”

She took a deep breath. “If I had to guess, I would say they were recalculating target trajectories.”

There was a quiet moment of dull horror shared between them.

“Can they *do* that?”

“They’d have to. The Brick contains pre-mapped targets for a number of scenarios. The common ones. The ones the Pentagon has run a million simulations on and come out with a 90%-plus likelihood. Russian aggression. North Korea. Iran and Israel. But they don’t have The Brick, and you can never predict *every* possibility that might land the President on the run, in the air, in *here*. So sure you can enter new targets, if you can calculate them correctly. If you have time. It’s not easy.”

Renicks pursed his lips. “What happens when they have the new target data?”

“Nothing, unless you’re there. They can’t do anything unless they have the authorized and validated Acting President physically present. You have to be within a foot or so.”

“So that was the idea. Set up new targets, have Gerry Flanagan launch missiles, somewhere.” He smiled humorlessly. “And now I guess the idea is, cut into the executive suite, take me by force. *Physically present* suddenly sounds kind of scary.”

Begley took another deep breath. Most people who hadn’t been tortured thought they could withstand it. That they were special. She sometimes felt that way, too, but she knew intellectually that it was bullshit. Renicks knew the score,

though, and that made her feel a little better. It was difficult to protect someone who didn't think they needed it.

She half-stood and leaned over towards some of the equipment. "This monitor over here is designed to scan for frequencies on the complex's feed. I'm going to see if they're getting anything from the outside. Police transmissions, military channels. If anyone's beaming television we can get that too."

"You mean actually know what's going on?" Renicks said, leaning back in his chair. "Crazy."

She smiled. Flicked on the monitor and pushed three buttons on the stack beneath it. Green lights. White noise. She put her hand on the big dial and started turning it, slow, careful. Like she was trying to crack a safe.

A moment later, a picture resolved on the monitor. No sound. It was local news.

They both stared at it.

It was strangely normal. The commentator was a middle-aged man with a terrible haircut and a worse suit. Begley thought he should be fired for the suit alone, but the haircut made it a capital offense. After a moment, they cut away to a long shot of the Capitol Building. The title read BOMBING AT STATE OF THE UNION.

"Fuck," Renicks said from behind. Then he leaned forward, jabbing his finger under her nose. "Hey! The crawl!"

She shifted her eyes down. At the bottom of the screen was a crawl of words, slowly moving from the right edge of the screen to the left. They both leaned forward, reading.

"Grant's alive," Renicks breathed.

Begley nodded, frowning. Reading. The crawl had switched to

a report about a possible chemical attack in Virginia. No one knew if it was related or not.

“He’s not even badly injured. *Stable condition.*” Renicks stood up. “*Conscious.* Jesus Christ, President Grant’s *okay.* What the fuck am I still doing here?”

Begley was intently reading the crawl. “Because they’ve somehow kept this complex online. They’ve somehow locked out changes, and you’re still in the system.” She turned to face him. “Normally if the all-clear is signaled, this complex goes offline, and you’re taken out of the system as the chief executive. If that signal is somehow *blocked*, you stay in. They would have to crawl through every node and remove your credentials. It’ll take days.”

He stopped. “Days.”

“That’s not the worst of it,” she added, pointing to the screen. “See here, where it’s reporting that Bluemont, Virginia and the surrounding area are being evacuated because of a ‘potential chemical attack’, possibly related?”

Renicks nodded. “Bluemont’s a few miles from here.”

Begley nodded. “It’s in the blast radius.”

Renicks started to say something, then stopped and stared at her. “They’re going to bomb this place.”

She shook her head. “They don’t have to. This situation’s been modeled, Mister — Jack. *Everything’s* been modeled. They pay bright people from Ivy League schools to sit in rooms and come up with hilarious scenarios and to plot likely responses to them. This one’s a classic: The Continuity Program gets compromised, a rogue Acting President attempts to launch missiles. So, the whole complex is wired to blow. Charges buried deep below, designed to make this place come down like a pancake.” She

pointed at the screen again. “Just in case the engineers got a little too happy with the TNT, they’re evacuating.”

“Jesus,” Renicks said. Begley thought it was becoming his favorite word. “They’re going to blow us up.”

“They can’t know that you’re not cooperating. They have to assuming you’re part of this.”

He looked at her and smiled. It was a gray, ghostly smile. “I can’t even get my ex-wife to give me my daughters’ cell phone numbers, and I’m supposed to be masterminding *this*?” He shook his head. “How do we know the people we’re running from haven’t cut those lines as well?”

She shook her head. “No lines to cut. It’s all wireless. Satellite feeds. Encrypted.” She paused. Was it *possible* they had seized control of the charges? Yes, she thought. For people who had done all this, yes, it was possible. No profit from that vein, though.

“All right. How long?”

She liked that. It made her feel like there was something positive to be done. “Based on evacuation pace and the normal chain of command,” she said slowly, reluctant to tie herself to an estimate that had no basis in clear evidence, “two hours. Maybe less.” She hesitated, then decided to pursue a policy of Full Disclosure with Renicks. “If they either crack the football’s security and gain access, or if you come into contact with it and activate the launcher, they’ll know. In Washington. And they’ll blow this place *immediately* at that moment.”

He nodded, looked back at the screens. They stood side by side, studying them, silent. There didn’t seem to be anything more to say.

11.

Seven minutes before sending Darmity down to Level Twelve, Director Martin Amesley practiced keeping his face blank.

It was a skill he'd developed as a boy, an awkward boy with thick glasses. Skinny. With a slight stammer. He'd found that reacting to bullies and verbal abuse only invited more depredations. Ignoring it, being *unmoved* by it, wore them down. It was a subtle skill. Not flashy. But satisfying in its own way. It was a skill that had served him well as he'd served to protect increasingly inferior men and women.

Right now it was a skill he was using on a constant basis when dealing with Frank Darmity.

Darmity tested Amesley's implacability. His trustworthiness was unimpeachable, of course. The man was a patriot, and had served his country well. Had come to his command with the best possible references. The best possible. He was not a military man, which Amesley could easily forgive as he himself was not comfortable with the military type. Capable, bluff men and women who always seemed at ease. But Darmity was also not Secret Service. He was corporate. A mercenary, Amesley supposed would be the right word. A contractor. With vast experience, of course. But Director Amesley disliked working with anyone he had not trained personally.

He had no choice, when it came to Darmity. Darmity had been added to the team via direct order. Amesley had been practicing his Blank Face ever since.

There had been a hundred small infractions, but the

altercation with Renicks on the road was the first major mistake Darmity had made. Amesley was not so much worried about the event in particular. It had resolved satisfactorily, albeit more from Secretary Renicks' professional attitude than from Darmity's efforts. What worried Amesley was Darmity's continued belligerence towards Renicks as a result of it. He seemed to expect some opportunity to exact revenge on Renicks for perceived slights and insults.

Darmity was violent and unpredictable. The other members of the detail were uncomfortable with him, and there had already been altercations. Under normal circumstances he would have chosen to keep Darmity separate from the rest of his team. A weapon under lock and key. Amesley had no doubt that Darmity had a skill set that would come in handy under a variety of circumstances, but he would have preferred to deploy him purposefully rather than have him wandering the complex with a chip on his shoulder.

But the technical team that had been working in the facility, shaping lines of communication and plugging the security holes they could, had exited the complex shortly after Renicks' arrival. As per plan. Which left him with a short detail of agents with half of them engaged in a difficult breaching operation. He could not afford to keep an effective tool like Darmity in a drawer.

Amesley eyed the security monitor. Sighed heavily. Reached over and picked up a walkie-talkie. Made sure it was set to the encrypted channel. Depressed the TALK button.

"Mr. Darmity," he said crisply. "Please leave those men to their *work* and report to me in the Security Office."

He switched off the walkie-talkie and watched Darmity,

standing in the hall outside the Executive Suite, pick up his own unit and say something into it. An excuse, Amesley thought. A reason he should be standing in the hall. Waiting for access to Renicks. He watched Darmity speak into the walkie-talkie, frown and adjust the channel, speak again, then finally turn and walk out of the picture.

The second major mistake Darmity had engineered had been the Hallway Detail. He wasn't Secret Service. He wasn't familiar with the protocol. He'd pulled the detail and that had spooked Begley. And now they were cutting magnetic locks and racing against time.

Still, Amesley had no intention of punishing Darmity. Amesley wasn't sure he would be *capable* of punishing Darmity. Darmity was short, but muscular. Trained. He'd displayed no empathetic response that Amesley could determine. He recognized authority, but not *Amesley's* authority. The Director knew that Darmity had been ordered to follow his instructions, but it was only that order which kept him obedient.

Also: Darmity hated him.

Amesley wasn't alarmed, or surprised. Darmity, as far as he could tell, hated everyone. He had a high school education from a high school of no consequence. He'd come from a broken home of some sort; Amesley had not been moved to investigate too closely. He'd spent much of the next fifteen years outside the country. A contractor. A mercenary. In the past, he would have been recruited into something. The CIA's less-savory portfolios, perhaps. In the modern age, an age when the United States of America had been bled dry by a series of inferior Presidents, corrupt cabinet members, increasingly stupid members of

congress — in such a debased age he had naturally gone to work for a corporation.

“Sir?”

Amesley blinked behind his thick glasses and turned to look over at one of the groups of Agents in the Security Office. It was a large room, filled with banks of equipment: Computers, monitors, televisions, telephones, massive slabs of buttons and switches. There were only four people in it at present. The agent who had spoken was a young blond man, a doughy, breathless-looking man who had trouble keeping his shirt tails tucked into his pants. He was monitoring the security cameras, watching for anything unusual throughout the complex.

“Yes, Agent Killiam?” Amesley said. Face blank.

“One hour,” Agent Killiam said.

Amesley nodded absently. “Do we have an ETA on the package?”

Killiam hesitated, then came to a decision and shook his head. “No, sir. The Grab Teams all report no contact.”

Amesley nodded again. “You did do advance work, Agent Killiam?”

Killiam paled, but kept his composure. “Sir, all research indicated they would be at the main property. We identified possible alternate locations as well, and have Grab Teams at them all. We'll get them.”

Amesley said nothing. Even if that were true, there was a worsening situation outside the complex, and he wasn't sure if a team could make it in time, or if they'd be able to approach if they did. Amesley sighed. There were other ways. There was Frank Darmity. “Thank you.”

Amesley glanced at the monitor again. Watched the sparks flying, melting the scene to white over and over again. He suspected it was going to come to that.

His stomach cramped, and he fought to maintain control. An acidic hand grabbed onto his bowels and twisted them, but he sat silently, staring at the security monitor. Drummed his fingers on the surface of the console in front of him. Didn't move at all.

"Sir," a female agent from the other end of the room said crisply.

He turned his head and practiced his blank expression on her. She was a plain woman. Late thirties. Square face. Bad haircut. Her name was Wallace.

"We've cut the fifth lock."

He nodded, swallowing bile. There were a few trailing spasms in his gut, and then he was left with just a pounding heart, sweat on his upper lip. Five locks down, seven to go. Another hour, at least.

He glanced over at the wall of monitors and picked out Darmity, riding the elevator. The man appeared to be talking to himself. Lips moving slightly. If Amesley were pressed to offer a guess he would suggest that Darmity was repeating a mantra of some sort.

He would have preferred to have only his own people involved. He would have preferred a lot of things. Begley, for instance. He would have preferred that she not have appeared unexpectedly at the morning conference call, would have preferred Murray had hesitated three more seconds before

crossing a street and not been hit by a speeding car.

None of this registered on Amesley's face. He sat, silent, completely still, and showed nothing.

"Sir?"

Amesley forced himself to turn slowly. Calmly. It was Wallace again. She had received nothing but high marks on all her reports and reviews. He disliked her anyway. Regretted placing her on the detail. But they'd been short of appropriate people.

"I've got a security alert," she said slowly, studying a monitor in front of her. "It's ... it's strange."

Amesley's guts twitched, but he merely tilted his head. "Yes, Agent Wallace?"

She hesitated another second, then looked up at the Director. "According to this, Secretary Renicks is on the eleventh level. Outside the Executive Suite."

Amesley squinted at her. Then stood up, smoothing down his tie, and stepping around to stand next to her. He bent down and peered at the monitor. The biorhythmic tracking system had picked up Renicks' signature. It was unreliable tracking people through the complex, but did often indicate a general location. You could not rely on it to show you in real time where someone was, but eventually it would note what level the DS was located on. Sure enough, it showed him on a lower level.

It was impossible. He straightened up and looked at Wallace. Said nothing. She knew as well as he did that it was impossible. There was no point in saying it. He glanced up as Darmity entered the Security Office.

The short man was wearing a Service-issued ballistic vest and carrying a light machine gun that was *not* Service-issued. A

positively huge hunting knife was strapped to his hip. He'd shed his suit jacket and rolled his sleeves up over the elbow. Amesley imagined he'd done this to show off his musculature, which was, the Director admitted to himself, impressive. Amesley thought it likely that Darmity had been just the sort of kid he himself had feared and despised as a child. A bully.

Amesley glanced back at the monitor for a moment. Made a decision. This was the most important day in American History. In World History. He was not going to risk everything because he lacked flexibility of thought. Or lacked the wherewithal to apply the resources he'd been given, however noxious they were.

His face expressionless, he looked at the short, burly man. "Mr. Darmity," he said clearly. "Make a sweep of the lower levels, starting with eleven. Make sure they are unpopulated."

Darmity hesitated a second, annoyance flashing across his face. Then he mastered himself and nodded, turning back for the doors.

"Mr. Darmity!" Amesley said in a tone of voice that was precisely one degree louder and more urgent.

Darmity paused, but did not turn around.

"Remember, if you let your temper get the best of you, it is not *me* you will have to explain yourself to. Understood?"

Darmity stood there another few seconds. Didn't turn around. Didn't say anything. Then stepped out of the Security Office. Amesley let his gaze linger on the empty space that had been Frank Darmity for a moment, then allowed himself a single shrug of the eyebrows to convey endless patience. For his own amusement. It was going to be a very long day, he thought, and comforted himself that at least he expected to be dead by the end

of it.

12.

Seven minutes before the elevator doors opened, Renicks watched Begley cautiously open a fire door a half-inch, leaning in to press her eyes against the sliver of light. He was still out of breath but tried to hide it, breathing in shallow little gasps. He was honest enough to admit it was vanity. Begley was young, and attractive, and capable. And she'd scampered up the access ladder like she did it every morning for exercise. Which, he thought, was entirely possible. The way she'd led him through the service corridors spoke of a familiarity bordering on contempt.

After a few seconds, she turned back towards him. Nodded, pulling her gun from its holster. He noted it was the first time she had drawn the gun since he'd arrived. It looked like a toy. Like it would weigh nothing. Like it was made of black plastic with some gray bits here and there, a red dot visible on one side. He didn't know much about guns. Uncle Richie would have said he knew just enough to get into trouble.

She pushed the door open and stepped into the hall, turning in a smooth movement to scan the visible area. She held the gun down by her thigh, finger along the barrel. She stood still for a few seconds, then holstered the gun again and waved him through without looking back.

"This place is huge," she said. "Chances of running into them on the non-essential floors is pretty low. I saw seven people. Plus the short guy, your driver."

"Darmity," he said, a small piece sliding into place in his

mind. “Not an agent, huh?”

She shook her head. “Not that I know of. It’s possible he’s from another office. But what I saw of him makes me doubt he’s in the Service at all.”

Renicks filed that away. “So what level is this?”

“Eleven,” she said, turning and walking. “Storage, mostly. A few administrative offices. If you’re in the mood to pick up a few RTE meals, now would be the time.”

“From what I hear, RTEs are made from old boots and tears,” he said. “No thanks.”

She snorted. “We can make for the elevators. If they’re still online, I can lock out changes once we’re in. They won’t be able to stop us from riding all the way up, and they won’t be able to beat us to the top. It might only be a minute or so, but we’d have a lead.”

“Would the elevators be running if the government’s planning to blow us to kingdom come?”

She shrugged. “Sure. If the perimeter upstairs is breached, keeping the elevators locked down won’t do much good; an invader can rain grenades down the shafts and then rappel down in a few seconds. So you might as well leave them online, for convenience.”

He nodded. “And if they think we’re still in the suite, even less reason to shut them down.”

The hallway was an improvement over the service corridors. It was carpeted; a thick brown industrial carpet that had plenty of dark grease stains and tread marks from countless hand trucks. The walls were finished. Everything painted a vanilla color that showed each scrape, divot, and stain the walls had ever

endured. The ceiling had been dropped, all the infrastructure hidden behind sagging foam squares running along aluminum tracks.

The silence was almost total. Renicks imagined he could hear a muted sizzling, the impossible sound of silence.

There were no signs on the walls or floor, and the doors had cryptic signs which offered no description of what lay behind them, but Begley moved confidently. Renicks himself was lost after the second junction. Every hall looked the same. All the doors looked the same, and he was willing to bet there were exactly the same number of them along each leg of corridor.

After the fourth turn, the elevator bank came into view. Two sets of doors, a pair of the ubiquitous keypads alongside each. The doors were a dull, scratched-up stainless steel.

Begley held up one hand, and Renicks stopped.

“Let me take a look,” she said, moving forward with one hand on her gun. “If they’re offline we can make for the freight elevator, but that’s less secure because I can’t lock out changes in it.”

Renicks watched her approach the elevators carefully, moving diagonally to hug one wall while she watched the opposite side, giving her a view of one end of the perpendicular corridor while hiding her from the other. She moved quickly. Trained. He found it comforting that she knew what to do. It was all in her posture and her movements: Straight and immediate. Back in the suite there had been moments of hesitation, of confusion.

Understandable. But now that they had made decisions and started moving, her body language was tight and controlled. A woman who knew exactly what she was doing. Which made him

feel a lot better about the first hundred minutes or so of his administration.

She ducked her head around the other corner, and relaxed. “Okay, let’s see if we’re in business.”

As she walked over to the nearest of the keypads, Renicks thought back to the file he’d discovered on the Brick. *ELIRO*. The first line was still clear in his mind: *dum tre longa tempo nun*. It had a rhythm to it, a bounce. He chanted it in his head a few times, convinced he’d seen the words before, or somehow recognized them. Like a song he’d heard once, long ago, the tune still familiar.

Dum tre longa tempo nun. He recited the words. Nothing came of it.

He let it go. He knew the only way to dredge up a memory was to relax. Forget about it. Let the brain do its work. He tested his weight on his ankle. Got a sharp pain in response. Manageable, he thought. If he had to he could even run. His whole foot throbbed. His shoe was tight around the swelling appendage.

He glanced up at Begley. She was tapping a complex series of buttons on the keypad.

He didn’t have any references to work with to analyze the phrase, and it was only six distinct forms anyway. More in the file; it was a brief document but long enough to work with. But he couldn’t remember more than the title and the first six words. Still, plenty you could do with simple thought experiments while waiting for your sole ally to work the elevators. Was it a cipher? If it was a simple substitution for English, the first word could be *the*. Would the President of the United States use something as

old and insecure as the Caesar Cipher or ROT13 to obscure something? A man who had the best cryptographers on the planet at his fingertips. Not likely.

Still, he thought: People did strange things. Out of laziness. Out of ignorance. Or because the document itself simply wasn't anything more than a curiosity. He might spend hours working on it, only to find he'd decoded a grocery list.

He ruled out a ROT cipher immediately. A Rotation cipher just rotated the alphabet by a certain number of letters. In ROT13, the letter A became N and so on, so the word "the" became "gur". Even if you altered the number you rotated the alphabet by, he could tell immediately the phrase didn't work in a simple rotation cipher.

Instant possibilities flashed through his mind. A book cipher. A one-time pad sort of code. He got lost in his own thoughts, his mind crawling through the slim amount of information he had at his disposal. The hallway faded away. The sound of the keypad buttons clicking under Begley's fingers disappeared. He was in a gray, silent bubble of thought.

The elevator *dinged* softly. He looked up.

"Oh, *fuck*," Begley whispered, stepping back suddenly, her hand going to her gun.

Renicks jerked back to full awareness. Half-crouched in sudden alarm, ready to move. Watching Begley. Following her lead.

The elevator doors split open.

The elevator was empty.

The interior was dull metal plates screwed in place. The floor was tile that looked thick and durable and was a shade of green

that made almost every human who looked down at it think of something they had vomited at some point in their life. It was lit by a weak incandescent bulb behind a frosted plastic bubble on the ceiling of the cab.

For a second Begley and Renicks just stood, staring into the empty elevator. Slowly, he straightened up. Started to say something to her. Then he heard a noise behind him. It was a dry, quiet noise. The sound of a shoe dragging slightly on carpet. Before he could react, there was something pushing into the small of his back, and then a familiar voice almost in his ear.

“Hello, asshole.”

13.

Four minutes before opening the first crate, Renicks watched Begley spin, hauling her gun from its holster and leveling it in his direction. He recognized Frank Darmity's voice with a stab of sudden horror. Those eyes in the rear-view mirror, hard and humorless.

"Step away!" Begley shouted. The gun in her hand was steady. It suddenly looked huge to Renicks. The one in his back felt larger. He considered scenarios. Twisting away, spinning and shoving the gun aside. Forcing himself backwards, knocking Darmity off his feet. He ran through the possibilities quickly. They all ended with him shot and bleeding.

He'd never been shot. Not once in his life. He tried to picture himself taking it manfully, wincing a little and shrugging it off. It was impossible. He stayed perfectly still.

Begley started moving very slowly, angling herself to get a better shot.

"Stand down, Agent Begley," Darmity said. He sounded amused, Renicks thought. Relaxed. In control. He had a vague Bostonian accent. Broad A, non-rhotic, but softened, like he'd spent a lot of time among people with different accents, or like he'd spent a lot of time trying to chisel it off his words. "And stop moving right now, or I'll panic and shoot the Secretary. Who I don't like much to begin with."

"You won't," Begley said, taking another small step. "You need him. You kill him, this whole complex goes offline."

"I got impulse control issues," he said. "You'd be amazed at

the things I've done when under pressure. Sure, I kill him, that's a mess. I've pissed people off before. I survived. And there's a lot of daylight between *dead* and *fucking hurt*, right?"

Renicks indulged in a quick, one-second fantasy wherein Frank Darmity was crushed under falling concrete blocks.

"Besides, where do you think you're going? This whole place is locked down. We tagged the elevators right away. Watching 'em. You ain't going nowhere that way. Even if you got up to the top this place is buttoned *up*. Nothing in, nothing out."

Renicks took a long, deep breath. Looked at Begley's face. It was a hard mask, determined and unflinching. Her eyes flicked to his and she shook her head slightly. Just a tiny movement. Telling him, he thought, to stay put. Stay still. Not to complicate her job by doing anything stupid.

He imagined himself calm and clear. Forced himself to try and see the scene as if from a camera. Outside his body. Objectively.

Suddenly, the gun disappeared from his back. Immediately there was a gunshot, so loud his ears rang and he jumped involuntarily. At the shooting range he'd always worn protective headgear, and the shots had been muted. Distant. The noise stayed in his ear even as the gun reappeared in his back.

Begley stopped. Still had her gun trained on them. "Okay," she said. "Okay, let's take a moment."

Renicks swallowed and took another deep breath. His heart was rattling in his chest, swamped by adrenaline. His legs felt weak. He forced himself to stay alert. Calm. He pictured the hallway behind him. Picked out the junction where another corridor cut across and figured that was where Darmity had

emerged from, moving softly behind them. The corridor was exactly like all the others Begley had led him down. The elevators were at a T-junction; one corridor terminating at the two sets of doors, another running left and right from there. The one elevator was still open.

“You got a *moment* to drop your fucking gun,” Darmity snapped.

Renicks considered the elevator. Played with the idea for one second. Saw himself shoving Darmity back and diving for it. Begley picking up on it immediately and diving after him. Hitting a button, the doors shutting just as Darmity fired, bullets slamming into the steel. Then rejected it. He didn’t have any leverage. Wouldn’t be able to make Darmity move much. And Darmity had said the elevators were being observed — of course they were. More likely they’d dive into it, hit a button, and then sit there like targets.

He looked at Begley again. She’d stopped moving, but still had her gun aimed right at them. He was standing in front of Darmity. Had the gun in his back. But Darmity wasn’t holding onto him. In the movies, when people had hostages they always draped an arm around their necks, or held onto their arms. But Renicks supposed that if you knew what you were doing you could use that against an attacker.

He was right in Begley’s line of fire. Which meant Darmity was in Begley’s line of fire, with the potentially unfortunate caveat that any bullet would have to first pass through *him* before hitting Darmity.

But Darmity wasn’t holding onto him. He stared at Begley and willed her to look back at him.

“You drop him, I drop you,” Begley said. Her voice was flat and the gun was steady in her hands. Renicks considered the worrying possibility that she might actually consider shooting him an acceptable sacrifice. It would solve the major problem.

Darmity laughed a hard-edged, humorless sort of laugh. Renicks remembered similar laughs from bullies when he’d been a kid. He’d been in plenty of fights with kids who thought it was fun to torture smaller, younger kids

“Listen, Agent Begley, I’m gonna reach for my radio and let ‘em know I’ve got you. And then in one minute —”

Begley’s eyes flashed to Renicks. He winked at her, and looked down at the floor, then back up. After a second, she nodded.

“— it won’t matter anymore, okay?”

Still looking at Renicks, Begley nodded. “Okay.”

He just let himself drop, sagging over to the left and hitting the floor hard, teeth bouncing in his mouth.

Two gunshots, one after the other. Darmity grunting, breath knocked out of him. A bone-rattling impact against the wall.

Then Begley was shouting at him, her hands digging into the fabric of his shirt and jacket, hauling him up. He stumbled into a staggered run as she dragged him behind her. After five or six steps he found his balance and she released him, pushing him ahead of her as she spun around. At the next junction she shoved him to the right, and he ran. Another junction and she pushed him left. Everything passed by him in a blur of panic. When she shouted his name and grabbed his shoulder, pulling him to a halt, he spun to face her and realized he had no idea where they were in relation to anything.

“In here,” she said, breathing hard. She pulled open an unmarked metal door. Fire rated, heavy as hell, but no lock. He ducked into nearly-total darkness and heard her step in behind him, pulling the door shut.

For a few seconds it was just darkness, a sense of being crowded, and the sound of their hitched, painful breathing.

“Jesus fucking *Christ*,” he finally hissed. His arm hurt where he’d fallen on it, and his ankle throbbed terribly. But he didn’t think he’d been shot, and decided that was about the best outcome he could have expected. “Thanks for not just shooting me dead and calling it a day. They’d probably have given you a medal for saving the world.”

She snorted. He realized he’d become quite familiar, and fond of, the sound of Agent Begley snorting in amused derision. “I’m Secret Service, Jack. My job is to *protect* my asset. Now shut the hell up for a few minutes.”

He listened to their breathing slow. Hers faster than his. Within a minute she’d dropped back to an easy, quiet respiration while he was still struggling to regulate his breathing. Out of shape. Too many glasses of Scotch with too many rich dinners. Everyone in Washington wanted to hold meetings over steaks and cocktails.

They sat in the darkness and listened. There was no sound. No footsteps, no shouts.

“Do you think you killed him?” Renicks finally whispered.

Begley stirred. He heard her moving. Smelled her perfume. “I don’t know,” she whispered back. “At that distance the five-mils can penetrate Kevlar, but depends on the rating of his armor. And I’ve never *seen* a penetration, just read about tests in labs.”

The weak blue light of her flashlight appeared. He saw her outlined in it, the weak light giving her face odd shadows, making her look alien. He spun around, searching the shadows. The room was much larger than he'd suspected, the walls shooting up at least fifteen feet.

"Where are we?"

"Storage L-15. Come on. They know we're on this level, we have to get out of here. Sooner or later they'll come to this room."

She moved briskly towards the rear of the room. Renicks looked around as he followed. The large, square room was filled with crates. The wooden boxes had stenciled lettering on them. It was too dark to read. The crates were stacked on top of each other, forming canyon walls they squeezed between. At the rear of the room she stopped, standing in a narrow corridor formed by two parallel walls of crates.

"Up there — "

Renicks gasped.

Begley spun, poised and alert. "What?"

"Look."

He took the flashlight from her and pointed it at one of the crates. Stenciled on the side was

CL-TOP

S/N 9900-RT-88Y-7

ELIRO_TRACK

REF: OWH-00992

Begley crowded next to him, leaning down. "What?"

He shook his head and snapped back to the present. Told her about Eliro, about the file on The Brick. Took the flashlight and turned until he spied one of the crates sitting on the floor, nothing on top of it. “Come on. Let’s see what’s in these things.”

She grabbed his arm. “Jack, we don’t have *time*. Darmity might come through that door at any time. A *team* might come through that door. We have to get off this level. Back into the service corridors.”

He shrugged her off. “One minute. We need information. We’re running around in the dark, here. literally.”

He heard her follow him to the crate. He dropped his bag and knelt down with the light, yanking it open and digging through, extracting a pair of scissors from his toiletry bag. Standing up, he worked the scissors into the lid of the crate until it was halfway in, then put his weight on it until the lid lifted up a fraction of an inch. Repeated the operation five, six, seven times until there was a uniform quarter-inch gap all around. Pushing his fingers into the gap, he flexed his hand and slowly forced the lid up, splinters digging into his finger. With a final grunt the lid popped up and he pushed it all the way up, holding it with both hands.

They stared down into it.

“Fuck,” Begley said in a low voice.

Body bags. It was filled with tightly rolled body bags. He’d seen a few in his father’s office, or their occasional trips to the hospital or morgue. They gleamed like black jewels in the weak blue light.

“That’s not *encouraging*, Begs,” Renicks said softly.

He found the shipping manifest folded up between some of

the bags. Squinted down at it.

“Shipped last week,” he whispered. “This is a drop shipment from a Tennessee location. Looks like a lot of similar shipments went out the door to a lot of other locations.” He looked up at Begley. “Why do you ship *body bags* to a dozen places around the country? All at once?”

Begley stared back at him, chewing her lip. “Body bags. Because you expect *bodies*.” She stood for a moment, eyes wandering the dark room. “Wait,” she said, kneeling down and peering at the stencil on the crate. She stood up. Pointed. “Put the light there.”

He followed her arm and shone the light on another crate a few feet away.

“Come on,” she said. “Different serial number. Different contents.”

Scooping up his bag, he followed her, handed her the light and worked the scissors again. A minute later they looked down into the crate.

“Well ... *fuck*,” Renicks whispered.

Emergency road signs. A variety of them, describing an immense disaster: Quarantine. Martial Law. Authorized Access Zones. He found another manifest that told a similar story. A huge shipment of emergency materials to various locations around the country. A preparation for something. For what he had no idea, but he didn't think it took a genius to figure that nothing good required body bags and quarantine signs to handle.

They stood for a moment in silence, contemplating. Renicks admired the design of the signage: They conveyed authority and

doom clearly. He was depressed looking at them. Body bags and disaster signs. Whatever they'd been shipped in preparation for, there was no doubt it was expected. *Planned*. Just like his own adventure had been planned, by someone. Renicks believed coincidence was just a lack of data.

He wondered at how his day kept hitting new bottoms. Then Begley shook herself.

“Come on. We have to *move*, Jack.”

He nodded and dropped the scissors back into his bag, slinging it over his shoulder and following her back to the rear wall. She took the flashlight from him and played it along the concrete wall in front of them, up high, near the ceiling.

“Where are we going?”

She stopped moving the light and pointed. “There.”

He looked up. Didn't like what he saw. It was an air duct grate. He did some quick math and judged it to be precisely big enough for someone of his height and weight to get stuck inside.

“You're kidding.”

Begley shook her head. “Jack, I *never* kid about air ducts.”

As she leaped up onto a nearby crate and started climbing up the jumble of wooden boxes, he fought a smile and swallowed crazy, inappropriate laughter.

14.

Twenty-one minutes before ordering Renicks to get rid of The Brick, Begley watched him make a spectacularly ungraceful exit from an air duct. It was about seven feet from the floor, and for a moment she didn't think he was going to squeeze himself through. He pushed with his arms against the wall, straining. Then popped free with a curse. Hit the floor flat on his back with a dull thud that sounded painful.

She stepped over and offered him a hand up. Ran a critical eye over him, checking him for cuts and other injuries. Lingered on his face as he brushed himself off. Looking for signs he was cracking under pressure. Running into Darmity, having a gun pushed into your back — it was disconcerting even to her. She'd seen him flinch when Darmity had fired his weapon. He was her asset, and if he was going to fall apart on her she wanted some warning.

“Do me a favor,” he said, glancing up at her. “Let's not ever do that again.”

She nodded, satisfied. Whatever Jack Renicks did in his normal every day life — and from what she knew about the position of Secretary of Education it could not be exciting in the least — he handled the unexpected well enough.

They were back in the service corridor, dull bare concrete and harsh light. She considered the possibility that Amesley and Darmity knew about the service tunnels, but rejected the idea. Not because she didn't think it was possible, but because there was nothing to be done about it.

“Okay,” she said out loud. “They know we’re out of the Executive Suite.” She looked at him. He was giving her his Full Attention look. It was an intent expression. Unnerving. She was acutely aware that everything she said or did was being noted, recorded, compared to what she’d done or said earlier. “We can’t expect to get out of this complex, Jack. Darmity told us they’ve sealed it off. I thought they might hold off on that until the government got an assault force into position, but they’re not taking any chances. We could fight our way up to the top level but we’re just going to find six inches of steel between us and the rest of the world.”

“Maybe we should save some time and start assuming the worst.”

Irritation bloomed under her skin. She swallowed it down.

“Jack, the *worst* would be that we’re all going to die in here in a very short time, so we might as well tunnel back into the Executive Suite and open up some wine. Have a party. Jesus, I don’t need *smartass* right now.”

He looked down at his feet. Nodded. “You’re right.” Looked back up at her. “Okay, so escape’s off the menu. We have to be careful about our movements, now they know we’re free, they’ll probably search the place for us, right?”

She nodded. Thanked him silently for not being an asshole.

He leaned back against the wall. He was a sweaty, dirty mess. His face and clothes were stained and blackened. His posture was comically casual. Hands in his pockets. Bag slung around his back. Back hunched. She didn’t think it would take much to imagine they were on his patio chatting. Maybe during a cookout.

“Okay,” he said, spreading his hands. “Escape is out. But we’re out of the suite. Our options still have to be better than they were an hour ago. We have to assume we can risk moving. We can’t stay *here* until the bunker blows up, right?” He smiled a little. “Seeing as it’s part of the bunker. And will be blown up.”

She nodded, ignoring his lapse back into Smartass eleven seconds after being admonished for it. “Of course. We just have to be careful. We can’t assume we’re invisible to them, and we can’t assume any area of the complex is empty.”

He nodded. “What about communication? Are there other security offices we can access, try to find an outside line?”

She shook her head, but an idea bloomed in the back of her mind. “I’m convinced now they’ve somehow cut the access overall. Not line by line. I think prowling from one security office to another would be a waste of time. But ... do you have your cell phone with you?”

“In my bag.”

She pursed her lips, thinking it through as she spoke. “We can’t get *out*, but maybe we can get *up*, maybe high enough to get a signal.”

He straightened up. “How?”

“This place is designed to be self-contained for months. Years. It’s designed to take in air from the outside under even the worst conditions. Radiation, gas — it’s got a complex and comprehensive air filtration system. There are several sets of air towers — shafts — that are designed to bring air down from the outside into the plant to be processed. Filtered. Tested. It doubles as an air sensor for the outside world, in case we need to monitor air quality or radiation levels. The shafts go up to the surface.

Each one has a service ladder inside. There's no egress, but if we can climb up one of the ladders high enough, you might get a signal."

Renicks pushed off from the wall. "How high would we have to climb? We're what, a mile down here?"

"I don't know. The cell signal won't penetrate too far down, but we'd have to just check the signal every few minutes until we get somewhere."

She watched him consider. Found it remarkable how familiar he seemed already. Knew that he was going to make some unfortunate joke seconds before he did so.

"Best idea we've got," he finally said, shrugging his bag off his shoulder and rummaging through it. Came up with two bottles of water and handed one to her. "My orientation packet didn't tell me I'd need to be in Olympian shape for this Designated Survivor gig, you know. The entire thing could have been boiled down to: *pack a bag, be prepared to spend the night.*"

She smiled, unscrewing the cap of the bottle. Took a sip. "Well, Jack, if at any time you feel you are not physically capable of being the Designated Survivor, you are shit out of luck."

His booming laugh surprised and pleased her as she turned to lead him down the corridor.

Begley had a map of the complex burned into her memory. Back down to Level Fourteen, easier than climbing up. Through another maze of identical concrete corridors. Through a heavy metal door marked VENT MECH ACC. Down a stretch of narrow, low-ceilinged hall that had no installed lights. Following the blue gleam of her flashlight, she led Renicks to another door, this one as narrow and low as the corridor. It squealed on its

rusted hinges and took three solid jogs with her shoulder before it opened wide enough to admit them. The air immediately felt colder, and damper.

There was enough light to see by, barely. She had the immediate sense of the ceiling soaring upwards. Just open space above them. Every noise was dimly echoed.

They were standing on a metal grating. Could feel air moving past them, sucked down into the floor by huge spinning fans. There was a hum of almost sub-ambient noise. Embedded into the wall were a series of metal rungs, stretching up endlessly.

“One of us should stay on the ground,” Renicks said, dropping his bag and kneeling to rummage through it.”

Begley considered. He was right; if they both climbed a slip by the leader could send both crashing to the floor. “You,” she said immediately. “It’s safer.”

He shook his head. Smiling. Casual. As if this was some sort of academic disagreement. She vacillated between finding his calm annoying or comforting, between wanting to smile back or knee him in the groin.

“My phone. I’m going up.”

She sighed. Affected resignation. When he stepped toward the ladder, she took hold of his arm, twisted it slightly, and caught the phone as it slipped from his fingers. He made a squawking protest — not really words so much as *noises* of outrage.

“Jack,” she said, pushing his phone into her pocket and striding purposefully for the ladder, “you’re the asset. You’re the acting President, for god’s sake.” She pointed. “About twenty feet up are the emergency seals. Iris seals. At any time Amesley could

engage them and they will spin shut in three seconds. Anyone who happens to be on the wrong side will be trapped. Anyone who happens to be twenty feet up this ladder will be *cut in half*. You don't climb the goddamn ladder, okay?"

Before he could argue, she jumped, grasped a rung, and swung her foot into position. Began climbing. Passed the iris seals with just a second's hesitation, imagining the instantaneous severing of her legs. Being cut in half. Surviving for a minute as she bled out. Not even any pain, just the conscious awareness of her own death.

She swallowed sudden fear and kept climbing. Hand over hand. After a minute, her arms started burning. Another minute, and she was breathing hard. Decided she was high enough to check the signal. Hooking one arm in a rung, she dug Renicks' phone carefully out of her pocket and squinted at the tiny screen. No signal. She pushed it back into her pocket, extracted her aching arm from the rung, and started upwards again. There was a persistent breeze pushing down at her as air moved into the exchange system. At first it felt cool and refreshing. Then made her shiver.

After another few minutes of climbing, she paused again. Checked the phone. No signal. Caught her breath.

Directly across from her, a yellow hazard light clicked on.

A distant, hollow-sounding noise filled the space around her. Far below, she heard Renicks calling to her.

For a moment, she froze. *They were sealing the complex*. It was impossible. There was no *reason* for them to do so, unless the army had shown up outside. Which was ridiculous. She'd seen the models herself: Any force sufficient to lay siege to a rogue

secure facility like this was two, possibly three hours out at minimum. And the conventional wisdom was that no one would bother sending an assault force. They'd just trip the explosives, make the complex into a crater, and apologize to the citizens of Virginia later.

She blinked. *Amesley knew they were in the air shaft.*

A flash of inspiration. The biometric chip couldn't be tracked this closely, she knew that. She'd run enough tests on it herself. Seen it in action three times before. It couldn't be done. Something else had been planted on them ... given to them ...

She blinked, frozen for a second. Saw it in her mind. It had to be. It was the only explanation that made sense. There was no other reason to cut off the facility from fresh air at this stage.

"Begs!"

Renicks sounded far away.

She started climbing down.

Down was slower. Going up she'd been able to see where her hands needed to go, going down her feet were hidden and finding secure footholds was a slippery process. The yellow lights gave her more illumination, which helped, but the sudden thud of her heart and the adrenaline dumping into her bloodstream made her shaky, which didn't.

As she descended, she tried to figure how long before the iris seals closed the warning lights came on. Thirty seconds? How long had it taken her to climb where she'd been?

Renicks shouted again. She risked a glance down and saw the dimly lit opening below. She could almost see the floor. Another ten, fifteen seconds of fast climbing and she'd be down.

The warning lights turned red. She didn't know exactly what

that indicated. It had to be the final warning. Seconds left. Five? Two? She didn't know. Unless it was closer to thirty, the iris seals were going to snap shut before she cleared them and she was going to be trapped in the air shaft.

She closed her eyes. Let go of the rungs. Felt herself falling.

She tried to relax. She wrapped her arms around her head and bent her knees. Tried to picture the small area under the airshafts, to judge whether she had any room to roll. Wondered if she would bang up against the iris seals after they snapped shut. If she would be cut in half by them as she passed through.

For one second, it was peaceful. Air rushing past. A sense of weightlessness.

She smacked into the ground. Heard her own leg break. A pop like a shotgun, but drier, shorter. She screamed and bounced once, scraping to a halt on the gritty floor.

She lay there. Took a few selfish seconds. Her right leg throbbed in ragged time with her heartbeat, but the pain was surprisingly low-key. Muffled. Like it was far away. Her head pounded, something sizzling on her scalp. Warm and wet.

Renicks was kneeling over, then. She opened her eyes and looked up at him without moving her head.

"My leg," she whispered.

He nodded. "It looks bad. You beat the iris by a second. You might have lost some hair as it closed." He touched her head and she winced. "You're bleeding, too."

Feeling drugged, she smiled slightly. Closed her eyes again. Thought she might sleep through the rest of it. Then a spike of adrenaline jolted her, and the pain in her leg ramped up.

"The Brick," she said, rising a little and then wincing with

pain. “Drop it.”

He shook his head. “I might —”

“They’re tracking it,” she said. She was breathing hard, her face twisted into a mask of pain. “That’s how they knew we’d be here. They’re coming. We have to move. And you have to ditch The Brick.”

15.

Nine minutes before he disobeyed a direct order, Frank Darmity sat spread-eagled on the floor of Level Eleven, right where he'd been dropped by the black bitch. He'd unstrapped his body armor but hesitated to pull it off completely. Every tug to the straps had sent a shock of agony up from his abdomen. He sat limply, bathed in sweat. He'd heard himself whimpering. He refused to call for help. He'd been in *charge* of the situation. And he'd been tricked by a soft yuppie and a mixed-breed cunt.

He had to clean up before reporting in.

There was blood. A lot of blood, it looked to him.

Sucking in breath, he lifted the vest up, starting from the lower right corner, where the blood was dripping. The pain smacked into him. A burning, screaming pain like he was hooked right into a nerve, yanking something out with him. The whole operation had gone to hell. Because it was riddled with people like Amesley. Pencil-pushers. Softies. People who sat behind desks and pressed a button, thought that made them men of action.

He closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath. Told himself that's where patriots like himself came into play. They would do the hard, bloody work. And set things right. And he'd be a hero, afterwards. Once the shock wore off, his name would be up there with Washington. Jefferson. Great Men. Because he *did* things. He didn't talk and talk and talk. When assholes like Amesley pressed that button, it was men like *him* who stood up and took care of it.

Clenching his teeth, he jerked his arms and yanked the vest free.

A wave of agony swamped him, lit up his nerves. He screamed. Everything turned hot and burning for a moment. He clamped one hand down on his belly and felt the warm, wet blood. Leaking. Not spurting.

Slowly, the pain receded. He lay sprawled, panting, sweating dripping off his face. He lifted the vest up and examined it. Blinked sweat from his eyes. The vest was deformed, a shallow protrusion like a finger jutting out. A backface, he thought. The bullet hadn't penetrated the armor, but had deformed it, pushing the vest material into him with the force of a gunshot.

He pushed the vest aside and hunched over himself, examining the wound. It was shallow. The blood had already almost stopped. It was just an ooze now.

He wiped one hand over his face. Smearred blood all over himself. Steadied himself and pushed himself up on his elbows. Stiffened and grunted as the pain slammed into him. Waited it out. When it was just a dull throb again, he pushed himself up onto his knees. Waited out another searing tendril of fire.

On the floor, still in the vest pocket, his walkie-talkie squawked.

"Mr. Darmity," Amesley's crisp, flat voice barked. "Report in."
Mr. Darmity. Never Frank. Or Joe. Or whoever. Always *miss* this and *mister* that. Fucking officious little prig. Thought he was smarter than everyone else.

That would change. A whole new world was coming, and guys like Amesley, like Renicks, like his bitch agent Begley, would find themselves on the bottom, looking up. Jumbo Softies. Big titles,

nice suits. But soft. They had all this rotten infrastructure set up to keep them up above everyone else. But he was there to help tear it down, even up the playing field.

The walkie-talkie crackled to life again. “Mr. *Darmity*. Please return to the Security Office immediately.”

Being a patriot, Darmity knew, was not about taking orders. Chain of command was important, of course, in the normal course of things, but all free men disobeyed orders when their intelligence or their experience told them it was the best course of action. The country had been built on the independent action of free-thinking men. The army hadn’t wanted him. Fuck the army. Bunch of brainwashed assholes, taking orders, strutting around with ribbons on their fancy uniforms. He’d found a way to serve his country. Had been in deeper shit and under heavier fire than anyone in the fucking army. The recognition — the medals and the rank — hadn’t meant anything to him. He’d just wanted to serve his country, his President.

He checked himself carefully, lifting up his clothes and probing his skin with his bloodied fingers. Just the one wound. Nasty. It would curdle and get infected, but it wasn’t dangerous in the short-term. In the short-term he didn’t have time to ward off infection, to dress and pack it properly. He was a hard man, he told himself. Other men would scamper to the Security Office, beg one of Amesley’s soft little agents to bandage them up. He was harder. It could wait.

He pushed himself up, using the wall for balance. Pain shot through his belly, but he clenched his teeth and took a few deep breaths, mastering it.

He walked around in a circle, breathing deeply. Watching the

floor for blood droplets. His side burned and stabbed with every move, but it was tolerable, and he thought the bleeding had stopped. He knelt and picked up the vest again, looking it over. He couldn't put it back on; the deformity would slip right back into the wound and the pain would be intolerable. He prodded the lump with his fingers but it was immovable. He dropped the vest, retrieved his gun and the radio, and stood for a moment, breathing hard.

“Mister Darmity!”

He clicked the walkie-talkie off.

He couldn't kill Renicks. He knew that. Amesley thought he was stupid; he knew *that* too. Men like Amesley always thought the people that actually did things for them were stupid, but it was a logical fallacy. He didn't get things done because he didn't *know* how to get things done. It was the other way around: Guys like Amesley sat behind desks because that was all they were good for.

At least Amesley had the right ideas about most things. Renicks was just like him — a Softy — but on the wrong side of things. He thought back to the drive over. Renicks in his whiny little voice holding up his phone. Telling him he'd report him. Another asshole, thinking he could push a button, make things happen.

But what happened when all the Button Men went on strike?
Turned around?

The girl he would kill. Payback. She was an enemy combatant. He'd gone into this thinking that if nothing else, at the very bottom, they were all Americans and due some sort of baseline dignity. He'd believed that. People could disagree. Enemy

prisoners were treated with respect. He'd intended to treat even Begley with respect. But then the bitch had gone and shot him. He couldn't kill the fancy Mr. Renicks, but he could *hurt* him, and he could kill the bitch. No loss there.

Amesley would forbid it. As Darmity moved towards the elevators, he decided not to check in. Begley was Amesley's, and he would protect his people even if she was on the wrong side. Even if she had *shot* him. You couldn't disobey orders you hadn't actually received. If he stayed offline now, he would only be disobeying the order to check in. A misdemeanor at worst. Darmity had enough experience with disciplinary actions to know that in the flush of victory it would be forgotten. Forgiven.

He pushed a series of buttons on the elevator console. The doors slid shut. He checked the chamber on his weapon and pushed it back into its holster. Took as deep a breath as his wound would allow. The elevator began to sink. He didn't need Amesley and his soft boys and girls. Everyone thought he was stupid. But he knew where to look for Renicks and Begley. Where Suits like Amesley never thought to look: The sewers. The service corridors.

16.

Thirty-one minutes before Begley passed out, Renicks was talking to himself.

She was heavier than she looked. He had one of her arms around his neck, and held both of her hands in his as he supported most of her weight. He half-dragged, half-carried her, retracing their steps as best he could remember. Shards of glass shot up his leg every time he put their weight on it.

“You’re not supposed to move a broken leg, dammit,” he hissed, breathing hard around his words. “You’re not supposed to move a *concussion* either.”

They’re coming, she’d said. He’d looked around the cramped, dark space. Not a place to be cornered by people like Frank Darmity.

Sweat streamed into his eyes. The service corridors had seemed cold before; now they were stuffy and hot.

“You with me, Begs? Stay awake, okay?”

She murmured something. Good enough. At least she was responding. He’d seen her head bounce when she’d crashed down, barely beating the seals. Blood was pouring down from a deep gash under her hairline, a sheet of it on her face. Head injuries bled. Always looked worse than they were. He knew two stories about lethal concussions. One from his father, who’d been called to a woman’s house. She was mid-thirties, in good health. Stepped on her son’s toy truck, hit her head on the bathtub. Dr. Renicks, senior, had called an ambulance and sent her to the hospital. She was fine the rest of the day. High spirits.

Complained of the fuss. Definitely concussed, but seemed fine otherwise. Died in the night. Just ... died.

His father had told him, quite soberly, that sometimes that's how it happened.

The other story had been told by Uncle Richie. Who had enjoyed shocking his nephew with terrible stories from his criminal life. Renicks remembered never being too alarmed by them, because Uncle Richie was such an easygoing, humorous guy. Just a thinner version of his father who chain smoked unfiltered cigarettes and wore leather jackets.

Uncle Richie had told him of a guy reluctant to pay back some debts he'd acquired from friends of Richie's. Renicks remembered that everyone in Richie's stories were friends of his. Even people whose names he didn't know were friends. The guy with the debts had been named Carlo, and Carlo had been snatched off the street by Richie and some others. The idea being to scare him into paying up. They took Carlo to an old warehouse and tied him to a chair. Richie had thought this story very comedic. He lingered on how fat Carlo was, and how his belly jiggled with anxiety. The elaborate plans they'd had to terrify him. Richie had sworn to his nephew that they hadn't meant to actually hurt Carlo. They were going to show him various instruments of torture and let him scare himself.

First up was a tire-iron. In demonstrating how painful it *would* be, Richie's friend Happy had swung it at Carlo's head, intending to make him wince and piss his pants. Instead, he hit Carlo right across the forehead. Carlo had passed out. But then came to a few minutes later, foggy, but promising to pay up as soon as possible. The mood had become jocular, and everyone

asked if Carlo was feeling okay. He said he had a headache. They drove him home. Richie found this particularly amusing — after hitting him in the head with a tire iron by mistake, they'd given him a lift home in broad daylight. He'd stepped out of the truck, turned to wave like they were dropping him off after a date, and collapsed, dead.

The punch line was that Richie had left town, convinced he was on a hitch for manslaughter. But no one ever said a word.

Every few feet, Renicks shouted at Begley or shook her until she responded somehow. She got heavier and heavier. Her blood soaked into his jacket. But he didn't know where Darmity or his colleagues might come on their way to the airshafts. He kept moving because *not* moving felt suicidal. But he didn't know where to go. He didn't have a destination. Every direction might be a bad one, and now that Amesley knew — if he hadn't before — that they'd been using the service corridors to move around, Renicks felt like every junction would bring him face to face with Frank Darmity again. Or several Frank Darmitys.

"Begs," he said breathlessly. "Begs! Is there a medical office? A clinic? Someplace with medical supplies?"

She shifted against him and murmured something indistinct.

"Agent Begley!" He stopped and staggered back to lean against the wall. Sucked in painful, burning breaths. Sitting behind a desk fondling a keyboard for twenty years, he was surprised to learn, was not a fitness regimen. He jostled her. She stiffened and screamed.

"I'm sorry!" he hissed. Everything seemed loud. Every breath, every moan, every scrape of their shoes reverberated with deadly volume. "Hospital, Begs, is there anything like a hospital?"

He reached up and turned her head towards him. She peered at him as if seeing him for the first time. Blinked. "Ninth level," she said thickly. Blinked again, rapidly. Eyes fluttering. "Where are we?"

Hefting her weight back onto his shoulder, he staggered off down the corridor again. Every other step made him wince and suck in breath as his twisted ankle rolled under him. Level nine. That was four levels up. He didn't know how to work the elevators. He was going to have to carry her up the access ladders. If he could retrace their steps. Everything looked the same. Every door, every junction in the corridors. Every sign. The service corridors were visually slick. Impossible to latch onto details.

As he moved, sweat soaking into his shirt, he looked down and stumbled to a sudden halt.

The floor was covered in dust. A thick carpet of dust. As gray as the floor itself. He could clearly see their footprints. Putting out of his mind the fact that this meant other people could also follow their prints, he took a deep breath and started moving again, following their own tracks back to the generic metal door that led to the access ladders. He set Begley down on the floor gently and slumped down next to her, chest heaving.

"Big baby," she murmured. "I don't weigh that much."

He nodded, wiping sweat from his brow. "When I get you fixed up, we're finding a scale and checking it out."

"Fuck you," she said dreamily.

Taking one last deep breath he knelt over her and peered intently at her face. Wiped blood away with one shaking hand. She looked back at him with a strange sort of calm. He held a

finger in front of her. Waited for her to focus on it. Moved it from side to side. Watched her eyes.

Nodding, he pushed her arm over his shoulder again and braced himself. "This is going to hurt like hell," he warned her.

"I know," she said.

He pushed up slowly, using the wall for balance. When he was standing she was sitting on his shoulder, braced against the wall.

"Grab the rungs," he said. "Pull yourself up as much as you can. I'll have you from below."

It was slow going. She pulled, he pushed. Twice, her hands slipped and her weight came back on him. She cried out in sudden pain. They waited a moment and then he coaxed her back into motion.

At the top of the ladder, they both lay on the dusty floor for a moment, gasping. Level thirteen. Three more to climb. He gave them five minutes, counting off the seconds in his head, then forced her up. Forced her to grasp the next rungs. Forced her up, pushing as hard as he dared. He felt better being off Level Fourteen, where they would start looking. But he worried about the tracks in the dust. Worried they'd just follow them. He didn't remember that kind of dust in the official areas. When they'd been going for the elevators, he was certain there hadn't been that level of dust.

They repeated the pattern: Up the ladder. Five minutes gasping on the floor of the next landing. Up the ladder.

On Level Nine, he inspected his foot. The ankle had swollen and pushed the leather of his shoes to its limit. He could feel it throb with every heartbeat. Every touch brought a spike of pain shooting up his leg. When he gave up and looked over at Begley,

she was out cold, lying on the dirty concrete floor.

He dragged her.

He couldn't carry her any more. He took her collar in one hand and limped down the service corridor. Just like every other service corridor. Gray. Concrete. Obscure signs that told him nothing useful. The silence seemed untrustworthy, and every corner seemed ominous. How long before they just started sweeping each floor for them? Where would they start? He didn't have enough information. He didn't know how many people they had.

Turning a corner, his eyes jumped to a sign on the wall. A large red cross. And arrow below it. Relief shuddered through him.

A minute later he dragged her into a small but tidy-looking medical office. It was two rooms. First there was an examination room: A standard padded table, a small desk, a locked storage cabinet. Various instruments and supplies neatly placed on the counter tops. A doorway to the right led to a procedure room: Stainless steel table, operating height. The walls covered in cabinets. Big OR lighting rig sprouting from one wall. Behind the desk were two flags. A standard United States and a deep blue one with the seal of the President. He stared for a moment. His brain churned. After a second he snapped himself back into motion. Stepped into the second room.

The floor under the metal table had gutters carved into it. So blood and whatever else spilled down from it would just sink into the plumbing and not stay on the floor to be slipped on. It was the sort of place you could perform a lot of basics in. A lot of meatball surgeries and other emergency procedures. Gunshot

wounds came to mind as he lifted Begley up and draped her onto the table.

He searched the rooms quickly. Found scissors right away and cut her pant leg up to the thigh, tearing the fabric apart. Was relieved not to see any bone. The leg bent to the left in an unnatural way, the thigh discolored and bruised. He glanced at Begley's face and decided it was a good thing after all that she was unconscious.

He tore through the cabinets. The ones in the procedure room were locked, but they were simple cam locks like you found on filing cabinets. He snapped them open using the scissors. The wall cabinets were filled with drug bottles, all clearly marked and dated. All fresh. All labeled with generic black and white laser-printed stickers. No brand names. He ran his eyes over them, startled by the sheer number of drugs available, and selected one small bottle of pills and a glass ampoule. Kept searching until he'd located a syringe, a suture kit, smelling salts and a roll of white plastic tape. Brought all of this back to the table and placed them on a wheeled metal tray. Then stood for a moment, looking around.

With a grunt he launched himself back into the exam room. Stepped around the desk. Plucked the American flag from its holder and examined the pole. Cheap, wooden. He bunched the flag up to expose as much of the pole as possible, took it in both hands, and snapped it into two across his knee. Hands stinging, he jogged back to Begley.

"Good thing you're still out," he said, taking her leg in both hands and slowly rotating it. He was doing everything you weren't supposed to do. He had even invented a few *new* things

you weren't supposed to do. But he need her to be mobile. He picked up the flag and tore it from the broken pole. Wrapped it around her leg, a little tight but not too constrictive. Her leg would swell. He placed each piece of broken pole on either side of her leg. Picked up the white duct tape and constructed a splint, taping the leg up as tightly as he could to hold the two pieces of wood in place.

Satisfied that he'd created the world's ugliest functioning splint, he took a smelling salts capsule and broke it up her nose. Held it there. Counted: One, two

"Jesus *Christ!*" Begley shouted hoarsely, sitting up with a lurch. She grabbed onto his wrist hard enough to make him wince again. Sat there panting, staring around in confusion.

"You're okay!" he said in something less than a shout. Aiming for reassuring. "Begs, you're okay."

"Define *okay*. Oh fuck, my head hurts," she moaned. Stared for a moment at her splinted leg. Looked back at him.

"That's next. But I needed to be sure you'd wake up."

He broke the syringe out of its sterile packaging and filled it from the ampoule. Held it up and tapped it a few times.

"Procaine," he said. "Topical anesthetic. We're going to have to stitch up that gash." He smiled a little. He could feel the sweat drying on him. The panic evaporating. Slowly. "It's going to be ugly as hell. I haven't done any suturing in years. But we need to stop the bleeding."

She nodded slowly. Her eyes on the needle. "You know what you're doing?"

"I used to help Dad out in the office on Saturday afternoons. Before I got older and started hating him for no good reason."

He leaned in and pushed her hair aside, positioning the needle. “And I was a Boy Scout.”

She laughed suddenly. He jabbed the needle in. She didn’t even notice.

“I can see you,” she said, sounding shaky. “In the uniform.”

He smiled, a numb expression he didn’t feel. He remembered his father. Always had that hazy half smile, that bland expression. He wore it like a shield — first in the office, telling people the bad news, the good news. Then always. His face blank no matter what, an expression calibrated to mean nothing.

The only time he’d seen the mask crack had been when the Sheriff had come around. A Sunday afternoon. They’d finished supper and were all sitting around the hot house, fanning themselves and digesting. Renicks remembered his father was listening to music on his stereo. He could remember the music, would know it if played for him but he’d never found out the title of the piece.

He remembered the Sheriff at the front door. *Maybe we ought to speak outside. It’s about Lem Knowles, Doc. His family’s makin’ noise that ... that you helped him along a little.*

He shut his eyes for a moment, deleted the memory.

He worked as fast as he dared. He put in a dozen ugly stitches, closing up the wound. Found some basic antibiotic ointment and smeared it on. Stood for a moment staring at the butcher job he’d done. Nodded. Best he could do, under the circumstances.

Stepping back, he held up the small bottle of pills.

“Acetaminophen and Codeine. Won’t be great once you start putting weight on that leg, but should keep you from screaming

every time you have to move without knocking you out. Take two to start, see how it goes. Don't take more than six. Let me see your eyes."

He leaned in and took her face gently in his hands, angling it up towards the lights. Studied her pupils.

"Thank you," she said quietly. "For ... taking care of this. Of *me*."

He nodded. "I'm just glad you weren't awake to hear me crying like a child," he said, stepping back. "They know we're out, now. I ditched the Brick, but they must be searching every level for us. We have to assume they know we've been using the service corridors." He sighed. Shrugged. "Now what?"

She shook her head, opening the pill bottle and pouring two of the white capsules into her hand. Then she looked up at him. Almost smiled. "I've got one more trick up my sleeve, Mr. President."

17.

Twenty-three minutes before they barricaded the door, Begs was trying to ignore the intense pain that exploded in her leg every time she moved. The pounding headache was helping, she thought. She felt shaky and dull, as if someone had put a piece of muslin between her and the world. She felt proud of having navigated two more access ladders without much help from Renicks, but felt exposed as they moved through Level Seven. It didn't make any sense; Amesley and Darmity knew they'd been using the service corridors. They weren't any safer there than in the main levels. But stepping out onto the carpet, the bright lighting, the wide hallways — it made her nervous.

She moved slowly. The splint was awkward. She had to swing her leg out in a wide, stiff arc and wobble from side to side as they walked. Renicks steadied her from time to time. She was impressed, though, by his quick first aid. She knew she needed better medical attention if she didn't want a crooked, painful leg and an ugly scar, but she was still doing her duty. He'd kept her operational in the field.

Despite her leg, she tried to move as quickly as possible. Without letting Renicks see, she'd already taken six of the pills he'd given her.

“What are the chances we can transmit?”

She grimaced, losing her balance for a moment and staggering sideways into the wall. She bounced free and shrugged off his attempts to help. “I don't know, Jack. It's the only thing I can think of. Maybe they already thought of it.

Maybe not. We were never supposed to get out of the suite, so maybe they didn't bother with the studio."

She certainly hadn't thought of it right away, she reminded herself. The television studio in the complex had never been used. It was kept up-to-date as technology changed, and could both broadcast over the air and transmit to all satellites in active orbit. It wasn't fancy. It was meant to be used by the President to communicate with the surviving population at large.

Begley had not been trained on any of the equipment in the studio. She'd only been in the room three times, all for spatial briefing. She could tell Renicks how best to escape the studio under a variety of circumstances. She could explain the lines of sight. That the podium with the Presidential seal was designed to be bullet resistant. That there was no back way out of the studio because the assumption was that the President would not be making addresses to the nation unless the complex was secure. But she had no idea how to actually transmit anything.

Would Amesley be able to block a satellite transmission? Would anyone be *monitoring* the satellites for strange activity like that? She didn't know. She saw no profit in telling Renicks. He would just make some horribly calm joke about it anyway, a personality trait she found both irritating and comforting in equal measure. He reminded her, in some ways, of her father.

It was quiet. The complex was huge, and if she'd been right about The Brick, they had no way to track them any more. So she pushed forward. Didn't think about the possibilities. Focused.

The studio was small. A control booth on one end, room for three people, banks of equipment designed for live transmissions. Limited editing and delay capabilities. No

storage. The studio itself was narrow and deep. A blue curtain. A podium with the seal. On a tight zoom the illusion of a larger room would be easy.

“It’s 1979 in here,” Renicks said softly.

She nodded. “The basic equipment’s been kept up to modern standards. It’s fully digital. But the support tech’s low on the list for a retrofit.”

The phones were clunky black plastic wall models with cords. The chairs were old, well-worn rolling chairs. The carpet in the booth was a deep rusty orange. It was, she thought, pretty much what she would have imagined a porn editing room in 1975 would look like. There was even a huge fax machine on top of the low filing cabinet against the back wall, installed circa 1985 and not used, she didn’t think, in five years. If ever.

They each immediately crossed to one of the wall phones and inspected them. Looked at each other, shook their heads. She turned to regard the equipment.

“We’ve got to assume the second we try to transmit, they’ll know,” she said. “So we have to do our best to figure things out before we power anything on.”

“There has to be a user manual or something,” Renicks said, crossing to the filing cabinet. “The assumption has to be that a lot of these systems might have to be used by people not trained on them. You’re not going to chopper a goddamn studio team here if nukes are raining down on you.”

She nodded, studying the controls. There were a million buttons and switches, toggles and jacks. Headphone-microphone combinations hung neatly on pegs between the work areas. She thought about cockpits. Huge, complex things,

with hundreds of controls and gauges — but an experienced pilot only needed a few of them to fly the plane. The rest were usually useful but not crucial. I just need to boil this down to the crucial, she thought. It doesn't have to be pretty. It just has to be a signal. Audio-only would be fine. We just need to find out what's happening, share information.

With some relief, she lowered herself into one of the chairs, her leg resting stiffly on the floor, and studied the banks. There would be a simplified procedure, she thought. They modeled everything. They considered every possible scenario. A scenario where the President — or someone else — needed to quickly, *immediately* transmit something had to have been considered. There would be a Dummy Button for it. A push-once kind of basic setup that would fire everything up on a standard, generic profile. Even if it was a sole survivor, one person. Hit a switch, walk into the studio and stand in front of the camera, speak your piece.

She listened to Renicks pulling out the cabinet drawers and dumping their contents onto the floor. Tried to push the noise out. Tried to push the pain in her leg away. The aching pressure in her head. The fear. The panic. Leaning forward, she turned and started running her eyes over everything. Top to bottom. Shift over one row. Bottom to top. Repeat.

“Any luck?” She said without turning away.

“You know what's in here? Canned, pre-written *speeches*. Filed alphabetically by *disaster scenario*.”

She nodded, still letting her eyes roam the controls. “They model *everything*, Jack. All day, all week, they think of new possibilities and start writing response flowcharts, press

releases, draft orders for the military and civilian agencies, and, yes, speeches. The idea is, when the world is ending, the President — or acting President — may not have their writing staff with them. Or there may just not be time to come up with something.”

She smiled. She felt a little dopey — not high, just insulated. She could still feel the intense ache in her leg and the throbbing in her head, but it was distant and unimportant. The pills, kicking in. “You know those envelopes psychics used to hand out on TV to show they predicted what you were going to say? Until I was twenty-two I swear my father had a set of those for me. And he was right, every time.”

“Until what? Law enforcement?”

She shook her head. “No, he got that too. But the next envelope was me getting married. And the one after that was kids.”

Jesus, she thought. One smack to the head, broken leg, and mild dose of codeine and you’re telling him about your *father*.

“Holy shit.”

For a second she thought he was reacting to her. Then she spun the chair around. He was standing with the fax machine’s phone in his hand. He was looking at her.

“I’ve got a dial tone.”

18.

Eleven minutes before they barricaded the door, Renicks watched Begley struggle out of her chair and almost fall at him. Overbalanced. Excited. He let her snatch the receiver from his hand. Watched her face as she pressed it against her ear. Held her gaze when her eyes jumped to him.

“Jesus,” she said, smiling. “A separate line. Hell, I forgot there was even a fax machine in the *complex*. They overlooked it. It’s on its own dedicated line, and they *forgot* about it!”

For a moment, he thought she might start to jump around. She quickly deflated. Handed the phone back to him. Turned awkwardly and hobbled a few steps away.

“I can’t call any of my Emergency Numbers,” she said to the air. “Amesley set those up.”

Renicks looked around the booth. “I think we’ve left protocol behind, Begs.”

“What do I do? Call the White House?”

Renicks considered. “The FBI?”

She turned around and looked at him steadily. “If the Secret Service is compromised in this, why not the FBI?” She shook her head. “We have to go a different direction.””

Renicks spread his hands. “Call 411?” He shook his head. “All the info we need was probably in The Brick.”

She was still staring at him. “That is ... not helpful, Jack.”

He nodded, grimacing. Frustration flooded him. He felt buried. underground, trapped. He was the linchpin of the whole situation. But he had no control. All he could do was play hide

and seek.

“The White House will be locked down,” she said, hobbling into a slow, shuffling walk. “We’re not getting in through the switchboard. And all Secret Service contacts will have to be treated as toxic. We also have to assume we only get one shot. Maybe that fax line stays unnoticed, or maybe a big red light turns on in the Security Office when we dial out. We have to make the first call count.”

Renicks nodded. He ran through his own office, his assistant, his Deputy Secretary. His staff of researchers. None of them would be of any use, assuming he even trusted them that far. He’d never doubted them before, but he’d never had the lives of tens of thousands of people — if not more — and the fate of the world on his back either. The Director of the Secret Service was involved. There were pallets of body bags and emergency signs in storage. That spoke of a large conspiracy. Dozens of people, at least, in positions to route shipments and blackline budgets. Would something like that bother to recruit from the Department of Education? Probably not.

But he couldn’t be *sure*.

He looked up at Begley. She was standing still in the middle of the room, chewing her lip. She was dirty, with dried blood in her hair, her clothes torn and stained. She was beautiful, he thought. She was most beautiful when she was locked in thought. Her forehead crinkled. Her eyes distant. There was a stillness about her frame he admired. Feeling giddy with stress, he briefly considered appointing her to something in his official capacity as Acting President. Secretary of something.

He paused, memory flaring.

“I have an idea,” he said. “I have a ... friend. In the CIA.”

Her eyes flashed to him. She didn't move otherwise. “A friend,” she said slowly. “I've got friends in agencies, too, Jack. What does *friend* mean here?”

He shrugged. Knew what she was saying. She was thinking through her list of contacts and coworkers just like he was, weighing them against the fact that Amesley was involved. Which meant anyone could be. “He's the only person I *would* call right now,” he said simply. Spread his hands. “I can't guarantee him. I've known him for more than twenty years. But if you have a better idea, say the word.”

She sighed and turned to face him. “What's his name?”

“Stan Waters.”

Chewed her lip again. Was silent for a few seconds. “I don't think I've seen his name.” She looked back at him. “I'm trying to remember correspondence. With Amesley. Which doesn't mean anything, either way.”

Renicks nodded. “If you saw his name somewhere, you never know what that could mean.”

“All right. Call him. We don't have any options. As long as you're in the facility, it's designed to stay online no matter what. We need to get you out of here immediately, and we need help. Call him.”

He turned and picked up the flimsy plastic receiver.

“But Jack — be on your toes. No offense to your friend ... but we don't *know* anything. Keep your bullshit meter on, okay?”

He nodded without turning. Punched Stan's cell number into the keypad. Watched the numbers appear on the tiny green LED screen. Heard a click, then a phantom ring in his ear.

“Stan Waters, X99-T. This is an unsecured personal line. You better have a fucking —”

“It’s Jack Renicks, Stan.”

There was silence on the line. Then a dry scrubbing noise. It took Jack a moment to realize Stan had dropped his phone.

“Jack?! Jesus, *Jack*? You still there?”

“I’m here, Stan.”

“Hold on. *Do not hang up.*”

There was a muffled sound of conversation. Renicks tried to pick out the words, the voices, but couldn’t. The ambient noise in his ear widened out. Like Stan was moving from a small space to a larger one. He heard hinges, then the echoed click of a door latch. Then a burst of static. It lessened immediately, but remained on the line. Stan’s voice came back sounding far away. The static made every other word a challenge to decipher.

“Jack!”

“I’m here, Stan.”

“*What’s going on?* The whole fucking government’s down here in the bunker. We’ve got two dead congressmen, we’ve got bombers in the air, and as soon as the Secret Service vets the route they’re getting Grant into a helicopter and getting him on Air Force One, where he may not ever return from the way things are going. That’s all. A typical day in my week, really. The whole Continuity System is fucked up, won’t go offline. You’re hot. *What’s happening* down there?”

Begley came over to stand in front of him, her face blank. Eyes locked on him. Renicks told the story in three sentences.

“Jesus,” Stan whispered, static blanking out the next few words. “... Jack, there are a lot of theories flying around here.

Your name is in some of them. We can't get anyone on the ... hell, you're about ... minutes from ... being *blown to hell*. We can't get the complex offline, we can't get your biometric signature out of the system, and someone's got the fucking football online and passing packets back and forth to the fucking launch system and we can't shut *that* out until we shut down the fucking complex, which so far we can't do." He breathed heavily into the phone. It sounded like he it was right up against his mouth. "So it's the failsafe: We're turning you into a blast crater."

"What happened? At the speech?"

"Explosions. Two. Neither near Grant, though we found three more nearer the podium that would've turned him into dog ... The security detail hustled him out of — "

"Jesus, Stan, you can't leave him with the Secret Service. For all we know every agent there *protecting* him right now is one of Amesley's."

Stan said something that was lost to static.

Begley's eyes widened. She emphatically mouthed something at him, but Renicks just shook his head back.

"Stan, *tell them*. Tell them it's Amesley. Tell them we're free, but they're searching for us."

"Listen ... to, but fuck, Jack, no one's going to *care*. Someone murdered Gerry Flanagan. Someone is trying to launch warheads. You will fall *easily* into the category of collateral damage if we have to blow up the fucking mountain to stop it."

"Someone *murdered Gerry Flanagan*?"

Under other circumstances, Begley's expression would have been hilarious, he thought.

"Looked like a heart attack. ME is telling us it was drug-

induced. Someone put him out of the way. That's one reason why ... one reason why your name isn't drawing any water around here right now, Jack.”

Renicks felt it. Panic. It was licking the edges of his thoughts. It was oozing into the space between them. He wasn't getting out of the complex. He was going to be trapped in it when they triggered the explosives buried underneath it. He was going to be burned alive. Killed. He thought of Emily. Of Elizabeth and Patricia. He thought, everyone calls Elizabeth Sissy because that's what Patty called her when they were very young.

He closed his eyes for a moment, feeling a wave of exhausted fear sweep through him. Then opened them again. There had to be *something*.

Begley's face mirrored it all back to him. “Tell him your ISA needs to speak with him,” she said.

“Stan — ”

“I heard. Tell your ISA I will brief everyone. My boss will brief their bosses, their bosses will brief everyone else, and someone will end up with the happy job of briefing Grant. Shit, what a fucking clusterfuck.” He sighed. “But listen, Jack. It won't change anything for you. We can't risk it. I'm ... shit, I'm sorry, man. I really am.”

Renicks nodded absently. He had picked a spot on the wall across from and stared at it. Ignored Begley. Felt a cold despair washing through him. They'd actually found a phone that worked, and it hadn't changed anything. No one cared whether he was telling the truth. They were going to die anyway.

He started to drop the receiver, then pushed it back against his ear. “Stan! You still there?”

“Yes, Jack. I’m still here.”

“You ever hear of something named *Eliro*? E-L-I-R-O?”

For a second, there was silence. When Stan spoke again, his voice had gone down to a hoarse whisper, static dancing on its edges. “Where did you hear that, Jack?”

“It was in The Brick — the handheld the Secret Service gave me. It went active when, when *I* went active. It was the name of a text file. It’s in code. It’s a routing code on a bunch of crates here in the complex. Crates of body bags and road signs.”

“Hell,” Stan grunted. “Hell and fucking *hell*.”

Renicks waited, his pulse crashing in his head. His knuckles stood out white on the receiver.

“Jack, you ever hear of an ERM? An Emergency Response Model?”

“Something like it, sure.” He thought of Begs saying *they model everything*.

“There are thousands of them. We do them, the FBI does them, the DoD, the Secret Service, White House flunkies, goddamn secretaries on lunch break in this town doodle ERMs on cocktail napkins. We encourage it. The idea is, whatever situation arises, once we know what’s happening someone will have written a fifty-thousand word report on how to deal with it. You’d be surprised how effective it can be. Smart people sit there and think of how things can go wrong and how to fix it, or at least minimize it, and sometimes they’re so prescient it’s kind of scary. ELIRO is an umbrella filing tag for a series of ERMs created on request about two years ago. It describes a U.S. President engineering a national emergency in order to declare martial law and seize power free from constitutional restraints.”

Renicks blinked. For a second he thought he'd had a tiny stroke; he'd lost a second. "What?"

"The idea was, what would happen if a President sought to increase the powers of the Executive through non-Constitutional means? How would they achieve that? A State of Emergency. Scare the bejesus out of the population, scare Congress itself, and have all sorts of emergency powers voted in. Send out the National Guard. Suspend *Habeas Corpus* and a host of other protections. All temporary, of course. But in the scenario the aim was to use those emergency powers to make the power grab permanent."

Renicks thought of the crates in Storage room L-15. Body bags. Emergency signs. Ready to be trucked out. When Martial Law was invoked. Because terrorists had just nuked a few choice population centers around the country — from *within* the country. Panic. Terror. Chaos.

Stan said something else lost to a burst of static.

"Stan! Stan, what was that?"

"I said —"

Begley suddenly snapped her head around, holding up her hand just as the call went dead in Renicks' ear. As if she'd used psychic powers to cut the line.

"Did you hear that?" she whispered.

Renicks let the receiver fall slowly from his ear. He strained, listening. "I didn't —"

The next moment she was moving. "Help me!" she hissed over her shoulder.

Renicks dropped the receiver and stepped forward. "With what?"

“Barricade the door!” she hissed back, grabbing onto the end of one of the filing cabinets and dragging it away from the wall. “They’re here!”

19.

One minute before finding himself in another air duct, Renicks stood, frozen. He watched Begley tugging ineffectually at the cabinet, trying to drag it. His eyes jumped to the door as someone crashed into it, making it jump on its hinges. The lock held. It wasn't much of a lock, though.

“Jesus, *Jack!*”

He blinked and sprang forward, dropping his bag and grabbing one end of the cabinet. He dragged it over to the door. Pushed it flush against it. Stood back and figured it would add another ten or fifteen seconds at best.

Repeated Stan's words to himself: *a U.S. President engineering a national emergency*. Pictured the crates in the storage room. Amesley, the man ultimately in charge of President Grant's security, running this show. The *ELIRO* document on The Brick.

Eliro. Renicks centered on the word again. It tugged at him. As if he'd seen it before, or ought to recognize it.

The door jumped again.

Begley turned and gave him a push. “Move!”

He stumbled backwards a step before regaining his balance. Suddenly decided Begley had grown up with brothers. Older.

“Where — ”

She pointed up. He turned to follow her arm and saw another air conditioning grate. Wide enough to wriggle into. He stood for a second, staring at it.

“Ah, *fuck.*”

She shoved him violently from behind. “Move!”

He whirled in time to receive several more blows to the chest. He whipped his hands up and grasped her by the wrists. The door jumped again.

“What about you?”

Staggering back, she surprised him. Pulled her weapon. Held it down against her splinted leg with her finger along the barrel. “I can't climb, Jack. Much less push myself through a fucking duct. *You're* the asset. You cannot be compromised, so climb up on the *goddamn* filing cabinet and get in the *fucking duct*.”

He stared for just a second. Brothers, he thought.

The door jumped.

He whirled and limped away, scooping up his bag and slinging it over his shoulder. Pushed his hand into his pocket and fumbled for his penknife. He pulled himself up on top of the filing cabinet, knocking the fax onto the floor. The grate over the duct was held in place by two small flathead screws.

The door jumped. There was a distinct cracking sound.

“Jack!” Begley shouted. “You don't have much time!”

“Thanks,” he muttered, sweat streaming into his eyes as he worked the screws.

The duct plate clattered to the floor. He shoved his bag in ahead of him and squeezed his shoulders in, pushing himself up.

“Jack!”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he hissed to himself. For a split second of panic he thought he was stuck. Then, with a searing pain along each side as the sharp edges of sheet metal screws sliced into his skin he was in. “Does she think I'm *taking my time*?”

Then he was in the hot, gritty, echoing world of the duct. There was just enough room for him to wriggle his way forward.

He was sweating immediately. Every move seemed incredibly loud.

Until the door smashed inward in the room behind him. Until gunshots. Until Begley screamed.

He froze. Realized he'd moved out of instinct. Terror. Self-preservation. He could pretend it was because he was the Designated Survivor, the acting President. Because he *had* to remain free, or people would die. But he suddenly wasn't sure if he hadn't run because *he* could die. Because he was afraid.

He lay there for a second. Paralyzed.

"Mr. Secretary!"

Darmity's voice. Other voices, then. Muffled.

Renicks pushed himself backwards a few inches. He couldn't leave Begley alone.

Then stopped.

"Mr. Secretary! Are you really gonna run from me? Are you gonna leave this gorgeous spitfire in my hands?"

What was he going to do? He couldn't even reach around to get to his own gun. He'd be emerging from the duct *backwards*. Going back was suicide. Going back was putting himself directly into their hands. Slowly, shaking with frustration, he began pushing himself forward again. Inches. He had to pull himself with his finger and push with his feet. Pushing his bag ahead of him. Swollen ankle throbbing. Metal screws catching his flesh as he moved. Sweat and grime working their way into the wounds and burning.

The President. Charles A. Grant. In the third year of an increasingly disastrous term. Renicks ran it through his mind as he listened to his own hot, claustrophobic breathing. A president

almost certainly playing out the string. A lame duck. He thought of the people around Grant, the people he appointed and hired. All of them had been with Grant for years, decades. All of them had been long time confidants. All of them had supported Grant in everything he did. There had been speculation in the papers that part of Grants' decline in popularity stemmed from the Yes-Men he had surrounded himself with, people of ability who nevertheless agreed with everything the President said or proposed. Even Gerry Flanagan. Grant with his crazy charm, a charm that inspired loyalty. A charm that inspired service.

He remembered Begley's words about Amesley. *He loves this country. And he idolizes President Grant.*

Grant. Tan. Tall, *Charming*. He'd felt the power of the man's charm himself. Standing in the Oval Office, being grinned at. The grin. It never left. It never flickered.

Jesus, it was possible. A president, even a weak, failing downward president like Grant had immense power behind the scenes. Executive orders, protected from public scrutiny. Add in men in other positions of power ready to take his orders. It was possible. *Engineering a national emergency*. Someone becomes Acting President when Grant stages an attack on himself. An Acting President in an Emergency, without all of the encumbrances and obstructions of a peacetime President. Launches nuclear missiles — where? Anywhere. A world war would be emergency enough. Or hit domestic cities, blame terrorists. Declare martial law.

And suddenly a weak and downward failing President doesn't have to worry about an election any more.

It didn't make sense, though. If that was the plan, why *him*?

Flanagan, as part of Grant's inner circle, should have been the Designated Survivor. He would have done what the President wanted. Why have him murdered so that John Renicks, Ph.D., who wasn't part of the plot and who wouldn't go along with things, would end up Acting President?

Maybe, he thought, Gerry hadn't been as charmed by Grant as he appeared. Maybe there'd been disagreements. Maybe Grant didn't think he could rely on Gerry to murders hundreds of thousands of people in order to spur a *coup d'etat*. That might explain why Gerry had been taken out, but not why he'd been slotted *in*. Unless they didn't have that much control. They could eliminate Gerry, but there hadn't been time, perhaps, to do anything else. Maybe they'd just done the math: Gerry wouldn't give in, wouldn't break. Maybe – *maybe* – Renicks would.

He told himself that maybe he would never know why. And that he had bigger immediate problems.

Blood was staining his shirt from the dozens of shallow cuts he'd inflicted on himself. He came to a junction. Ducts branching off to the left and right. He chose the left randomly. Simply because it seemed to lead away from the studio. Away from Darmity. Behind him, he heard a hollow booming noise. Realized he was leaving a perfect trail behind. Like a snail. Oozing blood with every increment.

He tried to increase his pace. Tried to estimate his lead. When he came to the next junction, with a duct branching off to the right, he pushed past it for several seconds, moving as quickly as he could manage. Straining his ears. He pushed back at panic, forcing himself to continue forward until he'd counted to a hundred. Then he reversed direction and struggled back to the

junction. Waiting for the shout, the slap of a hand on his ankle. The sudden pinpricks of light as someone shot upwards into the duct. When he'd backed up enough to make the turn to the right, he paused a moment to inspect his false trail. It wasn't long, but in the dim light he thought it would fool anyone following him. Long enough, anyway.

He pushed thoughts out of his head. Pushed with his toes, pulled with his fingers. Breathed. Pushed his bag. Pushed with his toes, pulled with his fingers. Breathed.

Grates began appearing at regular intervals on the bottom of the ducts. He could see through the slats into the rooms below. All empty.

The available light began to increase. He could make out a widening in the ductwork up ahead, which resolved into a large exchange, three feet wide and tall enough to sit up in. Up above, behind a heavy-looking mesh was a large fan spinning in lazy circles. He pushed himself up against the side, pulling his legs up against his chest, and pulled the Kimber out. Checked that the safety was off. He hadn't fired the gun in two years. Had never fired it anywhere but a range.

He waited. Tried to breathe shallowly. Ignored the burning scrapes oozing blood.

Nothing happened. There was no noise behind him. No sign of pursuit.

He set the gun down next to him and rubbed his hands over his face, scrubbing. Checked himself visually. His clothes were stained with blood, but it was all superficial wounds. He was filthy and sizzling with low-level pain, but he wasn't badly hurt. He wasn't in the hands of someone prepared to put thousands,

maybe millions of people at risk for his own purposes.

He swallowed and sat forward. Opened his bag. He had to help Begley. He had to go back.

Seven minutes before screaming in pain for the second time in an hour, Begley stared at the wrong end of Frank Darmity's gun. It was a Beretta ninety-two with no accessories attached. She could hear the other two behind her. Both dressed in sober blue suits. Both agents. She didn't know their names but she'd seen them before. The woman was tall and built, hours in the gym working the weights. The man was older. Forties. Still in shape, but with a belly starting to creep in from too many after-shift beers. Too many details sitting outside hotel rooms and in the backs of surveillance vans, eating pizza. Drinking sugared-up coffee. Smoking ill-advised cigarettes.

"Give me a boost again."

"You already tried. You're not going to fit."

Despite the throbbing pain in her leg she forced herself to remain standing. To prove to Darmity that he couldn't break her. Not with a blow to her injured leg. He might make her scream, an instinctual reaction. But it wasn't going to break her. She moved her eyes from the gun to Darmity. *He* wasn't going into the ductwork. He was one of those stocky men who wasn't exactly fat. Just broad. Muscular. Heavy. His knuckles, she noted, were all scabbed up. Like he'd spent a few hours the night before punching a brick wall. Or someone's face.

He was looking past her. At his two companions.

Begley watched Darmity's face. Tried to feel out the physics of the situation. Two agents behind her. Distracted. Facing the wrong way. Darmity in front of her. Distracted. Holding his gun

out in front of him like an asshole. The precise way you should never hold your gun. Straight out from you, easy to knock aside. Easy to snatch away. And if you were going to hold it that way, you should at least pay attention to the person you were covering.

She ran the possibilities through her mind: Reaching out. Fast. Could she pull the gun from his grip? He didn't have his finger on the trigger, at least. No knee-jerk firing into her belly. One less finger to hold onto the gun. She had no balance. No leverage. The chances that she'd fail to take possession of the gun and end up in a losing struggle for it were pretty high.

She was unarmed. Darmity had done that much right. Even if she managed to knock his gun away, she would then be a wobbly, off-balance woman weighing about half of this slab of doughy muscle with both feet planted firmly on the carpet. She looked him up and down. Was pleased to note the large stain of blood on his shirt.

"Leave it," Darmity ordered. "I know where Mr. Fancy's going."

Begley's eyes jumped back to Darmity's face. Did he? Alarm spread through her veins. Renicks had proven to be smarter than she'd expected. More resilient, certainly. There'd been no time to suggest a destination for him, and no way to help him find one even if she had — she herself would be hard pressed to navigate the ventilation system reliably, and she knew the complex better than just about anyone else in the world.

Darmity shifted his gaze and looked right back at her. Smiled. It was a mean little smile. Smug and cruel. She flinched back a second before his free hand flashed out. Pushed into her chest.

Shoved her off-balance. Her splinted leg went out from under her and she fell painfully to the floor, teeth clicking together.

“Stay here,” Darmity said. “In case Mr. Fancy comes back. But he won’t. He’s alone and he’s scared and he’ll go and do what’s familiar. He’ll head back into the service corridors. Find a place to hide. Curl up and wait for his little agent here to find him and tell him what to do.”

Begley propped herself up onto her elbows. Her leg throbbed and her head ached. She remembered the bottle of pills Renicks had handed her, in her pants pocket. She didn’t want to take it out in front of Darmity. Didn’t want to show him weakness. Didn’t want him to guess how much pain she was in. And wondered what would happen if she took more, hearing Renicks’ warning about topping out at six. The last thing she needed was to be stoned, nodding off or getting spacey.

She considered the general amount of pain she was in, and the likelihood she would spend the immediate future being hurt. Nodding off did not, after all, appear to be a real concern.

Darmity stepped around her. She kept her eyes forward and listened. A second later his fist grasped her shirt collar and with a sudden jerk she was being dragged across the floor. Her hands flew up behind her neck and grabbed at his wrist. She stopped. She felt the muzzle of his Beretta against the top of her head. Froze instantly.

“Behave,” he said.

And then they were out in the hall. He dragged her for a few feet easily, without any sign of strain.

“Mr. Darmity?”

He laughed. It was disorienting. Sliding backwards, his voice

behind her. “Funny how people start calling me *mister* at all the wrong times.”

She swerved, her leg jolting her as it banged against a wall. He was taking her towards the elevators. *At least he’s not going to try to pull me up the service ladders*, she thought sourly. The pain in her leg had dialed up fifty or hundred times from the rough handling. Beads of sweat had popped up all over her skin. “Why are you doing this? Why kill so many people?”

Without warning his hand let go and she dropped backwards, hitting her head dully on the thick industrial carpeting of the hallway. Then he was crouched over her. Knees on her arms, pinning her painfully. The gun under her chin. He had a dark shadow of beard already growing even though he’d been clean-shaven that morning. He was smiling in a precisely *unhappy* manner. His eyes were bright and heated.

“Because people like you and Mr. Fancy have *fucked this country up*, you stupid bitch. And there’s so much bullshit it can’t be fixed within the rules. Because you have to amputate a diseased limb. We’ve been waiting for it to happen any other way — for even a *sign* that it might be *possible*. Fuck that. We’re past that point. Change is *at hand*, Agent Begley.”

He straightened up and stepped around her again. She saw herself catching hold of his ankle. Pulling him off-balance. Scrambling for the gun. She did nothing. Let him hook his calloused hand into her shirt again. Resume dragging her. They were only a few feet away from the studio and a struggle would bring the other two on her before she could master the situation. And her goddamn leg. She couldn’t be sure of having enough torque to bring down someone Darmity’s size.

So, she let herself be dragged.

Change is at hand, he'd said. It stuck with her. She'd heard that phrase before, recently. She filed it away.

“What we need is a dictator,” he said suddenly. “Like in Rome. You know Rome? You read books? No one does any more. No one knows anything. Fucking Congress, supposed to represent the people. Don't represent anyone I know. Can't pass a goddamn nonbinding resolution any more, just endless arguing and tricks. We need someone to cut through the bullshit. The Romans had it right, they had that in law. When the Republic was threatened, pick someone who could handle it and make him Dictator. Get past the tricks, clean shit up. We don't have that law, so we gotta make it happen. Gotta get Congress to pass the laws, to make themselves irrelevant. Gotta *scare* them.” He chuckled.

In the elevator, he punched in a sequence of buttons she didn't recognize. They'd changed the code sets. Which meant she didn't even know the correct codes to use, unless they simply switched to the next day's set. She knew the next day; she made it her business to start memorizing them a few days in advance.

“I used to go to meetings,” Darmity said as the doors slid shut. “Like minded people. Pissed off people. And I'd sit there and listen. These were good people, you know? Citizens. Patriots. A lot of veterans, but not the smug kind. And they would talk, and talk. Campaigns and fundraisers and voter registration and targeting one asshole in Congress with another asshole who *wanted* to be in Congress. Shit, I couldn't take it any more. So I started standing up, telling what we needed was to be teaching folks how to shoot, teaching them history, getting them angry. This country, when things go wrong we have an inalienable right

to bear arms and make it right again. So they asked me to stop coming to meetings. I was making too much noise. Telling 'em shit they did not want to hear. That's what we're up against. That kind of stupidity. Cut through it. Just slice on through it. Get someone emergency powers and let them spend a few years fixing it all, one executive order after another. The right man, with emergency powers." He sighed almost dreamily. "But to get emergency powers, you gotta have an *emergency*. That's where I come in."

Just outside the Security Office, he let go. "On your feet," he ordered, pulling open the door and holding it. He stood there and watched as she struggled upright, using the wall for balance. With an exaggerated gesture he ushered her through the door.

She stopped right inside the familiar room. Five men and women she'd never seen before that morning were working the Security Office: Jackets off, sleeves rolled up. Hunched over monitors. Two were standing around the remote launch interface,. They glanced up at her for a second, then returned to their work. Director Amesley was standing in the midst of them, crisp and neat. His large, thick glasses made him appear to goggle at her, but she knew this was an illusion.

"Agent Begley," he said, inclining his head slightly.

For a moment she stared at him, anger flooding her. She had served under Director Amesley. Had feared his temper. Been impressed with his knowledge and experience. Had even conceded that his passionate beliefs were inspiring for their depth and fire even if she did not always agree with his politics. And now he was instrumental in committing what could be the worst terrorist act in the nation's history.

“Martin,” she said coldly.

“Come on,” Darmity snarled, taking hold of her arm and pulling her roughly after him. She lost balance and stumbled, pain shooting up her leg. He kept her from falling through sheer arm strength and almost threw her into a chair. It rolled backwards, spinning, and crashed into an unused rack of monitors and phone lines.

“Mr. Darmity!” Amesley said loudly. It was not exactly a shout. Simply a higher level of volume than his voice normally utilized.

“Shut up,” Darmity said. “You’ve been puttering around here for a goddamn hour and he’s still wandering around the complex free as a fucking bird. We’re gonna cut to the chase.” He holstered his gun and stood for a moment, looking around the security office. He spotted a walkie-talkie lying on one of the panels and stepped over to it, picking it up and turning several of the switches in small, precise increments. Then he stepped back to loom over Begley. She forced herself not to flinch away from him as he leaned over her and pressed two buttons on the panel behind her.

“Mr. Renicks!”

Darmity’s voice, spoken into the receiver, boomed throughout the room and echoed in the hall outside. Begley jumped in spite of herself. He’d patched in wirelessly to the PA system. His voice was in every room of the complex, including the service corridors.

Everyone else in the office had stopped. Stood staring at Darmity. Amesley was blank-faced as usual but Begley thought there was something in his posture, his attitude that hinted he

did not approve — whether of Frank Darmity in general or this new tactic in specific, she couldn't tell.

“I know you can hear me, buddy, so listen carefully. I could spend all goddamn day trying to track you down in the goddamn crawlspaces where you're hiding from me like a coward. I don't have time. So you gotta know something.”

“I've got your bitchy *In-Suite Agent* here. You prepped her nicely for us, so we won't have to go through the trouble of breaking her leg to begin with.”

Begley stopped breathing for a moment. Amesley scowled and looked down at the floor. Pushed a hand into his pants pocket.

“Renicks, I'm not some polite agent, trained like a puppy to hold your hand while you piss, okay? You know what I was contracted for with the company? Involuntary Extraction. You know what that's a *euphemism* for?”

Contracted. Begley nodded to herself. A mercenary. Blackwater, Goldhawk, XCE Incorporated — a company like that, handling military-type operations the military didn't have manpower for. She'd worked with some of those types before. Darmity confirmed a lot of her prejudices about them, a lot of her experiences with them. Cowboys. They operated between the cracks — they weren't under military or governmental discipline, and their corporate bosses didn't much care what they did as long as the missions got done and everyone got paid. The problem was, you couldn't just ignore them, have contempt for them, because a lot of them were ex-military, ex-CIA, and usually high-grade. Even the ones with no formal background had skills. She'd shot Darmity from five feet away and he was still there,

operating.

“It’s a euphemism for *this*,” Darmity said. He took two brisk steps towards her and kicked her solidly in the leg.

She spun off the chair, screaming, and hit the hard floor of the Security Office, which sent a second shockwave of agony throughout her whole body. She screamed again, one final bitten-off howl, and then got control of herself. She lay as still as she could, face-down on the concrete, panting. Sweat dripping off her forehead. She watched it be absorbed by the stone.

“You listening, Renicks? I don’t know if you give a shit about your cute little *In-Suite-Agent* here, but imagine this was your daughter, man. Imagine that. This is just to give you some sound effects for your imagination, okay?”

Through the agony, Begley fixed on that. *Your daughter*. What did that mean? Darmity didn't sound desperate. Didn't sound like a man spinning bullshit in hopes of shaking something loose. He sounded smug and mean.

Begley heard him turn. The scrape of his boots on the floor. She twisted herself around to look over her shoulder, trying to manage it without moving her leg at all. Watched him striding towards her, the walkie-talkie in one hand. She clenched her teeth, determined not to make a noise. *Not a sound*. No matter what.

Darmity filled her vision. Then suddenly froze, one leg off the ground. His eyes rolled up in his head. He fell forward, landing on his face, unconscious. Right next to her. Close enough for her to feel the breeze of his passing.

Behind him, holding a small black device whose edge crackled with electricity for a second, was Director Amesley. He stared

down at Darmity for a second, expressionless, and then looked at her.

“My apologies, Agent Begley,” he said flatly.

21.

Three minutes before he rediscovered gravity, Renicks was peering through the slats of a grate into the television studio. Trying to determine how many people were in the room below him. Whether Begley was still one of them.

He was bathed in sweat. Gritty from accumulated dust and dirt. Bloody. He'd pushed his bag, with the Kimber on top, in front of him as he'd crawled, following his own slime trail. Knowing that if he hadn't retraced his steps he would have become hopelessly lost in the dark, cramped airway. When he reached the first junction, he turned away from his original path and followed the new duct. It angled upward slightly, and he quickly found himself looking directly down into the room. He could hear voices. He couldn't see anyone, no matter how he angled his head.

Sweat dripped from him. He felt shaky. He imagined every breath, every twitch of his muscles to be incredibly loud.

He had no plan. It occurred to him that he was a terrible hero.

The murmur of voices was maddening. At least two people. A woman and a man. If they left, he could worm his way back around and re-enter the studio. The idea of staying in the ducts any longer terrified him. He felt like he couldn't breathe. He wanted to scream and beat his hands against the tight, flimsy sheet metal walls.

He considered just hiding in the ducts. He could make his way back to the exchange he'd found; more room there. He had a bottle of water in his bag. And the Kimber.

He imagined himself making his last stand huddled in the goddamn air-conditioning. A twitchy, off-center smile crept onto his face. He stifled sudden laughter that threatened to convulse him.

Through the slats, he saw someone step into his field of vision.

A man. Wearing a suit. White earbud hanging from a wire over his shoulder. Renicks held his breath. One of Amesley's agents. Moving with exaggerated slowness, Renicks reached forward and took hold of the Kimber. Checked the safety. Pointed it downward. Wondered what would happen if he shot through the slats. He knew the Kimber would blow right through the thin metal. Would it send shrapnel back at him? Would it queer his aim?

Could he kill someone? In cold blood?

Paralyzed, he lay there trying to keep his breathing slow and quiet. He became aware of a low noise. It was a low creaking sound, steady. All the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. He didn't know much about ventilation systems, but he was confident this was not a good sign.

The whole duct shifted.

There was a loud wrenching noise, and he felt the thin metal jump under him, as if he'd dropped half an inch. Gripping the Kimber tightly, he stared down through the slats of the grate. The agent below had turned. Stared up at him with a quizzical look on his face.

Renicks exhaled slowly.

With a snap like a gunshot, something gave way and the world tilted. The grate vanished, and for a second it was all

darkness. Then a confused noise like cardboard boxes tumbling, and a square of light opened up below him. His bag slid down, dropping over the edge, and a second later *he* was sliding down, head first. The duct had crashed through the dropped ceiling, hanging on an angle.

He popped out six feet above the floor and crashed into the agent. They hit the floor in a tangle. The agent rolled Renicks onto his back and squatted on his chest. Took hold of his wrist with both hands and pointed the Kimber up at the ceiling. Chunks of drywall tile rained down on them. The silver ductwork swung up and down above them, vibrating. Renicks stared up at it for a split-second. Twisted free and flopped over onto his belly just as it snapped free and crashed down on top of them.

For a second, he thought he was pinned. Two hundred pounds of agent plus half the ceiling on top of him. With a painful twist he was able to pull himself forward. Scissored his legs and was free. The Kimber still in one hand, he got to his knees and stared at the carpet for a second. Head ringing. He felt heavy and slow, and thought he'd just stay right there for a moment. Let the world end while he caught his breath. He stared at the gun. Lifted it up. It was heavier than he remembered. Warm in his hand. He put his finger over the trigger and tried to remember what it felt like to fire it. The kick. The shockwave up his arm. The involuntary jerk of his shoulder. The involuntary wince every time he fired it that had become a joke between him and the instructor.

A noise brought his head up from his chest. A woman, another agent dressed in a sober blue pantsuit, was sitting up on the floor, one hand on her forehead. She'd been knocked down

when the ceiling had collapsed. He stared at her, frozen. She was young, about Begley's age. Pale white skin and reddish, messy hair that hung down just to her shoulders. A plain, round face with a short, flat nose. A competent face unused to passion. Her hair was almost purposefully without artifice, almost defiantly messy. She wore no makeup. Her crisp white shirt was buttoned to the top and betrayed almost no shape at all. Her nails were short and unpainted. She wore no jewelry. He couldn't see her shoes, but he knew they would be ugly, comfortable, and not new. A serious woman who wanted everyone to *know* she was a serious woman. Which Renicks thought meant she wasn't nearly as competent as she wanted everyone to think.

He compared her to Begley, who made no special efforts to be attractive and yet was, who made no special efforts to appear competent, and yet *was*.

A lance of alarm startled him. These two had been with Darmity. Lazily, still feeling dopey and slow, he raised the Kimber and pointed it at her. Again he wondered if he would be able to shoot someone.

The motion caught her eye and she turned suddenly. Gaspd when she saw him.

For a moment, they stared at each other.

Her eyes dropped to the unconscious male agent for a second. Then jumped back to him. He told himself she didn't know him. Didn't know anything about him. Didn't know he'd never fired the gun outside of a range, wearing protective glasses and earplugs. He'd stayed out of their reach and he'd come crashing from the ceiling, bloody and raw. He kept the gun steady. Tried to look calm and evil. And hoped to hell there wasn't something

giving away his pounding heart, his sense of being exposed.

“Where’s Agent Begley?” he said. His voice came out as a dry rasp. He was grateful for the dust.

She shook her head. “I don’t know. Darmity took her.” She raised one hand up towards her ear. “I’m going to reach for my radio and find out for you.”

“Stop,” he said immediately. He wished he could extricate himself from the unconscious agent and the ductwork without lowering the gun, but he didn’t think that was possible.

Her hand kept moving. “I’m just reaching for my radio, Secretary Renicks,” she said slowly. Her eyes were locked on his face.

He thought about clicking the hammer back for emphasis. But his instructor had told him years ago that this was a meaningless gesture you only saw in movies. He was afraid she would know that too and it would make him look like an amateur. His knuckles were white and his arm had started shaking from the strain of holding the gun on her.

“If you don’t stop moving,” he said carefully, “I *will* shoot you.”

She shook her head. “No, you, won’t, sir.”

Her arm jerked downwards. His finger spasmed. The gun roared and kicked back at him. The loudest sound he’d ever heard in his life. He sprang back up straight. His hand and lower arm buzzed with the shock.

He couldn’t see the woman any more. A light spray of red blood had appeared on the wall behind where she’d been sitting. He twisted his torso and used his elbows on the carpet to pull himself out from under the agent and debris. Scrambling to his feet, he ducked down, feeling ridiculous, and duck-walked his

way around the rubble. His hand had gone numb but he still clutched the Kimber, aiming it down towards the floor as he moved.

The woman came into view. Dead. Her gun in one hand. Her chest still seeping blood that slowly soaked into her shirt. Her eyes open and staring up at the ruined ceiling.

Renicks stared at her. Heart pounding. She looked like someone he could have gone to school with. He stood over her. Knew he should move. Knew that the gunshot might have been heard, that more of Amesley's people might be on their way. Any second, they could burst in and take him. The man he'd knocked unconscious might wake up behind him. But he couldn't move. He stared down at the dead agent. She didn't look anything like his daughters. She reminded him of both.

Slowly, he moved to her side. Knelt down. Studied her face for a moment. Couldn't stand her eyes, so he reached down and after a second's hesitation moved his hand over her eyelids, gently closing them.

"I'm sorry," he said, voice shaking.

He could feel a breakdown somewhere in the near distance. Whatever this woman had done, or intended to do, he had shot her without knowing anything about her.

He fought an urge to reach down and tidy her up. As if leaving her disheveled and bloody was wrong somehow. Like a little grooming would make up for it. He stared down at her, frozen. Then his eyes jumped to her arm, which was thrown over her belly. Like she was just resting.

He concentrated. Forced himself to move. To make tiny decisions. He flicked the safety back on the gun. Pushed it back

into his waistband. Turned to make sure the other agent was still out. Stooped to retrieve his bag. The wrenching pain in his ankle as he did so made him pause and inspect himself for injuries. He was shaky from adrenaline, but aside from a million tiny cuts from his excursion into the ducts, there was nothing major.

He looked at the dead woman again. His stomach turned. He spun and staggered towards the back wall. Bent over and vomited onto the carpet. Stayed in that position for a few seconds, breathing hard, head pounding.

Then he spun away, looping the bag's strap over his shoulder. He hesitated over the corpse and stepped over to the other agent instead, kneeling down and searching him quickly, retrieving the man's walkie-talkie and gun. He hesitated for a moment, then pushed the radio and the new gun into his bag and went to the door. Still feeling shaky, a light film of grimy sweat all over his body, he opened it a crack and peered out into the corridor. Taking a deep breath, he opened it further and pushed his head out, looking up and down quickly.

"What they never tell you in school," he whispered to himself as he slipped into the corridor and shut the door carefully behind him, "is that being President of the United States kind of *sucks*."

22.

Four minutes before getting really scared, Marianne Begley was trying to notice everything she could.

She had no idea if she could escape, but if an opportunity arose she had already plotted out a route in her head. Out of the Security office, left. Pass the first two junctions, then right. Eight steps or so to a supply closet filled with janitorial supplies. If she felt she had the time, there would be a short ladder she could wedge under the door handle. That would give her some minutes to work with. An air duct in the closet was reachable by climbing the metal shelves. There would be something in there to pry the grate off with. She was pretty sure there was a straight shot of twenty feet of duct that would bring her to a service corridor, and from there she would be lost in the maze again.

All of this would have to be done with a broken leg that throbbed and lanced her with agonizing pain every time she shifted her weight. The light insulating buzz from the pills had worn thin. She thought if she could somehow get to the closet before being apprehended, she would have enough time to get herself into the ducts. But that was a big *if*. And she was handcuffed to a heavy rolling chair for the time being anyway. She could move, pulling or pushing the chair along with her, but it weighed her down. Made everything awkward. She pictured herself limping through the corridors, being pursued, dragging the chair behind her.

Grit her teeth in frustration.

Still, if the opportunity came, she wanted to bring as many

details of Amesley and his operation as possible. In case anything was useful.

There was also the elevators. She couldn't be sure they hadn't changed the operating codes to something she didn't know, but she had come to suspect that Amesley had just shifted the codes forward a day. Easier. Simpler. The elevators were closer, thirty or forty feet away. If she had enough of a lead, she could make it. If she guessed the codes correctly. And even then, they would know exactly where she went, and she would be trapped in an enclosed space for the duration of the ride.

Amesley was talking with two of his agents, young men with athletic builds, serious and humorless. They were very deferential to Amesley. Any doubts Begley had about their dedication to the odd older man evaporated: These people were true believers. Whether it was in Amesley personally or whatever he was working for, they were convinced. As she watched, one of the two nodded crisply and exited the office, moving with athletic ease.

She knew Renicks was still at large. If he'd been found there would have been more excitement, more activity. He would be brought to the Security Office immediately, as he had to be in physical contact with the football to order a launch. They had retrieved The Brick; she saw it sitting out on the console Amesley was using as a desk. So they had the tactical calculators and coordinate sheets the President would use to select targets.

There was a team of agents still working on the football itself, obviously trying to undermine the biorhythmic security or crack the encryption. A hopeless task. But she understood why Amesley would order it pursued; it kept people busy, and you never knew

when pure dumb luck would insert itself into an operation. While Renicks was loose, there was no reason *not* to try patently impossible things.

There were no other people in the office: Just three agents, herself, and Director Amesley. The rest, she assumed were out scouring the complex for Renicks. Not a hopeless mission, just a difficult one. Even without knowing the layout of the facility the way she did, it would be easy for Renicks to stay lost. A wandering child could evade pursuit for hours by sheer luck.

She thought of Renicks. Jack. A stab of worry pierced the artificial calm she'd managed to hold together. She liked the Secretary of Education, and she'd admired how well he'd held up. Stayed calm, Took orders, but offered suggestions. The sort of person, she thought, who was generally useful in any circumstance. But now he was alone, being pursued by ... she stumbled over the word *terrorists* even in her own thoughts. These were Secret Service. This was Martin *Amesley*. President Grant had trusted this man with his own safety — with his *family's* safety. The idea that these people were not only working to undermine the United States but were willing to murder thousands of innocent people in order to accomplish it was impossible.

She hoped Renicks was smart enough to just find a hiding place and stay put. There was no way out. Their only play was to wait either for the army to bust in and take the complex — which her professional pride insisted was impossible — or for the local evacuation to complete and be vaporized along with the entire complex.

Begley considered her own death. A lump of fear tightened in

her chest, but she was surprised to find it manageable. She would die. It would be instant. She probably wouldn't even know it had happened — whatever amount of time it took for sensory information to travel from her nerves to her brain, the invasion of fire and superheated air would be faster. One microsecond she would be here, tied to a chair in the Security Office, the next she would be ... dead. And so would Jack, and all these people. But hundreds of thousands of others would be alive, and the country preserved.

Worth it, she thought. This was what she had signed up for: Protect her country with her life. That was what she was doing.

Dad, you'd be proud, she thought. And you'd finally shut the hell up about grandchildren, I bet.

Somehow, a smile appeared on her face as Amesley turned away from his agents. He stopped, staring at her in surprise, and then walked over to her. She watched him as he approached. Amazed at how normal he appeared. She'd been in countless meetings with Amesley. Countless more times in the same room while he treated her like a stick of furniture. There was absolutely nothing unusual about Amesley's manner or gait. The man might have been chairing a weekly status update meeting.

"Agent Begley," he said quietly as he approached, pulling another chair over and seating himself close to her. Folded his hands in his lap and slumped forward, his glasses sliding down to the end of his nose. "I apologize for the handcuffs."

"That's what you're apologizing for?"

He smiled slightly. A secret, muted smile aimed at the floor. "Agent Begley, I will not insult your intelligence. I will not torture you. Mr. Darmity has been ... placed under arrest for his actions.

You are, in my estimation, a good agent. Patriotic, in your way. You deserve our respect even if you cannot bring yourself to understand and cooperate.” He looked up at her from under his eyebrows. Even though he was the most unassuming man she’d ever met, even though he was sitting calmly, she felt alarmed at his closeness. “I *will* ask you, once, if you cannot be convinced to *listen* to my argument, and perhaps be persuaded to help us locate Secretary Renicks?”

She stared at him. Studied his face. The mild expression and folded hands made her angry.

“How can you *do* this, Martin?” she exploded, once again omitting *director*, purposefully demoting him. “You’re going to kill, at minimum, thousands of people. Possibly *hundreds* of thousands. How can you betray your country like this? How can you betray President Grant?”

She expected a reaction to that. Amesley *worshiped* Grant, and even the hint of his disapproval would be intolerable. She waited. Watched his face.

He shrugged.

“The President would not approve of this approach, no,” he said mildly. “His standing order is that no single person is more important than our mission. He would no doubt prefer Mr. Darmity’s approach in all things.” He shrugged. “You sometimes have disagreements with your superiors. I must run my command as I see fit.”

She stared at him. It seemed to her that everything had gotten very quiet, as if the office had been suddenly wrapped in a thick blanket. There was not enough air. It was too hot. Everything muffled and far away.

his standing order
disagreements with your superiors
your superiors

He nodded at her. “President Grant is a great man, Agent Begley. You have not spent time with him. Had an opportunity to study his philosophy, his plan for America. A great man, held back by the accumulated minutiae of rules and procedures and tricks. A great man bound into ineffectiveness because he must endlessly dicker and deal to implement his plans. If you had ever been able to listen to him, I am sure you would be with us right now.”

“Oh, my God,” she whispered.

“You see, Agent Begley, it is not just a few random *traitors*. We are, in fact, not traitors *at all*. We are under orders from the Commander in Chief. Doing his work. Pulling this country, kicking and screaming like an *infant*, out of the morass of indecision and divisive politics. Setting its trembling feet back on the path towards prosperity and its destiny.” He spread his hands. She noted that they trembled slightly. “So, you *see*.”

Fear, real fear, seeped into her joints and muscles. Soured her stomach. She realized this was more than a small number of conspirators. She realized that she had no idea, really, *how big* this was. A film of sweat appeared all over her skin. *The President*. The President had *ordered* this. And these people had *obeyed* that order.

Forcing herself to focus on Amesley again, she shook her head. “Martin, this is *insanity*.”

He nodded. Didn’t seem upset in any way. “The country — the world — has been insane for some time. Perspective has been

skewed. I don't think you would know a sane course of action if it was presented to you, Agent Begley." He leaned in towards her slightly. "This is not *random*, Agent Begley. We are orchestrating an *emergency*. It is precisely calibrated. The loss of life, the destruction of property is necessary. Regrettable, but necessary. We must have an emergency of sufficient scale to reduce opposition. We have the legislation written and ready. We have the Executive orders written and ready. As soon as we gain access to the launch system, as soon as we effect the collateral damage needed, the President will declare an emergency and request broad powers, suspension of Constitutional restraints, and can begin the hard work of making this country what it was always *meant to be*." He sighed. "Unfortunately, we have seen our elected officials ignore arguments, ignore pressure. We are out of arguments, we have no time for pressure. All they will listen to is *damage*. And fear. For their own lives. Their families."

He stared at her over the rims of his glasses for an uncomfortable few seconds. As if expecting a response from her. She had none. *Legislation*, she thought. Did that mean congressmen were involved? *Jesus*, she thought, *how many people were involved in this?* It was like a cult, with Grant at the head of it, handing out Kool Aid.

"All these people who will die," she said slowly, "are *innocent*."

"Yes." Amesley shrugged. "I agree. Though that is the minority view, you should know, as many believe no one who sits idly by can be regarded as innocent. But you see, the damage is necessary. The deaths are *necessary*. A threat, no matter how real, that is averted may inspire some cooperation, some progress. But it will fade. When the World Trade Center was taken, there

was a period of a few months when some of us had hope. Now, we thought, *now* the country will come together. Now we will change our disastrous course, because we have been shown the evidence of our own decline.” he shook his head. “Despite the thousands dead, the billions in damages, we forgot. We relaxed again. We lost sight of it.” He nodded. “So this must be calibrated to ensure it will *not* be forgotten.”

He's insane, she thought with a shudder. She shifted in the seat. Straightened up. Tilted her head back. “They’ll blow the charges under the complex,” she said defiantly. “The President won’t be able to stop that. Even if he issues an executive order, they’ll do it. All he can do is delay things, but he won’t be able to stop it.”

Amesley nodded. “Yes. But he *will* delay it as long as he can. We’re prepared to accept death as the price of success or the cost of failure.” He hesitated, glancing down at his hands. “I am sorry you and Dr. Renicks will have to make the same sacrifice. I know that you have made no such pledge.”

Amesley suddenly nodded and stood up just as one of the agents Amesley had been talking to dropped his walkie-talkie from his ear, spinning to face the Director.

“Sir! We have a situation.”

Begley strained forward slightly, studying him, trying to catch every word. *We have a situation*. A phrase she’d heard a thousand times. The standard opening to any informal field report. He was a young man, perhaps her age. His shirt appeared to be slightly too tight. A man proud of his physique. Vain. He was vacation-tanned and his hair looked like he’d had it cut that morning, which might have been true. He was vaguely good-

looking in a generic kind of way — square jaw, good nose. She thought she'd dated about six of him in college and immediately after. The sort of men who were charming as hell on a first date and exponentially less interesting on each subsequent date, until you realized you were sleeping with a man who was doing crunches in his head whenever you were talking.

“Agent Harris is dead,” Square Jaw said. “Shot in the chest. Killiam found her and Simmons. Simmons is unconscious. The TV studio's a mess.” He grimaced. “And Kennings is unaccounted for.”

A thrill went through Begley, a combination of dread and triumph. Renicks was not hiding in some ventilation duct — he was on the move. The knowledge made her inexplicably happy.

“Renicks?” Amesley asked. His voice sounded as calm and flat as always.

The reporting agent shook his head. A single, crisp jerk of his neck. “I doubt it, sir. I had Craddock check on Darmity. That goddamn animal's escaped.” The agent tilted his head. “I think we have a serious problem on our hands.”

23.

Ten minutes before reflecting that they didn't make Secret Service agents the way they used to, Frank Darmity lay on the carpeted floor with his eyes closed.

It was a generic office. Just a desk, a filing cabinet, a phone. Two comfortable chairs in front, one leather chair behind. Nothing else. Small enough for a tall man to reach both walls with outstretched arms. The sort of room set aside for when a visiting dignitary brought a dozen secretaries and each one needed a desk. The sort of space that became essential if you ever *did* have to move the entire Federal Government into the facility, finding space for every assistant to the assistant vice everything.

The door had a simple lock. He'd given it a good look when they'd brought him in. Being gentler with him than they should have because he was one of them. Didn't stop them from handcuffing him, but when he'd hesitated at the doorway, pretended to be bothered about being locked away, they'd given him some latitude and he'd gotten a good look at the lock.

He could kick the door open with one shot, he was pretty sure. If he didn't mind the noise. If he was going to do some sneaking, it would take him a few minutes to pick it. He didn't know if they'd posted a guard. First things first: He had to get the handcuffs off.

He lay with his eyes closed and relaxed. Did an inventory of every muscle and made sure each was as relaxed as possible. People didn't realize how tense they were even when they were relaxing. You had to consciously think of each muscle group and

force it to go slack. You had to be truly aware of your body. He took several deep breaths. Then slowly raised his legs, bending at the knees. Lifted himself up slightly and rolled his shoulders, slowly sliding his wrists down over his hips. It took two minutes of slow contraction. The wound in his belly burned and sizzled. He forced himself to breathe deeply and steadily, straining for every centimeter until his hands slid free behind his knees. A moment later he slipped both feet over the handcuffs and sat up.

He made a quick survey of the office. Didn't expect to find anything in the drawers and wasn't surprised. He had nothing handy to pick locks with.

He stepped up to the door and pushed his ear against it. Held his breath. Heard nothing.

He seethed. Amesley. He knew the Director was a soft man. An Office Man. A fucking Paper Pusher. He'd known that going in. President Grant had known that going in. That was why Grant had given Darmity his private orders, which were to keep everything on track. He hadn't actually said that. But Darmity knew Grant was a subtle man. A man he could never hope to fully comprehend. A man beyond him. And that was okay. He was okay being Grant's inferior. Grant was the only man whose superiority he acknowledged. The President hadn't had to issue direct orders. Darmity understood anyway. Anticipated. And he knew that an Office Man like Amesley would go Weak Sister in tight places.

His hands curled into fists. Sneaking up behind him. When he was *getting somewhere*. Making the bitch squeal, drawing Renicks out of hiding. Fucking paper pushers. He'd pressed the button, and when the Button Man had shown up he'd cowered

back in terror.

Softies had to learn: If you press the Button, you're *not in charge anymore*.

He turned and walked back to the desk. Picked up the phone and dashed it to the floor. The sound of cracking plastic seemed loud and startling in the quiet, muffled atmosphere of the room. He waited, listening. There was nothing. Taking three steps back, he stared at a spot just below the handle of the door, right where the latch slid into the jamb. Closed his eyes. Reared back and kicked it. His foot connected solidly and the door jumped, the latch bent but holding. He settled himself, took another deep breath, and kicked again. With a vibrating pop the door snapped open and crashed against the wall outside. The offices had never been intended as holding cells. He nodded to himself. He was the only person on the whole operation who knew what he was doing.

Darmity waited, crouched, cuffed hands held in front of him. He listened for a moment. There was nothing. He approached the door slowly, listening. Stepped out into the hall and looked around. It was completely silent. He was just a few dozen feet from the Security Office. He might as well be in another state for all he could hear. He turned left, heading away from the office and started walking, scanning each door. The elevators were out, though he doubted Amesley would bother to change the access codes; he didn't want to call attention to himself. He needed a weapon. He needed something to get the cuffs off. He needed a radio, so he could listen to the reports coming in.

He needed to find Renicks before the Softies did. He needed to be in charge of getting the Secretary's cooperation.

Son, I'm giving you the most difficult mission of all. I know you've had the hardest road. I know you've been unappreciated — except by me. Except by me, son. I haven't been able to give you the praise you deserve — yet. But I will. When the time comes.

He made a loop around the level, heading away from the Security Office through the empty corridors, then circling back towards it from the other direction. Everything was still and muffled by the soft carpet. The white light was harsh. The hallways seemed to get narrower as he walked. He paused at the final turn and peered around. The hallway outside the Security Office was empty. He waited. Went over the encounter with Renicks on the highway again. Had been going over it all day. Replaying it. Reliving the frustration, because if Renicks had made that call, made a formal complaint during a Continuity Event, Amesley would have been forced to pull him from the detail. Ruined everything by pushing a button.

Fucking Jumbo Softy.

Darmity watched the hall. Waited. He knew how to wait.

Our time will come, son. Your time will come.

It was amazing, still, he thought. Grant should have been a Softy too. A paper-pusher. He'd served in the army, sure, but he'd never seen action. And he was a fucking politician. Darmity had expected bullshit when he'd been invited to meet the President-elect. Flew all the way from the fucking Middle East just so some rich Senator who'd won an election could shake his hand, tell him he's doing a hell of a job. But Grant was on a mission. He wasn't a Softy. He was *pretending*. To get in. To get power. And then achieve his operational objectives.

Darmity remembered that thrilling moment when reality had seemed to shift, and what Grant was saying clicked into the deep groove in his head and *made sense*. For the first time in his life, a superior officer had made sense. He felt the thrill all over again. An end to bureaucracy. And end to the paper-pushing. One final button to push, and in flames and blood Grant would seize the power to remake the country as it should be. And in that instant, Darmity had been convinced he knew exactly how Grant would remake things. Exactly the decisions he would make. And he approved.

The door to the security office opened and one of the Frat Boys stepped out. Darmity had purposefully forgotten all their names. This one was young and built — there were two of them, almost twins. A fucking queer for his own body, always showing off his arms and taking off his shirt, talking about his workouts, his women. Thought having a ripped stomach and being able to bench press three hundred pounds meant he was a bad ass.

These guys, Amesley's people, should have been doers. Instead, they were Softies, just like their boss.

Darmity watched him walk away down the corridor. The elevators, he thought, and turned to loop around towards them from the other direction. He would show him how fucking wrong he was.

Hurrying along, the wound in his belly sizzling and burning, damp with leaking blood, he paused again around the corner from the elevator bank, peering around. Seconds later, the Frat Boy emerged from the parallel corridor and pressed the call button on the elevator.

Darmity studied him. Didn't move. Waited for the indicator

light to glow, for the soft sound of the elevator doors opening. As the Frat Boy moved to step into the cab, Darmity swung around the corner and jogged lightly, angling towards the wall. He arrived at the elevators just as the door began to slide shut, ducked around and through, launching himself into the cab and crashing into the Frat Boy. They fell to the floor of the cab. Darmity had complete surprise. He took hold of the Frat Boy's ears with his hands, jerked his head up from the floor, and smashed it down again. As hard as he could. Did it again. Heard a cracking sound. The Frat Boy's body spasmed and then he lay still.

The elevator doors closed behind them.

Breathing hard, Darmity climbed off the agent. He got to his knees and shuffled over to the buttons, punched five buttons in sequence. The elevator started to rise. If they saw it in the Security Office, though, they'd assume it was their boy, off on an errand.

He shuffled back to the agent and went through his pockets. Relieved him of his gun, a penknife, a set of keys, and his radio.

Two floors and ten seconds later, the doors slid open again. He stepped out and looked around. Stood and listened for a moment. Then he walked to the nearest door, opened it carefully, and stepped into another abandoned office. Turned on the lights. Started going through the keys, searching for one that might fit his handcuffs.

He knew where Begley was, he thought. That was half the battle. Now he just had to find Renicks and get him to cooperate. Amesley's plans hadn't worked out, Grab Teams out there with nothing to grab because the old man had fucked up somewhere,

gotten his research wrong. Which meant the old man, the Softy, didn't know what to do now, wouldn't let him go after Begley. because she was one of his. So it was up to him, as usual. To do the hard jobs. Which, he thought, was going to be *fun*. He smiled a little, thinking about it.

Here comes the Button Man, he thought.

24.

Five minutes before setting a fire, Renicks was on the fourth floor, moving fast. He knew the main Security Office was on the third floor. He knew Begley was being held there because he'd heard it on the radio, which burst into life every few minutes. They'd discovered the bodies in the TV Studio. They'd blamed Darmity for them, which had surprised him. But he was happy to let that be.

He walked as quickly as his ankle would let him, eyes jumping from door to door, looking for clues. Most were unmarked. He'd noticed on his forced tour with Agent Begley that offices and other utilitarian rooms were unmarked, but storage units and custodial spaces usually had name plates on them using a simple code involving the level they were on and their function. Every time he saw one of those plates, he opened the door and inspected the space. His heart was pounding. He was acutely aware that there were other people crawling through the complex, looking for him. That they might appear at any time. He kept fighting the urge to spin around as he walked, trying to keep every angle in sight.

The first few doors he opened turned out to be, in order, a lavatory complete with shower, an office supply storage closet filled with toner cartridges and copy paper, an inexplicably empty room, and, finally, a long, narrow room filled with cheap folding cots that had metal rings popping from the concrete. A jail of some sort, he decided. The rings could have handcuffs or chains looped through them.

The Federal Government, he thought, had thought of everything. Except its own Chief Executive going nuts.

The fourth door he tried turned out to be a janitor's supply closet. He stepped in quickly, turned on the light, and shut the door behind him. Set his bag down on the floor and paused, listening. He'd set the walkie-talkie's volume as low as he could, afraid of having it burst into static at just the wrong time. When he was certain he wasn't missing anything, he began searching the room.

There were bare metal shelving units on either side, leaving a narrow corridor between. They stretched up to the ceiling. In the rear, lodged in the chasm between shelves, was a standard custodial mop and bucket with a spring-loaded ringer. The whole room smelled sweet. Renicks walked up and down the shelves until he located a cardboard pallet of toilet paper. Twenty-four rolls. He slid it onto the floor and kicked it up towards the door. Squinted up at the ceiling. Spotted the sprinkler bud and smoke detector combo unit bolted into place and nodded to himself.

He positioned the pallet directly under the smoke detector. Tore the plastic wrap off but left the rolls of paper nestled in the shallow cardboard box. Stepped back to his bag. Extracted a plastic tube about the size of a small flashlight. Unscrewed the top. Poured a heap of strike-anywhere matches into his hand. Took a moment to marvel that he was actually about to use the contents of his End of the World Bag in its expected way.

He pushed ten of the matches under the cardboard pallet so that just their red and white tips emerged from underneath. Then he set two matches, very close together, on the floor right in front of them, so that the wooden end of the pair touched the

tips of the ten. Working towards the door, he created a trail of matches, two at a time, back to front. A fuse. At the door he crouched down and counted: twenty-two matches long. With each match taking about forty seconds to burn from tip to end, he had almost fifteen minutes.

Keeping one match in his hand, he twisted the plastic tube closed and picked up his bag. Opened the door and held it open with his body, taking a moment to re-inspect his fuse. Slung the bag over his shoulder again, knelt down, and struck the match in his hand. Watched it flare up perfectly into a dancing orange flame. He knew the matches were good ones, designed to burn steadily and completely. There was no guarantee he didn't have a bad one that would snuff out before burning down to the next match in line. No guarantee this would work at all. No guarantee of what the reaction to a fire alarm would be.

He touched the flame to the nearest pair of matches. The second they lit, he dropped the match in his hand and stepped out of the closet, slowly closing the door until it latched.

Then he ran.

Counting the seconds in his head, he speed-limped his way back along the corridor to the fire door that led to the service tunnels and ladders. He'd marked the innocuous gray door with some of his own blood as he'd emerged, enabling him to find it again. He let the door click shut behind him and leaped up onto the service ladder. Pulled himself up, hand over hand. Dragged himself onto the rough concrete landing on the third floor and pushed himself to his feet and into motion.

Four minutes done, eleven to go. If he was lucky. The matches would burn at different rates. He might have nine minutes, or

twenty. Two matches might burn out too soon, in which case he would be waiting for an alarm to sound in the Security Office forever.

He opened the access door slowly. Carefully. The third floor was populated, and he had to be cautious. He slipped out of the access tunnel onto the carpet and stopped. He had no idea where the Security Office was. Or where the unknown number of Amesley's agents would be.

He pulled out his stolen walkie-talkie and made sure the volume was set as low as possible but still audible. He'd noticed that whenever someone clicked the red TALK button on their radio, there was a loud burst of static before their voice came through. It was the main reason he'd turned the volume down, because he'd been afraid of having his position or hiding place betrayed by the noise.

Holding his breath, he clicked the TALK button.

Dimly, he heard a burst of static somewhere. Far off, muted by distance and walls.

He checked his count. If he was lucky, ten minutes left.

It was difficult to tell which direction the static burst had come from. He turned right; his best guess. The sense of being watched settled on him and pushed. He *knew* there were people on this floor. They could be around any corner, behind any door. Every step forward was an effort. When he found the first junction of corridors, he hit the TALK button again.

To his left, muffled but distinct, came a squawk of static.

Slowly, he stepped towards the noise. He reached into his bag and pulled out the Kimber; it felt warm and heavy in his hand. He pictured the dead agent lying somewhere below and left the

safety on.

When he reached another junction, he toggled the button again. The burst of static was closer, to his right again. He slowly edged around the corner. The hall was empty. Instead of the usual blank-faced fire doors, however, there was a bank of windows with two glass swinging doors set in the center. He retreated and put his back against the wall. Eight minutes.

He closed his eyes and imagined the security camera screen he'd seen with Begley in the smaller office below. He counted the people he'd seen. Amesley and Darmity, and six or seven others. He knew from the radio chatter that Darmity was imprisoned somewhere. Amesley might have sent some of his people out to search for him. Unless some number of *other* others he didn't even know about had returned to their headquarters; just because he'd so far only seen six or seven people didn't mean that was all there was.

He hit the TALK button. Heard the squawk of the radio. Definitely inside the Security Office. No one in the hall nearby.

He waited. Seven minutes to go.

He heard the squeak of the glass door's hinge. He froze. Heard the squeak again as the door swung shut. Waited, holding his breath. Five minutes and counting.

No one stepped around the corner to surprise him. He let his breath out slowly. Waited.

He thought about *ELIRO*. Felt again that he knew the word, had seen it before. It would be something personal to Grant, he thought, if the President was using it as a personal code term. He thought of the coded message the file contained: *Dum tre longa tempo nun*. His sense of familiarity increased. He fell back on a

technique he'd used in his linguistics work, letting his mind jump from connection to connection, running through different languages he'd worked with, studied. Throwing the unknown word into sentences, see if it fit, or maybe just made him think of something.

C'était le meilleur des périodes, il était le plus mauvais des eliro.

Era un día frío brillante en abril, y los eliro pegaban trece.

He froze. Four minutes left. He knew exactly what ELIRO was. It was Esperanto. An invented language, spoken by a handful of linguists and hobbyists around the world. It was originally developed as a simple universal language, a language everyone could learn easily, to bridge borders and cultures. It had never taken off, and for century had been a curiosity. Researched by people like him, sometimes played with by intellectuals and people like President Grant. It wasn't much of a code, but it served well enough to stop casual spying. He concentrated, trying to pull together his rough memory of the language.

He thought back to a project he'd worked on in school, translating the Bible into different languages and then having the translations themselves translated back into English, to study how nuances changed, meanings shifted. The idea being to quantify how ideas got altered throughout history as old texts were translated and re-translated. One of the test languages had been Esperanto. *Eliro* meant *Exodus*.

He paused for a second, looking around and listening. Then opened his bag and pulled out the e-reader. Tapping it into life, he scrolled through the thousands of books stored on it and

pulled up an Esperanto primer, a text he hadn't accessed in twenty years. Emily had always made fun of his insistence on keeping every book he'd ever read. He made a mental note to tell her about this when he saw her again.

If he saw her again.

After a few seconds of tapping, he knew that *dum tre longa tempo nun* meant, roughly, *for a very long time now*.

He couldn't remember the rest. It hadn't been very long. A last minute instruction to a fellow conspirator? Or maybe something important, something that would help derail the plot. Maybe something, he thought hopefully, that would help get him out of this alive. Or maybe it was coincidence. But that first line: *History will forgive me*. It had to mean *something*.

He needed The Brick back. He needed to see the file again.

Flushed with a momentary success, panic swept back through him as he realized he'd lost count of the time. Two minutes? One? He glanced down at the gun in his hand, suddenly remembered. Told himself that if he had it out, he had to be prepared to fire it. To possibly kill someone. Otherwise there was no point in having it in his hand.

He tightened his grip on it. Moved his thumb. Flicked off the safety.

There was a dim alarm from within the Security Office. Pushing through the layers of drywall and insulation, it was just a dull buzzing noise.

He heard the glass doors squeal open. Squeal shut. He heard a voice, moving away from him, towards the elevators. One man. He took a deep breath, checked the Kimber one last time, and turned the corner.

25.

Forty-five seconds before Renicks walked into the room, Begley saw one of the warning lights on the main security console light up bright red. A second later the buzzing noise of an alarm filled the room.

Amesley glanced down at the console. “There is a fire alarm on —” he paused to examine the screen embedded in the console, “— Level Four.”

“Renicks?” Square Jaw said, stepping over to stand next to Amesley.

She watched them while she worked on the bolts of her chair. The handcuff had been simply but effectively looped around the support of the armrest. There was a simple bolt holding the arm onto the chair, and she’d been working it with her fingers every moment that Amesley and the others were distracted. Which was most of the time. She wasn’t making fast progress. The bolt was tight and she had only her fingers to work with. She also had to keep her movements concealed, which limited her leverage.

She estimated it would take her nine hours to loosen the bolt enough to slip off the arm and free herself.

She kept working at it anyway. Waited for a better idea to occur to her.

“Killiam, check out Level Four,” Amesley said. “He’ll have displaced when the alarm went off, but see if there’s a trail.”

Killiam was chubby, and his wrinkled shirt looked like he’d stolen it from a laundromat that morning, but he nodded sharply enough and headed off, checking his weapon. Moving with

purpose. *Jesus, Jack, what are you doing down there?* she wondered, picturing all sorts of scenarios that could result in a fire alarm, few of them good. The longer she'd been separated from him, the less confident she was that Renicks would be all right on his own. Notwithstanding that neither of them would be *all right* in the strictest sense, since the scenario now pretty much ended with the complex destroyed and them dead.

She looked the room over as she worked her sore, stiff fingers on the bolt. Amesley and the three remaining agents — Square Jaw, another man with a circle of curly brown hair around the edges of his head, and a plain woman with the worst haircut Begley had ever seen in real life — were poring over the systems, seeking signs of Renicks in the complex's alerts and systems. A few feet away was the Football, left unattended.

Stay alert, pay attention, she told herself. She was trained for this. No matter how limited your options were, they could alter at any moment. Being ready was the most important thing.

She moved her eyes around the room. Most of it was still dormant and swathed in plastic. They'd dusted off only the parts of the Security Office they needed to use. The Brick caught her eye. It was forgotten, sitting on top of an unused console just a few feet from her. She kept moving her fingers over the bolt as she looked around. When she saw Renicks standing outside the glass doors, she froze. Blinked. Smiled half a smile before alarm shot through her.

Renicks pushed his way into the room, leading with his chrome-plated gun.

She surged to her feet and almost overbalanced, catching herself on the nearest bank of screens and keyboards.

“Don’t move!” Renicks shouted. He looked faintly embarrassed.

“Stop!” Begley shouted. Pushed out her free hand towards him, palms up. “Don’t come any closer!”

For a moment, there was no movement in the room.

Renicks flexed his hand, changing his grip on the gun. Licked his lips. “What?”

For a second Begley stared at him. He looked terrible. Covered in blood. His arms a maze of tiny scars. His clothes dirty and wrinkled. This was not the calm, slightly sarcastic man she’d met a few hours ago. The goddamn Secretary of Education.

Amesley turned towards Renicks with his hands up by his shoulders. Begley scanned the room, making sure none of Amesley’s people were moving.

“All right, Mr. Renicks,” Amesley said in his flat, pinched voice. “Do I believe you will shoot people? I do not.”

Renicks met Begley’s eyes and held her gaze as he spoke to the Director. “You’ve got your hands up.”

Amesley shrugged. “Plenty of people have been shot by accident, Mr. Renicks. Let’s talk like reasonable men, before you get yourself hurt.”

To Begley’s horror, Renicks smiled. “You can’t kill me, Mr. Amesley. If my vital signs flatline this complex will assume the Designated Survivor, the Acting President, is dead and will go offline, transferring executive power to another facility.”

He sounded calm and confident, but Begley could see his hand was trembling, the barrel of the gun moving in a tiny arc. He took a step forward. Begley stiffened again.

“Jack! Don’t get any closer to the RLI! It’ll activate if it senses

your physical presence!”

To her relief, he stopped immediately.

“Impasse,” Amesley said, spreading his hands. Begley imagined his face: Blank and inscrutable as always. “Let’s see; I will assume that you have enough ammunition in the magazine to kill each of us, shall I? And I will assume you have an exfiltration plan, because you are a smart man, Dr. Renicks. I will also assume that it will be at least another minute or perhaps two before Agent Killiam reports in via radio and will expect a response. Very well. For the next two minutes, perhaps, you have the advantage of us. What is it you plan to do?”

“Jack — get out of here!” she shouted. Emergency vibrated throughout her body. The Designated Survivor was the key to the whole plan, and here he was, within inches of unlocking the nuclear football. “Just go!”

Renicks stood there for what seemed an eternity, eyes moving over the room. He saw The Brick and his eyes lingered on it for a moment. Then he looked at her and held her eyes again. She pantomimed, throwing her arm at him and mouthing *Go!* He smiled and looked back at Amesley. She did not like the smile, and the sense of emergency soured into panic.

“She’s coming with me,” Renicks said. “No one else move.”

Begley hesitated. She was handcuffed to a chair. Her leg was splinted. She would have to stand up and limp, dragging the chair behind her, passing within inches of Amesley’s people. She looked back at Renicks. She felt time slipping past them, imagined the fat agent, Killiam, hurrying back. Renicks could order Amesley and the agents to move to the side, but that would make it difficult to watch them. But she knew they had to get out

of the room immediately. Every second they remained narrowed their chances of escape.

She considered telling Renicks to leave her. *He* was the important thing. He was the asset. She found herself reluctant to leave him on his own. He was *her* asset. She was pledged to protect him, and without her he would be at a disadvantage in the complex. He had to stay free until ... until it ended. Until the order was given and the evacuation was complete and the complex was blown to hell. That's what it had become: They couldn't stop that, they couldn't save their own lives. But they could keep him out of Amesley's hands until the facility was neutralized.

She considered trying to immobilize Amesley and his people and rejected it. There was no time. They needed to get away before the other agents returned. If they were trapped in the Security Office it would be an untenable situation.

She stood up and cleared her throat. "Guns. Radios. Slide them here."

Amesley turned his head slightly, but didn't turn to face her. No one else moved. She felt the tension in the room. Time was slipping through their fingers. And she didn't know what Renicks —

Renicks straightened up, moved his ridiculous, huge gun down slightly, and shot Amesley in the foot.

The Director screamed and dropped to the floor. Begley froze in place and stared as Renicks moved the gun again so it pointed in the general direction of the three agents.

"You heard the lady," he said. His voice shook, but she noticed his hand was now perfectly still. "Guns and radios on the floor."

Slide them to her. And keys to the handcuffs.”

There was another second of stillness. Amesley gasped and rolled on the floor, clutching his bloodied ankle. Begley was momentarily fascinated by the sight of Amesley expressing something other than mild disdain or courteous blankness.

“Do it,” Amesley hissed. “We can’t risk a firefight. We need him —” he gasped in sudden agony “— alive.”

The woman nodded and slowly pulled her gun and radio from her belt. Holding them up, she soft-tossed them towards Begley. The other two did likewise. She knelt awkwardly and gathered the weapons and radios, checking over one gun and pushing it into her pocket, dropping the rest into the chair.

“Come on, Agent Begley,” he ordered. His voice was still shaking. She didn’t know how long he was going to hold it together. Rushing wouldn’t do them any good. She stepped behind the chair and started pushing it ahead of her with one hand, pulling the appropriated gun from her waistband with the other. In the silence she could hear the cooling fans of the consoles.

If she’d been ordered to surrender her weapon and radio, she thought, she would have a backup.

When she reached Renicks, she leaned in close. “You know what you’re doing, Jack?”

He didn’t take his eyes from the agents. “Nope.”

“You should have stayed hidden.”

He nodded. “With you screaming on the fucking PA system? I’m not that smart, Agent Begley.”

She sighed. “If we were going to survive this, Jack, I’d be planning how to pin this disaster on you when we get out of

here. All right. We back out. I —”

She looked over his shoulder at the corridor. Stared in shock.
Frank Darmity was standing there.

26.

Ten seconds before crashing through the glass doors of the Security Office, Begley stared at Frank Darmity and thought, *he looks crazy.*

He was a little roughed-up, as if his fellow conspirators hadn't been too gentle when locking him up somewhere. He had a crooked smile on his face that looked like he'd forgotten it was there. His eyes were bright and glassy. Blood had stained his shirt and soaked into the waistband of his pants. She remembered shooting him in the corridor; he must have been bleeding since, a slow bleed.

In his hands was a light machine gun.

It was the expression on his face more than the weapon. It was simultaneously vacant and leering. As if he'd been waiting for this moment. Had imagined it in detail. And was pausing to savor it.

The threat had shifted from behind her to directly in front. She was still chained to a heavy rolling chair. But she was armed. And Darmity was standing so close to the doors his breath was steaming the glass. Her mind did instant calculations. No numbers involved. She knew the weight of the chair she was cuffed to. She knew how weak her splinted leg was. The agents behind her might have hidden weapons, but that threat had just dropped down to second or even third on her list of priorities.

All this in a second. Then she twisted and took hold of the arms of the chair. Lifting it up in front of her, she launched herself forward, letting gravity and momentum make up for her

bum leg. Crashed into the glass door. It swung out and smacked into Darmity with her weight behind it, shattering into hundreds of large jagged pieces that rained down onto the floor as Darmity staggered backwards and slammed into the wall behind him.

The chair rocketed out of her grasp and yanked her off balance. She fell to the floor. Glass sliced into the knee of her uninjured leg as she slid. Pain exploded in her splinted leg as it twisted stiffly under her. She grayed out for a second, two.

Vision fuzzing back, she looked up at Darmity. Saw the butt of the gun coming it her. Flinched a moment too late

It connected with her temple and she lost another five, six seconds.

When she came to, she was sprawled on the floor. The rolling chair was sitting on its wheels next to her. It had been chewed up, the upholstery torn and ripped. The armrest where she'd been handcuffed had snapped at a welded joint. Her arm hung by the wrist from the cuffs still, raised up in the air over her, but she could free herself easily.

Her hands were cut up and bleeding.

There was gunfire in the air.

She turned her head. Slowly, it seemed. Frank Darmity towered over her. His legs spread. The machine gun in his hands. He was spraying quick bursts of bullets into the Security Room. His eyes were just as wide. Just as glassy. His face had the same expression on it as earlier, blank and joyous.

She turned her head and looked through the jagged, broken doors into the Security Office. The walls and consoles had been shot up. One hanging fluorescent light fixture dangled from the

ceiling by a wire, swinging and flickering. She couldn't see any of Amesley's people, or the Director, or Renicks.

Darmity stopped firing and leaned forward along the rifle, squinting through the smoke and gloom.

She felt heavy. Her head buzzed. Her whole body seemed to vibrate, but her leg wasn't hurting her.

"Oh, *fuck* no," Darmity suddenly said. Pointing the rifle up into the air, he strode purposefully into the Security Office, glass crunching under his heavy boots.

Using her elbows, she pushed herself up to a sitting position. Coughing, she pushed the handcuff off the chair's armrest and staggered to her feet. Wincing with the pain, she pulled the gun from her waistband, checked the safety, and stepped over to the wall. Carefully, she leaned over to look into the office. Leaned against the wall to avoid falling over.

Renicks had gone for The Brick. He had it in one hand. His gun in the other. She could see this because he had both hands in the air. Darmity stood a few feet away from him, his back to her, the gun trained on Renicks' chest.

She raised the gun. Blood was dripping down the grip. She took a deep breath and sighted directly at Darmity's head.

Then sucked in another breath and lowered the gun slightly.

The Remote Launch Interface. The Nuclear Football. It was green across the board.

Her eyes flicked to Renicks. Two feet away from it. He'd activated it. All that remained was to key in the codes and coordinates, which were on The Brick. Which was in Renicks' hand.

She put her eyes back on Darmity's head. "Don't move."

She wished she'd had time to make sure of the location of the other agents. She knew Amesley was injured. The other three were unaccounted for.

"The bitch is back," Darmity said without turning. "You gonna shoot me again, Agent Begley?"

Shoot him in the head, she thought. *Remove him from the equation*. Killing Darmity might not enable them to stop the complex from being destroyed, but it might; free to move about the complex and use its facilities they would be able to contact anyone on the outside and possibly avert disaster.

She hesitated. How far did this conspiracy go? The Director of the Secret Service, agents within the service, the President of the United States himself — who would they call? Who could be trusted? It was overwhelming. And Darmity must have some of the answers. Amesley might know more — if he was still alive somewhere in the darkened room, under hunks of plastic and debris — but Darmity was a sure thing, in her sights. To shoot a potential witness to the greatest conspiracy the country had ever seen was impossible.

"Drop the weapon," she said, straining through pain and sweat to make her voice steady and implacable. "Step back towards me. Hands on your head. Don't turn around."

"How 'bout I just shoot Professor Fancy here?"

"You can't do that. Drop the weapon. Hands on head. Step back towards me."

Darmity nodded. "We had this conversation before, Honey," he said. "I can't *kill* Professor Fancy. But I can *hurt* him."

In a blink, he surged forward. Jammed the gun into Renicks' belly. Renicks doubled over and Darmity clamped one huge hand

around his neck, jerking him up and around. Held him in front of him, now facing Begley. It had taken just a few seconds. She felt fuzzy and slow.

“Better ‘n body armor,” Darmity said with a grin. “Now, we gonna continue our *negotiations*, or —”

He paused, eyes shifting suddenly. Alarm surged within her. She knew what he was looking at. The Remote Launch Interface. Lit up green like a Christmas tree. She saw it all going straight to hell in ten seconds. Darmity with all the pieces: The launcher, the codes, the physical presence of the Designated Survivor.

She was moving before he took his eyes from the RLI.

She saw the opening: Get in behind Renicks. Jam the gun into Darmity’s ear, his neck. Push Renicks up against him to trap his arms. Just like that, the situation had changed. Keep going, she told herself. Kill him. Don’t stop.

She slammed into them and pushed the gun up into the space between Renicks’ head and shoulder, but Darmity flinched away and spun out from behind Renicks. She pulled the trigger a second too late and fired into the drywall.

She clawed her other hand into Renicks’ shirt and dropped to the floor, pulling him on top of her.

“Down!” she hissed. “Stay —”

A burst of automatic fire split the air for a second, scattering into the wall. She heard Renicks curse and rolled him to the side, crawling awkwardly forward.

Quiet, then. Their harsh breathing. The sound of Darmity’s boot on some broken plastic.

She grabbed Renicks’ shoulder. He looked at her. He had The Brick clutched in one hand, his bag in the other.

“Make for the door! *Run!* I’ll cover you!”

He nodded back. She didn’t wait. There was no time for a deep breath or a momentary reflection. She got herself into a painful crouch, her splinted leg extended in front of her, and leaped up awkwardly.

“Go!”

She swung the borrowed gun out and fired three times. Across the room, Darmity ducked down behind the bank of consoles.

She stayed up. Began limping towards the exit. Gun up. Eyes scanning the opposite wall. Took a step, sweeping her leg along with a rolling gait. Moved faster.

Darmity’s head appeared across the room again, trailing a few feet behind her pace. She squeezed off one careful shot and he dropped down again.

She turned and limped for the ruined doors. Renicks crashed through and made the turn to the right. Thick shafts of intense pain exploded in her leg each time she slammed it down on the floor. But she kept going. Felt the glass crunch under her shoes. Two steps from the door she heard something behind her and she leaped, knocking some slabs of glass to the floor as she scraped through the empty door frames.

She tottered, off-balance. Renicks flashed out a hand and pulled, yanking her out of sight and pushing her roughly down into the rolling chair she’d been cuffed to.

“Sit and use that gun,” he said. A second later she started rolling backwards, dragged behind him.

She steadied herself as best she could. Brought the automatic up. Watched the hallway behind them. It scrolled away as

Renicks pulled her in the chair behind him. Heart pounding, she watched for Darmity to emerge.

“Where am I going?”

“Elevators! Take your first right. The bank is just a few feet after that.”

The hallway swung to the right, and then she was looking at an empty corridor. Pristine. Untouched. She rolled to a stop and the world spun again as Renicks oriented her so the elevator’s keypad was directly in front of her. She reached up. Noticed her hand shaking violently. Hesitated a second, then keyed in the next day’s code. Immediately there was a soft *ding!* and the doors split open. Relief swept her — they’d just rotated the codes forward a day, as she’d suspected.

Renicks spun her again and she sailed backwards into the elevator. Sat for a few second feeling her pulse, holding the gun ready, waiting for Darmity to leap into view.

The doors rolled shut. She blinked. Leaned forward and keyed in another complex sequence.

“Where are we going?”

She licked her dry lips. Forced herself to drop the gun in her lap. “Down. Twelfth Level. I have an idea.” The Security Office had been shot to hell; she didn’t think anyone would be able to track them effectively any longer. They had The Brick and the launch codes and coordinates it contained. Renicks was with her. Darmity couldn’t launch without The Brick. All they needed to do was stay away from him for perhaps an hour. A half hour, even. It wouldn’t be long before the complex was destroyed.

She turned and looked at Renicks. He nodded and reached down, taking her hand. Smiled what she thought might be the

least believable smile she'd ever seen. "Thank you," he said.

She squeezed his hand and looked at the elevator doors.

27.

Seventeen minutes before almost dozing off, Begley opened her eyes and said, “I feel like I’m in the hospital.”

“You *should* be in the hospital,” Renicks said as he pushed her in the chair. “We should *both* be in the hospital.”

The corridors of the twelfth floor were immaculate at first glance. The carpets, however, had been tracked with dirt from several waves of people marching through. Other than that it would be easy to imagine nothing at all happening in the complex. A normal day. Boredom and inactivity.

She’d spent the elevator ride pondering options. Concluded there weren’t any. With the Security Office destroyed and a number of rogue agents still roaming the complex, the chances of making significant contact with the outside world were slim. With the implications of the conspiracy so huge, chances of accidentally contacting an enemy were high. They were both injured and her estimates on time until detonation of emergency charges were pessimistic.

Her conclusion was that their only sensible course of action would be to find someplace comfortable and wait out the last half hour or hour of their lives.

John Renicks, Ph.D., she reflected, wasn’t the person she would have chosen to spend the last hour of her life with. But she also figured she could have done worse, and decided to be content.

They turned the corner and the scorched and torn-up double doors leading into the Executive Suite came into view.

Equipment, including the hulking laser cutter they'd been using on the mag locks, had been dropped on the floor and left behind. Big portable lights with chrome stands and yellow metal reflectors still cast the door in a blinding white light. The walls around the door had been torn up, exposing the thick steel rods held in place by the magnetic system; only six of the twelve had been cut through. Renicks pushed her to within a few feet and she struggled up out of the chair. Approached the door. Punched in the override code she'd created just a few hours before. The magnetic locks released immediately and the steel rods snapped back into their holsters in the walls.

The suite was exactly as they'd left it. Painfully normal-looking. She pulled the door shut behind them and sealed the room again. Then dropped into the couch with a sigh and sat there for a moment, feeling more tired than she'd ever been before in her life.

Renicks dropped his bag and The Brick. Stepped out of the main room. Returned a moment later with two bottles of cold water and a small white box.

"First aid kit only had acetaminophen," he said, tearing the box open and pouring small white pills into his hand. "Here's four thousand milligrams. Your liver won't forgive me, but it'll help a little with the pain."

She accepted the pills and a bottle of water. Swallowing the pills, she drank the entire bottle. Sat gasping on the couch. Felt instantly like going to sleep.

After a moment, Renicks said "Jesus."

She nodded. "I'm not even a Christian," she said, "and that about covers it."

“You think we’re okay here?”

She shrugged. “He doesn’t have the launch codes or coordinates.” She pointed at the Brick. “Those are in there. Before they had the codes and the RLI, but not you, so they couldn’t activate the launcher. Now they have an activated launcher but no codes. So they can’t do anything. We’ll shut up and barricade the tunnel. They don’t know where it leads to, I don’t think, but we’ll barricade it.” She looked at him steadily. “We only have to hold out for a little while longer.”

He frowned at her, then nodded. “The charges.”

“The charges.”

They sat in silence for a moment.

“I wish I could call my kids,” he said.

“I’m sorry.”

“How about you. Family?”

She smiled. “More than I can handle. I’ve been avoiding them as much as possible for years.” She shook her head. “Doesn’t matter. Let’s not talk about that, okay?”

She watched him pick up The Brick. As he touched it, it sprang back to life, the screen lighting up instantly. Then he dropped it and stood up. “I’m going to shut up the tunnel. It would be funny if they just snuck in here and grabbed me, after all this.”

“Jack,” she called out after him as he walked back towards the kitchen, “I do not think that would be funny *at all!*”

She sat in a daze. Felt curiously calm and contented. Her leg hurt like hell. She had a few other minor aches and sprains. She was exhausted. But she felt like laughing. On one level she knew it was just an adrenaline crash. Her brain had been soaked in all

sorts of chemicals, some of which it hadn't produced in decades, and now she was enjoying their effects without the associated trauma or terror to offset them. On the other hand, it felt unreal: She was still beaten-up, still being hunted. Still charged with keeping a man she'd only met a few hours earlier alive. Until he could be killed by remote detonation of buried charges.

The absurdity of it finally made her burst out laughing. She grabbed and hugged a pillow to herself. Peals of it escaped her, uncontrolled. When Renicks walked back into the room he stood for a moment, studying her. She pointed at him.

"Is that a bottle of wine?"

He nodded, holding it up. "It is. It is not a bottle of *good* wine, but I have decided to be good and drunk when ... when this ends."

She nodded. "Saddle up."

He sat down and twisted off the cap. Held it up. "Twist off caps used to be a sure sign of your federal government saving money by purchasing its wine by the ton, but no more. Twist-offs are becoming common." He held the bottle out towards her. "Under other circumstances drinking with the amount of acetaminophen in your system would be a bad idea, but I'd say we have little to lose."

She accepted the bottle and took a swig. It wasn't bad. She had an idea that she would love anything right then. "You learn all this from your Dad?"

She remembered his file. Small town doctor, used to take young Jack to the office on weekends, let him help out a little. Had hopes his son would follow in his footsteps.

Renicks nodded, taking back the bottle. He looked right at

her. She found that invigorating. So many men didn't look at you. They either looked at your chest and took mental snapshots or they looked at their shoes, all *aw shucks* and *yes ma'am*. She liked how Renicks just *looked* at her.

"I learned a lot from Dad," he said, taking a swig. "More or less by accident. I remember things easily. I'm not really so smart. I just remember things." He picked up the Brick and it lit up again.

"I have a good memory," she said. "But not for information. Numbers. Directions. If I read a book, I can't tell you anything about it a week later. But give me a keycode to remember, and I have it for life. I still know my high school locker combination."

They fell silent. They passed the bottle back and forth a few times. Renicks appeared absorbed in something he'd found on the Brick. Feeling much more drunk than she should have after approximately one glass of stale white wine, Begley studied him dully and wondered if he'd happened across a secret document entitled WHAT TO DO IF SECRET NATIONWIDE CONSPIRACY TRIES TO HIJACK THE NATIONAL SECURITY AND HOMELAND SECURITY PRESIDENTIAL DIRECTIVE. Fought back another attack of what she suspected was inappropriate laughter.

"What are you reading?"

He looked up. Leaned forward and relieved her of the bottle. Swirled the contents around a bit and offered her a raised-eyebrow, then took a long pull. His clothes were torn up and he was filthy. His hair stood up in odd directions, stiff and sticky. But he still looked put-together, somehow. It was the confidence, she thought. He was a man who always seemed to know exactly

who he was.

“I’m translating a file President Grant placed here personally. A private memo to AG Flanagan. Written in ... not *code*, but something meant as a code. An artificial language.” He grinned. “I’m a bit rusty.”

She raised her own eyebrow. “*That* is how you’re spending your —” She hesitated over *last hour alive* and substituted “— time here? That sounds like the most boring shit *imaginable*.”

He nodded. “Most of my career is the most boring shit imaginable. If I was going to start a rock band, our name would be *Most Boring Shit Imaginable*.”

She laughed. Thought this was not a terrible way to spend your last moments. Her leg was throbbing and her head was pounding. But it was peaceful. Quiet. And, she decided, she *liked* Jack Renicks.

Silence again. She lay back and tried to think of everything she loved. People, things. Trips. Feelings. Every memory she savored. She told herself she’d done her job. She’d protected the asset and served the interests of her country. She closed her eyes and felt sleepy, enjoying the sensation of being still and calm. She hoped —

Renicks suddenly sat forward. Hissed a curse. Knocked the bottle to the floor, where lukewarm wine chugged out onto the carpet.

“What?”

He looked back at her. “We’ve got a problem.”

She sat up, wincing as her head gave her an extra-deep throb, like she was having an aneurysm. “With what?”

Renicks stood up. “Darmity. He doesn’t need this for the

codes,” he said, gesturing at her with the Brick. “He already has them.”

28.

Four minutes and ten seconds before toppling over a refrigerator, Jack Renicks was replaying the ELIRO memo in his head.

Dear Gerry — forgive this

The first line in English.

For a very long time now I have been plagued — blessed — with visions. They interrupt my sleep and dominate my thoughts.

He helped Begley limp to the front door again. A sense of sudden panic enveloping him. His bag was once again slung over his shoulder, the Brick shoved carelessly into it.

“How are we going to find him?”

At first I discarded the images I was being shown. Then, when I began to suspect they were not merely dreams, but rather glimpses of a future, I withheld them for some time. I feared they would not be taken seriously.

“The RLI is meant to be activated and used — if it’s closed up and moved, it will deactivate until you show up again,” Begley said breathlessly. She hopped to the keypad just inside the door and began punching keys. “He can’t risk moving it. He’ll barricade himself into the Security Office. That’s why he didn’t pursue us. He *wanted* us to leave the Security Office, get out of his hair.”

“How long until he can issue the launch instructions?”

The images I am shown are not happy ones, Gerry. You and I have had many talks. We both agree what needs to be done. I

know you are with me on this difficult journey to rebuild our nation and cleanse our people.

The magnetic locks snapped free again, and Renicks surged forward and pulled the doors inward.

“Depends. The RLI is preprogrammed with what are considered likely targets based on the most recent red band classified alerts. If he were using a pre-loaded target, five minutes. If he was going to change out the preloads and he had a secure dongle with the data, ten minutes. If he’s got to key everything in from memory or paper, thirty minutes. Maybe more.” She limped out of the suite, gun in hand, and surveyed the hall. Then turned to wave Renicks out. “Mr. Darmity looked like he had some pretty fat fingers on him, and the keyboard on the RLI is tiny.”

You are one of my most trusted friends and colleagues in this great mission. But all men are subject to weakness. We conduct simulated launches regularly, Gerry. We have a three percent failure rate due to human refusal to launch. High-ranking people who simply refuse to launch when they are ordered to. They do not know it’s a drill, Gerry. They think they are about to kill millions of people and they cannot do it.

There is no shame in this.

Renicks stopped. “Say forty minutes. Begs, it’s been at least fifteen minutes since we hopped the elevator. Maybe more like twenty. I wasn’t paying attention. Do we have *time* to get down there?”

Begley spun awkwardly. “What other choice do we *have*, Jack?”

You may note there is a face on the team you do not recognize. Do not be alarmed. He is there as my personal agent.

Martin did not know of his inclusion until this morning.

Renicks nodded. "You're right, okay."

They headed off down the hall, leaving the Executive Suite doors open.

The new man is there as insurance, Gerry. For both the mission and for your place in history. I do not doubt you, my friend. But I have been disappointed by others I did not doubt. So many others who seemed to be friends, who seemed to understand, but in the end did not.

They turned the corner and approached the elevator bank. Renicks felt his pulse pounding, his head throbbing with each beat. He regretted the wine. He regretted almost everything about the last twenty minutes.

I do not doubt you, but the new man is there to be certain that when the moment comes, we will fulfill our mission.

Begley stumped forward again and started keying in the code to summon the elevators.

The new man has all the information he needs to complete what I'd call a 'rump' of our mission. Your direct involvement is far preferable. Your glory is ensured; the new man only has the very basic data to ensure success. If you proceed as we have planned, we will accomplish far more. But if you choose not to proceed, for any reason, he will be able to at least achieve more modest goals.

She was still punching buttons when the indicator light came on, the soft *ding!* lilting through the air.

She straightened up, frowning. "I didn't —"

My man has been ordered to do nothing as long as our plans proceed. He will defer to you as long as you wish him to. He is reliable. He is a Fellow Traveler. He has been instructed, I must warn you, to use

whatever tactics are necessary to ensure success.

Begley suddenly shoved Renicks to the side and hobbled backwards, bringing the gun up directly in front of the elevator doors.

They slid open.

Begley fired four times.

He will treat you with respect, Gerry. But he will need your physical presence to accomplish his mission, if you choose not to accomplish yours. And he will not be gentle. He is, in fact, incapable of gentleness. As he was trained to be.

She spun and slammed herself against the wall. Amidst shouts and cries from within, the elevator doors shut again.

“Amesley’s people,” she said, pushing off and limping back the way they came. “Come on!”

“Jesus,” Renicks hissed. “Stop a second!”

She didn’t. He moved up quickly behind her, hearing the elevator doors open behind them again. Scooped her up. Carried her around the corner and moved as quickly as he could, a lurching, gasping sort of run.

You, of all people, understand the necessity of our timeline. There can be no records. No evidence. No witnesses to crack under questioning. No impurity can ever attach itself to the events of today. Martin has accepted his role. If necessary he will wear the mask and play the part. But when I am pressured to act, as I will be, I cannot hesitate or the image we are painting will be tainted.

Renicks heard voices. Tried to picture them stepping out of the elevator. Careful. Slow. They’d just been ambushed. Begs had reminded them that she was armed too. They would creep for a

few steps, afraid she was waiting right around the corner. His lungs burned. His ankle felt like it had been replaced by broken glass and small bits of stone. Sweat had instantly appeared all over his body, soaking him. The double doors of the Executive Suite seemed to remain at a fixed distance.

Move quickly. Move with certainty. Do not hesitate.

When he was still three or four steps from the doors, a gunshot. A section of wall over his shoulder exploded into dust. Begley wriggled in his arms. Put her arm up and over his shoulder as if to hug him.

“Watch your —”

She fired twice, the first shot incredibly, painfully loud in his right ear. The second shot sounded distant, muffled. She jerked in his arms from the recoil. They crashed through the double doors.

Good luck to you, my friend. Tomorrow will be the greatest day in our nation’s history. No matter how it unfolds, your name will be on the statue. Your name will be considered one of the Second Founders. You will be remembered as a true patriot, and that is reward enough for all of us.

There was another gunshot as Renicks dropped to the floor and set Begley down roughly — not quite dropping her, but not exactly *easing* her down. He spun around without getting off his knees and slammed the doors shut, hearing them latch.

“How do I seal it!?”

I promise that to you, Gerry. Even if you fail. Even if you hesitate and my agent must step in to do your duty for you, your memory will never be tarnished.

Begley didn’t respond. She lurched up and hopped deliriously

towards the keypad, wincing. The doors leaped behind him. He pushed back, his feet slipping out from under him. He fell to the floor with a grunt and immediately pushed himself back up. Strained back against the door as it jumped again.

“Uh, Begs?”

She pounded the wall with one hand. “They keep bumping the fucking sensors. The seal won’t engage unless the door’s flat in the frame!”

Good luck.

He let his eyes scan the room. “The lamp! Begs, get the lamp base!”

She turned and followed his pointing finger. Looked back at him. Up over his shoulder. Nodded.

“Won’t take them more than a minute!” she shouted as she limped over to the lamp. Tore off the shade. Ripped the power cord from the wall.

He nodded as the door jumped again. “We won’t need more. Out through the kitchen.

She carried the metal rod over. Slid it through the door handles. Staggered backwards, unsteady. Renicks looked at her.

“Go! I’ll be on your heels.”

She nodded. Turned and stumped off. Faster than he thought she could. He waited. Strained back against the doors. Waited.

The doors jumped again. He pushed back against them, legs and back burning. When they sagged back again, he pushed himself up in a pathetic imitation of a jump and ran after Begley. Passed her just before the kitchen and ricocheted around her. Gathered some speed and slammed himself into the refrigerator, which he’d pushed and pulled into position over the tunnel

entrance. It tipped over and slammed into the countertop with a crash he barely heard, his ear ringing. He knelt and got his hands under it. Rolled it over just enough to open a wedge of darkness they could both fit through.

He turned as Begley dropped to the floor, sliding a foot or so to the entrance. Dangling her legs over the edge, she handed him the gun. He leaned back against the fridge and held it in front of him. He wasn't familiar with it, but he assumed all guns worked basically the same.

Begley dropped into the hole and disappeared. Renicks could hear them slamming into the door again. The lamp base was made of heavy metal, but it wouldn't last long. He gave Begley a count of ten, then pushed the gun into his waistband and dropped his legs over the edge.

Heard the door crash in as he began lowering himself down, hand over hand.

God bless.

Six minutes and forty-five seconds before watching him die, Begley limped after Renicks, breathing hard and trying to ignore the settled, burning ache in her leg.

“This ... is ... not ... a ... good ... idea, Jack,” she said, sucking in breath between each word.

He didn’t slow his pace or turn around as he led her down the corridor of the Thirteenth Level. “We know where they are, Begs — right behind us,” he said, sounding just slightly less out of breath, which annoyed her. “They won’t be *on* the elevators. And we have three legs between us right now, so the less ladder climbing the better.”

She sucked in a deep, painful breath and surged herself forward to draw even with him. Was amazed he knew how to get to the elevators. Each level followed the same basic floorplan in the sense of where the access tunnels led out and where the elevator shaft was, but it was still surprising.

“I want to know how they found us,” she managed, swinging her arms to compensate for her stiff leg. “And why they’re even bothering. Darmity has the RLI. You say he has the codes. If we’re holed up in the Ex Suite, why not just leave us there?”

“As for finding us, might have been a good guess — it’s the one secure place in the whole complex, right? Perfect for a hiding place. Or maybe they can still track the Brick and we just don’t know it. As to why, the memo I just read indicates Darmity’s a last-minute drop-in. They don’t know him. He seems to have his own set of orders. And he didn’t mind killing several of Amesley’s

people. I'm not sure the lines of communication are open."

They turned the corner like birds, coordinated.

"And maybe," Renicks added as they swerved in front of the elevator bank, "they were planning to just keep us bottled up, just in case we did realize what was happening and tried to stop it."

Begs considered. She drew the borrowed automatic and checked it. One round left in the magazine. One in the chamber. As Renicks pressed the call button she held the gun ready, safety off, finger resting lightly on the trigger. She thought, *two rounds, Jesus.*

They stood for a few seconds, waiting. Silence all around them. She stood breathing hard through her nose, feeling every ache and scrape, slightly dizzy. Her stomach sour. A light film of sweat all over. It was so quiet. The lighting so flat. For a second she thought she might just be in a coma somewhere, sweating out a fever and imagining her worst possible work day.

The indicator light lit up. The electronic bell *dinged*. The elevator doors split open. The elevator was empty.

Relaxing, she limped into the cab. Started punching in a code. Renicks reached out and put his hand on hers.

There was a crash. Muffled by the corner and the walls, but distinctly coming from the direction they'd come.

"Ninth floor," Renicks whispered, taking his hand back.

She frowned. Heart pounding. "Why there?"

"So we can stop this."

She chewed on that. Voices down the hall. Whispers, careful. She punched in the code and stepped back, gun held down by her leg but ready. Stared straight ahead, heart pounding.

The doors slid shut. She thought she heard something just as

they did, a rustle of fabric, shoes on the carpet. Then they were rising.

“You gonna let me in on the plan, or is this a teaching moment?”

The sense of bizarre calm had returned. There were armed people chasing them. The whole complex would be destroyed within the hour. A man was trying to launch a nuclear assault on his own country not too far away. But she was standing in an elevator, waiting calmly for it to arrive at their destination. The only thing, missing, she thought, was Muzak playing softly.

“No,” Renicks said as the doors split open. “Just play along. Pay attention.”

She limped after him, fuming. “We should be going after Darmity. We can’t know that they’ll trip the charges before he manages a launch — in fact, we know the President is probably stalling, giving Darmity as much time as he can. Jack — *Jack!*” She stopped and caught him by the shoulder. “We should be looking for Darmity. We should be trying to stop him. Millions of lives are — ”

He nodded. “I know. Trust me. This is better. He might not be where we think he is. He might have found a way to displace. He might be barricaded better than we expect. We might not be able to get to him. Even if we can get in, he’s armed.” He shook his head. “There’s a lot of leeway in that plan. But there’s one thing *I* can do that ensures we stop him.”

She swallowed frustration and nodded. “Okay. And that would be?”

“Take this complex offline. Come on. They’re gonna catch up to us soon.”

He turned and walked off down the hall. She started to limp after him, frowning. *Take this complex offline.*

Her heart thudded in her chest. She threw herself after him in a sudden anesthetic of alarm.

He was heading for the hospital.

“Jack! Jesus Christ, Jack!”

She stopped again. He was going to kill himself. Take the complex offline — by taking the Acting President off the grid. If his vitals flatlined, the system would transfer authority to the next Secure Facility in the system. Colorado, if she remembered correctly. Which had not been hacked and seized by conspirator — as far as she knew. Where no one was waiting to launch missiles. The threat would be removed immediately.

But the only way to do that would be for Renicks to die.

She limped half a step after him again, taking a deep breath. Stopped again.

They were dead anyway.

At some point, either before Darmity launched or after, the complex would be destroyed. They would be blown up with it, a sudden, searing death.

She stood for a moment, engulfed in sudden emotion. She didn't know what to do. Everything felt backwards. She'd only known Jack Renicks for a few hours. *Didn't* know him, really. But he was her asset and letting him die — kill himself — felt so completely, totally wrong.

But it would save so many lives. Slowly, she struggled after him. *Jesus*, she thought, *I hope he doesn't ask me to shoot him.*

She watched him step into the tiny medical center. She pushed herself to rush after him, swinging her leg awkwardly.

When she stepped inside after him, he was standing with his hands on the counter by the small sink, staring down at the floor.

“We should barricade the door, just in case,” he said softly. “They’ve shown a knack for finding us.”

She stared at him for a second. Felt she should say something. Couldn’t think of anything to say.

She turned and shut the door behind her. Turned the bolt. Turned around again. “Help me with the desk.”

They both hobbled over to the small, efficient desk at the far end of the room. Taking one end each they pushed and pulled it over to the door and upended it so it fell across the doorway. Begley, catching her breath for what felt like the millionth time, examined it; if they busted the deadbolt the desk wouldn’t hold the door. But there was a drywalled bump-out just past the door, and the desk would catch it and wedge against it as the door was opened. They wouldn’t get the door more than five or six inches open. It wouldn’t stop them forever, but it would slow them down.

“Come on,” Renicks said, picking up his bag and stepping into the exam room.

She followed him slowly. Her instinct told her to talk him out of this — this was insanity. Except it wasn’t crazy. She felt strangely numb and inert. The pain in her leg had become a dull, permanent part of her. It felt natural. Watched him pull open all the cabinets, rifling through their contents. Plucking ampoules off the shelves as he went.

When he was done, he dumped seven small bottles filled with liquid and two plastic-wrapped syringe kits onto the metal table. Just as he did so, something crashed against the door in the next

room, making them both jump. Then they looked at each other.

Renicks stepped around the table, unbuttoning his cuff.

“Come here. Listen closely.”

She felt the curious inertia pulling at her, holding her back. She felt like she could just stand there for years, unmoving. Like it was her natural state.

Then she shook herself free and pushed herself over to stand next to him as he rolled up the sleeve of his bloody, ruin shirt. His arm was covered in dozens of angry-looking cuts and scrapes, a skein of red lines.

He took up one of the syringe kits and tore it open with his teeth. Extracted the syringe, Took the rubber tip off and tossed it aside.

In the next room, they began banging against the door repeatedly, a fast rhythm.

Renicks began filling the syringe with small amounts from several of the ampoules, holding the needle up to the light each time and flicking it with his finger.

“What is that?”

He didn’t pause. “Something I learned from my father.”

“You learned ... *this* from your Dad?”

He continued to work. “I used to come into the office with him on weekends. He let me have a stethoscope and I helped him, getting things for him. When I was a kid there was an investigation; the family of this old man my Dad treated for decades accused my father of — ” He paused for a second, glancing at her, then set the syringe down on the metal table and picking up the second kit. “Of assisting his suicide.”

She blinked. “A mercy killing.”

“Yes. Nothing came of it. He was an old man, filled with cancer. The family wanted an autopsy. They said it wasn’t the first time. I don’t know exactly what happened, but it went away. There were rumors for years afterwards.”

He tore the second bag open and pulled out the second syringe. Tossed the rubber tip away. Began filling it the same way, from different ampoules.

“When I was eighteen, Dad took me to the office one day and told me it was true. He helped four people die. Suicide. They were all dying anyway, in a lot of pain, with nothing to look forward to except a few more months of more pain and less mobility, more pain and more humiliation. He wasn’t proud of it. He wasn’t ashamed. He considered it part of his job. To ease suffering.”

The door in the next room took a sudden heavier blow from outside, as if they’d found some sort of battering ram. Begley felt it in her feet.

“I didn’t know what to think. I was shocked. But I knew my father always did what he thought was right, no matter what. So I asked him to show me how he did it. I wanted to know that it was painless as he said it was. So he showed me. He made a cocktail of drugs, explained each one to me. Explained how it worked. Explained what would happen to the patient.”

She studied his face. It was impassive. “And you remembered that? Every detail?”

He nodded. “Every detail. I remember things. Always have.”

He set the second syringe down. Pushed the ampoules off the table into his hands and threw them onto the counter. Picked up the syringes and held them out to her, with his right hand

forward.

“Take this one.”

The door boomed again, with a distinct cracking noise at the end. She reached out and took the syringe from him. It was filled with a small amount of clear liquid. Her hand, she noted with annoyance, was shaking.

“Adrenaline,” he said.

She looked into his eyes. “You’re fucking kidding.”

“Nope. We’re going with a bit of a brute force approach. But forgive me if I’m going to try and stack the odds a bit. The idea is, I die. I’ll have to *actually* die in the sense of my vital signs stopping. This place goes offline. Then you bring me back to life.” He tilted his head and smiled what she thought was the most charming smile she’d ever seen, under the circumstances. “If we’re *not* going to blow up, and we’re *not* going to wake up to a nuclear nightmare, well, hell, I want to *be* there.”

The door boomed again. The cracking noise again, louder.

“Do you know CPR?”

She nodded. She was re-certified every six months. She was watching the syringe shake in her hand. That couldn’t be right. Her hands did *not* shake.

“Good. I’ll self-administer the cocktail. It’s effect will be almost immediate. I assume there will be an obvious sign that the complex is offline?”

“It’ll be obvious, yes.”

“All right. As soon as you’re sure we’re in the clear, you take that syringe, you push it into my chest, here,” he pointed at a spot off to his left of his chest and above the rib cage. “You push the plunger all the way. All the way, Begs. Then you pull it out

and you do chest compressions. CPR.”

She nodded, staring at his chest. Then she looked up as the door banged in five inches and smacked into the desk. She could hear voices. Three or four, men and women. “That’s *it*? CPR? That’s your plan to get back?”

He nodded. “You got about ten minutes, give or take. Ten minutes from when I go flatline. After that it’ll be much harder to bring me back, okay? Ten minutes.”

She smiled thinly at him, listening to the shouts and banging just a few feet away. “But no pressure, right?”

He stood up. Pushed past her and sat down on the floor. “What pressure? I’m the one saving the world here. Come on. Let’s get this over with.”

The attempts on the door had become rhythmic and steady. They were ramming the door inward into the desk, pulling the door closed, then ramming it again. Trying to break the desk into pieces. It wouldn’t take long, she thought, judging by the weight of it: Particle board and wood screws, maybe a steel brace somewhere if they were lucky. The last time she’d felt lucky had been yesterday.

She set the syringe on the table as he used a piece of rubber tubing from one of the kits to tie off his arm. When he had his vein plump and firm he held the syringe in his hand. Paused. Looked up at her. Their eyes met.

She nodded. Moved awkwardly behind him and slid to the floor behind him, her splinted leg sticking out along his side. Leaned into him and wrapped her arms around his middle, pushing her cheek against his back. Closed her eyes. He was trembling, slightly. Tiny little tremors deep under the skin.

“Begs,” he suddenly said, his voice hoarse. “Marianne ... I have ... my daughters ...”

She closed her eyes. “I’ll ...” She stopped. She didn’t know what to say. What promises she could make that she had any hope of carrying out. She swallowed. “I’m here, Jack.”

He took a deep breath. She felt him moving. Imagined him pushing the needle in. Imagined him pressing the plunger. Imagined something hot and terrible leaking into him, racing around his circulatory system, heading for —

He jerked. Her eyes popped open. She felt his body tense up for a second. A tightening of every muscle. And then he relaxed. Slumped. Raising her face from his back, she hesitated, sitting there. Tears in her eyes suddenly.

The door banged inwards. There was a sharp cracking noise.

He sagged sideways. She tried to catch him, to brace him. He’d gone utterly limp. The lights flicked off. An alarm began blaring out in the hall, distant. The yellow emergency lights came on for a moment. There was a chorus of shouts from the next room. For a moment she was in the near-dark, listening to the rise and fall of the alarm.

Then the lights came back on.

30.

Nine minutes and fifty-two seconds before she ran out of time, Begley was on the floor next to Renicks, feigning unconsciousness. She remembered her Emergency Situations seminar: identify and protect your advantages. She had two rounds to her name and was in no shape for a physical confrontation. She judged three pursuers coming in. She'd reset the complex, she was certain of that. But she still had to bring Renicks back from the edge of death. And somehow survive herself.

So she tore off her jacket while they were forcing the last few inches from the door and the rubble of the desk. Rolled up her sleeve. Secreted the syringe Jack had given her in her pocket, needle up, and laid down next to Renicks. Pushed the gun under the exam table, just out of sight, just within reach. Just in case.

Shut her eyes. Emptied her head and steeled herself.

They came in a loud rush, smashing the desk with one last swing of the heavy door. She heard them climbing over the debris, kicking the chunks of the ruined desk out of the way. Three voices. Two men, one woman. One of them Square Jaw with the too-tight shirt and the abundance of confidence.

“Ah, look at this shit.”

“Christ.”

“Fucking hell. Check them.”

She heard shoes on the hard floor. Sensed someone coming near. *Stay absolutely still*, she thought. *You move and you will have to go home and marry that guy Daddy set you up with and have babies.*

Six or seven babies. Babies until you die in childbirth.

She heard a dull metallic noise very near her ear and imagined someone putting a gun down on the floor. Felt Renicks' body being shifted.

"He's dead," the woman said.

"Are you sure?" Square Jaw snapped.

"No pulse."

"Jesus *fucked*. We're into Cleanup now, you know that."

"Shut up. Get the Old Man on the radio. What about her?"

She felt Renicks being shifted again, felt someone lean in close. Perfume. A light touch with it. Classy. Her head was shoved to one side and two fingers pushed painfully into her throat.

"She's alive."

"I can't decide," Square Jaw said in an exasperated tone, "if that makes my job easier or harder."

"Can't get the old man on the radio."

"Jesus *fucked*."

She felt the woman moving away from her. She stayed perfectly still. The Old Man was Amesley; it was a common nickname for the Director. She wondered what was going to happen. The complex was offline. No missiles were going to be launched. Renicks was slipping away. She couldn't discount the possibility of feeling the barrel of a gun against her head one second before being killed.

"This is Cleanup, Tom. We have a clear protocol."

"It's not Cleanup until the Old Man orders it. I'm not going to waste her and then have to explain my thought process."

There were a few heartbeats without words. She heard people

moving. Breathing.

“Grab them both. We take them back to HQ and find the Old Man. Get our orders. Easy enough to pop her up there as down here.”

“Waste of fucking time, Tom.”

“Shut the fuck up, Mel.”

She heard them moving again. Felt Renicks shift again, then be lifted up from the floor. For a moment she felt the cold empty air where he had been. Counted back in her head. Eight minutes, twenty seconds left.

Then someone grabbed her by the shoulders. Pulled her up into a sitting position. Then she was lifted, slung over someone's shoulders. She smelled aftershave and sweat, gun powder. Let herself hang limp. Every step he took her splinted leg banged into his chest, sending a lance of pure agony through her.

She was carried quickly to the elevator. Heard the doors shut. Heard the code being entered. Felt the shift in gravity as they rose. Heard the soft *ding* of the alert, heard the doors open again. She was carried briskly for a few more seconds and then a door was opened. She was dropped unceremoniously on the floor, hitting her head. She managed to resist reacting in any way. She lay sprawled where she fell, a shock of pain from her leg spreading through her like poison.

She heard the door close. She checked her internal count. Seven minutes, six seconds to go.

They hadn't searched her. She wondered if she was really alone in the room. If they weren't testing her, waiting quietly to see if she was really unconscious. But she had no time. Either she'd fooled them or she hadn't, and she had to revive Renicks

and effect their escape before his time ran out, before they came back with a decision from Amesley. Before *cleanup* began in earnest.

Because suddenly, there was a chance she and Renicks might survive.

The complex was offline. Renicks had been removed as Acting President. If the plan was localized, if they hadn't compromised the *entire* Continuity Plan, that might mean the emergency was over, and President Grant might no longer have the option of blowing the complex. Even if no one suspected him. The complex was no longer locked down, either. They could walk out the front door, if they could *get to* the front door. She thought it was suddenly reasonable that if they could get away from Amesley's people, they might live.

If she could get to Renicks before it was too late. If she could bring him back. If he would be strong enough to climb back into the guts of the complex and climb. And climb. And climb.

She opened her eyes and sat up.

She was alone in one of the many tiny, generic offices. The room was probably eight by eight, with a small desk, a rolling chair, and a single cheap, metal filing cabinet. The door was shut and locked, but the lock was a simple deadbolt system. The complex had been designed as an emergency facility; all of the office doors locked from the outside so they could be used as temporary detention rooms if needed. The complex was also a federal facility, funded by Congress, which meant everything had been done by the lowest-bidding contractor.

Seven minutes.

She crossed to the door and checked it. No sense wasting

time if the door had been left unlocked. It was bolted. She stepped back to the desk and pulled open the drawers one after another. Found a pair of scissors in the middle drawer.

Six minutes, forty seconds.

She opened the scissors up and sat by the door, broken leg stretched out straight along the wall. Jamming the blade at an angle into the latch, she closed her eyes and tried to feel it. With a jerk she snapped her arm across her body, pulling on the door handle at the same time. With a pop, the door slid open.

Six minutes, twenty-seven seconds.

Pulling herself up by the door handle, she held the door almost shut for a moment, listening. Then she eased the door open slightly and peered into the empty hallway.

Sliding the scissors into her pocket, she stepped out into the hall. Looked up one way and then the other, judging where she was. Around the corner from the Security Office, she thought, on the third level.

Six minutes, eleven seconds.

She scanned each side of the hall. They would have put Renicks in a nearby room. No reason to carry his body any further. Crossing to the one directly across from her, she tried the handle. Open. She moved to the next one, tried the handle. Found it open too. The fourth one she tried was locked. Locking the door on a dead man was exactly the sort of thing she would do herself — the crazier the situation, the more you relied on protocol, on procedure. Pulling the scissors from her pocket, she leaned down and repeated her operation and popped the lock, a few seconds faster this time. She took hold of the handle —

Gunshots froze her in place. Three. Rapid. Not far. Two

almost on top of each other, then a beat, then the third.

Heart pounding, she pulled the door open and slipped into the room.

Five minutes, fifty-three seconds.

Renicks had been dumped on the floor too. He lay on his back, arms spread out from his body, legs spread. Aside from a yellow-brown bruise on his arm where he'd injected himself, he looked the same.

Two more gunshots made her jump.

"Shit," she whispered. *Cleanup*, she thought. *Sounds messy to me.*

She yanked the syringe from her pocket. Hands trembling, heart pounding, she sat down next to him on the floor. Traced her fingers on his chest, trying to remember exactly where he'd pointed her to. She sucked in breath and raised the syringe about six inches above his chest. She knew she would need a little force to plunge the needle in deep enough.

Five and half minutes, she thought. *Ready, steady —*

She froze. Someone had opened one of the doors in the hall. Close by. She knew this because they had opened it via the simple expedient of kicking it in. She sat there for a second or two, listening, the syringe held just above his chest. Then another door crashed inwards. This time she heard the grunt of effort and felt the vibration. It was one of the offices right next to this one.

Five minutes, fifteen seconds.

She scrambled up, wrenching her leg painfully and biting her lip. The syringe still in her hand, she limped behind the desk and dropped down, putting her back to the door and pushing herself

under it, her leg stretched out stiffly before her. She was in shadow from the knee back; the rest of her leg was in plain view to anyone who simply walked close enough to the desk.

Five minutes, five seconds. She tried to control her breathing.

Five minutes. Silence.

Her leg began to burn with a steady, throbbing pain in time with her heartbeat. She bit the inside of her cheek. Drew blood. The new pain pulled her away from her leg. She was sweating.

Four minutes, fifty seconds.

With an explosive noise like a gunshot, the door crashed inwards. She jumped a little, knocking her head on the top of the desk, then went completely still, the sudden aching in her head doing a fine job of distracting her from her leg. She hoped the noise of her impact had been swallowed up and hidden by the noise of the door.

She held her breath.

She could hear someone moving through the room. Two, three steps. Then they stopped. She heard a creaking noise — leather or straps being stretched as someone bent down.

“Check out the big brain on Mr. Renicks,” she heard Frank Darmity say in a low, relaxed voice. “Didn’t get you too far, did it?”

She held her breath and listened intently. Tried to pick out every creak of Darmity’s boots, every whistles of air going through his nostrils.

Four minutes, thirty-five seconds.

“Where’s your bitchy In-Suite, huh?” Darmity said in a low, easygoing voice. A man without problems, she thought, remembering the gunshots. A man who wasn’t worried about

anything. "In one of these offices, huh."

Four minutes, twenty-seven seconds.

Lungs aching, she let her breath out in a silent stream, slow and steady despite the burning in her chest. Forced herself to breathe in at the same slow rate. She heard Darmity moving again. Heard him cough. Lingering. She imagined him standing in the room looking around. Sniffing the air. Then the sound of the door swinging on a broken hinge, squealing.

Then nothing. Static. Dust hitting the carpet.

Four minutes, fifteen seconds.

She counted another ten seconds in her head, holding herself still. Heard nothing. Moving slowly, she pushed herself forward out from under the desk. Reached up and used it to pull herself back up onto her feet.

The door hung open, sagging inward on a slight angle. The door jamb had been bent. She could see a slice of the hallway outside.

Four minutes.

She moved to her left, staying in the blind side the door provided; anyone out in the hall would be unable to see her. She moved as quietly as she could to the door and stood behind it. She squinted through the gap between the door and the jamb. Strained her ears. She heard nothing. No sign of anyone moving around. She bit her lip and wondered if Darmity had left the area. Had no way of knowing. He would be back, though. He would ascertain that she wasn't in any of the other rooms on the third level. He might assume she'd fled back into the guts of the complex, but she knew he was smart enough to think of double-checking this room.

Limping back to Renicks, she bent down and grabbed hold of one wrist. It was cold. She pulled it up and worked her way around to his other side, leaning down and taking hold of his other arm. She took one hobbling step back, pulling Renicks, and put some weight on her broken leg to gain enough leverage. Pain exploded, shooting up her side into her head, making her wince and almost overbalance.

She stopped. Breathed deeply once, twice, three times.

Three minutes, forty-seven seconds.

Tried again. Calibrated how much weight she could put on the leg, how much pain she could take before it overwhelmed her. She dragged him. Slowly, inches at a time. Arms shaking. A low growl of agony in her throat, swallowed. She pushed the door open with her butt and dropped him, leaning out to check the hall.

Empty. She sucked in air. Grabbed hold of him again, and dragged him out.

She chose one of the offices Darmity had kicked in, gambling on the pop psychology of it. Gambling he would think she would feel exposed in one. She pulled Renicks until he was just inside, then tried to push the door back into its exact position. The exact angle it had been hanging open.

She tried to move quickly, but she felt sweaty and shaky, unreliable. She lowered herself back onto the floor next to Renicks. Checked the syringe. Held it an inch or two above his chest again.

Three minutes, three seconds, by her count.

Taking another deep breath, she brought the needle down with a sharp jerk of her arm. Pressed the plunger all the way in

one spastic motion. Yanked the syringe free. Sat there for a moment, panting. Staring at Renicks. Who looked just about as dead as he had before.

She tossed the syringe aside. Leaned over him and thought back to her CPR classes. She leaned forward again. Placed both palms of her hands flat on the center of his chest. Pushed down with most of her strength; she had no leverage and weighed half of him. Did Thirty compressions as fast as she could, trying for a steady force and speed.

Two minutes, forty-seven seconds.

Pushing one hand under his neck, she tilted his head back. Cupped open his mouth and pushed one finger inside to make sure his tongue wasn't blocking his airway. Leaned forward and took two deep breaths to bring her own oxygen levels up. Put her mouth over his. Pinched his nose. Breathed out, pushing air into his lungs. Leaned back and took two more deep breaths. Leaned forward and repeated the process.

Tilted his head. Put her mouth on his. Breathed into him.

Two minutes, thirty.

Straightened up and positioned her aching hands on his chest again. Thirty compressions. Sweat dripped from her forehead onto his undershirt.

Two minutes, two seconds.

She straightened up again and slipped her hand under his neck ... and leaped backwards with a startled grunt when he suddenly convulsed, a whole-body twitch. He raised his head and made a deep choking sound in his chest, eyes fluttering open. Then he melted back onto the floor and lay there shivering, breathing rapidly with a loud, scratchy buzzing in his chest.

Alarm swept through at all the noise he was making. She scrambled up onto her feet and stumped for the door, pushing it as far closed as it would go, then spun and sank down to the floor again, grabbing his hand. Ice cold. She leaned in close.

“Jack!” she hissed. “Jack, *shut up!*”

He turned his head slightly and looked at her. She was relieved to see the spark of recognition in his eyes. To see he was all there. A smile spread across her face, spontaneous and, she thought, ridiculously inappropriate. He licked his lips with a pale, yellowish tongue. Moved his lips. She leaned in close.

“Fuck,” he whispered, “*me.*”

She tried to stop herself, but burst into muffled, strangled laughter.

31.

Five minutes before finding Renicks in one of the empty offices, Frank Darmity stared at the suddenly dim Remote Launch Interface. A second before, it had been lit up green, accepting his keyed-in data. He'd been frustrated at how slow entering the codes by hand was proving to be. But at least it was progress. Then the tiny screen had flickered, gone blank for a second, and was now displaying the bright-red OFFLINE graphic, the Presidential Seal in the background.

One second after that, the lights had gone off. The emergencies had flickered on for one baleful, yellow moment, and then the regular lights had come back on again.

He sat back and let out his breath. Stared at the RLI. Then leaned forward, took it in both hands, stood up, and dashed it against the floor. It bounced. A single piece of plastic broke free and flew off into the shadows of the ruined Security Office. The box-shaped RLI bounced again and rolled a few more feet, then stopped on its side. Still lit up. Still, he thought sourly, completely functional. American-built, no doubt.

He could hear his own breath whistling in and out of his nose. He could feel his heart pounding. So *close*. So fucking close. And that stupid cunt and his pet agent had fucked it up.

He only indulged himself for a few seconds. A few seconds of rage. He wanted to tear all the consoles from their bolts and hurl them around the room. He wanted to set the place on fire. He wanted to break bones and inflict some goddamn *suffering*. Instead he took a deep breath, wincing slightly at the pinch in his

side. Then he exhaled and relaxed. Worked through each muscle in his body and consciously relaxed them until he was standing at ease.

Then he picked up the automatic on the console in front of him and started walking through the debris. The overall mission had failed. But *his* mission had one last component.

So did everyone else's, he reminded himself.

He stepped slowly through the wreckage and around one of the console banks. Martin Amesley sat on the floor with his back against the wall, a few feet away from the shattered front doors. He'd been shot twice in the same leg, which was stretched out in front of him like a burst sausage. Darmity could tell at a glance that the bullets had somehow missed the arteries — else Amesley would have bled out by then — but he'd lost a lot of blood in any event. The old man was surprisingly calm, though, and Darmity gave him some grudging points for that. He'd imagined Amesley as the type to cry like a baby if he got a scratch.

The old man was watching him as he turned the corner and approached. His watery eyes behind the thick lenses flicked to the gun in Darmity's hand, and then back to his face.

"Mr. Darmity," he said with a curt nod.

Darmity stood for a second, then knelt down on one knee right in front of the Director. Stared at him.

"You know what just happened," he finally said.

Amesley nodded again. "We've failed."

Darmity nodded, keeping his temper. "*You* failed, Mr. Amesley. I could have run the shit out of this operation. You tippy-toed it. You fucked it up. You should have stood aside and let a Field Man run a Field Operation."

Amesley smiled. Darmity didn't like it. It was a soft smile. A secret smile. A fucking Cheshire Cat. The old man thought he was smarter than everyone else.

"As you say, Mr. Darmity."

Darmity leaned forward. "You thought you were my boss." He tried to mimic Amesley's subtle smile.

The older man's face remained exactly the same: Slight smile, blank eyes. "As you say."

Darmity felt his control slip. *As you fucking say*, he thought. Fucking talks like an asshole. He mastered himself. Just to show he could. There was no reason to. But he wanted Amesley to know that he was a man you had to pay attention to.

Outside, in the hall, he heard the elevator's light ring as it arrived. Heard the doors split open. He paused, turning his head, and listened. Heard the voices of Amesley's people. Turned back to Amesley, who was still staring back at him with that still life of an expression. Like nothing bothered him. It made Darmity *want* to bother him. Just to see his face change.

He stood up and pointed the gun at the old man. Amesley looked back at him. No flinch. No expression. Darmity felt anger rising in him. He wanted to think of something to say. Something devastating. Something that would make Amesley collapse.

"Well, Mr. Darmity?" Amesley said without moving. "Clean up your mess, son."

Rage filled him. He shook with it. *You pressed the button*, he thought, and took one step forward. Squeezed the trigger. Again. Once more. Stood over the body. His breathing like sandpaper.

"What the fuck!"

He spun. The three of them outside the office. All of them looking haggard. Sweaty and defeated. He'd thought about them all. Nothing in-depth. He hadn't had time to do any research, any social engineering. He'd had to observe them in tiny bursts and form assessments based on very little data — the way they took orders. The way they interacted with each other. The way they carried themselves. The way they responded to a mild insult.

That was Darmity's favorite tactic. You learned so much from the ten seconds after you pushed someone *just a little*.

In any group of three or more, there was a leader. Unspoken, usually. Darmity knew without hesitation the leader was the one he thought of as the other Frat Boy. The only one left, now. Frat Boy had the easy build and good hair of the youngster who'd never been in a situation he couldn't charm or fuck or fight his way out of. His body had never failed him, had never failed to respond to his needs.

Darmity shot him first.

Nothing fancy. He wanted to put them down; he could make sure of a kill later. So he aimed for the torso. The biggest target on the body. Frat Boy tumbled backwards, belly exploding into a geyser of blood.

The other male agent Darmity had dubbed The Monk. A ring of dark hair on his head. Should have just shaved it, accepted his fate, but was clinging to his hair like it was a life preserver. He was staring at Frat Boy. Mouth open. Frozen. A fucking moron. Darmity swung the gun in his general direction and fired. The Monk dropped.

The female agent he'd named Plumper. When he spun to put the gun on her, she shot him in the left shoulder.

He was spun around and tripped over Amesley's outstretched legs. He hit the wall and went down onto his back. There was no pain. His left arm was numb, but there was no pain.

He propped the gun on his chest and lay still. Thinking, *stupid cunt shot me*, over and over. But he didn't move. He waited. Heard the pop and scrape of glass being stepped on. Waited. When she appeared around the edge of the nearest console, gun held out in front of her in a way she probably thought was professional and badass, her free hand wrapped around her wrist, he squeezed the trigger and sent her flying backwards.

He sat up, and the pain hit all at once. He grit his teeth and examined his arm. He couldn't see the wound through the fabric, but it was soaked through with blood. He moved the arm experimentally and found it flexible enough, checked the fabric on the back and found the exit hole. A through-and-through. The bullet had busted right through his shoulder and missed everything vital. Painful, but not immediately worrying.

He stood up. Felt dizzy for a moment, then steadied. Blood loss, he thought. He stepped over Plumper, who stared up at the ceiling with yellow, filmy eyes. He could hear someone gurgling pathetically in the near distance. Stepping back out into the hall, he found Frat Boy trying to hold his intestines in with his arms. His face was white as marble and his arms were bright red. He'd pushed himself up against the wall and kept opening his mouth and swallowing air.

Darmity felt hot and slow. Weak. He stood for a moment in the hall looking down at Frat Boy and watching him open his mouth and make this weird sucking noise, then shut it. A bloody spit balloon had formed on his lips. Darmity sympathized. Frat

Boy, Amesley, all of them had been told that Cleanup meant making sure witnesses like Renicks were dead. But *he* had been ordered to make sure *everyone* was dead.

He knelt down on one knee and put the barrel of his gun against Frat Boy's forehead and tilted his head back. The agent swiveled his eyes slowly, finally focusing on Darmity.

"Renicks," Frat Boy managed to wheeze. "Renicks and Begley."

Darmity nodded. "In one of the offices?"

Frat Boy nodded back. A slow, deliberate up and down.

Darmity glanced down at the floor. Blew out a little breath. Squeezed the trigger.

It was time to clean this shit up. But he wasn't going to have to do it alone.

32.

Three minutes before watching the agent be killed, Marianne Begley was trying to get Renicks to stand.

The silence oppressed her. The door hung open in exactly the way she'd found it, exactly the way Darmity had left it. The air seemed to sizzle with unused acoustics. She kept imagining she could hear someone out in the hall. A soft step outside the door. Heavy breathing. And everything she and Renicks did seemed incredibly loud to her. Every whisper a shout, every movement like boulders rolling across the floor.

She had no gun. Every few seconds she thought back to the gun she'd left on the floor of the clinic. Longed for it like a lost love.

"Can you stand? Jack, you have to be able to move. I can't drag you."

She whispered. Her throat hurt. Like she'd been smoking cigarettes. She hadn't smoked since high school.

Renicks nodded. He looked awful, she thought. Pale. Dark bags under his red, swollen eyes. A film of sweat covered his forehead. "I can walk, I think. I'm gonna slow us down, though. You should go on without me. Get topside, send down help."

She shook her head. *Cleanup*, the agents had said. "Darmity's still out there. I leave you here, you're dead. Come on, up."

Renicks smiled. "If Darmity's out there, what are we going to do if he comes out of the bathroom while we're awkwardly limping down the hall? Karate moves?"

She paused. He was right, she thought. For a goddamn

academic, Renicks had a sense for survival she had to admire. She thought again of the gun she'd left on the floor. It wasn't worth it. Two rounds. If she knew where to get more ammunition ... her thoughts shifted to the Security Office. She saw herself gathering up guns and radios. Darmity was out looking for her. There was a chance he was nowhere near the Security Office.

She looked down at Renicks again. "Stay here. Be quiet. Gather your strength and be ready to stand up and move," she said briskly, turning for the door. "I'm going to get us some weapons."

"Get big ones," Renicks said tiredly after her. "We already shot that bastard with a normal gun."

She slipped through the busted doorway without touching the door, leaving it in exactly the same position as before. If Darmity trawled down the hall again, she hoped he would psychologically discount that room because he'd already checked it. That he would assume they would be on the move immediately, running from him. Bullies, she thought, always assumed you were terrified of them. Always assumed you would run like a scared rabbit when you heard them coming.

The hall was empty.

She started moving towards the junction; the Security Office right around the corner. She moved slowly, listening carefully and marking the busted-open doors Darmity had left in his wake. Every few steps she paused and turned her head to make sure nothing was creeping up behind her. The silence made her skin crawl. The pain in her leg had become commonplace, though, as if her threshold for suffering had been buoyed up by

the constant agony. It hurt like hell but she didn't mind too much.

When she turned the corner, she stopped for a second in shock, staring at the bodies.

She recognized Square Jaw. He was slumped against the wall. Hands clasped weakly over his torn-open belly. Blood splattered all over him, all over the wall behind him. His eyes were open, his mouth was open. The top of his head had been blown open by a bullet and a flap of skin and hair stood up from his scalp like a cowlick.

Begley stood for a moment. Listening. Her gut told her there was no one nearby, but the bodies strewn in the entrance of the Security Office confused her. Who'd killed them? Darmity? But weren't they on the same damn side?

Cleanup, she thought. The word was pretty generic. Might encompass anything. And Renicks had made it clear from the memo he'd deciphered on The Brick that Darmity was not part of the team here in the complex. He'd been dropped in. Inserted by the President himself. It stood to reason he might have a whole set of *cleanup* instructions separate from everyone else.

Slowly, she walked up to the Security Office. The bodies were warm. The blood was still fresh — already sticky, but it hadn't been more than a few minutes. She remembered the gunshots she'd heard. Pictured it. Darmity in the office. Probably trying to figure out what had happened to the Football, why the lights had flickered. The other agents come to report in ... Darmity has complete surprise. Takes them down. Comes to find her and Renicks.

She pushed herself against the wall across from Square Jaw

and leaned slowly forward to peek into the office. Froze again. Director Amesley lay slumped against the wall, looking small and dry, like a puppet. Something you would prop on your lap and throw your voice with. He was a bloody mess. Anger boiled up inside her. Martin Amesley was a traitor, yes, but Begley had been proud to work with him up until a few hours ago. Whatever he had done, he had dedicated his life to the Service. He had ensured the safety of countless people, run countless investigations and run them well.

He did not deserve to be left like *this*.

The office appeared empty aside from Amesley and the bodies of other agents. Biting her lip, she took the risk and stepped around the empty frame where the glass doors had once been. Shattered glass crunched under her feet. She stopped just inside, near enough to the hall to dive at an angle out of the line of sight.

Nothing happened.

She stepped inside briskly, then. The chair with guns and radios piled on the seat was still there. Right where she'd left it. She checked them over — all P229s. She selected two and dropped the magazines from the other two, pushing it all into her pockets. The quiet clashed with the state of the room — shot up, screens smashed, blood on the walls. Most of the equipment had gone into maintenance mode when the complex had reset. Screen savers. Generic login screens. A few of the screens displayed some of the same security cam feeds she and Renicks had seen in the auxiliary Security Office down below. She took a moment to examine them, on the off chance they might show her where Darmity was.

They all displayed static, unmoving stilllives from all levels of

the complex, most flashing from one scene to another every few seconds in a pre-programmed cycle, others showed just one room endlessly. One showed the exterior of the Executive Suite, the cutting equipment abandoned, the double doors now hanging slack after the reset. She let her eyes sit on each screen for a moment. The last one was turned off. After a second's hesitation, she reached out and turned it on.

It sprang to life immediately. It was the same news feed they'd seen earlier, down below. There was no sound, again. It showed an aerial view of the White House, marked FILE FOOTAGE. A nifty graphic of a map of the USA with the word EMERGENCY imprinted on it blazed in the corner. Begley spared a moment's thought on the absurdity of the graphic, of putting thought into that graphic. She looked at the picture on the screen in tired incomprehension for a moment, then remembered to focus on the crawl at the bottom of the screen.

Stared in shock.

unsubstantiated reports from the emergency bunker beneath the White House say President Charles Grant has committed suicide ... no word yet from official sources ... there are reports of increased Secret Service activity in the

Suicide. She'd never been introduced to Grant, though she'd been in the same room a few times. He'd been tall and thin, unnaturally tan. His white hair a perfect, gauzy coif. An easy manner, but weightless, like there was nothing behind anything he said or did. He didn't seem the type.

Movement on one of the other screens caught her eye. It was showing the lobby way up on the surface, where she'd met Amesley, Renicks, and Darmity that afternoon. A man — she

recognized him as one of the agents who'd been with Amesley in the Security Office earlier, a pudgy, disheveled boy of a man — was standing with his arms in the air. He was standing with his arms in the air because he wasn't alone in the lobby. There were six other people, five men and one woman. They were wearing what looked to Begley like military-grade body armor. They had night-vision goggles propped on their heads. They each had a sidearm holstered on one hip and a compact hunting knife on the other, and slim, hardshell backpacks. They each had what looked to Begley like a variation on the Herstal F2000 assault rifle, though she couldn't be sure.

They didn't look like US military to her. They didn't look *military* to her.

The woman was out in front, pointing her rifle at Amesley's man and shouting something. The agent shouted back, waving his hands in the air as if to stress his compliance. She kept yelling at him.

Then she gunned him down.

It was eerily silent. The woman, who looked pretty on the blurry security monitor, rocked on her feet, absorbing the recoil. Amesley's agent jiggled in place for a second, his shirt and chest tearing themselves open, and then fell to the floor. The five other troops stepped forward, fanning out and eventually moving out of the camera's field of view. The woman stepped forward slowly. As she passed the dead agent's body she casually drew her sidearm, fired once into his head, and re-holstered the weapon.

Then she too was out of the camera's range.

Cleanup, Begley thought again. The word had come to terrify her. Whoever had almost — but for a heart attack and a car

accident — nuked the United States with its own missiles in order to engineer a Presidential coup had clearly planned for failure just as they'd planned for everything else.

Moving as fast as her leg allowed, she retraced her steps. The silence crowding her was balanced by the sudden roaring in her head. Too many things had gone sideways. Several dozen things she'd believed her entire life had proved false within the last few hours. She was relieved to slip back into the office and find Renicks standing. Leaning with his hands on the desk, gasping for air, but on his feet. So far she'd been able to rely on Jack Renicks all day, and it steadied her.

She held a gun out to him, holding it by the barrel. "Safety's off," she said as he took it, standing up from the desk and wobbling a little. "Come on."

She turned and limped back towards the door. "Where are we going?" he called after her.

"To get bigger guns."

33.

Five minutes before making a plan, Jack Renicks was trying to remain standing. The very slight vibration of the elevator made him feel like he was standing on a piece of plywood riding a giant wave to the beach. Sweat poured down his back at a steady rate. His heart thudded against his ribcage like it was trying to escape his chest. Waves of dizziness swept through him, making him have little gray moments, near-blackouts.

He supposed being dead for nine minutes or so would knock anyone on their ass.

“Isn’t riding the elevator dangerous? What if the doors open and there are six people with assault weapons waiting for us?”

“They can’t have beaten us down here. There’s only one elevator — if they were going to surprise us it would have been on Level Three when we got on. They’re going to follow a protocol, Jack. First step is, make sure the top level is clear. That we’re not hiding in a bathroom or something. Step two, probably, secure the elevator on the top level so we can’t use it.”

The elevator stopped. The doors split open. There was no one there.

“Jack,” Begley said. “Go grab a waste basket or something we can hold these doors open with.”

He stepped into the hall. Turned as Begley stepped forward and held the doors open. “What for?” he asked as he moved off.

“So we can secure the elevator before they do.”

He rounded the corner and headed towards the Executive Suite again. Had a gray moment, and a strange feeling of *deja-vu*

settled over him. It was like a terrible dream, repeating over and over again. He kept heading to the Executive Suite and awful things kept happening.

He stepped around the equipment Amesley's people had abandoned in the hall and stepped into the suite. It was exactly as they'd left it. He went into the office and grabbed the plastic trash bin, breathing harder than should have been necessary, and carried it back to the elevator.

"Jack," Begley said briskly, "this is what the best training in the world gets you: High-tech solutions to problems." She stepped out into the hall and released the doors. Jammed the garbage basket between them. They bounced open and stayed open.

"If we hit the emergency button, or put it into fire mode," she said, turning and leading him back towards the suite, "that can be reversed remotely if you have the codes. Which we have to assume these people do. The doors will read someone blocking the doors and will not close under any circumstances. And the elevator won't move if the doors are open. So if they're sitting up on the top level calling the elevator, they're going to have a long wait."

Renicks smiled. "They're going to find another way in."

"Of course they are."

They entered the suite again. Begley limped through the living area and headed back towards the bedrooms. When he caught up with her, she had the closet open and one of the rifles in her hands.

"This is an M16A2 Rifle," she said. "I'm going to give you one and as many magazines as you can carry, Jack, but I don't have

time to give you any training, and you're going to be goddamn dangerous with it." She looked at him. "I know you've had some experience with small arms, Jack, and the M16 is pretty idiot-proof, but until you fire it live you don't know it, and if you don't know it you won't hit anything you *want* to hit with it, and probably hit plenty you *don't* want to hit. Like me. Okay?"

He nodded, fighting to remain standing. "So you're saying me squeezing that trigger is a last resort."

"That is *exactly* what I'm saying. I'm going to set it to a three-round burst. Not full auto. That should help you retain control and keep you from spraying the ceiling with bullets."

She checked the rifle in her hands again, slapped a magazine into place, and handed it to him. He took it and had to catch himself.

"Heavy," he said.

"It's a pig," Begley agreed. "Here."

She pushed five magazines at him. "Put these in your bag. Did you see how I released the magazine?"

He nodded. "I think so."

"Try it," she said without looking at him, reaching in to select another rifle from the stock.

He tried it. The magazine slid into his hand. He slapped it back into place and felt the satisfying catch.

"There'll be noise and smoke and a kick if you fire it," she said, looking down at the rifle she'd chosen. "Never try to fire it without bracing it. Your shoulder will hurt like hell. It'll get hot after a few sustained bursts." She bent and came up with four more magazines and handed them to him as he slid the tough-looking fabric belt over his shoulder. "Here ends the instruction

on the weapon. Your takeaways?”

He smiled. “Don’t fire it, but if I have to don’t fire it at *you*.”

“Congratulations,” she said, slamming the closet shut. “You graduate.”

He followed her back out into the living area and on to the kitchen, where they pulled some lukewarm bottles of water from the unplugged fridge. He was shivering.

“So what’s our plan?”

She closed her eyes and leaned back against the wall. Renicks thought she looked as tired as he felt, which was terrible. “They’ll spend some time trying to override the elevator. Not long; they’ll figure out we’ve manually disabled them quick enough. Say, ten minutes. They’re here to clean this mess up. Make sure no one knows exactly what’s happened here. And now that we’re offline and the crisis is over, they have a very short window before legitimate authorities show up. FBI. Marines. Hell, *everyone’s* on their way here right now.”

Renicks nodded. “Everybody involved so far seems to have walked into this with suicide as an option.” He thought of Grant. Smiling, smooth President Grant.

Begley nodded, eyes still closed. “They won’t waste time, and they won’t worry about someone coming in after them. I saw only six. They’ll leave one up top, in the lobby, just in case someone slips past the others. They’ll be aggressive.”

Renicks swayed on his feet. The rifle was heavy. It pulled at his shoulder like someone was pushing down from above, making him strain to remain upright. Every muscle ached like he’d been beaten up three or four times. He was nauseous and worried what vomiting all over Agent Begley might do to her

opinion of him.

“That assumes you saw everything. Just six. There might be more. They might be crowding in up there.”

Begley frowned. “Sure. They might have tanks, or laser guns. But if I’m running this show from their end, it’s a small team. The legitimate authorities can’t be more than half an hour out. Marines. Secret Service. FBI. Racing here, now that the danger’s over. They don’t have *time* for a huge operation.”

“So — they’re here to clean this up, to stick with that charming phrase,” he said slowly. “Based on the actions of our resident psychopath Frank Darmity, that appears to be a really, really bad code for *kill everybody*.” He paused, working through his thick, slippery thoughts. “I can’t imagine six professionals in body armor are here to escort Mr. Darmity to freedom.”

Begley’s eyes popped open.

Renicks nodded. “We’ve got two problems. We’ve got Darmity hunting us, and we’ve got, I don’t know, Ninjas? Mercenaries? Hunting us.”

Begley stared at him. “Ninjas?”

He waved it aside. “Let’s put them in the same room.”

Begley nodded slowly. “Worse case scenario: Only Darmity gets killed.”

“Best case scenario? They all kill each other.”

She pushed off from the wall. “Or, we stick to the access corridors again, work our way up. Maybe we skip all of them, end up with just one person to deal with.”

He thought of climbing. Climbing and climbing in those tight, hot shafts. He shook his head. “And if you’re wrong — maybe you turned away from that video screen just before five

hundred more showed up. We show up in the lobby and there's an army waiting. Or they're already *in* the access corridors." He took a deep, shuddering breath.

She thought about that. "How do we get them in the same place?"

"They're both looking for us, no matter what else they're doing," he said. Each word took individual effort. "Let's make some noise."

She studied him for a moment. Then nodded. "All right. Let's make some noise." She pushed off from the wall and didn't ask him if he was okay, if she could rely on him not to pass out or stumble. He was grateful for that. Grateful she didn't make him say that he didn't know. That he felt weak.

"Come on, Jack," she said, limping out of the kitchen. "Between us we have three legs, multiple contusions, and one near-death experience. I'd say we're due some fucking *luck*."

34.

Thirty-three seconds before he heard Marianne Begley's voice, Frank Darmity was strapping his body armor back on, wincing a little as the blowback pushed into the wound in his abdomen, as the straps dug into his bloody shoulder. He was sweating and felt a little lightheaded. Shock, he thought. And exhaustion. He'd lost blood, suffered injury, and hadn't eaten or drunk anything in hours. This was not professional behavior, he chastised himself. A professional keeps himself in top condition at all times. He repeated the mantra his commanders had almost literally beaten into him: There is always time to eat. There is always time to hydrate. A hungry, thirsty operative is sloppy and weak.

Except, there literally had *not* been time.

He adjusted the vest so the indentation where the Begley Bitch had shot him didn't slip right into the hot, painful wound like a peg into a hole. It felt uncomfortable, out of sync, but he felt better with it on.

He hefted his rifle and checked it over, blinking sweat out of his eyes.

Amesley's Assholes had dropped his equipment one office over from where they'd try to imprison him. It hadn't been hard to find.

What had been hard to find was Doctor Jack Renicks' dead body.

Renicks was another one. Sitting behind a desk. A button-pusher. He'd been looking forward to teaching the Secretary a

lesson about the difference between them. But then the motherfucker had gotten all slippery and he'd wasted a lot of time chasing him, and then he'd killed himself. A coward. A bitch. He'd bitched out. And that had been an unsatisfying way for it all to go down. But Darmity was a soldier. He knew mission creep when he saw it. Once everything had gone to hell, his mission had shifted. So he'd let it go. He had to find the Begley and smother that fire.

Start with Renicks. She'd been with him, maybe planning to follow suit. He didn't think he'd find her weeping over the corpse, but it was a starting place. So he'd gone back to the office. And found it empty. A syringe on the floor. He'd picked it up and stared at it. Then at the empty spot on the floor.

Thought he should have told Amesley to fuck off and gone for Renicks with both barrels, right away. Fuck the subtle shit. That's where it had all gone wrong.

Just as he was slinging the rifle over his shoulder and trying to decide where to look for Begley, her voice suddenly crackled from the complex PA system.

"... — ever we do, Jack, we have to be smart. We can ride this out."

He blinked, staring up at the ceiling. The tiny speaker, like thousands of others throughout the complex, made her voice tinny and thin. But clear.

"We should keep moving. Hiding out someplace is just waiting to be killed."

Renicks' voice. Darmity straightened up and cursed. An involuntary vocalization.

"We keep moving, we actually increase our chances of just running into them, Jack. This studio is our best —"

Darmity was out the door. Their voices were in the air. The second he stopped concentrating on them, they stopped forming into coherent words in his head. They were bird songs. Just tinny noises fluttering in the air. All they meant was that Renicks — miraculously alive — and the Begley Bitch were in the TV Studio on Level Seven, accidentally hitting the PA.

He could see how it happened. He'd been in the studio, and the PA patch-in button was right on the console in the office portion. Someone had leaned on it. Or sat on it. Or put something on top of it, and the microphone was patched through to the PA. And the studio was insulated and soundproofed and wired so that the PA didn't cut in there, just in case the President was making an address to the nation from the Secure Facility. You didn't want security announcements stepping on the Commander-in-Chief.

So they didn't know they were transmitting. Announcing their location.

The studio. He trotted down the hallway with the rifle in his hands, safety off, pointed down and to the side. It made sense. The Fax line had been yanked out of the wall, but if there was a place aside from the Security Office you might be able to communicate with the outside world, that would be it. And he liked the psychology of it: They might assume he wouldn't come back there because there had already been a close call for them there. It was the sort of half-smart thing a Softy like Renicks would think of.

As he approached the elevators, He smiled. Half smart. The studio would have been his next stop. There was an unconscious agent there that needed to be tended to.

He keyed in the call code. The indicator light blurred red for a moment, then went out. He frowned. Keyed it in again, more slowly. Sweat dripped off his nose. He felt shivery. He wondered if his wound was souring.

The indicator blurred red again. Then went off.

For a second, Darmity stood there glowering at the keypad. Renicks and Begley's voices were still sizzling in the air around him. Had he misremembered the code? After a second, he keyed in the previous code, for when the complex had been online. It didn't work either.

"Mother-fucker!" he spat, leaning back and kicking at the keypad. Nothing happened.

He turned away and started trotting unsteadily back the way he came. Renicks and Begley weren't the only people who knew how to use the Access Corridors.

The voices were still in the air. "*... increase our chances ...*"

By the time he crashed through the unmarked door leading to the service corridors, he was sweating freely and had given up holding his rifle carefully; he held it loosely by the barrel as he ran. Mouth open. Lungs burning.

In the service corridors there were no speakers. He could still hear their voices on the PA for a few seconds, and then they were swallowed by the walls. Then he was in the tube, sliding down the access ladder with his hands loose on the railing. He hit the landing and almost fell, staggering backwards and catching himself.

He raced down the next three ladders the same way, ran for the access door on Level Seven and burst into the hallway.

"*... can ride this ...*"

Their voices, still in the air. He didn't listen. All that mattered was that they had not yet realized their danger. They were unaware. He was creeping up behind them, and he was going to enjoy putting his foot up their ass.

He looped the rifle's strap around his forearm and held it carefully, pointed down at an angle. The door to the studio had a big red light mounted right above it to indicate when it was in use. The bulb glowed brightly. He knew they would be in the office section; if they had moved into the set their voices would be muffled and distant.

He kept his eyes on the door as he approached. He felt tensed and ready. Limber. Oiled. Sweat dripped into his eyes and he blinked them feverishly. But didn't stop. Didn't hesitate.

He took the last two steps quickly and kicked the door open. The lock shattered. It was just a privacy lock, had never been intended to resist a determined Frank Darmity.

The tiny control room was the mess he remembered it from earlier.

Renicks and Begley were nowhere to be seen.

Standing amidst the chaos, arms up in the air over his head, was the agent he'd left in the studio after capturing Begley. He was filthy. He didn't even turn to look in Darmity's direction.

Renicks and Begley were still talking.

"... just waiting to be killed."

"We keep moving, we actually increase our chances of just running into them, Jack."

A recording. Darmity stared at the agent — Simmons, he remembered — and considered. The studio control panel could digitally record sound and play it back; they had recorded a short

conversation, patched through to the PA, and started a looped playback. Renicks and Begley were on set. Out of his line of sight. He saw their train of thought: He hears them, comes in guns blazing, they cut him down from an oblique angle before he even knows what's happening.

A second before the man behind him spoke, Darmity heard the shift of fabric behind him.

“Drop the rifle,” a male voice said. Just a few feet behind him. Far enough to be out of reach. Close enough to not have to aim anything. “Just relax your hands and drop it. Do anything else, and I will shoot you dead. Don't say a word. Don't move anything but your hands.”

Darmity sighed and released the rifle. There were protocols.

“Good. Step into the room.”

Darmity stepped into the room. Simmons stared at him. Darmity didn't acknowledge him in any way. He turned, and found two more people: A woman with short, red hair pulled back into a severe ponytail, her angular features terse and composed, and a burly man with a shaved head, scars on his scalp like Martian canals. They both held the same model of assault rifle. They both looked, to him, like people who would not hesitate to kill him the moment he gave a wrong answer.

This was proven a moment later. The woman turned to Simmons, studied him for a moment, and then said “*Kiu estas la flava regxo?*”

Darmity nodded to himself. He didn't know what the words meant, but he'd heard them before.

In the corner of his eye, Darmity saw Simmons look at him. Then back at the woman. “I don't kn — ”

She squeezed the trigger. Four, five shots, one second.
Simmons jiggled and exploded, fell to the floor like a sack of corn.

She swung the rifle towards Darmity. He looked back at her.
“*Kiu estas la flava regxo?*” she said softly.

He nodded. Didn’t waste any time. “*Trovi li en la strato de la kvar tordi.*”

He didn’t know what those words meant either. He’d been taught them, and he remembered.

The woman nodded and put up her gun. The other man did as well. Darmity imagined the man behind him did the same.

The woman snapped a salute. “Sir!”

Darmity smiled and saluted back.

35.

Thirty seconds after watching the woman salute Frank Darmity, Begley turned to Renicks and said “What the *hell* was that?”

Renicks finished his third water bottle in the last few minutes. He was feeling almost okay, though every muscle and ligament still ached. There was a thick core of exhaustion deep inside him, spreading outward, but he didn’t feel like he was going to fall over any more. “*La flava regxo*,” he said, hearing the tinny voices patched in from the studio. “A pass phrase. Esperanto. It means *The Yellow King*.”

Begley pursed her lips. “Looks like our Mr. Darmity is more highly placed in this than we thought.”

“Looks like our Mr. Darmity might be *running* this.”

There was a moment of silence. Renicks thought its flavor would accurately be described as *horrified*.

Their odds, he thought, had actually just gotten worse. The plan had been simple. Neither of them were in any shape to take on a fresh group of heavily armed, trained people. If they were here to “clean up”, lure them to a room with Mr. Darmity and let them sort each other out—he’d thought their worst-case scenario was just one of them dead. Instead of weakening or eliminating one of their enemies, they’d combined them into one more effective unit. And they still had to make it out of the complex alive.

“There were six of them when I saw the first poor bastard get gunned down,” Begley said. “Where are the other three?”

Begley leaned forward and pointed at one of the screens.
“Lobby.”

Renicks followed her pointing finger and studied the screen. In the large, useless lobby, grainy and grayscaled, three men in similar body-armor were visible. One appeared to be walking the perimeter, his futuristic-looking rifle aimed down at the floor in casual competence. The other two were working together on the floor, back towards the unused desk. A large black bag lay next to them.

“Bolting down tripods for heavier guns. They’re planning to defend against an assault.”

Renicks frowned. Watched the screen intently. His head throbbed like his brain was trying to squeeze out through his eyes and ears. “They’re going to try and hold the complex? Jesus.”

Begley leaned back, letting out an explosive sigh. Renicks looked at her. She was dirty. Bloodied. Her crisp, tailored suit had been torn and sagged off of her in unfortunate ways. She stood there with her arms crossed under her breasts fiercely, chewing her lip. Her posture, he noticed, was still perfect. For a moment, he wanted to reach out and touch her. Just her shoulder, or upper arm. Just friendly contact.

He didn’t move. Looked back at the security screens.

He watched the tiny figures in the lobby for a moment. Conscious of the silence. He glanced back at the TV studio. Darmity and the other three were gone.

Suddenly it felt like they could be right outside the door. This huge underground space, he thought. Everywhere they went there could be someone with an automatic weapon waiting to kill them.

He leaned forward. “Wait. Look.”

Begley leaned in next to him. Their shoulders touched. He was aware of her physical presence suddenly. Warm. Solid. Comforting.

“What?”

He hesitated, trying to make the grainy security signal clearer. Trying to will it into better resolution. At the pace this complex was updated, he figured the Federal Government would get around to installing high-definition video feeds by the next century.

Then one of the three figures moved, and he had a clear view of what they were doing again. He nodded. “The tripods. Look at them.”

Begley sucked in breath. “What the *hell*.” She turned to look at him. “They’re oriented inward.”

Renicks nodded, leaning back. “They’re not holding the complex against an assault. They’re just making sure we don’t get *out*.”

Begley stepped back, turned, and began the ridiculous process of pacing in the tiny office. Three steps up, three steps back. Three steps, three steps. Then she stopped and grabbed his arm.

“Jesus, Jack, it’s the same playbook. The charges. Underneath the facility.”

Renicks blinked. Head pounding. “What?”

“They *planned* to blow the place. I think if they failed to pull this off, the President was supposed to blow the place and erase all evidence. But he didn’t — he killed himself. That wasn’t part of the plan. I think the idea was that Grant would be able to walk

away untouched, maybe even a hero, the strong leader who guided us through a crisis. Win-win — either they launch their attack and manage their Soft Coup or whatever, or they get out of it with his image burnished and no one any wiser about whoever these crazy bastards *are*.”

“But then Grant goes loses his nerve. He takes the easy way out.”

“So, the backup plan. Blow this place. *Destroy every single scrap of evidence.*”

Renicks nodded. “There’s a lot, right? A lot of fingerprints. They re-wired the place. There’s surveillance video, access logs. The cut magnetic locks on the suite. The Brick, too.”

“Us.”

“Fucking hell.”

“This was the plan from the beginning. If they fail, blow the whole complex, make sure no one knows what’s happened here.”

Renicks nodded. “That animal wasn’t killing the other agents to keep them silent. He was killing them so they wouldn’t get in the way.”

He turned and stared at the screens again, searching for movement. The tiny office suddenly felt small. Hot.

“So what do we do?”

“We can’t go up,” Begley said immediately. “Even assuming we can slip past Darmity and his three little helpers, we hit the lobby and there’s a choke point. No other way out except the elevators. We’d be cut to ribbons. I’m willing to bet those three are ordered to fire at *anything* that comes up. Even their own people. No one is supposed to come out of this alive.”

“And those three? In the lobby?”

She shrugged. “Suicide. Or suicide by cop, if need be. Won’t be hard to get themselves shot once the FBI and the Marines arrive.”

Renicks suddenly shook his head. Remember, suddenly, the news feed they’d seen earlier: Bluemont being evacuated. “Doesn’t matter. Think about it. This place is rigged to be destroyed. That’s a lot of force. Even if we could teleport to the surface right now and start running — ”

Begley finished the sentence. “We’d never get clear of the blast radius.”

They stood for another few seconds in silence. Renicks swallowed, something hard and choking. All this, he thought. And then he’d thought maybe they were going to get out alive. He thought of Stan. At least *someone* had some idea of what had really happened. He knew Stan well enough; he would investigate. Was probably already getting into trouble over it.

He looked back at Begley. She was staring at the monitors without focus, just staring. Lost in her thoughts too.

“The charges,” he said suddenly. “They’re not designed to be set off locally, right?”

She turned to him and blinked. once. Twice. Clearing her head. “Right. They’re in place for remote detonation by order of the President.”

“So there’s no *button* or anything in place here, right? They can’t have a box or something, a remote detonator?”

Begley nodded slowly. “Sure, Jack, they have to ... holy *shit*, Renicks.” She looked back at him with sudden energy. “They have to get *down* there. They have to set the charges *manually*.” She paused. “Jesus. That’s a *hard* suicide mission.”

It took Renicks a second or two to realize she was talking about themselves. When he looked up, she was looking right at him. He held her gaze for a moment and nodded.

“I already died once,” he said, forcing a grin he didn’t feel. His heart thudded erratically in his chest. He felt like puking. But he smiled at Begley. “What do we do?”

She smiled back. He had the impression they were both programming expressions on their faces like feeding a program into a computer: Just mechanical reactions to conscious commands. Both of them acting for the other’s benefit. He wondered if this was how his father’s patients had acted: Forced cheer, everyone in on it. Everyone smiling and saying the right things, everyone terrified and cringing underneath.

“We go down,” she said. Then her smile changed. Became more natural. He blinked and found himself smiling back, mysteriously excited.

“They’re on seven,” he said. They were buried, fourteen levels down, deep inside the mountain. “We’re ahead of them.”

She winked. Renicks thought that wink was the most remarkable thing he’d ever seen anyone do under any circumstances. “I know a shortcut,” she said.

36.

One minute after their decision, Renicks trotted unsteadily behind Begley, wondering how in the world she managed to *almost* run with a broken leg while carrying a heavy automatic rifle. He wanted to draw some blood when they were finally done with this and win a Nobel Prize analyzing her genetic code. They were retracing their steps back to the service tunnel. They passed a series of unmarked doors along the damp, finished hallway that Renicks remembered. He knew the door that led to the tunnels was rusted. There was water flowing nearby, deep underground. He could smell damp in the air and wondered how often they had to tear out the carpet and moldy drywall, replace everything dry. Every few years, he thought.

When the rusted door came into view, Begley attacked it. Tore it open with a grunt. Her own momentum carried her back into Renicks. He steadied her and pushed her gently back into forward motion.

He felt the energy. The necessity. They had, for the first time, an advantage. They were some minutes ahead of Darmity, and for the first time knew exactly where all the other players were: Above them. Everyone was above them, heading down. Heading down *fast*, and coming armed. But simply *knowing something concrete* was energizing. He hadn't realized how long they'd been running blind, scampering from one faulty hiding place to the next, always worried about turning a corner and finding an enemy.

Running felt perfectly natural.

Three steps into the service tunnel. There was the butt end of the ladder leading up to the thirteenth level; Renicks stared at it and skidded to a halt. Stood for a second, an image of Begley sliding down the last few feet of a ladder flashing through his thoughts.

Begley skidded to a halt on the gritty, irregular floor and twisted around. "Jack!"

"Go!" he shouted back. "I'll catch up in a second!"

She hesitated, then spun and hobbled off. He watched her for a second, knowing how much pain she had to be in. Then he tore open his bag and started riffling through its contents. Pulled the little mini-survival kit out and dug into it, extracting the fishing line. Dropping the rest of the kit back into the bag, he freed the fishing line from the plastic clip that kept it looped up and let it dangle free: About four feet of thin, shining wire.

He looked back at the ladder. Saw Begley sliding down. Wondered, for just a second, if that was a common trick. Decided it probably was.

When the ladder emerged from the channel a few feet above him, metal pieces had been welded into place, jutting back to the walls where they were attached with big, rusted bolts. To stabilize the last section of ladder. He stepped up close to the ladder. Put his face where it would be if he was sliding down, terminal velocity from above. Lined up the bolts on the sides above him. Concluded that any wire strung between those bolts would slice up through the chin.

Thought about that for a second.

Thought about Frank Darmity. Saw his flat, squinty stare. Remembered his voice on the PA, making Begley scream.

Thought about the guns. These people, he reminded himself, had tried to murder millions, and had come to make sure he and Begley were dead. Would kill thousands as collateral damage if the complex was destroyed before a complete evacuation had been effected.

Keeping his weight on his good ankle, he climbed up a few feet. The silence was almost perfect again, and for a second he imagined he could feel the ladder vibrating under his hands. Someone up above in the darkness, riding down. Then he hooked one arm through the rungs and hung on, looping the fishing line around the bolt on the left. Three, four times, twisted. Looped it again. Twisted. Made a knot. Pulled it over to the other side and looped it around the other bolt. Pulled it taut, as tight as he could manage. Looped and twisted until it was secure. He plucked it with one finger and climbed down to the floor.

It was invisible. Anyone sliding down the ladder would have no warning. He thought it would probably clear their body and catch the face.

Hesitated for one more second. Then turned and moved as quickly as he could after Begley.

He pushed all thoughts out of his head. Blocked out any chance of imagining someone slicing through that wire. Told himself this was war. Told himself that anyone coming down that ladder was coming to set off the charges and kill Begley and himself. Told himself a lot of things, quickly and loudly, shouting to distract himself.

He caught up with Begley quickly. The hallway seemed to be devolving. The floor had become uneven and the walls were

rougher. The regular hanging lights had given way to bare bulbs sprouting from a single electrical conduit. He had the impression of coming to the edges of the complex. Everything blurry. Unfinished. It was palpably colder and damper.

Begley turned her head as he fell into step behind her.

“The charges are throughout the complex,” she said breathlessly, turning back. “Every level. Deep inside the concrete. Designed to pancake the whole goddamn place. Which will destabilize the whole mountain. Rockslides, mudslides in addition to the fireball and gas venting. You can’t get to the charges. You’d have to drill into the pour on every level, each one would take a fucking hour to get to, and they’re pressure-locked, so the minute the air hit them from a bore-hole they’d trip individually. They’re linked to the outside via dedicated satellite hookup. Designed to be separate from the Security Office, because the whole idea is to blow it out from under someone seizing the complex illegally.”

She took a few steps in silence, catching her breath.

“They ran the satellite hookup through the old mine shafts. If you want to disarm the system, you have to disconnect the hookup from the complex. If you want to set the charges off manually, you have to simulate a signal *from* the hookup!”

They came to a right-angle in the corridor. Renicks watched Begley limp around the corner. Lungs burning, he raced after her. His ankle shooting shards of glass up into his calf with every step.

He turned the corner and slowed just a fraction of a step. The corridor widened out into a small room. On his right was a huge steel blast door. A single sheet of steel set into the rock. A small

keypad — for a moment Renicks was stupidly amused at the tiny scale of the keypad compared to the door itself, which was about ten feet high and twelve or fifteen feet wide. It was unmarked. The metal reflected the weak light back and appeared to glow a soft orange-yellow.

He turned and saw Begley continuing down the corridor, which narrowed down again, disappearing into near blackness. The electrical conduit on the ceiling ended at a junction box a few feet past the corner.

“Isn’t *that* the access door?” he shouted, lumbering after her.

The blue light of her tiny flashlight sprang into being ahead of him. “Yes — two sets of blast doors, one leading to the old mine shaft itself and one into here. They take time to open. Five minutes or so before a single person can squeeze through, ten minutes to full aperture. It’s a production.”

He could barely make out her outline as he closed in again. He could feel the walls narrowing down. Reached up and found he could touch the ceiling. Their sounds were muffled back at them. The corridor was shrinking.

“This,” Begley said, breathing hard as she came to a stop, “is the shortcut.”

Renicks squeezed in next to her. With his shoulder jammed into what felt like rough, raw rock, he was pressed against her tightly. He could feel her struggling for breath. Could feel her body heat. She was exhausted. *He* was exhausted, he realized. Heart pounding, head pounding, legs shaking. They were both close to their physical limits.

He squinted, following the weak pale light of her flashlight. The space tapered off sharply from where they were — the

ceiling crashing down, the walls sucking in, until there was just a black shadow, perhaps two feet high, a foot and a half wide. If that.

“What is it?”

Begley turned to face him, giving him a sudden sense of release as he was no longer being pressed into the wall. “Just a void. I had hours to myself in this goddamn tomb, so I wandered. I read specs and old manuals. I explored. I don’t think this was here when they built the place. I think something gave way and this opened up. No one ever noticed. It’s a hole, basically. It’s wet. Water erosion, I guess, caused it.”

Renicks strained his eyes at it. It was just darkness. Shadow. “A hole.”

“It’s tight. For me. For you, it’ll be *really* tight. It drops you into the cavern beyond, what the old mineshaft opens into. Where the hookup is.”

“You climbed into that,” he said. He tried to imagine the frame of mind that would lead Begley to shrug and *climb into it*. The level of boredom required. He didn’t think he had a suitable experience with which to compare it. The idea of pushing himself into that hole, with the weight of rock around him was horrifying. He knew immediately that the only thing that would ever convince him to do so was something like Frank Darmity with an automatic weapon creeping up behind him.

He felt rather than saw her preparing. Pulling off her jacket. Leaning the rifle against the wall.

“No way to carry the guns in. But we can use the straps to pull them in after us,” she said. “Give me yours.”

He slung it off his shoulder and held it out blindly until he felt

her grab it. “How come you didn’t report this? It’s a pretty major breach of security.”

She removed the strap from his rifle and hers. “I don’t know. You can’t get into the cavern from the outside except through another blast door, and getting *up* into the void from in there is not nearly as easy as dropping *down* into the cavern from here.” She tied the straps together into one, then set the safeties and looped it around the rear sights, binding them together. “It was a serious breach of protocol, I admit it, Jack. When we’re topside you can file a complaint.”

He managed a ghost of a smile. “I will. I already have to file one against Darmity, so it will be no trouble.”

“I go first. When the rifles drop in, come in after me. I’ll talk you through if you get disoriented.”

Renicks swallowed. “Jesus,” he said.

Begley paused. After a second he felt her hand on his. “You gonna be able to do this, Jack?”

He swallowed again. Felt his heart lurching in his chest, a crazy non-rhythm. He thought if his heart were doing that under any other circumstances he’d be in the car already, headed for the Emergency Room. He nodded. “I’ll be okay.”

She squeezed his hand. Then let go. Went back to work.

“We’ll be inside in thirty seconds,” she said. “It’ll take them, minimum, five minutes once they get here. That’s our window. If we can trash the hookup in five minutes, they can’t blow the place.”

He shook himself. “But can still shoot us.”

He heard her small, cute laugh. “Well, *sure*.” She paused. “Here, take the light. I know what I’m doing here. You’ll need it

more.”

He took the flashlight from her. Watched her sit on the floor, push her legs into the shadow. He wondered if her splint was going to cause her trouble, but she made smooth progress, and he figured it was a sloping fall, a straight shot. She pushed herself forward with her hands, the straps of the guns looped around one fist, dragging them behind her. Her feet disappeared, then her legs, then her midsection, and finally her head. The rifles rattled on the stone right behind her, then were sucked into the darkness behind her. It was as if the darkness was eating her.

He waited. Realized he was waiting to hear her say she was okay, or that he should come through now. Felt stupid.

Far off, he heard a sudden shriek. There and gone.

He dropped onto the floor and pushed his feet forward until they were swallowed by the darkness. Felt no resistance. Took two quick, deep breaths. Began pushing himself into the void. He watched his legs disappear, eaten by darkness. Felt a change in temperature; it was colder once you crossed the threshold. He felt the top of the void and leaned back, getting onto his elbows. When his shoulders were slipping under, he could just see the rough line of the top of the hole. Just enough room for him to slide into. His feet were suddenly dangling over an edge, and he could see that he'd be able to just barely push himself along until gravity took over and sucked him down.

He pushed with his arms until he couldn't go any further that way, then used his legs. His calves were bent over the unseen edge; he pulled with his hamstrings, letting his head and shoulders lie on the floor as he pulled himself further in. The dim

glow of the flashlight showed him rough gray stone, droplets of milky water hanging half an inch from his eyes.

Then he stopped.

He kicked his legs but was unable to get any more purchase; they were extended out too far. He stopped breathing. He could twist his arms but they were wedged between his body and the rock and for a moment he couldn't get them free. A black, swallowing terror welled up inside him. He thrashed for a second, kicking his legs uselessly and twisting his torso violently. One arm squeezed free, and he quickly found the inner edge of the slot with his free hand. With just his fingers he managed to slide himself another inch or so, and that was enough. His other arm squeezed free and then he was able to pull himself the rest of the way through. Just before his head cleared, gravity finally noticed him and yanked him down. He scraped his forehead on the rough stone and tumbled a few feet down a sharp, rocky incline, biting his tongue and knocking his head a few times.

He lay for a moment on a wet, sharp surface. It was painful, but he didn't want to move again. Perhaps ever.

"Jack," Begley whispered, almost in his ear. *"You okay?"*

He nodded. Felt foolish. *"I'll live,"* he whispered back. He wondered why they were whispering. He didn't see the flashlight; there was a thin film of weak, gray light that nudged the edges of things and left them indistinct. He could barely see Begley, a foot away. She looked spectral and immaterial, like a ghost come to haunt him. She held out one of the M16s.

"Good," she said. *"Because we're not alone in here. Someone beat us to it."*

37.

One minute and forty-three seconds after Begley missed her shot, Renicks was crawling through the darkness towards the inner blast door.

They'd landed in a slight depression in the floor of a huge cavern. He judged its size by the hollow sound of the air in the gloom. His eyes were adjusting as best they could; he could see but beyond a few feet things became grainy and blurry. The floor felt sandy and shifting, like standing on a deep pour of fine gravel. Begley had led him to the lip of the depression and he'd climbed up a few feet to peer over the edge.

The outer blast door was open. He could see a sliver of it, a pale glow in the distance, reflecting back every bit of light. A soft gray glow poured from beyond it — the old mine shaft, worming up through the mountain to the surface. An experimental shaft, never intended for actual mining.

Beyond the little depression he and Begley had spilled out onto, the cavern floor was relatively flat, an irregular oval shape, the size of a baseball diamond. Thick metal conduits emerged from the rock floor just past the blast door, sprouting up from the ground like the roots of some monstrous gray metal tree. They spread out immediately, dividing into smaller and smaller pipes, bolted directly into the soft rock, running in straight lines in the direction of the inner blast door, where the conduits dove back down into the earth.

Here and there black boxes with softly glowing LED screens and a single, nonstandard-looking multi-pin jack, wide and thin.

Renicks had never seen a cable that would fit the connection.

The two men crouching around one of the boxes obviously had: They had a flat, wide cable plugged into the box. The cable led to a small handheld keyboard. Both men were dressed similarly to the others they'd seen on the security screens: Black body armor, hardshell backpacks, the strange, melted-looking rifles. One was laboriously typing into the keyboard while the other read softly from a small, palm-sized book.

Begley pulled softly at his shirt and he climbed back down behind the lip of the depression to sit next to her, their backs against the rock.

She took the rifle in her hands and looked at him. Renicks nodded and put up his hands: Shooting people in the dark with an automatic weapon was, he thought, pretty clearly Begley's department.

He watched her as she prepared, choosing a spot where she could lean forward against the slope and have her shoulders up over the edge. She steadied the gun against her shoulder and sighted. Turned slightly and sighted again. Then back again. He saw her take a deep breath, lean back slightly.

She fired.

The noise was there and gone, louder than he'd expected. The gun danced a little in her hands, and a yellow-orange flash lit up the muzzle for a second. He saw the man kneeling over the keyboard spin and drop, transformed into a ragdoll. The other rolled away almost instantly, disappearing into the shadows.

"Fuck!" Begley hissed, sliding down to join him again. "I can disable the hook up if I can get up there, but I need you to draw him off."

Renicks nodded. His heart pounded in his chest, and dread filled every space between his thoughts. The man in the darkness was a professional. Trained in weapons, in combat. In killing. Renicks was an amateur.

He paused, thinking that he *had* shown a certain dumb talent for killing people. Hated himself immediately.

He nodded and leaned forward again. "Wait for my signal!"

He gave a thumb's up, hoping he was projecting a confidence he didn't feel, and got up into a crouch. Ran along the lip of rock as far as he could; fifteen or twenty feet away from the blast door the depression rose up to meet the rest of the floor and he lost his cover. He dropped into a crawl and moved as quickly as he could, trusting in the gloom to cover him.

He'd thrown himself into motion without allowing himself to hesitate. He knew if he stopped to think, he'd freeze up. As he moved he raced through what needed to be done. He had to distract and engage the surviving man. Keep him off of Begley. Kill him if he could.

When he reached the blast door, he pushed himself into the deepest shadow available and gave himself ten seconds to look around. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest like it was trying to break free, adrenaline soaking into everything. He tried to fix the geography in his head. The outer blast door was not directly across from the inner blast door. The inner door was also set lower; from where he lay panting in the dark, Renicks could only see the top of the other opening. A pale gray rectangle. Begley was in the depression, hidden completely by shadows. As was the surviving man, hiding somewhere else in the gloom.

He let the rifle drop. Pulled his bag around so it sat on his

belly. Tore it open and dug into the contents. The Kimber. The survival kit. The bottle of Scotch, forgotten deep down on the bottom. Found Uncle Richie's Zippo.

He went back to the survival kit: A couple of fishhooks, the water purification tablets — turned to powder in their little plastic bag — a small game snare. He put it all back into his bag.

Looked around again. He took a breath and nodded to himself. He didn't have time for a plan. He needed to just do whatever came to mind. He reached down and took hold of his own shirt. Tore a big swatch of the fabric free with both hands. About five inches of the material. He dug the bottle of whiskey out of his bag again, took the cork between his teeth and yanked it free, spitting it out into the darkness. Took a swig. Regretted the swig immediately as his heart lurched and his head swam. He poured some of the liquor onto the torn piece of his shirt, then a bit more right onto the gritty floor of the cavern. Stuffed the fabric into the neck of the bottle until it filled it like a plug, a plume of white spilling out of the glass.

Carefully set the bottle down on the floor. Slipped the Zippo into his pocket. Getting back into a crouch, he took the Kimber from the bag and placed it in a shadowed nook right next to the blast door.

He crept back to where he'd left the bottle and rifle and picked both up. Slowly straightened up. Heart pounding, he counted to ten, wondering, far too late, if Darmity's people had brought night vision with them.

Then he figured if they had, he would have been shot two minutes ago.

He held the rifle exactly the way you weren't supposed to: One

handed, arm outstretched. He pointed it off to the side. Tried to brace himself.

Well, so much for my marksmanship merit badge, he thought.

Squeezed the trigger.

The rifle roared for a split second, the muzzle flashing in the gloom. The rifle bucked and jumped out of his hand, straining his wrist. Biting back a cry, he stumbled a little but forced himself to watch the darkness. Just as he steadied himself, he saw it: A similar flash, then the noise of return rifle fire, aimed a few feet to his right.

He started running.

Fixing the location of the flash in his mind, he ran as fast as he could push himself, holding the improvised bomb in one hand while he dug the Zippo out of his pocket with the other. He approached at an angle, coming around in a loop so he would pass in front of the spot from the left side, from the shadows across from the open blast door.

Lungs burning, he forced himself to wait until he started the approach, looping inwards. Then he snapped the lighter open and flicked it into life, the tiny yellow flame dancing immediately. He touched it to the piece of white cloth and it flared into bright life. Without pausing to think, he threw it as he ran.

The tiny flame traced an arc across the distant, black ceiling of the cavern and smashed into dancing flames. For a moment they swirled on the floor, liquid, rising up in tongues. A second later they seemed to reach out like an arm reaching into the darkness and grabbing onto a man's form, revealed next to the pyre as if he'd formed out of the new light itself. Then there was a

man outlined in flames, running. Running. Falling to his knees. A burst of gunfire from the darkness of the downslope, and he fell backwards as if kicked.

Triumph surged through Renicks. He resisted the urge to throw his arms up in the air as he made out the dim form of Begley scrambling onto the maze of conduits. Continued to run out of sheer exhilaration. As the triumph faded into a vague, rotten horror, he passed close to where the first man had fallen, shot by Begley. He slowed to a walk, all the energy draining from him. He'd killed two people directly. Murdered them. Self-defense, maybe, but they were still dead. He'd aided in other deaths, too.

He stopped and stood for a moment. Pictured the woman up in the TV studio again. His kids were going to ask him to tell them how this all happened. He was going to have to tell them the story.

“Jack!”

He blinked in the darkness and snapped his head up. *Pray for forgiveness on your own time, Jack*, he told himself, and pushed himself back into motion, back towards Begley. She was crouched over the tiny handheld LED screen and keyboard, attached via the thin, broad cable to the black box on the cavern floor.

“This will take me about ten minutes,” she said without looking up.

Renicks shook off the last clinging horror and self-disgust, clearing his head. “Maybe we should go find an ax. Just cut the lines.”

She shook her head without pausing or looking up. “Can’t.

Interrupt the signal improperly, the charges blow. It's designed to prevent people from taking possession of this facility when it's online as the new Commander-in-Chief's headquarters." She tapped something into the keyboard and studied the stream of data that spilled out after it. Shook her head. Finally looked up at him.

She was exhausted, and Renicks felt immediately guilty. She was in worse shape than he was. She was still focused and working to save lives — to save their lives. "I need ten minutes."

He nodded. "What about the mine shaft?" he said. "Just making a run for it?"

She looked back down at the screen. "Aside from the potential deaths of civilians? We're not alone in this facility yet, Jack. We walk away, Darmity gets in here five minutes later and sets the charges, we're half a mile up that shaft when a fireball comes through, burning us alive, and then the whole damn thing just collapses. We don't even know how many people they've sent. We've seen nine, including our friend Mr. Darmity. There could be dozens more we just haven't seen."

Renicks nodded. "I'm sorry. I'm not thinking. I'm —"

Somewhere behind them, a red flashing light sparked into life. A klaxon split the silence. And a deep rumbling noise he could feel in the stone under him lurched into life. The Blast door, being opened.

In his head, Renicks heard Begley again. *We're not alone in this facility yet.*

38.

A minute-and-a-half after stepping over the writhing body of the man he'd nicknamed Fugly, Frank Darmity stood in front of the blast door and watched the woman — he'd named her Red — work the keypad. He felt like a thin wire had been run through his whole body, hooked up to a weak battery. A sleepy buzzing.

She'd fucked up the first two tries, getting a flat unhappy noise and a red light each time. One more fuckup and the blast doors would lock down for fifteen minutes, sending an alarm to the deserted, half-destroyed Security Office where no one would see it. Fifteen fucking minutes would be disaster. He held his handgun loosely down by his thigh, ready to teach her a lesson if that happened.

He glanced over at the other man. Darmity hadn't named him yet. He studied the man's dark skin and tight curly hair. His huge build. A weightlifter. Darmity wasn't a racist. He realized there were examples of greatness in every ethnicity. It was just harder to find anywhere but in the white races. He distrusted the black man instinctively.

Red punched in the code a third time, and finally got a tiny green light, and then the blast door began its ponderous journey to being open. The tiny space filled with noise and vibration. Darmity glanced down at his shoe and noticed some of Fugly's blood on the toe. He stared at it for a moment, then decided to just leave it. He'd have more blood to deal with before this endless fucking day was over.

They had five minutes or so to burn.

Red shrugged off her pack and dropped her Herstal on the floor. Darmity watched her snap open the hardshell pack and inspect it. He turned to look at ... at Hulk, he decided. Hulk was doing the same thing, a fast field inspection. He'd started with the rifle. Darmity smirked. Fucking professionals. They always dug in deep to the goddamn *procedure*. The ritual. Like knowing shit made them better at their jobs, which was bullshit.

He didn't move. Kept Hulk and Red in his peripheral vision. His breathing was slow and heavy. He felt weak and off-balance. He stood watching the door move in almost invisible increments, just more and more steel door sliding past him. They all had their jobs. Three in the lobby to prevent exfiltration. Two in the cavern to set the charges in motion. Four in the complex to erase any survivors. He and Red had been organizing for a sweeping of the complex, the idea being to herd Renicks and his bitch agent ahead of them, trap them, and get rid of them. Then, one of the vital signs alarms on Red's people had triggered: One of the cavern team, dead.

They'd headed for Level Fourteen at a run. Fugly in the lead because he was fast. On Level Thirteen they'd gotten the second vitals alarm: Man two in the cavern, dead. Fugly had taken the ladder at a slide, pissed off. It hadn't worked out too well for Fugs.

"You feel a draft?" Hulk suddenly said. Darmity scrubbed his voice for an accent. There wasn't one he could detect.

Red stopped and was still for a moment. "Maybe," she finally said.

Darmity ran his eyes over her. Thirty, maybe thirty-five. Skin like milk and red hair out of a bottle. Pretty enough. A little

angular in the face. The body armor made them all look the same, but he thought she must have a tight little body under there. Fit.

“It’s the door,” he said tiredly. “Voids inside the rock, a vacuum effect when it starts extracting.”

Fucking *professionals*.

After a second Hulk and Red shared a look and went back to their field tear-down. Darmity kept them both in his conscious thoughts. He’d never met them before. None of them knew each other’s name or anything about each other. Police? Military? Mercenary? He didn’t know. They didn’t know *him*, either. He was nominally the commander of the operation — he’d been given that code. So they were under his command. But Darmity knew his orders were to leave *no one alive* at this facility even before it was set to blow. No chances. No assuming anyone would just burn up in the explosion. *Everyone*.

He glanced at Red. Everyone. Including these two.

Darmity figured they’d both been given the same orders. Kill everyone, including him. When Fugly had slid down the ladder and ended up with half his face on the floor like a piece of fucking hamburger, Red had put a bullet in his head without too much hesitation. One more man down, which was no good, but better than hauling some screaming, bleeding asshole behind them, especially when he was going to die anyway.

Darmity had no intention of letting that happen. His orders were sparse: *Kill everyone. Blow the complex. Kill yourself*. He’d been solemnly handed a paper packet of cyanide pills in case he objected to being torn apart by an explosion or the feel of warm gunmetal against his head. Even as he’d taken his oath and

acknowledged his orders — he had a quick memory of the room, dark and hot, fires burning in the sconces, the heavy, sweet smell in the air — he knew he'd been lying. Just about that last part. He served his country. He believed in this mission. He'd served it honestly and to the best of his abilities and he'd been truly willing to sacrifice his life if that's what it took. But the mission had failed. The mission was fucking borked, there was no reason he had to go down with the ship.

Red and Hulk, on the other hand, and their two other people in the cavern, the three upstairs — they would go. Darmity would make sure of that. Security would be maintained. He glanced at each of them casually. Assumed they were both thinking the same thing. Darmity had seen this before. You order people to go down with the ship, half the people in the room start clocking where all the fucking life preservers were.

He did nothing. For now he needed these people until he'd put bullets in Renicks and Begley's heads, make sure the charges were set. Then he would handle them.

“Pack it up,” he said quietly. “Both of you. Be ready when the fucking door opens.”

They didn't say anything, but both started quickly re-packing their gear. He waited, listening to himself breathe through his nose, biting the inside of his cheek until he tasted blood. Forced himself to stand very still. He hated being in charge of people. He liked working alone. There was always this attitude.

He told himself he was going to enjoy slitting their throats. Then told himself he had to be patient.

In short increments, he forced himself to relax. Muscle by muscle he unclenched. Took deeper breaths. Slowed his heart

rate. It was all conscious acts of will, orders from his brain. He knew if he charged in there pissed off, he would make poor decisions. He couldn't afford to make poor decisions.

He checked his watch. Sixty seconds.

He chewed over the problem. Renicks and Begley were in there. It was dark. Unfamiliar. They'd had time to scout it. Time to set up a defense. Traps. Tricks. They knew exactly where he would be coming from, and would try to be ready for him.

He paused. It occurred to him that one of his goals was to get rid of these two shitheads.

"They may be trying to disable the charges," Red said, standing up and slipping her pack back on.

Anger flared. "No shit," he snapped. "You figured that out all by yourself? Jesus fucked." He took a deep breath. "Cover the door as it opens, wait for some light. Manage your exposure — don't stand there like a pair of knuckleheads. Wait for the door to be fully open, get a good look. Once we have access, I want Hulkaburger here in first." He ignored the look the big guy shot him. "Don't be stingy. Shoot first. We got no collateral damage to worry about. Just hit anything that moves as hard as you can. Then hit it again."

Darmity felt satisfied with himself. He had two pawns. He would use them.

39.

Two seconds after settling into position, Renicks began to sweat. In his head, he heard Begley's hoarse whisper: *Jack, we're going to have to kill them.*

It wasn't the temperature of the cavern, which was pretty low. It was reaction. Adrenaline and terror, the sudden burst of activity followed by sitting in a hole and trying to be as still as possible.

The noise of the blast door opening was so loud and caused so much vibration it ceased to be sound and became, instead, simply part of the fabric of the new reality.

Renicks didn't have an accurate idea of when the blast door would finally open far enough to admit whoever was coming in, but his sense was they had about twenty seconds. He scanned the cavern. He couldn't see Begley, but knew she would be across from him, about five feet further from the inner blast door than he was. They'd hastily positioned themselves so they could concentrate fire on the blast door and avoid cross-firing into each other. Assuming he could actually aim the M16. Which he was not certain of.

In the noise, in the gloom, they'd spent the last four minutes preparing for their visitors. Begley had looked at him like he was crazy when he'd told her to take her jacket off. He didn't know if he was being clever or not. He'd adopted *just do something* as his personal motto. There was no time for ponderous plans or research. He was just throwing together whatever he could, as quickly as he could.

Dressed in his and Begley's jackets, the two dead men had been posed as best as they could over the black box, the keypad with its sinuous cable placed delicately in the slack hands of the one Begley had shot. Both were positioned with their backs to the blast door. Neither looked like anything except two corpses that had been dressed and posed, Renicks thought. But in the gloom, in a split second, he thought they might cause hesitation. Assumption. *Something* they could use.

He'd handled a corpse before.

When your father is a doctor in a small town, he thought, it isn't surprising that you learn a lot about medicine. In a workmanlike, practical kind of way. It isn't surprising that you sometimes act as unlicensed nurse or unlicensed anesthesiologist. Or unlicensed coroner.

The sense of dead weight was as he remembered. The lingering warmth. The body surprisingly loose. Not stiff at all. He'd had a woozy moment of familiarity: the feel of the dead skin, the sagging body. The sense that somehow this was now just a heavy sack of *material*, and not a person, any more.

He'd kept his mind blank while carrying them. The burned-skin smell was overwhelming. He could still smell it, since he was wearing the man's charred body armor, still warm to the touch. Begley had wordlessly refused to wear the other set, and there was no time to argue with her.

After they'd posed the bodies, he'd felt wired. Amped up. Like any kind of silence, of stillness, would be a mistake. Allow something to occur to him. He needed to keep moving and found himself studying the inner blast door as it ground its way open. He had a minute or so, maybe a minute and a half. He ran over to

it, ankle sending friendly spikes of pain up into his leg, and dumped out his bag for what seemed like the fiftieth time. Found the slippery wire of the small game snare and unwound it, threading it between his fingers and getting a sense of its length.

He'd trotted back to the blast door with it. It was a simple piece of work; a thin wire, about ten feet or so long, with a small loop on one end, banded by a brass clip that kept it from slipping. The other end had a bigger loop formed with a noose-like knot, a sliding hitch that allowed the snare to constrict around anything that tugged at it. The idea was, you set the snare up in the forest so that the noose hung over a likely path for a small animal — rabbit, squirrel, or similar. As the critter passed through the space its head would catch the noose, and its own forward momentum would snap the noose tight.

He'd affixed the small end of the snare to a stub of rock where the blast door had been carved out of the wall years ago. Tugged it a few times to be sure of it. Then turned and looked at the floor of the cavern right inside the door. Had tried to decide in five seconds how they would come.

They wouldn't come in straight down the middle. Too obvious. Plus, they would be impatient for the blast door to open. As soon as it opened wide enough, they would come. They would come at an angle, dashing for the shadows. Since the door was opening, from their perspective, from left to right, he assumed they would angle to his right.

Knelt down with the noose end of the snare and formed a little platform for it, scraping together some dirt and gravel so the noose could lay elevated from the rest of the floor. Not by much. He didn't want it to be an obvious obstruction to avoid by

instinct.

Renicks crouched in the darkness and tried to pick the snare out. Couldn't. The dark had swallowed it. He knew the odds of anyone stepping on it were very low. The odds of *him* or Begley stepping on it were somewhat higher. He didn't know what else to do. He held the rifle in his hands, finger off the trigger, and watched the bright line forming as the blast door opened.

Jack, we're going to have to kill them.

If they could somehow gun them down before they reached the shadows, they had the advantage. Once they reached the shadows, it evened up, and he didn't like how square odds ended for him. Trained mercenaries in the dark with automatic weapons ... and him.

He watched the bright line get thicker. After living with the new reality of the opening blast door for so long, the line was widening far too quickly. He watched it swelling, counting off the seconds.

He felt his own sweat on the surface of the rifle, chilled to a slimy film.

Jack, we're going to have to kill them.

He stared at the thick band of light formed by the opening blast door. Cold sweat dripped into his eyes.

Then there was someone running.

Renicks didn't get a good look at them. They were there, framed in the light, and then they were running. Right towards the two corpses. He swung the rifle clumsily, trying to keep up with them. They moved too fast, and the light was so dim — he turned quickly with the heavy gun and overbalanced. Swinging the gun up to shift his balance, his finger jerked and he spat

three rounds into the hidden roof of the cavern.

Then gunfire burst from Begley's position. He saw the brief flash. Imagined he heard a shriek over the rumble of the door — a strangled cry, instantly swallowed. As he scrambled to regain his balance, heart pounding and head aching, he couldn't be sure. Which meant the first one through the door could be out there, still. Creeping about.

Keep it together, he told himself. Calm down.

Begley would be displacing. *If I fire, I'll move*, she'd said. He wouldn't know her approximate location any more. He put his eyes on the door again, just in time to see something small and cylindrical sail through the opening, landing softly. Renicks followed it with his eyes, alarm flashing through him.

There was an explosion loud enough to drown out the door, heavy enough for Renicks to be knocked over by its invisible fist. The rifle flew out of his hands and was swallowed by the cavern. And then the whole cavern lit up like the sun in your eyes no matter where you looked, blinding and painful even after he'd shut his eyes tightly. And stayed that way.

40.

Ten seconds after watching Hulk get gunned down, Frank Darmity smiled a little and looked at Red. “Well, they got assault rifles.”

Red was staring into the slowly widening window of shadow into the cavern. “Jesus.”

Darmity congratulated himself. He hadn’t expected Hulk to just run into the fucking space like an asshole, but now he knew what Renicks and Begley were up to, and it wasn’t even half smart. Although posing the corpses was slightly higher on the badass scale for Renicks than he would have expected. It was going to force a complete recalibration of his opinion of the man.

“All right, Red!” he shouted over the rumble of the door, fishing in his pocket. “Shades. We’ll hit ‘em with the Stun, you go in and scout it out, okay? Take your time and be careful. They’ll be blind and disoriented.”

She didn’t react right away. He watched her in his peripheral vision. Studying her body language. He could tell she was thinking about him. Questioning. She’d taken an oath, too, and she’d been vouched for, or she wouldn’t be there. But he didn’t know her. Amesley and his people had been patriots, too. Good people, sure. Fuckups all the same. As he fished in his big flap pocket, he let one hand fall idly on the butt of his sidearm.

He could almost see her walking through it. He’d ordered Hulkaburger to go in, but he hadn’t told him to run in a straight line like an asshole. Hulk had seen bodies over one of the access modules and he’d just gone for them. He could have been

smarter about it. There'd been nothing wrong with the order.

Red nodded. "Okay!"

Darmity relaxed slightly. She'd decided *she* would be smarter about it. Good girl, he thought, admiring the shape he imagined under all that armor.

He pulled the grenade from his pocket. A modified issue. He stepped up to the slowly rolling blast door and glanced at her as she positioned herself just to the left of the widening entryway. Checked her weapon one last time. Pulled her goggles up over her head, strapping them over her eyes. Tiny dark ovals, like swimmer's goggles, but with black lenses. Looked forward and nodded.

He pulled the ring. Counted to three. Tossed the grenade into the cavern. Counted to three while he slipped his own goggles on.

The bang was loud enough to hear over the noise. Loud enough to feel in his legs. Light poured out of the opening like someone had lit the space on fire, some fuel in the air that burned bright white.

Darmity watched Red sprint into the space. Moving fast, at an angle to her left, turning her head as she ran to scan the area — merely brightly lit to her due to her goggles — to spot Renicks and Begley.

He watched her left leg suddenly jerk behind her as if some invisible man had grabbed onto her ankle. Watched her sail forward, arms whipping outward with unspent momentum. Saw her slap down onto the cavern floor, hard. Saw her head bounce off a rock. Hard. Saw her lying there, unmoving.

Well, he thought, crouching down and stepping forward,

scanning the area, *they got traps, too.*

Then he paused and smiled. Saw Begley plain as day, ducked down in what had been impenetrable shadow, blindly swinging her rifle in a shallow arc.

41.

Just before he heard Begley scream, the world seemed to tilt. Renicks felt like he was sliding off the deck of some huge ship. Going down. He was blind, but it was sensory overload instead of a lack of light: The light was everywhere, pushing into his brain. He threw his arm up over his eyes and that helped, but even then some of the intense white light burst through, painful.

In his left ear was just a high-pitched ringing noise and a dull throb. He could still hear — the incessant grinding of the blast door was still there, like any other weak force in the universe — but only in his right ear.

Panic gripped him. Reaching up to his ear, he felt warm, sticky blood. He'd heard of stun grenades, on the news. In video games. He knew what they were. This had been something beyond his experience. He was blind and disoriented, resisting the sick urge to run, to just run until he hit something or got hit by something. Clenching his teeth, he let himself drop, falling prone.

Being on the floor of the cavern helped. He knew where bottom was again. For a second he clung to the floor like a man floating on a piece of driftwood. He pictured the cavern in his memory, the fuzzy, dark details. He knew how stun grenades were used: Blind and confuse your enemies, then come in, hunt everyone down. Staying in one place was suicide. So he started to crawl.

After two seconds, he heard the snarl of automatic fire. Then he heard Begley scream.

He froze again. His heart staggered and skipped a beat, two, then slammed back into motion. With the screech of the blast door and one ear not functioning, he couldn't tell where she was. But he knew it meant someone was in the cavern. And they would be looking for him next.

42.

Frank Darmity stepped into the cavern. Imagined he could feel the dividing line. As if the bright light of the stun was an oil suspended in the air. He paused just inside and swept his gaze around. He knew they would be blind, but he still felt exposed. Aside from the containment force left topside, he had no more pawns to work with. As it probably should have fucking been from the goddamn get-go, he was running the show. And about fucking time.

He moved carefully. The shades toned the light down to a manageable level, but left everything grayscale and his depth perception was for shit. He hadn't spotted Renicks. He wasn't too concerned; Renicks was a soft touch – smarter than expected, maybe, but he'd been a Desk Man and he remained a Desk Man – and he was probably on the ground in a panic, blind and confused. He could take his time.

He knew where Begley was. He had her position fixed and he was certain he'd nailed her. She might not be dead, and Darmity figured he had time to go check.

And then he would go find Renicks.

43.

Renicks started crawling.

In the noise and blinding light, he focused in on one thought: *Do something. Do anything.* His choices were to curl up and let the noise and light wash over him until Darmity or one of his people found him and put him out of his misery, or move. Just move.

He was blind, but he knew where the blast door was.

He had a vague sense of its position anyway, but it was the engine pumping all the noise into the space. It was easy to start pulling himself with his elbows in the damp, gritty soil of the cavern floor, pulling himself towards the roar.

44.

She was still alive. The Begley Bitch. She resolved in Darmity's vision like a pixilated image on a screen. The M16 lay on the cavern floor next to her. He kicked it away, kept his rifle trained on her. She was curled up on her side, arms pushing against her belly. The blood looked black to him. Thick black rivers of it. Her hands were painted with it. She writhed and gasped.

He stood over her. Enjoying the moment.

And then he had an idea.

45.

When Renicks came across the body he stopped. Breathing was difficult. He was overheated and dehydrated. His head pounded. Every time he breathed in he inhaled a cloud of dust that made him want to cough and choke. When his arm slapped onto something fleshy, he froze for a second, cringing, waiting for the blow. The gunshot.

Nothing.

He reached forward and pulled himself forward using the body. Still breathing. Still warm. He slapped blindly at it, seeking anything that might give him an advantage. Anything.

He found her head. Felt the elastic band looped around, followed the straps. Found the goggles.

46.

Kneeling over her, Darmity made sure she didn't have a weapon hidden. A handgun, a knife. Something clutched in a hidden hand, ready to make him look foolish. There was nothing. She'd been gutshot with high-velocity rounds and was in too much pain to be able to think straight.

Holding his rifle in one hand, aimed away from him, he reached down and pushed his hand roughly into her belly.

Made her scream.

Come on, he thought, bring 'im over here.

47.

Everything ran through her mind all at once. The pain, yes, foremost and immediate. The smell of the motherfucker, stale sweat and something worse. A man you wouldn't sit next to at a bar. Her father, shaking his head in amused exasperation, his usual emotion. The pain again, eating up every bit of her and leaving just lungs and vocal chords and taut, strained muscles. Her sisters, all so alike, looking back at her from eleven, nine, eight, seven years ahead. Jack Renicks, smiling that secret smile when he knew more than you did.

The pain again. Then, for a few blessed seconds, blackness.

48.

Darmity slapped her face with his bloody hand. Fucking hell. Passed out. He stood up, feeling his back twitch as his knees popped. Hefted the rifle.

Without warning, the noise stopped. The blast door finally open. The sudden silence seemed like noise itself, for a moment.

Then, behind him, someone pushed the muzzle of a gun into the back of his head. The soft spot where his neck met his skull. And he thought

Five minutes before discovering he had just two rounds left in the Kimber, Renicks was shaking as he stepped over Frank Darmity's body. Darmity's eyes were staring up at him, a surprised and somehow pathetic expression on his face. As he did so, the blinding light suddenly faded, in seconds, leaving him blind again wearing the woman's dark goggles.

He tore them off and knelt next to Begley. He didn't try to move her. He checked for a pulse and found it, thin and shaky. Panic. The taste of it in his mouth.

He knelt there, shaking, the Kimber, recovered from its hiding place, still in his hand. He spent a few seconds considering his options. He could try to drag her back up to Level Nine, to the medical office. Five ladders, carrying her. While she bled like a slaughtered hog. Stopping on every landing out of necessity, gasping for breath, rubbing at his aching ankle. He could try to pack the wound with his shirt, wrapped tight with something, then carry her up. Either scenario would have left the cavern undefended, and Begley had said it herself: They didn't know how many there were. Another team could be making their way down. The whole complex could be blown.

If he didn't do anything, she was going to die. Bleed to death in the bowels of this complex. He knew immediately that he couldn't allow that.

He pushed the Kimber into his waistband. The move felt natural. No longer like pretending to be something. He gently rolled her onto her back. He purposefully didn't examine her

wound. Or note the way the blood seeped out of it. He tore the stinking, charred body armor off. Tore the buttons of his shirt ripping it off. Shivering in his undershirt, he folded his dirty shirt into a thick square and pushed it down onto the wound. He took off his belt and wrapped it around her midsection, cinching it tight to hold the shirt in place.

Then he turned to face away from her, took her by the feet, and began dragging her.

He moved as quickly as he could manage. Nothing to be gained by being gentle. He pulled her out of the cavern, past the unconscious woman in body armor, her leg snagged by his small game snare. He hesitated. Had a vision of her coming to, alone. Hunching over the black box, setting the charges.

He heard Begley in his head. *Jack, we're going to have to kill them.*

He let her legs drop. Walked over to the woman. She'd taken a nasty bang to the head from a large rock with a sharp edge, and had bled fiercely. He walked back to the blast door and unhooked the snare from the outcropping he'd snagged it on. Working as quickly as he could, he hogtied the woman, tying the snare wire around her ankles, then tugging it cruelly tight and tying it off around her wrists so that she was bent backwards. The wire sank into his skin and blood welled up around it.

He picked up Begley's legs again. Resume dragging her.

The fourteenth level was quiet and still as he moved back through it. Breathing heavily and sweating freely, he continued to shiver. It was cold and damp.

Behind him, he heard Begley moan suddenly. Then fall silent again.

Just as he turned the corner, bringing the ladder into view. He stopped in his tracks.

First, because of the spectacularly dead man lying on the floor. The smell of the blood was heavy in the air. His face had been almost shaved off by his little trap. And Darmity and the others had just left him there. No, he squinted at the body. They'd shot him in the head.

A wave of nausea swept Renicks. The emergency, the desperation of just half an hour before was gone. Evaporated. Might have been a fever, a paranoid imagining. And he'd killed this man in the most painful way possible.

As he stood there, shocked, there was a soft noise in the distance. A bell-like sound. Cheerful and dainty.

The elevator arriving.

For two staggering heartbeats he stood in dull surprise. Anger flooded him. *Now?* After everything. After all this, there was *more?*

He wanted to scream and throw things. He stood there paralyzed with anger.

Sucking in air, he closed his eyes for one second. *Move*, he told himself. Now was not the time to let everything swamp him, pull him under, drown him.

He looked at the ladder. His fishing line had been removed, naturally enough. He could hear commotion from further down the hall. Muted voices. The on-off rasp of a radio. He didn't think he would be able to pull Begley up the ladder quickly enough. They would be on them when he was still visible, grunting and struggling with her weight.

He pulled the Kimber from his pants and checked it. A round

in the chamber. One in the magazine.

Two.

A numb sort of frustration settled onto him. He spun in place. Looked down at the corpse. The assault rifle the man had been carrying — unfamiliar and bizarre-looking to Renicks, was still trapped under him. Renicks looked up the corridor. Whoever was coming was close. He stopped and asked himself, *are you really going to try to hold off whoever's coming?*

Better, he thought, to let them move past.

He left the rifle, and the corpse, where it was. Dragged Begley roughly to one side, leaving a clear path. Undid the belt around her waist and tore off the blood-soaked shirt. Put it back on. Reached down and touched Begley's blood, smeared it on his hands. Then on his face and neck. Then he lay down in it, composed himself, and closed his eyes.

He didn't try to stop breathing. It would just lead to a sudden choking gasp at exactly the wrong moment. And he didn't think it would stop anyone from shooting them in the head just to make sure. But he doubted anyone would bother to check.

It was a very long time before they came. It had seemed like they were so close, so near. Just around the corner. But after he went still and closed his eyes, hoping to blend into the gore. He concentrated on breathing. Shallow. Through the nose. The coppery smell of blood like acid, making him want to sneeze.

Then they came.

Aside from the tap of their boots on the floor, they were disturbingly silent. He heard them moving around him. Breathing. Fabric moving. Another sudden burst of radio static, a distorted voice, suddenly cut off. He heard them stop. The

scrape of a boot.

“Jesus.” A man’s voice. A hoarse whisper.

“Clusterfuck,” someone else said. A brisk, flat voice. Midwestern, Renicks thought. “Okay, we got another asshole here — holy fuck, what happened to this shithead? — and two civvies, it looks like.”

“She’s Secret Service,” a woman said.

“What?” A third man’s voice. Alarm pulsed through Renicks. He knew the voice. For a second its identity remained elusive, and he struggled to stay completely still. He heard someone moving rapidly towards him. Felt someone kneeling down next to him. Heard him breathing.

“It’s Jack Renicks.”

Renicks felt a hand on his throat as he opened his eyes. He realized he was smiling.

“Hello, Stan.”

Stan Waters stared down at him with tired, puffy eyes, dark circles making them look sunken. A thin, tall man with a round, shaved head. He had a boyish, soft face offset by dark, serious eyes.

It was Stan’s eyes that had always made people take him seriously.

For a second he smiled dumbly back at Renicks.

“For Christ sake’s Jack,” he said gently. “You were supposed to stay in the fucking Panic Room.”

Renicks laughed. It foamed out of him, easy, light. He nodded. Stan blinked dumbly, then surged back up to his feet.

“Captain — we need med evac!” he shouted. “Now!”

“Mr. Waters, our brief is — ”

“Your brief is under my fucking office for this operation, Captain, and I’ve had men with more troops under his command than you assassinated before, so send a runner up the fucking elevator shaft and get a fucking med evac done here *now*.”

Renicks closed his eyes again. Fell asleep almost instantly.

50.

Forty-five minutes after shooting Frank Darmity in the back of the head at close range, Jack Renicks sat in the back of an ambulance, handcuffed to a gurney.

He didn't feel so bad, all things considered. There had been shouting and running when the EMTs had seen all the blood, but they'd quickly figured out the true extent of his injuries. His ankle was swollen to about three times its normal size. His shoe had to be cut off. They'd wrapped it tight in an athletic bandage, shoved IV fluids into his elbow, checked his pupils with a tiny flashlight. And left him there.

Begley had been another matter altogether. She'd been choppered off the mountain minutes after being brought up from below. Renicks hadn't heard anything since, mainly because he'd been summarily arrested by some humorless military types, cuffed to the ambulance interior, and left there.

The mountain was swarming with people. And equipment. Helicopters touched down, disgorged more running people, and took off. Cars arrived by the minute. The crowd was a chaotic mix of civilians, blank-faced Intelligence types in suits, Army, Marines, and bureaucrats. Cell phones were everywhere, most of them failing to find a signal. Satellite phones sprouted in increasing numbers, some connected to mysterious square boxes that bristled with antennae. Troops arrived in neatly ordered squads and double-timed off into the surrounding wilderness.

Renicks sat in the ambulance, watching it all. Exhausted. He

lifted his arm and stared down at the handcuffs. They looked formidable: Bright steel, a long chain of thick links that gave him a few feet of movement. Tried to remember anything his uncle Richie had told him about restraints. Couldn't think of anything.

“Well, the Federal Government is here. It'll all be sorted out some time before the next century.”

Renicks looked up at Stan Waters, who looked, if it was possible, more exhausted than before. “Stan,” he said. “I think you just saved our lives.”

Stan looked down at his muddy boots. Pushed his hands into his pockets. “I spoke to Emily. She's fine, the kids are fine. Your parents got a scare when we flushed a goddamn rape van out of the shadows across the street from their house, but they're okay too. Agent Begley's in surgery,” he said. “Good people working on her. No prognosis yet. I'll try to keep you updated.”

Renicks nodded, a sudden wave of emotion swelling inside him. “She saved my life, too,” he said thickly. “There was a point where it stopped being her protecting me, you know. Stopped being a Secret Service Agent and the Acting President, and it was just two people trying to survive something. And she stuck by me.”

Stan nodded but kept looking at his shoes. Then he looked up and nodded at the handcuffs. “Sorry about that.”

Renicks waited a beat, settling himself. “I guess you're not here to take them off, then.”

Stan shrugged. “This is what the Intelligence Community calls in technical terms a fucking mess, Jack. You have to appreciate what just happened. Multiple members of the United States Secret Service were involved in a deep, long-term

conspiracy to seize control of the government for the express purpose of launching nuclear arms against their own country.” He hesitated, shaking his head and looking away. “And it appears ... it appears the President was ... involved.” He firmed up again, looking at Renicks sideways. “And the fucking Attorney General, and *who knows who else*. We’re pulling prints from some of those bodies down there, and a couple are in the servers. Mercenaries, wetwork types.” He shrugged again. “We got a couple of suicides in D.C. on this. Shit, Jack, we’re fucking poleaxed here. Nobody saw this, and this is *organized*. This is *deep* inside the government. I’m afraid the password for today is *trust fucking no one*.”

Renicks nodded. Intellectually, he knew this made sense. But he burned with anger. He’d spent the last few hours abandoned by everyone who was supposed to be protecting the country, protecting *him*, and now he was under *suspicion*. He swallowed his emotions with difficulty. “So you’re here to question me.”

“I’m here to *debrief* you,” Stan said, stepping forward. “You melodramatic asshole.” He pulled out a small ring of keys and stepped in close to work the handcuffs. “I spent months having drinks with Melodramatic Jack during your divorce. I don’t need to relive it now.”

Renicks didn’t smile, but the anger ebbed. “I *was* kind of depressed, wasn’t I?”

“Depressed? To this day whenever I hear the name *Emily* I start crying, uncontrollably.” Stan inserted the key, nodding. Paused and looked at Jack. “You’re not going to, like, try to overpower me and steal a helicopter or something, right?”

Renicks tried to stay angry, but burst out laughing. “Jesus, Stan, no.”

Stan nodded. "I ask because you have displayed heretofore unsuspected levels of kickassery. You sure you weren't recruited by the NSA or something under sealed orders?" He unlocked the handcuff from the gurney, slipped it onto his own wrist. He reached up and took the bag of IV fluids from the pole and held it up. "Come on."

Renicks stood up, wobbled for a moment as he got dizzy. "Where?"

"I'm not debriefing you, kiddo. You moved past my pay grade sometime around three hours ago. Hell, we've been waiting for someone at the *right* paygrade to show up so we could hand you over."

Renicks dropped from the ambulance to the muddy dirt with a little help. His legs felt weak and unreliable. The handcuffs seemed ridiculously heavy.

Stan led him through the maze of milling people and haphazardly parked vehicles, everything from domestic sedans with tinted windows to helicopters and army trucks painted in forest camouflage. People gave him plenty of second glances as he walked slowly, a bloody mess, handcuffed, with Stan holding his IV bag up over them. His ankle now seemed unbelievably tender. Every step hurt like hell, and he wondered how he he'd managed to run with it this bad. Adrenaline, he decided. He'd been living on adrenaline for hours.

Stan led him down the slope for a few hundred feet, to where the road curved up from down below. A black Town Car sat by itself. Three men in dark suits, white earbuds and sunglasses in place, watched them approach. When they were within ten feet, one of them stepped forward, holding out a hand.

“I’m sorry, sir, this area has been restricted.”

Stan nodded and fished in his pocket, pulling out what looked to Renicks like a passport. He flipped it open and handed it to the man.

The suit reached into his own pocket and produced a small black device that looked like a flash drive with a glowing red end. He swiped it across Stan’s ID and nodded, handing it back.

“All right, Mr. Waters. You’re expected.”

The three men stepped aside, suddenly interested in other things. Stan led Renicks towards the car and stopped just next to it. He handed the IV bag back and took out the keys.

“They’re jumpy, Jack,” he said conversationally as he unlocked the handcuffs. “So don’t do anything crazy.” He looked up at him from under his eyebrows. “Which is my way of saying, don’t do *anything*.” He slipped the cuffs off and pulled open the door. With a jerk of his head he indicated that Renicks should get in. “I’ll be right here unless they order me off, Jack.”

Renicks studied him for a second, then nodded and ducked into the back seat awkwardly, juggling the IV bag. Froze instantly.

Sitting there, jotting notes on a digital tablet with a stylus, was Vice President Mallory.

Renicks corrected himself. *President* Mallory.

“Dr. Jack Renicks,” she said without looking up. “Glad you’re alive.”

Renicks blinked stupidly. In person, she was even more striking. Her skin was dark and smooth, completely without blemish. She might have been forty or sixty. She was skinny, her hair was bigger than it looked on TV. She wore delicate half-

glasses on the tip of her nose which were secured to her by a pretty little silver chain. She smelled expensive. Jasmine. Her suit, he noted without trying, was Versace, though when she was on TV she almost always wore something from a chain store.

A dozen things occurred to him simultaneously. Before he could concentrate on any of them, Mallory began verbalizing the most important one.

“You’re wondering if I was in league with Charley,” she said, still jotting on her tablet. “I was just as shocked as anyone, though, between you and me, Charley had been acting strangely for months and a crisis was beginning to form around it.” She finally looked up. “No, I was not, Dr. Renicks. I realize you may not believe me. Still, I’d like you to do your best to give me the benefit of the doubt.” She smiled. It was a powerful expression, and he smiled back without thinking.

“You had never met Martin Amesley before today?”

He shook his head. He felt dopey.

“Marianne Begley?”

He shook his head again.

She nodded and glanced down at her tablet again. “Dr. Renicks, I believe you are an honest man, and I believe you had nothing to do with this conspiracy. Because if you had been part of it, a backup Designated Survivor, we would all likely be dead right now. This has been planned for years, and its actors came from long histories of service.” She looked up again. Her gaze was unblinking. Intelligent. Renicks was reminded of some of the tougher professors he’d had as a kid.

“These people — like Gerry Flanagan, like Martin Amesley — were trusted. Long-term. No one would have ever suspected they

were part of what is possibly the biggest conspiracy this country has ever witnessed. So you understand that there are still those who urge me to treat you as a hostile.”

Renicks nodded. He was falling asleep again.

The new President suddenly turned to face him, twisting herself around. “Mr. Renicks, have you ever heard the phrase *La Flava Regxo?*”

He nodded slowly. Remembered the tinny voices from the studio, Darmity taking command. “The Yellow King.”

The President nodded back, once. “So have I. And we don't think it refers to President Grant.” She tapped her tablet one last, authoritative time and set it on the seat between them. Closed her eyes and leaned back, lacing her fingers across her belly. She was, Renicks thought, the best damn looking sixty-year old woman he'd ever seen.

“Start at the beginning,” she said. “And tell me everything.”

Epilogue

Thirty seconds before stepping into the room, Renicks heard the noise. He paused in the hall just out of sight. Holding the huge mass of flowers, damp and fragrant against his cheek. The sheer volume of voices was intimidating.

The two men standing guard outside the room looked at him and kept looking. They were both nice-looking men of indeterminate age in lackluster suits that did not hide shoulder holsters well. They were both big without being huge. Strong, athletic men in the prime of health. The one nearest to Renicks produced a small hand-held device and manipulated with his thumb in a familiar way.

“Name, sir?”

Renicks cleared his throat. “Jack Renicks.”

There was, he was certain, a ripple of recognition between the two men. He had not seen his name in any news item. Had not been contacted or recognized or in any way indicated. According to every newspaper, web site, TV channel, or radio program he’d seen or heard, he’d been nowhere near the Secure Facility when there had been a “malfunction” of some equipment that had put the country on high alert for twenty-four hours. He was impressed at the thoroughness of the clean-up mission, in fact.

The focus of the story was Grant’s suicide and the investigation into how long his mental illness had been covered up. Renicks had little doubt Mallory and her advisors were more than willing to withstand the humiliation of being accused of hiding a President’s competence issues in exchange for being in

control of the story. The bombings were also in every story, painted as the crisis that had pushed Grant over the edge. Speculation was energetic and colorful, and investigatory committees were sprouting like mushrooms. Renicks had no doubt they would get nowhere near the truth unless all of their members held the highest clearances.

For proof of this theory, he looked to the Secure Facility — which he'd started thinking of in capital letters. The events he'd been part of there had been masterfully downgraded to a “systems failure” that had merely contributed to a paranoid President's breakdown. He was impressed. Mallory and her people had taken three days to convince everyone that this was an isolated, if horrifying, breach of national security, and were working hard to pin much of the blame on an unbalanced President who had allowed “uncleared” elements access to his immediate surroundings against the sound advice of his Secret Service.

The man moved his thumb smoothly on the tiny screen, then nodded. Glanced at Renicks, then back to the screen. “Okay,” he said. “Go on in.”

He steeled himself. Glanced down at himself to make sure he was presentable. He'd worn an old pair of jeans, broken in but still serviceable, a white button-down shirt, and a blue blazer. Had struggled with the choice of clothes like a kid going on a first date. Ironically trying very hard to land on some vaguely defined level of casual.

Concealing his limp, he forced himself into motion and moved forward, turning to his left and stepping between the expressionless men into the room.

At first, no one noticed him. The room appeared to be filled with women and flowers. Renicks watched the scene for a moment, wondering if it would be possible to flee.

Begley lay in the bed, looking small and child-like. She had her arms folded peacefully over her belly. A monitor was clipped to one finger, and an IV line ran from her left elbow to a pair of clear plastic bags hung above her. Renicks winced at how tired and drawn she was. But beautiful. And unbroken: She was laughing, her whole body involved, quaking with good humor. He wondered how many people would be able to go through what she had and still laugh like that. Open, without hesitation. As if they hadn't both just learned just how terrible the world was. Just how dark its secrets were.

Around her were four adult women and six small girls. The women were grouped loosely around the bed, finding floor space where they could amongst the dozens of huge floral arrangements. Renicks stared for a moment, struck by how much each of them resembled Begs. Her sisters were plumper than her, all older in small increments. They were rounder and less-defined, physically, but their faces had the same oval prettiness, the same clear intelligence. The same mocking eyes and glossy, dark hair, the same creamy tan skin. This was an entire family, he thought, that had never once gone to a dermatologist in high school, begging for an acne cure. He imagined if he used the word *blemish* they would frown at him and shake their heads, unfamiliar with the term.

The children were all tiny Begleys. They were playing an obscure game involving toilet paper and tunneling between their mothers' ankles on a continuous basis, laughing so furiously

Renicks thought it likely they were all hyperventilating. Their mothers were all talking with each other, a roundabout conversation that formed smaller sub-groups on the fly, mutating and shifting constantly.

He cleared his throat.

The conversation didn't stop, but attention shifted as all the adults in the room turned their heads to look at him. The combined energy of their attention felt like a physical force beating against him. For a second they continued to talk, the kids continued to scream and run.

"Jack!" Begley shouted.

The sisters all shouted *Jack!* in concert, and he was enveloped in perfume and fuss. The flowers were lifted from his arms and exclaimed over, transported to a heretofore unnoticed spot of clear space on the window sill. For a minute and a half he was closely *observed*, each sister reporting her findings in a loud, happy voice.

He's handsome!

So tall!

You'll have to take this man shopping, Annie. He's been single a long time, I can see.

These scratches! You poor thing.

As the reports were announced he was pushed through the crowd. He stepped over more than one child, all of whom grinned up at him mischievously, shyly. He finally found himself standing at the edge of the bed. Begley reached up her arm and placed her hand on his forearm. He leaned in awkwardly and gave her a peck on the cheek. Then stood there, grinning stupidly. For a few seconds he and Begs were the eye of a chatter

hurricane as her sisters continued to discuss him loudly.

Begs squeezed his arm. “Hey, guys,” she said in a surprisingly strong voice. “Give Jack and me a few minutes, okay?”

To his amazement, her sisters all nodded amicably and began the complex process of gathering their children. This took some time. Through it all they chattered on, sometimes addressing him, sometimes acting as if he’d left the room. He stood there silently, throwing smiles around. Couldn’t believe that he felt awkward. Being awkward with Marianne Begley should have been impossible.

When they were alone in the room, one of the two men guarding the door peeked his head in. Begley raised her arm towards him.

“Give us a little privacy, okay?”

He hesitated, glanced at Renicks, then nodded, pulling the door shut.

Renicks stood for a moment, looking at the door.

“Thanks for coming, Jack.”

He looked down at her and smiled. “I would have come sooner. First I was arrested, then you were unconscious.”

“Wanna see my scar? It’s *epic*. They told me they had to remove most of my insides and put them back like a puzzle. I’m going to win every scar contest for the rest of my life.”

“But you’re going to be okay?” He eyed the tubes running in and out of her, the monitors crowded around. The thinned, tired look of her.

“I’ll be fine, in time. The leg ... I’ll never run another marathon under five hours.”

He blinked. Realized he’d had no idea she ran. Wondered at

this, that there were things — huge swaths of information — that he did not know about Marianne Begley. It felt wrong. It felt like something that should be corrected.

“You run marathons?”

“Three so far.” She sighed. “I had an idea about running one on every continent, some day.”

He nodded, impressed. Another silence swelled up between them. He cleared his throat, suddenly filled with emotion, suddenly aware that this person he’d just met, who’d saved his life, who had come to feel like a part of his existence had been very close to dying.

“They done *debriefing* you yet?” he said.

She laughed. “I get the feeling debriefing is going to be my new career. You?”

He took a deep breath. “They’re forming a group. Don’t call it a committee. Blackline funding, top-level clearance, reports directly to The President. Officially won’t exist. They asked me to be a part of it. Sort of an advisor.” He nodded. “You too. We’re first-hand witnesses. We interacted with them.”

She looked at him. Steady. Tired, but *there*. Committed.

“We’re still in trouble, huh, Jack?” she said.

He reached down and took her hand. Smiled. “Yep. I think we are.”

THE END

About the Author

Jeff Somers began writing by court order as an attempt to steer his creative impulses away from engineering genetic grotesqueries. His feeble memory makes every day a joyous adventure of discovery and adventure even as it destroys personal relationships, and his weakness for adorable furry creatures leaves him with many cats. He has published nine novels, including the Avery Cates Series of noir-science fiction novels from Orbit Books, the darkly hilarious crime novel *Chum* from Tyrus Books, and most recently tales of blood magic and short cons in the Ustari Cycle, including the novel *We Are Not Good People* and the novellas *Fixer*, *The Stringer*, *Last Best Day*, and *The Boom Bands* from Pocket Gallery. He has published over forty short stories, including “Ringing the Changes,” which was selected for inclusion in *Best American Mystery Stories 2006*, “Sift, Almost Invisible, Through,” which appeared in the anthology *Crimes by Moonlight* edited by Charlaine Harris, “Three Cups of Tea,” which appeared in the anthology *Hanzai Japan*, “The Company I Keep,” which appeared in the anthology *Life is Short and Then You Die* edited by Kelley Armstrong, and “Zilla, 2015,” published in 2019 by the Lascaux Review. He also writes about books for BookBub and about the craft of writing for *Writer’s Digest*, which published his book on the craft of writing *Writing Without Rules* in 2018. He lives in Hoboken with his wife, The Duchess, and their cats. He considers pants to always be optional.

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