

FALLEN: A LEOPOLD BLAKE THRILLER  
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## Blake Family

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See also: Blake (disambiguation)

The Blake family (/ˈbleɪk/ blayk) is an American industrial, political and banking family that made one of the world's largest fortunes in the oil business during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with George D. Blake and his brother James D. Blake primarily through Standard Oil.<sup>[1]</sup> The family is also known for its long association with and financial interest in the New Manhattan Bank, now part of Blake Investments Inc. They are generally seen as one of the most powerful families in the history of the United States.

Most recently, since the death of Robert and Gisele Blake, the sole heir to the family's business interests, Leopold R. Blake, has taken the family's investments in a different direction and has disappeared from the political landscape to concentrate on developing business interests in the fields of modern biotechnology, clean energy, and charitable causes. <sup>[2]</sup> Although the circumstances following the deaths of Robert and Gisele Blake are still unclear, many believe...

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# FALLEN

## A Leopold Blake Thriller

**Sometimes, the only justice is the one you  
make for yourself...**

When a wanted terrorist voluntarily surrenders himself into FBI custody, expert criminology consultant Leopold Blake suddenly finds himself drawn into a deadly game of cat and mouse - and he's already several moves behind. As the shocking truth is uncovered, Blake realizes with chilling certainty that life as he knows it is over. An old enemy has returned after decades in hiding, and, for him, getting caught is only the beginning...

Left for dead and with nowhere left to turn, Leopold soon realizes the true meaning of loyalty - and what it means to lose everything he holds dear.

For Mary Jordan, police sergeant with the NYPD, danger has always been part of the job description. But with New York City on the brink of a major attack, and with Leopold out of commission, Jordan is forced to seek out new allies. Together, they will need to push their skills - and their lives - to the ultimate limit. But who can

she trust?

*Fallen* is the sixth book in the Number 1 Best Selling Leopold Blake Series of Private Investigator Thrillers, and can be read as a standalone novel.



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*A Leopold Blake Thriller.*

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# Chapter 1

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THE COLD WINDS picked up as two men stood outside the FBI headquarters in Washington, D.C. calculating the exit routes. The J. Edgar Hoover building loomed overhead, a monolithic structure of ugly gray concrete that took up an entire city block. The taller of the two men, an aging figure dressed in dark clothes and a long coat, felt the evening chill bite at his ears. He turned up his collar.

“It’s time, sir,” his companion said. Wrapped in a thick jacket, the shorter man’s chest looked out of proportion to the rest of his body. A woolen hat covered his shaved head, although if he felt the cold, he didn’t show it.

“Make sure everything is in place, Hawkes. Timing is crucial.”

“Yes, sir.”

The taller man nodded and walked away as a crowd of FBI office workers shuffled past. He followed, careful to keep his head down – more out of habit than necessity – and only stopped to gather his bearings when he reached the FBI building’s main entrance. With a brief glance in each direction, he followed the workers inside.

The foyer loomed above him, a cavern of

marble and steel, with a security checkpoint up front. The floors looked freshly polished and the smell of industrial cleaner still hung in the air. Ahead, the official seal of the FBI took pride of place on the far wall, with the words “Fidelity, Bravery, Integrity” stamped in foot-high letters across the tile.

Slipping one hand into his pocket, he approached the security booth. He clocked three armed security officers in the atrium, probably more waiting out of sight, and at least four cameras covering the room from several angles. The booth he approached was fitted with bulletproof glass.

“Identification, sir,” the booth attendant asked. She looked bored.

“No problem.” He pulled his hand out of his pocket. “My passport.” He slid it through the gap.

“What’s your business here today, sir?” She scanned the document through her computer, which emitted a soft *beep* as it searched for the relevant records.

“I’m here to see FBI Director Richard Ward.”

“You have an appointment?”

“No.” He smiled. “I’ll need you to make one for me.”

The attendant looked up and opened her mouth. Before she could reply, a piercing klaxon noise filled the lobby and everybody froze, looking for the source of the commotion. The man in the long coat tensed



as half a dozen armed security guards stormed through the checkpoint, weapons raised. They formed a tight semi-circle behind him, closing off his escape. One of them ordered him to get down on the floor.

Slowly, he raised his hands above his head and glanced down at the booth attendant. “You might want to hurry that along,” he said.

## Chapter 2

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THE TV STUDIO was stifling and they were already running late. A dozen cameras blinked and buzzed as Leopold Blake settled into the armchair and tried not to look directly into the spotlights aimed right at him.

Jimmy Cox, the host of *Up Late with Jimmy*, probably the third or fourth most popular talk show on basic cable, sat opposite. A team of makeup artists bustled around his head, dabbing his face with an assortment of powders. Leopold felt his skin prickle under the heat of the lamps and wondered how the hell he would make it another five minutes without sweating through his shirt.

The makeup team left and Jimmy leaned across the desk separating them. "Just follow my lead," he said, beaming a brilliant white smile. "Keep it casual. We'll break for commercial in ten. Bobby will count us in after the VC."

Leopold assumed he meant to the prerecorded video segment they were airing while the crew set up. He nodded politely and took a sip of water from a glass on Jimmy's desk. Predictably, it was lukewarm.

"We're on in five, four," the man Leopold assumed was Bobby announced, mouthing the final three numbers silently from behind

one of the teleprompters. He held up a thumb and the audience applauded.

“And we’re back,” said Jimmy, staring ahead into the cameras. “We’re here with Leopold Blake – stock market genius, businessman, philanthropist, and consultant to the NYPD.” He turned to look at Leopold. “And now we can add bestselling author to that list.” Another bright smile.

The audience applauded again. Leopold glanced up at the clock hanging above Jimmy’s head, mentally cursing the show’s producers for bumping his interview back by half an hour. It was five minutes to nine. He was going to be late.

“So, tell us about the new book,” Jimmy said, resting one elbow on the desk. “An autobiography of sorts, with some interesting twists. Are you excited to have the book hit the shelves and jump straight to number one?”

“Yes,” Leopold said, curtly.

Jimmy’s smile held. “Any big surprises we can look forward to reading about?”

“No.”

The smile faltered a little and he turned back to the cameras. “Folks, I can assure you he’s a little more talkative in his book.”

The audience laughed.

“I gotta say, Leopold,” Jimmy continued, “there aren’t many people whose life story could make for interesting reading. Tell us about your relationship with the NYPD –

how did that start?”

Leopold looked up at the clock again. “It all began a few years ago,” he said, in as relaxed a tone as he could manage. “I had some information they needed and I offered my help. It grew from that.”

“Okay, I get it. You don’t wanna give any spoilers. How about we talk a little about Mary Jordan instead?”

The audience clapped loudly. A few people whistled.

“What do you want to know?”

Jimmy pointed up at a giant video screen. “You two have been spotted out together a *lot* recently,” he said, as a collage of photographs appeared. “Judging by these photos, I’m guessing it’s more than just a professional relationship?”

“We’re partners. We work together, that’s it.”

The audience booed.

“All right, all right,” Jimmy said, palms up. “Let’s give the guy a break.” He turned back to his guest. “Let’s talk growing up. You inherited control of your parents’ company when you were a teenager. In the book, you mention how your parents’ deaths affected you. What was it like, having all that responsibility at such a young age?”

Leopold sighed and decided to throw the poor guy a bone. “Like you said, I do a lot of work with the police. I’m starting to think you missed your calling with questions like that.”

The audience erupted in a peal of laughter and Jimmy relaxed a little.

“Growing up was pretty hard work,” he continued. “But I’m pretty sure nobody’s going to feel too sorry for the guy inheriting a multi-billion-dollar business. So I’m not going to ask you all to get out your violins.”

More laughter. Even Jimmy chuckled a little.

“The response to the book has been completely unexpected. I’m blown away.” His eyes wandered back up to the clock. “But I can’t take all the credit, obviously. The brave men and women of this nation’s law enforcement agencies should be the ones getting the recognition here. That’s why all profits from the book are going straight to *Helping Heroes* – a charity set up to support police officers injured in the line of duty.”

The audience cheered.

“What a guy,” Jimmy said, reaching over to place a hand on Leopold’s shoulder. He waited for the applause to die down before continuing. “So let’s talk a little more about your experience in business. You’ve got stuff going on all over the world, right? What’s the most interesting thing you’re working on right now?”

Leopold couldn’t take his eyes off the clock. It was five past nine. He was definitely going to be late. The interview would have to wait.

“Anything you’d like to share with us?”

Jimmy asked again.

“I need to leave.”

“Sorry, what’s that?”

“I need to leave,” Leopold repeated. He stood up and pulled off the microphone clipped to his jacket lapel. “There’s somewhere I need to be.” He laid the tiny device on the desk.

“You’re serious?”

“Maybe you can edit this out later.”

Jimmy covered his own microphone with one hand. This is live television you freakin’ moron. Nobody walks out on Jimmy Cox.”

“There’s a first time for everything,” said Leopold, fastening his jacket.

Jimmy’s face turned red. “Sit. Down. Now.”

“Maybe you can cut to commercial a little early,” said Leopold, ignoring him. “My publicist will be more than happy to arrange a follow-up.”

“If you think...”

Leopold wasn’t listening. He had already made it halfway to the stage door.

## Chapter 3

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POLICE SERGEANT MARY Jordan drained her glass of white wine and checked her watch. Her stomach growled and she called the waiter over, ordering a breadbasket and some olives. The waiter nodded and scurried off, leaving her alone at the table.

The restaurant looked a little fancy, more so than Mary was used to, but the atmosphere was relaxed and comfortable. The soft clink of crystal wine glasses accompanied the background music and the quiet chatter from other diners filled the gaps between tracks. The tables were laid with silver cutlery and cloth napkins, but you had to ask for salt and pepper. And they didn't serve cheeseburgers.

The waiter came back with the bread and olives. He glanced at the empty chair opposite Mary. "Would you like to take a look at our menu?"

Mary buttered a slice of bread and didn't look up. "I'm expecting someone. This is fine for now."

"Something else to drink?"

"Another glass of wine."

"Same again?"

She sighed. "Bring me whatever; just don't take too long."

The waiter swept away toward the bar.

Mary chewed on an olive and nearly chipped a tooth on the pit. The night was not going as planned.

At the front of the restaurant, the heavy glass doors opened and a gust of chilly wind blew through. The streets outside were jammed full of yellow taxis, a typical New York City weekday night. A figure stepped inside wrapped up in a thick coat and blew into his hands. He looked up and locked eyes with Mary, offering an apologetic smile. Unbuttoning his coat, he walked up to Mary's table and sat down in the empty chair.

"You're late, Leopold. Again," she said.

"I got held up."

"You're always *held up*." She held his gaze and forced herself to keep her anger in check. "This whole thing was your idea."

"I know, I know," he said. "It couldn't be helped. Is he here?"

"The contact? Yeah, he was here. After waiting around fifteen minutes, he got spooked and left."

"Why didn't you stop him?"

"You don't think I tried? There's only so far a little black dress can go, especially when you're talking corporate espionage."

"Don't be so dramatic."

Mary clenched her teeth. "Look, it took me everything I had to convince him just to meet with us, and you can't even show up on time."

Leopold sighed and ran his hands through his hair. "We'll just have to get him back



again, won't we?"

"You don't understand. You should have seen his face. The guy was terrified. He's not going to be talking to us again anytime soon."

"What about the other leads?"

"Dead end. If anyone knows what happened, they aren't coming forward."

"I need answers."

"Yeah, you're not the only one," she said. "But just remember, this all happened under your roof."

"Don't remind me."

The waiter returned with a fresh glass of wine and set it down next to Mary. He looked over at Leopold.

"I'll have a whisky," Leopold said. "Aberlour, if you've got it. No ice."

"Yes, sir." He left.

"So, what's the plan?" Mary said. "Any genius ideas?"

"Constantly. Though, in this case, I think we might have reached the end of the road. I can maybe pull the court records, but seeing as it all went through the French system..." He trailed off. "People can't just force the sale of a company without bending some rules. There's got to be something we're missing."

"Something *you're* missing," said Mary. "As far as I'm concerned, you're on your own. This is your mess, not mine. Why don't you get your legal team to look into it? You don't need me. Or the NYPD."

"There's somebody else we can ask with the

right connections. She might be able to help.”

“Yeah, who’s that?”

“You know who I mean.”

Mary flinched. “Absolutely not. I told you already, that’s out of the question.”

“You’re giving up?”

“I’m learning where to draw the line. Finally.” She took a gulp of wine. “And I’ve already had too much to drink.” She stood up.

“You’re already dressed for dinner. Seems a shame to waste a good outfit.”

“It’s already been wasted. Along with the whole evening.” She picked up her clutch bag and slung it over her shoulder, draping her jacket over her arm. “Enjoy your drink. I’m going home.”

Leopold turned in his seat as she swept past. “Look, I’m sorry. Really. For everything.”

Mary paused to look back at him. “It’s too late for that,” she said, before slipping on her coat and heading out the door.

## Chapter 4

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FBI DIRECTOR RICHARD Ward hadn't enjoyed a full night's sleep for nearly a month. His son had been born at two a.m. on a Tuesday morning almost four weeks ago, and fatherhood was already taking its toll. This morning had been no different to the twenty-five that had preceded it – being forced out of bed at four a.m. by a screaming baby had become business as usual – but the lines under the director's eyes were beginning to cause him some concern. Too bad the FBI didn't allow employees to wear sunglasses in the workplace.

He was wearing a tailored suit, a little crumpled from nine hours behind his desk, partnered with a white shirt and red tie. He had black skin, short dark hair going gray around the temples and coarse stubble on his chin from forgetting to shave the night before.

“You know, my wife's going to kill me,” Ward said, as the elevator doors slid open. “I said I'd be home three hours ago.”

Special Agent Jack Marshall offered a curt nod in response. He looked like the typical agent type, slick and conservative. “I'm sure she'll understand, sir.”

“I wouldn't count on it.” The director

stepped inside and punched in his access code. Marshall sidled up next to him as the doors closed with a disconcerting rattle. "You know, they've been talking about renovating for years," Ward said. "God knows where they'll find the budget. We've got pieces of goddamn wall falling off and all they can talk about is cutbacks."

"Yes, sir," said Marshall, as the elevator began its descent.

"So, you gonna tell me what this is all about? Burke was keeping tight-lipped on the phone."

"Protocol, sir."

"Right. In-person only, is that it?"

"Yes, sir."

"And I take it you're not the person to tell me?"

"Correct, sir."

"Well, that's bureaucracy for you," said Ward. "Give me a field assignment any day; beats the hell out of department meetings and paperwork."

"Yes, sir."

"Talkative guy, aren't you?"

Marshall nodded. "We're here, sir."

The elevator rumbled to a standstill and the doors opened, revealing the portly outline of Deputy Director of the FBI Franklin Burke. He wore an immaculate suit, his FBI service medals pinned to the lapels. And he didn't look happy.

"Thank you for coming, Director," Burke

said. "I apologize for the cloak-and-dagger approach, but I think you'll agree it was necessary."

"I might, if someone would tell me what the hell is going on," Ward replied, stepping out into the corridor. "It's not every day I get summoned down to the holding rooms."

Burke shook his head. "It's not every day we have to deal with a situation like this. Follow me, sir." He turned and headed off down the corridor. "We'll just get you signed in and I'll brief you myself."

Ward nodded and kept pace, with Marshall taking up the rear. At the end of the hallway, Burke swiped his security ID and pushed through a set of heavy double doors, leading through to a windowless reception area. A pair of armed agents stood guard behind the visitors' desk. They beckoned the three over as they entered.

"Just press your thumb down here, sir," Marshall said, pointing at the fingerprint reader mounted into the console.

"I know the drill," said Ward. He obliged and one of the agents nodded as the computer verified his identify. Burke and Marshall followed suit.

After signing in, the deputy director led them through to a stuffy conference room and shut the door. A small projector was mounted to the ceiling, hooked up to an ancient computer bolted onto the desk. "Again, my apologies for keeping you late,

director.”

“Don’t mention it.” Ward sat down. “So, what’s going on?”

Marshall took a seat opposite.

“There was an incident earlier this evening,” Burke continued. “Caught us on our asses. A man walked into the main lobby at around six p.m., apparently having trailed in behind a group of night shift workers, and set off pretty much every alarm system we’ve got.”

“He pulled a gun?” Ward asked.

“No. Never even made a move. Simply breezed up to one of the booths and handed over his passport. We ran the ID and it triggered an automatic lockdown.”

“Why the hell is this the first I’m hearing of it?”

Burke shifted in his seat. “Obviously, we get a lot of crackpots. We had to run due diligence. Turns out this guy’s legit. A bona fide person of interest just strolls on up to the FBI headquarters and turns himself over – that’s not something we see too often. Says he came to speak with you personally, sir”

“Who is he?”

“He’s gone by several aliases: George Carlill, Thomas Harding, and Raymond Finch, to name a few. He was active two decades ago, but nothing recent.”

“The names ring a bell,” Ward said. “But this is all a little before my time. Why does he want to talk to me?”

“He wouldn’t say. Didn’t speak one word

after we took him into custody.”

“No request for a lawyer?”

“I think he knows he wouldn’t get one, sir.”

Ward chewed his bottom lip. “What’s our interest in this guy? Do we have a sheet?”

“Probably better we show you, sir.” Burke turned to Marshall. “Load it up.”

The special agent nodded and turned on the projector. After a few seconds of flickering, the desktop came into view and Marshall signed in to the FBI database. “These records go back about twenty years,” he said, scrolling through a list of text and image files. “The security systems flagged about two dozen case reports and profiles. The most interesting of which is this.” He pulled the document up and it filled the screen.

“Holy shit,” Ward said, a little louder than he intended.

“My exact words when I saw this, sir,” Burke replied. “We checked fingerprints, DNA, and dental records and confirmed the match. He’s had reconstructive surgery on his face over the years, but you can’t fool the DNA results.”

“He’s a ghost,” Marshall said, scrolling through the document. “Hit the Most Wanted List early in his career, then disappeared from the radar for over fifteen years. Intelligence figured he’d either been killed or he retired.”

“In this line of work, they’re one and the same,” said Ward. “Shit, how the hell did we

let this guy fall through the cracks? If this is even close to accurate,” he pointed at the screen, “this man is responsible for *at least* eighteen separate acts of terrorism on foreign and domestic soil. And who knows how many others he could have helped orchestrate. Is the CIA in on this?”

“No, sir.” Burke shook his head. “After we verified his identity, you were the first person we informed.”

“Good. Keep them out of the loop for as long as you can. As long as he’s here in the US, his ass is ours. I intend to keep it that way.”

“Yes, sir. How do you want us to handle it?”

“Set up a ring fence and get the attorney general on our side – he can smooth things over with The President if we need to bring this up. Issue a bulletin to CIA Director Franklin, but make sure it gets waylaid. I don’t want this coming back to bite us in the ass, so make it look like a computer glitch.”

“No problem, sir,” said Burke. “Marshall, get this thing rolling.”

“Yes, sir.” Marshall got up and left the room.

“Where are you holding him?” Ward asked, as the special agent closed the door.

“Level Zero. The area’s on full lockdown. Authorized access only.”

“Good. Let’s get down there and find out what he’s got to say for himself. I just need to



make a quick phone call.”

“Sir?”

“My wife. It looks like I’m not going to make it home tonight after all.”

## Chapter 5

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LEVEL ZERO WAS the FBI's dirty little secret. A legal loophole allowed for most terrorist suspects to be treated as enemy combatants – meaning the bureau's laissez-faire approach to habeas corpus went largely overlooked – and Level Zero was where domestic suspects were held prior to a formal trial. If they ever got one.

Burke led Director Ward through to the viewing room, a secured area roughly the size of a squash court but with lower ceilings. A small team of agents manned the room and the walls were lined with banks of oversized computer monitors. One of the agents got up to greet the pair as they entered.

“Welcome to the dungeon, sir.” She stood a little under six feet tall, dressed in a conservative suit, her blonde hair tied back in a ponytail. Ward wasn't sure which one of them she was speaking to.

“This is Special Agent Carter,” Burke said. “She runs the ops team down here. Been keeping our guy under a microscope since he came in. Anything to report?”

“Vitals are normal,” she replied. “Pulse rate never goes above sixty-five beats per minute. He hasn't said a word since you brought him down. He just sits there looking up into the

camera. A little freaky, if you ask me.”

“Show me,” Ward said.

Carter waved the two men over to her workstation and unlocked the console. “Most of Level Zero is locked down from surveillance, for obvious reasons,” she said. “But we still have cameras in the cells and holding areas, and we can access them from up here.” The monitor lit up and displayed a black and white video image. “Here’s your man.”

Ward blinked as his eyes adjusted to the glare. The monitor showed the interior of one of the cells, a small eight-by-ten room with a sink, toilet, and bed bolted to the floor. The suspect sat serenely on the edge of the mattress, looking up at the camera. Thanks to the high-resolution lens, Ward could make out his features clearly: graying hair, a chiseled jaw and faint scars around the neck and eyes. His frame was trim and muscular, and he wore suit pants and a white shirt unbuttoned at the collar and cuffs. All things considered, the man looked perfectly at home. It was unnerving.

“You got a line to him?” Ward asked.

“Sure,” said Carter. “Just speak into this. You’ll be able to hear his responses through the speakers on the wall.” She pointed toward a slim microphone mounted on the desk. “Just press the red button when you’re ready.”

“Let’s see what this guy has to say.” He leaned in to the microphone and activated it.

“This is Director Richard Ward. To whom am I speaking?”

Inside the cell, the man smiled and stood up, stepping closer to the camera. “Ah, Director Ward,” he said, his voice coming through loud and clear. “So kind of you to drop by. I thought you might have been delayed.”

“I was told you wanted to speak with me. Well, you’ve got my attention. What do you want?”

“We’ll get to that, don’t worry. I’m sure your wife and son are desperate to have you home.” His words cut through the air like a knife.

Ward felt his stomach clench. “I feel like this conversation is going to be a little one sided,” he said. “You know all about me, but I know nothing about you. Who are you? Why are you here?”

“You seem to be working under the assumption that you get to ask the questions,” the man replied. “I asked to speak with you because we both know how this works – you’re the only person here who can get things done. So why don’t you settle down and pay attention?”

“I’m listening,” Ward said. “But if I don’t hear something that makes this little trip worthwhile, I’ve got a team of agents who are just dying to have a chat. Like you said, I know exactly how this works.”

The man smiled and tilted his head. “In

1997 the FBI and the CIA sanctioned thirteen operations designed to disrupt Middle Eastern oil interests in the US. Over the course of twelve months, more than fifteen agents were killed in the line of duty. The details of the campaigns were never reported and the deaths were blamed on terrorist cells. In truth, after the operations failed, the agents were stranded undercover and left to die. Their families never knew what happened.”

“How the hell...?”

“In 2000, the US government accepted funds from liberation movements in Angola and Sierra Leone. The money came straight from the diamond cartels. Naturally, the cash was used to fund weapons development. Many of those weapons ended up in Iraq and Iran – used to help the natives fight and kill each other. Clearing a path for later, so to speak.”

“Where are you getting this information?”

“In the summer of 2004, the FBI traced a human trafficking syndicate down in Florida. You used the immigrants as moles for your own ends, under threat of deportation. For those who survived, you sent them home anyway. Most likely to face imprisonment or execution for trying to flee.”

Ward gripped the microphone a little tighter. “So, this is extortion? You want something from me?”

The man laughed. “No, Mr. Ward. I’m merely giving you an idea of who you’re

dealing with.”

“What do you want?” Ward asked again.

“I’m here to warn you.”

“Warn me?”

He stepped closer to the camera. “All of you. But that will have to wait – the person I need to speak to isn’t here yet.”

“Then why ask for me?”

“Because you can bring him to me. And you can make him listen.”

Ward gritted his teeth. “Who are we talking about?”

“That question I *will* answer,” the man said. “There’s only one person who can understand the implications of what I’ve got to say. I need you to find him and get him here.” He paused. “I need you to bring me Leopold Blake.”

## Chapter 6

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THE MEAL HAD been excellent. An appetizer of grilled scallops with truffle oil followed by pork belly and Dauphinoise potatoes had left Leopold feeling tired and sated. The bottle of Chablis hadn't helped with his energy levels, either. Now close to eleven p.m., and with his solitary dinner settling in his stomach, Leopold rode the elevator up to his penthouse apartment and considered whether or not he should finish the night with a glass of brandy.

The elevator doors opened up into his hallway and he stepped out, hanging his coat up on the stand as he made his way toward the kitchen. As usual, the cavernous apartment resembled a bomb site – papers and files stacked knee-high on the floor, books everywhere – but at least it was clean. Leopold passed by the study and the guest bedrooms, neither of which he used, and was about to step through into the living room when the sound of music stopped him in his tracks. The melodies were muted, but the unmistakable riffs of Miles Davis' "Bye Bye Blackbird" were coming from somewhere in the house.

Leopold whipped around. To his left stood a tall bookshelf, just next to an empty wall

where the faint outlines of long-removed photograph frames were still visible. Since the accident that claimed his parents' lives, Leopold had taken down most of the old family portraits and had given up trying to find suitable replacements some time ago. Behind the wall, the music seemed to get louder and Leopold leaned in and knocked on the plaster.

The music stopped.

"Whatever you're doing, keep the noise down," he called out.

No response.

"Don't make me come in there."

The music started up again. Leopold sighed and reached up toward a light fixture hanging overhead. He located the hidden switch and pressed it. "You know I hate this damn thing."

A metallic *clunk* sounded and the bookcase shuddered. Leopold grabbed hold of a shelf and pulled, swinging the unit outward on its hinges. Behind, a steel door with a keypad mounted onto the metal stared out at him. He punched in the code and the door slid open.

"It's getting late, Jerome," he said, as the interior came into view. "And this is a panic room, not a storage closet."

Jerome stood in the center of the floor, a selection of handguns laid out on a steel table in front of him in several pieces. Despite the late hour, he wore his usual uniform: a well-tailored Armani suit, the fabric almost as dark as his coal-black skin, with a white shirt and



silk tie.

“You only cleaned those a few days ago,” Leopold said, stepping inside. The panic room was large enough for six or seven people to stand comfortably side by side, but the harsh fluorescent lights and flat panel monitors mounted into the walls made it look a lot smaller.

“It gives me something to do,” Jerome said, picking up the guide rod from a Glock 30. “Besides, it’s my job to make sure these things work when they need to.”

The stereo system switched to the next track.

“We should really work on getting the soundproofing fixed in here,” said Leopold. “It hasn’t been the same since they put in the new systems.”

“I’m a bodyguard, not a plasterer.”

“More’s the pity.”

“Dinner didn’t go well, I take it?” Jerome said. He wiped the rod down with a cloth.

“The dinner part was fine,” said Leopold. “It was the lack of company that bothered me.”

“Your contact didn’t show?”

“He was there. I wasn’t. He bolted.”

“I’m betting Sergeant Jordan wasn’t impressed.”

“Is she ever?”

“Point taken.” Jerome finished with the guiding rod and picked up the slide. “So what’s the next move?”

“We’ll need to go through the French legal system. Maybe we’ll get lucky.”

“I meant; what’s the next move with Sergeant Jordan?”

Leopold frowned. “There is no ‘next move.’ She’s pissed off, but she’ll get over it. I got there a little late; it’s no big deal. Not with everything else going on.”

“Maybe she doesn’t see it that way.”

“Like you said; you’re a bodyguard. You’re not a shrink.”

Jerome shrugged. “Suit yourself.” He finished with the Glock’s slide and placed it back on the table. He started putting the gun back together. “But you know I’m right.”

Leopold opened his mouth to reply, but found himself cut off by his cell phone ringing. He pulled out the handset and checked the incoming number.

“You going to get that?” Jerome asked.

“It’s a blocked number. And it’s getting late.”

“Only a handful of people know how to get hold of you on that thing. It might be important.”

“More important than a decent night’s sleep?”

“They’ll only call back. Better get it over with.”

Leopold hit the “accept” button and turned on the phone’s speaker. “Whoever this is, it’s late.”

The voice on the other end crackled a little.

“Blake, this is Ward.”

“Director Ward? This isn’t a good time.”

“I couldn’t agree more. I need your help.”

“What else is new?”

“There’s something going on, and you need to be here.”

“Not my problem,” said Leopold. “Like I said, I’m busy.”

“We’ve got a suspect in custody. Level Zero. Asked for you by name.”

Leopold looked up at Jerome. The bodyguard nodded.

“This isn’t a request,” said Ward. “I’ve sent a couple of agents from the field office. Please go with them.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I wish I were. I don’t have time to explain everything now. We’ll talk more when you’re *en route*.” Ward hung up.

“I wish he’d stop doing that,” Leopold said, turning off the phone.

“What choice do you have?” said Jerome. “When the director of the FBI calls, you go find out what he wants.”

“You know, for someone who’s supposed to keep me out of trouble, you seem to enjoy getting me into difficult situations.”

“As I said before; it gives me something to do.” He smiled.

A red light flashed on the computer console and Leopold looked up at the monitors. A video image flickered into life, a live feed from the elevator camera. It showed

two men, dressed in dark suits, riding the car up toward the penthouse.

Jerome finished reassembling his Glock.  
“Looks like our ride is here.”

## Chapter 7

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LEOPOLD PUNCHED IN the security code and the elevator alarm system clicked off. The two men held up their ID cards as the heavy doors slid open, identifying them as Special Agents Smith and Coleman of the New York City FBI field office. Both wore ugly black suits with the usual white shirts and ties, their handguns holstered to their ribs. If not for the slight difference in height, they could have passed for identical twins. The two men introduced themselves with a cursory nod before slipping their IDs back into their jackets.

“We need you to come with us, sir,” Coleman said.

“I gathered that,” said Leopold. “I don’t suppose we have much of a choice?”

Coleman didn’t reply.

“Relax. We’re coming.” He nodded to Jerome. “Set the motion sensors. This might be a good time to test out the remote systems.”

Jerome consulted his cell phone. “Done. I’ve linked everything to our handsets. Anything goes wrong, we’ll know about it.”

“Will this take long?” Leopold addressed Coleman.

“No more than necessary, sir.”

“Then we’d better get started. Lead the way, gentlemen.”

Coleman moved to the side as Leopold and Jerome stepped into the elevator. Smith hit the button for the lobby and the car began its descent.

A black GMC Yukon SUV was waiting for them at street level, parked on the curb just outside the main doors, drawing considerable attention from late-night revelers making their way between nightclubs. Coleman ignored them and opened up the back doors, waving the pair inside, before settling into the driver’s seat. Smith rode shotgun while Coleman started the engine.

“So, anyone going to tell us what this is all about?” Leopold said, as they pulled out onto the main road. “Not that I don’t enjoy surprises, but it might help me prepare.”

“Our orders are to escort you to Teterboro, sir,” Coleman said, not taking his eyes off the road. “A jet is waiting for you.”

“We’re flying into D.C., right?”

“The director will brief you via video phone once we embark.”

Leopold sighed. “Look, this is not exactly how I planned to spend my night, so how about you guys loosen up a little and tell me what the hell is going on?”

“Our orders are to escort you to Teterboro, sir,” Coleman repeated.

“Yes, you said that already. Maybe your friend can fill in the details?”

Smith turned in his seat. "Listen, you know how this works. Just sit back and relax. And tell your friend to keep that Glock holstered." He glanced at Jerome.

"So long as you don't give him a reason to use it, I'm sure there won't be a problem," said Leopold.

"The orders didn't say anything about bringing the both of you, just keep that in mind." He kept his eyes fixed on the bodyguard. "I've got no issues leaving you on the side of the road."

"He's with me," Leopold said. "You want to drag me across state lines, he's coming too."

"Don't misunderstand. You don't get to give the orders here."

"I beg to differ. You want my help? Learn to play nice, or you can drop us both off here."

Smith gritted his teeth but didn't reply. He turned to face front and muttered something to Coleman.

"Don't feel bad," said Leopold, sitting back. "Babysitting duty can be a rough deal. But I'm sure you'll do just fine." He looked over at Jerome and smiled. "We'll try to behave, I promise."

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Teterboro airport was a small operation, a little over eighty-seven acres, and a popular choice for non-commercial flights out of

New Jersey. Its location, just a few miles from central Manhattan, made it the perfect choice for private charters – a feature that made it popular with both sides of the law.

As midnight rolled by, Agent Coleman pulled the black SUV over at the airport security gates and flashed his badge, prompting the bored-looking attendant to wave them through after a brief glance at his computer screen. Coleman took the service route around the airfield and headed for one of the private hangars at the southern corner of the site, about half a mile from the main terminal. The floodlit road looked deserted, save for the occasional glimpse of local wildlife, and within a few minutes they had arrived at their destination. Coleman rolled the Yukon to a standstill and killed the engine.

“We’re here,” he said. “The jet should be ready. Follow me.”

The wind had picked up considerably, and the cold winter chill filled Leopold’s lungs as he climbed out of the car and drew a breath. Above, the night sky was a glassy black, any trace of starlight obscured by the muddy orange glow of Manhattan and Newark on the horizon.

Coleman led the way toward the hangar, a steel structure roughly the size of a barn, just a short walk from their parking spot. The lights were on inside and the giant doors had been opened wide, spilling fluorescent light out onto the empty asphalt.



Inside, a blue and white Gulfstream G280 jet was being prepped for takeoff. A team of engineers in orange vests kept themselves busy with the preflight checks; some unhooked power cables and fuel lines, others ran through safety checks on the engines, fuselage, and landing gear. As they dispersed, the aircraft door opened and a tall man dressed in a blue pilot's uniform appeared, pausing for a moment in the doorway before stepping down to ground level.

The two FBI agents held up their ID as they drew closer, and the captain nodded a silent approval.

"Welcome, gentlemen," he said. "Are the passengers ready?" He aimed the question at Agent Coleman.

"Good to go," he replied.

"Then I can take it from here."

Coleman thanked him. "Director Ward will dial in once you're seated," he said, turning to Leopold. "Captain Gray will look after you while you're in the air. We'll keep track from here."

"Very kind of you," said Leopold.

"They're all yours, Captain," Coleman said, turning to leave.

"Fly safe," Smith said, though Leopold suspected he didn't mean it. The two agents headed back to the SUV and out of sight.

"So, Captain Gray," said Leopold. "I assume you know where we're headed?"

"Washington D.C. We should touch down a

little over an hour from takeoff, wind permitting.”

“And I suppose you have no idea where we’re going once we land?”

“You suppose right.” He smiled. “My job is to get you to Reagan National. Then you’re someone else’s problem, I’m afraid.”

Leopold glanced at Jerome. “How encouraging.”

The bodyguard shrugged.

“Follow me, please gentlemen.” Gray set off toward the Gulfstream. “We’re on a tight schedule tonight. We take off in fifteen.”

“Nice ride,” said Leopold, following the captain up the steps and into the main cabin. “Though I prefer the G650 myself.”

“As do I,” said Gray. “But the FBI is sticking to its budget these days. I hope you can learn to slum it a little.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“In the meantime, I’d like to introduce my copilot.” He turned toward the cockpit where a younger man sat poring over a preflight checklist. “This is Frank Griffiths; been with me on the last dozen flights.”

“Welcome aboard.” Frank didn’t look up from his clipboard.

“The man takes his job a little too seriously,” Gray said, apologetically. “Anyway, I need to check in with the tower. Gentlemen.”

Gray settled himself into the cockpit and drew the curtain closed behind him, leaving

Leopold and Jerome to get comfortable in the cabin. The Gulfstream was roughly the length of a train car, but instead of cheap plastic seating a half-dozen leather armchairs took up most of the floor space. Each had a small table, as well as an adjustable television screen mounted into one of the arm rests, and looked as though they could recline all the way back.

A plush sofa took up most of the farthest corner, complete with a fully stocked dry bar and a mahogany coffee table with a selection of magazines spread out on top. Some of the leather looked a little worn, but, overall, the Gulfstream seemed to be in pretty good condition.

“Before you say or do anything stupid,” said Jerome, taking a seat on the sofa, “just remember these guys are our ride home. Try not to piss them off too much.”

“Don’t worry. Ward is one of the good guys.” He settled in to one of the armchairs and let out a deep sigh. “Let’s just hope he’s in a good mood, otherwise this might take all night.”

“I wouldn’t count on sleeping any time soon, if I were you.”

Leopold grunted and folded his arms, sinking deeper into the soft leather. A deep rumbling noise from the twin Honeywell engines mounted to the wings signaled it was time to start moving, and the aircraft rolled slowly toward the open hangar doors. As they

taxied out onto the asphalt, Captain Gray pulled back the curtain and addressed his passengers from his chair.

“I never did like speaking over the intercom,” he said. “Never know whether the damn thing’s switched on. Anyway, we’ll be taking off momentarily. We’re due to arrive at Reagan National in a little over one hour, and we’ll be cruising at an altitude of forty-three thousand feet. As I’m sure you’re aware, the weather is a little choppy, so expect some turbulence.” He paused. “Help yourselves to refreshments, FBI Director Ward is dialing in to the video system right now, the call should come through in a moment. You’ll see the images up on the screen there.” He pointed to the back of the cabin to a large television monitor anchored to the wall opposite Jerome’s sofa. “There’s a camera built in, so you’ll both be able to see each other. Any questions?”

Leopold shook his head. “Just try not to drop us out of the sky and we’ll get along just fine.” He smiled and stood up, making his way over to join Jerome on the sofa. “You can patch the director through when you’re ready.”

“We’ve got ten minutes until takeoff. I’ll need you back in your seats and buckled up before then.”

“You got it.” Leopold offered a mock salute.

“I’ll put the call through now.” Gray

disappeared back behind the curtain.

A few seconds later, the video monitor flickered into life with a burst of static from the speakers, revealing the weathered face of FBI Director Richard Ward. Dark circles under his eyes and more gray hairs than Leopold remembered could only mean one thing.

“Good evening, Director,” said Leopold. “It’s good to see you again. It’s been a while. Fatherhood treating you well?”

Ward laughed. “Is it really that obvious?”

“Crow’s feet never lie, I’m afraid. I would have sent my congratulations, but...”

“I know, I know, I should have said something, but the whole pregnancy was a whirlwind, especially toward the end. I guess I had other things on my mind. *Mea culpa*. Things have been kinda crazy over here.”

“Relax. I’ll make sure you get a card or a bunch of flowers or something. Though I suspect you’d prefer a night alone in a hotel room somewhere?”

“Two for two.”

Leopold grinned, leaning back in his seat. “You never know, maybe the bureau will give you some time off. Stranger things have happened.”

Ward shrugged. “Unfortunately, chances are slim. Comes with the territory. Speaking of which, I’m sure you’re wondering why you’re here.”

“The thought had crossed my mind. You

mentioned Level Zero. Let me guess; one of your guests isn't playing ball?"

"You could say that." Ward leaned in closer to the camera. "Earlier this evening, we took a suspect into custody after he set off just about every alarm system we've got. The guy just walked right into FBI headquarters and let himself get taken."

"Was he armed?"

"No. Nothing on him other than the clothes on his back and a forged passport."

"What intel have you got on him?"

"We've got a dozen files on at least five different aliases, hundreds of pages, but nothing solid on who he is or where he's from. No real name, no fingerprints, no DNA. Nothing. The strangest thing is that he seems to know all about us. He had knowledge of FBI and CIA operations going back years – some even I didn't know about."

Leopold sat up a little straighter. "Okay, you got my attention. What does he want?"

"That's just the thing," said Ward, taking a deep breath. "He wants you."

The noise from the jet's engines got a little louder and the captain pulled back the curtain. "Gentlemen, two minutes until takeoff. Make it quick." He disappeared back into the cockpit.

"We'd better wrap this up," said Ward.

"Agreed," Leopold said. "Email through any info you've got. If this guy knows me, he's got the advantage. I'd like to level the

playing field a little.”

“I’ll send through the files while you’re in the air. Once you land in D.C. there’ll be a car waiting. In the meantime, make sure you’re ready – I’ve got a feeling this one’s going to be messy.”

“Just like old times.”

“Let’s hope not. I’m getting too old for this.”

“Aren’t we all?”

“Too true.” The director shook his head. “Listen, have a safe flight and I’ll see you when you get here. I’ll have those files sent over – most of it’s classified, but I’ll see how much we can let you have. Just don’t expect any names, dates, or photographs.”

Leopold arched an eyebrow. “How very kind.”

“It’s the best I can do.”

“I’ll manage.”

“I’ll see you soon, Blake.” Ward nodded a goodbye and signed off. The video screen filled with static.

Jerome hit the remote and turned the monitor off. “Not exactly what I expected,” he said. “How much do you think he’s holding back?”

“He’s not going to let anything slip before we get there,” said Leopold. “Ward doesn’t want me knowing any more than I absolutely need to. He’ll let the suspect do the talking.”

“Not exactly a team player.”

“It all depends what team you’re on.” The noise from the jet engines reached a crescendo. Leopold stood up and returned to his chair, buckling up. “Let’s go find out who we’re playing for, shall we?”



## Chapter 8

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MARY LAY IN bed, staring at the ceiling. Her cramped one-bedroom NYC apartment was on the sixth floor of one of the older blocks in Greenwich Village and the noises from street level were still loud enough to keep her awake despite the thick windows. Although that would be an easy excuse for tonight's bout of insomnia, Mary knew it wasn't the traffic preventing her from getting some shuteye. It was something else – something much more irritating.

She sat up and reached for her cell phone, pawing at the nightstand in an attempt to locate it in the dark. Almost knocking over a lamp, she eventually found it buried underneath a stack of old paperwork. She held the handset up and unlocked the screen, squinting as the light hit her eyes.

*What the hell am I doing?* The familiar warnings echoed inside her head.

With a resigned sigh, Mary flipped through her contacts and found Leopold's number, her finger hovering over the button. She thought back to their botched meeting earlier in the evening – after months of research, countless hours of tracking down people willing to help, Leopold had blown it.

*Asshole.*

Mary tossed the phone onto the bed sheets and flopped back onto her pillow, mentally cursing herself for letting herself get worked up. With more than fifteen years on the force, New York's Finest had prepared her for almost anything, but there were still times Mary felt totally lost. And, despite everything that had happened, there was still only one person in the world who could help at a time like this.

Mary sat up again and picked up her phone, dialing a number from memory. The call went through and was picked up on the third ring.

"Mary? Are you okay? It's nearly two a.m..."

The voice on the other end was a little groggy.

"Yeah, Mom. It's me. I'm fine. You awake?"

"I guess I am now. What do you need, honey? Problems at work?"

"Not exactly."

"Man trouble?"

"Not exactly."

"Then I guess that only leaves one thing," her mother said.

"Yeah, I guess."

"What's he done this time?" Mary imagined her mother's eyes rolling as she spoke. "He's not getting you into trouble again? I thought we talked about this. You've got responsibilities to your *real* job. Stop letting him push you around."

Mary gritted her teeth and squeezed the phone a little tighter. "It's not like that, mom – nobody's forcing me to do anything. I'm a

thirty-seven-year-old woman who's trained to take down rapists and murderers. I can look after myself."

Mrs. Jordan let out a chuckle. "Yes, of course you can dear. But that doesn't mean I can't still be of some use now and again."

"Yeah, I know. Sorry. I shouldn't have called."

"Tell me what's wrong, dear."

Mary sighed. "Well, you were right about one thing. The source of my problem, that is."

"I don't know why you just don't get your boss to keep Blake out of the way. He sounds like nothing but trouble to me."

"He is. Trouble, I mean. But, unfortunately, he closes more cases than anyone else. What he lacks in social skills, he more than makes up for by being a smartass when it comes to tracking down criminals."

"You know, they say it takes one to know one."

"Don't get me started," Mary said.

"So what's he done this time?"

"It's complicated."

"Try me. I'm not senile quite yet."

Mary smiled. "All right, all right, you win. You know how Blake's company owns other businesses overseas?"

"Yeah, I kinda guessed that. Far too much money for one man. It's bound to go to your head. Not surprised he's half-crazy."

"Well, the company he inherited when his

parents died was also an umbrella corporation for a bunch of independent operations in other countries. One of those companies, Chemworks, was involved in chemical and biological research. Supposedly, they were doing it for humanitarian causes, but someone on Blake's board of directors decided they could make more money out of weapons research instead."

"Or maybe Blake decided he needed a little more cash in his pocket."

"He's not like that, Mom," Mary said. "And, besides, I was with him when it all happened. He had no idea. They just took control out from underneath him, and sold the research company off to the highest bidder. There was nothing he could do to stop it, and the transfer papers were sealed."

"Can't he get some computer whizz to, you know... hack in? Is that the right word?"

Mary smiled. "It's not that simple. It all happened in a foreign country, where the laws on this sort of thing are much stricter. We don't even know where to start looking."

"And you're worried this company might be doing something bad?"

"I'm sure of it."

A moment of silence. "Listen, Mary, honey... You know this isn't really my area of expertise. Maybe you could speak to..."

"Not gonna happen, Mom."

"You've got to speak to her some time."

"Give me one good reason."

“She’s your sister, is that a good enough reason? You can’t stay mad at her forever.”

“Just watch me.” Mary bit her bottom lip. “Besides, she already called. Before all this happened.”

Another pause. “Well, what did she say?”

Mary sighed. “She called to warn me.”

“Warn you?”

“Somehow Kate found out what this company was working on. She figured Blake must have been involved somehow.”

“And you’re still sure he’s not? Kate knows what she’s talking about.”

“Kate works at the World Health Organization – it’s hardly NASA. They make mistakes all the time. She’s wrong – Blake’s desperate to figure out what happened.”

“But he couldn’t be bothered to show up after all the work you put in? Doesn’t sound like he’s that concerned to me.”

The last remark had Mary stumped.

“You know I’m right, honey,” her mother said. “If this was anybody else, you’d agree with me. Your perception is all messed up.”

Mary slumped back against her pillow. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe I’m not seeing this straight.”

“You need to have words with him, sweetheart. Figure out what’s going on.”

“I will. I promise.” Mary felt the tiredness hit her. “Thanks, Mom. You know, for everything.”

“That’s why I’m here, honey. Any time.”

“Speak later, okay?”

“Love you.”

“You too.” Mary hung up. Her mind spinning, she fished around for a glass of water and found one tucked away on the cluttered nightstand. She took a gulp. It tasted dusty, probably from being left out for a couple of days. With a tired groan, she heaved herself out of bed to fetch a refill and paused at the bathroom sink, taking a glance at her reflection in the mirror. The result didn’t look good.

Weeks of stress had taken their toll – dark circles under her eyes, weight gain around the neck and jawline all conspired to make her look at least five years older. She slapped her cheeks with both palms and took a long draw of fresh water, trying to stay awake.

Climbing back under the bedcovers, she grabbed her cell phone and found Leopold’s number. Her mother’s words still echoing in her head, Mary dialed and took a deep breath.

The call went straight to voicemail.

She tried again.

No answer.

With a frustrated sigh, she flopped back onto her pillow and resisted the urge to throw the phone against the back wall. Wherever Blake was, he wasn’t interested in talking. She felt the anger take over once again, chasing away the tiredness. She gave up, turning on the lamp.

Mary’s bedroom was a mess – paperwork

scattered over the carpet, clothes piled up next to the laundry basket – but none of that mattered. Within a minute or two, she located her television remote and turned on the small set anchored to her wall. She flicked through the channels until she found what she was looking for, the only real remedy to insomnia: late night shopping channels.

Mary found her purse, pulling out the only credit card that wasn't already maxed out, and settled in for the night.

## Chapter 9

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THE BLACK CHEVROLET Suburban SUV sailed down Pennsylvania Avenue, dark and deserted at this time of night. With almost zero traffic, the ride from Reagan National airport had been a breeze, and Leopold had taken the opportunity to go over the suspect files for the third time.

Ward had been true to his word – the documents provided almost nothing of use. Close to a hundred pages of text with nearly half the words blacked out and a few heavily pixelated photographs were all that had made it through. Leopold scrolled through the files on his smart phone, trying to pick out anything that might help.

Jerome sat next to him in the back, his long legs crushed up against the seat in front. Two dark-suited agents, Burton and McCoy, rode up front, staring silently at the empty road ahead. The driver, Special Agent Burton, slowed down as the dark silhouette of the J. Edgar Hoover building appeared just a few blocks away.

“We’re nearly there,” he said, turning down a side street. “Director Ward will meet us once we get you signed in. He’ll take you from there.”

Leopold looked up from his phone. “We



don't get the pleasure of your company?"

"We're just here to make delivery, sir."

"Shame." He turned off his handset and slipped it into his jacket pocket. "And you were both such interesting conversationalists."

Leopold heard McCoy mutter something under his breath as they turned another corner, but couldn't make out the words. With the car's headlights providing the only illumination, the Suburban rolled its way cautiously through the deserted back streets and Burton stopped as they reached the entrance to an underground parking complex. He opened the driver's window and leaned out, holding up his ID badge. With a screech of cold metal, the steel doors opened and Burton steered the vehicle inside, finding an empty spot next to an identical-looking SUV against the back wall.

"The director is waiting inside," Burton said, killing the engine. "You'll need to surrender your firearm, sir." He looked back at Jerome. "No exceptions."

Jerome scowled but didn't say anything.

"Director Ward will take you through to the suspect personally," he continued. "All visitors are required to go through security, so make sure you check your pockets." He glanced over at Leopold. "Cell phone signals are blocked, but you should be able to connect to the secured wireless network if you need to access the internet. Any questions?"

Leopold unbuckled his seat belt and

opened the door. “Yes. How long is this going to take?”

Burton shook his head. “The director will brief you, sir.”

“Then let’s get this over with, shall we?” He stepped out onto the parking lot. The basement was dimly lit, packed full of cars – mostly dark sedans and hulking SUVs – and smelled of gasoline and engine oil. The air felt cold and damp, though still preferable to the gale-force winds outside. Jerome and the two agents climbed out of the Suburban, and Burton led the way toward the locked doors that led to the building’s interior. He swiped his security badge again and stepped through, heading for the elevators at the end of the polished hallway. The walls glistened white and a distinct smell of industrial cleaner hung in the air, lemon scented. The aroma was overwhelming, and Leopold felt his nose prickle as the scent hit his nostrils.

Burton hit the elevator call button and the doors rumbled open. The four men stepped inside and Burton punched in a code, shielding the keypad with his free hand. The car began its ascent with the whistle and twang of steel cables tensing under the load.

“Anything useful in the files?” Jerome asked, his deep voice filling the tiny space.

“As expected,” Leopold said.

“That bad?”

“I’ll make it work.”

Agent Burton turned to look at Jerome.

“This is our floor coming up next.”

“Remember to surrender your weapon,” McCoy said, adopting as authoritative a tone as he could muster.

Leopold glanced up at Jerome, who rolled his eyes but didn’t reply.

The elevator slowed to a halt, rattling a little as the doors slid open to reveal a tiny reception area manned by a bored-looking agent. He looked up as the four men approached.

“Burton. Took your time,” he said, slipping on a pair of glasses. “Director Ward’s inside. Get these guys signed in.” He slid a clipboard across the desk.

Burton nodded in reply. “Jameson. Good to see you’re keeping the country safe from behind reception,” he said, picking up the clipboard and handing it to Leopold. “Put your signature on here and leave your ID.” He turned to Jerome. “You too. Simmons will take your firearm.”

Jerome’s eyes narrowed. Slowly, he unclipped his Glock and laid it on the desk. Simmons dropped the weapon into a clear plastic bag and locked it up in a drawer. He handed Jerome a handwritten ticket.

“You can pick this up later,” he said. “Both of you, press your thumbs and forefingers down on this, please.” He pointed to a fingerprint reader hooked up to his computer. “Then please stand over there and empty your pockets.” He gestured to the end of the desk.

The two men complied. Simmons stood up and approached with a handheld metal detector. He waved the instrument over both visitors.

“Okay, you’re clean,” he said. “Pick up your things and go on through.” He pointed toward a locked door behind him. “Burton will hand you over to Director Ward.”

Leopold picked up his cell phone and wallet, Jerome following suit.

“This way, gentlemen,” Burton said, heading for the door. McCoy waited behind. “You’re about to enter a secure area. Director Ward and another agent will be present at all times. As I said, you won’t be able to make any phone calls from your cells, but a restricted Wi-Fi network is available. All incoming and outgoing signals are monitored, of course.” He unlocked the door with his ID card. “You’ll sign out when you leave and you can pick up your weapon then.” He nodded at Jerome. “After you.” He waved them through.

The door led through to a windowless room where two men stood waiting. Leopold recognized FBI Director Richard Ward, who stepped forward to greet them.

“Blake, good to see you again. In the flesh, this time.” He held out a hand and Leopold shook it. “I hope the flight was uneventful.” He glanced at Jerome.

“Bumpy as hell,” Leopold replied. He looked over at Ward’s colleague.

“May I introduce Deputy Director of the

FBI Franklin Burke,” Ward said. “He’ll be joining us tonight.”

Burke nodded curtly. “Blake. Who’s your friend?”

“This is Jerome.”

“Jerome who?”

“Just Jerome. He handles my personal security. I trust that won’t be a problem.”

Burke opened his mouth to speak, but Ward cut him off. “Of course not. You’re both welcome.”

“I do hope you both understand the irregularity of allowing civilians inside this part of the building,” Burke said, scowling. “For the record, I am *not* a supporter of handing out state secrets to civilian contractors.” He looked straight at Leopold. “Regardless of reputation. I hope you understand it’s nothing personal.”

Ward shook his head. “Please forgive the deputy director. He wasn’t exactly keen on the idea of bringing you in.”

“People usually aren’t,” Leopold said. “But soon they figure out I should have been brought in much earlier.”

Burke grunted something in reply.

“Perhaps you should give Deputy Director Burke a demonstration, Blake?” Ward said.

Leopold frowned. “I’m not a performing monkey, Director.”

Ward laughed, further creasing the lines around his eyes. “Please, indulge me.”

Leopold glanced at Burke, who folded his

arms.

“Fine. Consider it a personal favor. Though you owe me enough of those already.”

“That’s not such a bad thing; how many people can say the Director of the FBI owes them?”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

Ward nodded. “Don’t I know it.”

“Will this take long?” Burke said impatiently.

Leopold sighed. “Deputy Director Franklin Burke,” he began, stepping forward. “Sixty-one years old. Ex-military. Left handed. You live within a couple miles of here.” He looked Burke up and down. “Arthritis in your wrists. Married, no kids. You have a dog at home,” he glanced down at the deputy director’s trousers. “Make that two dogs.”

Burke frowned. “Nothing you couldn’t have looked up.”

Leopold studied the man’s shoes. “You tell your wife you walk to work in an effort to lose weight, but, secretly, you catch a taxi. You play golf,” he paused. “*Badly*. And you recently switched from wearing glasses to contact lenses.” He sniffed the air. “You smoke cigars, but not while you’re at home. You try to hide it from your wife, but she already knows.”

“What did I tell you?” Ward laughed again. “He’s got you figured out!”

“Guesswork and conjecture,” Burke said. “And what’s this bullshit about my wife?”

Leopold grinned. “Your suit is too small,

meaning you've put on weight recently. Your shoes are pristine, even the soles, so you don't wear them outside the office. That means you change your shoes after you arrive. You don't look like a cyclist, so the only explanation is you walked here. Unfortunately, your waistline remains as considerable as ever, so the exercise obviously isn't helping. And you haven't bought a new suit. So why else go through the motions, unless you're hiding something?"

Burke scoffed.

"Your watch is a Patek Philippe," Leopold continued, "only a few years old so it's not a family heirloom. On your salary, owning a fifty-thousand-dollar watch means you haven't had to shell out cash for kids' educations over the years. And as for the smoking, your clothes smell fresh, but the fingers on your left hand are stained with nicotine. I can smell the cigar smoke on your skin, but you take care not to get any on your clothes. I assume your wife disapproves? It's not exactly a shot in the dark to say she already knows." He smiled. "Women always do."

"I don't see how any of this is useful to us." Burke turned to face Ward. "Is this some kind of joke?"

"On the contrary, Deputy Director," Leopold said. "You need me here because you have a man in custody and you know nothing about him. Where the FBI only sees what's staring them in the face, I tend to dig a little

deeper.” He stepped back. “So maybe you just let me do my job and I’ll let you get back to whatever it is you do around here.”

Burke’s face turned a peculiar shade of purple.

“Shall we make our way through?” Ward said, interjecting. “We’ve got a long night ahead of us. This way, please.” He pulled out his ID badge and headed for a set of double doors at the back of the room, beckoning the others to follow. He swiped his security card and the doors opened. “Gentlemen, welcome to Level Zero.”

The room beyond provided a stark contrast to the cramped reception area. High ceilings and polished tile floors greeted them, the floor space taken up by a half-dozen workstations complete with state-of-the-art computer systems and twin oversized monitors. Two agents occupied each desk, each staring intently at the screens while speaking into their wireless earpieces. The noise and chatter were palpable, a welcome change from the stoic silence of the last few hours. Ward walked toward the closest desk and both agents looked up – one male, his dark hair salted with gray, and one female, her blonde hair tied back in a ponytail. Both looked mid-thirties, dressed in the ubiquitous dark suits favored by the bureau’s best and brightest.

“Special Agents Marshall and Carter,” Ward said, as the two agents got to their feet.



“They’ve been keeping an eye on our guest.”

“Sir,” Marshall said.

“Anything to report?”

“No movement, sir,” he said. “He’s not said a word since you left.”

“Let’s hope he gets a little more talkative,” said Leopold. “Ready to take us through?”

“Yes, sir.” Carter buttoned her jacket. “I’ll take you down to the cells myself. They’re expecting us.”

“Let me guess, more security checks?”

Carter nodded. “Comes with the territory. We need to make sure anybody coming in doesn’t pose a risk.”

Leopold looked over at Ward. “That’s all very good,” he said, folding his arms. “But what happens when someone wants to get *out*?”

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Two elevator rides later, Agent Carter rushed through another security scan and the steel doors to the cellblocks opened with a dull thunk. One of the armed guards manning the entrance stood to the side to let Leopold, Jerome, Ward, Burke, and Carter pass through.

“You can speak to the suspect through the intercom,” the guard said. “Take the last door on the right.”

Ward nodded and set off in front. Leopold

followed behind, noticing the CCTV cameras mounted to the ceilings at regular intervals. He counted six holding cells in total and the corridor was silent, save for the faint echoes of their footfalls on the hard floor. The harsh lighting made every nook and crack in the white paint clearly visible.

Whoever was being held down here, Leopold knew, wasn't getting out anytime soon.

Ward reached the final door on the right and punched a code into the keypad embedded into the metal door. The light above the frame switched from red to green. "You ready, Blake?" he asked, his hand resting on the handle.

"Based on the intel you sent, I can safely say I'm as ready as I'll ever be."

"I'll take that as a 'yes.'" He opened the door and stepped through, holding it open for the others. "Take a seat."

The interview room was large enough to fit all five comfortably. A row of steel chairs had been bolted to the floor facing an opaque glass panel that took the place of a fourth wall. Each chair featured a foldout tray table and intercom controls. In the far corner, another locked door with a recessed control panel. Leopold figured it led through to the cell behind the glass.

"Our guest is waiting behind that panel," Ward said, as they each took a seat. "The glass is designed to switch between opaque and

transparent. Once I activate the intercom, we'll be able to see inside. He'll be able to see and hear us too."

"Before we begin," Leopold said, "perhaps you could fill me in on some of the missing information?"

"What have you determined so far?"

Leopold sat back in his chair. "I inferred from the case files that the suspect was involved in multiple terrorist and non-sanctioned operations over the last few decades, but dropped off the radar fifteen years ago. I couldn't find any political or ideological patterns, which suggests he's for hire – a mercenary, of sorts."

Ward nodded. "Go on."

"Most mercenaries are ex-military command, and some will have spent time at the higher levels of government. Either way, they know how that world works. Chances are, he's an American national who's been active overseas for quite some time. Though why he's decided to make himself known now, I can't say."

"He said he's here to warn us."

"Warn us?"

"Those were his words. Maybe he's come across some information – a change of heart, maybe?"

Leopold shook his head. "We both know that doesn't happen. Any family connections?"

"Wish I knew," Ward said. "We have no

DNA records, no fingerprints, no dental. Whoever this guy is, he's been careful to stay under the radar. Until now."

"Have you checked the camera footage from his arrival?"

"I've been over it myself."

"Did he enter with anyone? Perhaps we can ID an associate, track him down that way."

Ward let out a deep breath. "Our surveillance equipment picked him up on approach from across the street. Wherever he came from, he figured out our blind spots. The footage didn't give us anything."

"So we're well and truly in the dark."

"Yes. Your priority here is to figure out who he is. And what he really wants."

Leopold smiled. "You don't ask for much, do you?"

"No more than usual." Ward offered a weak grin in return. "Shall we get started?"

"Be my guest."

Ward turned to Agent Carter. "Would you do the honors, please?"

"Yes, sir." She flicked a switch on the intercom panel mounted into her armrest. "Ready?"

The others nodded. Carter pressed another button and Leopold heard a short burst of static as the speakers activated. The cloudy glass panel in front of him turned transparent. Beyond, he saw a cramped room lit up with a fluorescent glare, a bed fixed to the floor. In the center of the room a man stood, his back

facing them, dressed in a white shirt, its sleeves rolled up to the elbow, and dark suit trousers. The man turned slowly, his angular features casting shadows over his face, the skin marred by faint pink scar tissue around the jawline and cheekbones. His eyes settled on Leopold and he smiled.

“Ah, you made it,” he said. “I had pictured you a little... *younger*. Time can play tricks, don’t you agree?”

Leopold felt his body stiffen. A clawing sensation in his stomach spread to his limbs, rooting him to his chair, immobilizing him. He opened his mouth to reply, but no words formed.

“I see you’re a little lost for something to say,” the man said. “A pity.”

Jerome stood up, his hands balled into fists. Agent Carter reacted, reaching for her gun.

“What the hell is going on?” Burke said.

Leopold blinked hard. “Director Ward,” he said, forcing the words out of his mouth. “I’d like to introduce you to Robert Blake.”

Ward stared back at him, eyes wide.

“My father.”

## Chapter 10

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THE WOMAN WITH the orange tan and the white teeth held up the necklace, a big grin on her face. The music started up again. The station switched to the news report, some story about the state of the economy. According to the scrolling headlines, the Chinese were buying up all the world's debt and the Japanese Yen had reached an all-time high.

*Yawn.*

Mary sighed, reaching for her phone. Zero missed calls. Zero messages. The screen stared blankly back at her and she tossed it back onto the floor irritably. It landed next to a pile of laundry. She switched off the television, climbed out of bed, and stormed into the bathroom.

*Not answering your phone? Then I'm coming over. This conversation is happening.* Her mind boiled, a hundred scenes flashing through her head – most of them involving her hands around Blake's neck.

Mary ran a brush through her dark hair and freshened up, throwing on a clean set of clothes from the pile spilling out of the laundry basket. Once dressed, she checked herself over in the mirror, before slipping on a thick coat, grabbing her handbag, and

heading for the front door.

Finding her keys, she shut the door behind her, riding the elevator down to street level. Once outside, she turned up her collar against the frigid wind, making her way to the corner where a steady stream of traffic indicated a decent chance of her finding a cab.

*God bless New York City,* she thought. *It's never too late to go kick someone's door down.*

At the intersection, Mary saw a taxi approach and threw up a hand. Across the road, a gang of young partygoers whooped and whistled, making a beeline for the nearest open bar. She watched them disappear into a seedy-looking nightclub as the yellow cab rolled to a stop in front of her, blocking her view. She climbed inside, grateful for the warmth of the car's heaters, and gave the driver Blake's address. He nodded and set off.

Mary blew into her hands, taking the edge off the chill. She took her phone out of her bag and tried Leopold's number again. The call went straight to voicemail. She tried Jerome's with the same result.

She frowned and slipped her phone back into her handbag. Whatever was going on, she knew, a more direct approach was definitely needed.

## Chapter 11

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“WHAT THE HELL is going on, Blake?” Ward dragged Leopold out into the corridor, shutting the door behind him. They were alone.

“Your guess is as good as mine, Director,” he replied, running a hand through his unkempt hair.

Ward gritted his teeth. “Don’t bullshit me, Blake. Do you seriously expect me to believe that man is your father? A man with ties to over a dozen terrorist organizations?”

“Suspected ties,” Leopold said. “Like you already mentioned, you’ve got nothing on him.”

“Cut the crap. Your father died when you were a teenager. Along with your mother.”

“Yes, I remember.”

“Then how the hell can he be standing there in front of us?”

“I would have thought the answer would be obvious.”

Ward’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t play games.”

“He caught me off guard too,” Leopold said. “But the facts are the facts. He’s undergone cosmetic surgery, for sure, but not enough that I don’t recognize him.”

“And this isn’t freaking you out?”

Leopold hesitated, his mind spinning. He



shook the sensation away, forcing himself to focus on the present. “I’ll admit,” he said, “it’s caught me a little off guard.”

Ward folded his arms. “You’re a damn robot, Blake. None of this makes any sense.”

Leopold sighed. *Focus on the facts.* “My father’s body was never recovered,” he said. “Robert Blake was a man of wealth and influence – it’s entirely possible the whole thing was staged.”

Ward’s eyes narrowed. “Staged? How?”

“I don’t know.”

“You must have noticed something. Anything.”

“I had my suspicions.” Leopold said, considering his response. “In the last few months, there have been signs. Letters, strange phone calls, the board of directors making deals behind my back. I knew there had to be someone pulling the strings. Someone with enough knowledge of my life and influence over the people in it to cause problems.” He paused. “But I had just assumed it was someone trying to rattle me. I never gave serious consideration to...” He trailed off, shaking his head. “None of that matters now. Whatever the reason he decided to show up today, it’s not going to end well. Not for anyone.”

The director’s expression softened. “Can you deal with this, Blake?” he said, putting one hand on Leopold’s shoulder. “We can find someone else.”

“There isn’t anyone else.” He made for the door. “Let’s finish this.”

“That’s what I like to hear.”

Leopold pushed the door open and strode back into the interrogation room. Agent Carter flinched as he entered, her hand dropping to her hip. Ward shook his head and she sat back down again. Without breaking pace, Leopold approached the glass.

“Glad to see you’re recovered,” Robert Blake said, a faint smile crossing his lips. “I was almost worried.”

“A temporary lapse, I assure you,” Leopold said.

“I see Jerome is still hanging around.” He eyed the bodyguard. “I recall being impressed when I hired him. I hope he’s lived up to expectations.”

“I’m surprised you remember. Boca, right?”

Robert laughed. “Rio. But nice try.”

“Why are you here?”

“I suppose Director Ward hasn’t filled you in.”

“He said you had a warning.”

“A warning, yes.”

“Why only speak to me? Why show yourself now, after all these years?” Leopold held his father’s stare.

“Because what I have to say concerns you.”

“You’re lying.”

Robert smiled again, wider this time. “I can understand why you don’t trust me.”

“I hope so.”

“The game is only just getting started. Let’s not start off on the wrong foot.”

“This isn’t a game.”

“Ah, but there’s where you’re wrong.” Robert rolled down his shirtsleeves, buttoning them at the cuff. He walked over to the bed to retrieve his jacket. “The game goes on with or without you. The choice is yours.”

“Get to the point.”

Robert slipped on his jacket and ran a hand through his dark hair. “All right, I’ll give you a head start. A free roll of the die, so to speak.” He paused. “There is going to be an attack on New York City. Something on a scale nobody has ever seen before.”

Leopold shook his head. “Why are you telling me this?”

“If the people behind the attack succeed, certain...” he paused. “Certain *assets* of mine will be affected. I can’t allow that to happen.”

“And that’s worth going to jail?”

Fastening his jacket, Robert approached the glass and leaned in close. “Who said anything about jail?”

Leopold opened his mouth to reply but his cell phone’s speakers cut him off – a piercing klaxon noise loud enough to make Carter reach for her gun again.

“What the hell is that?” Burke said, getting to his feet.

“The proximity alarms,” said Jerome, standing up. “The ones set up back at the apartment. Somebody’s broken through the

perimeter.” He stepped toward the glass. “What the hell have you done?”

“Distraction,” Robert said, “is the key to any successful game plan – forcing your opponent to focus his attention in one direction while you make your move somewhere else. Child’s play.” He shook his head. “I expected more from you.”

Leopold felt his stomach lurch. “Inviting me here. This whole time, you just wanted me out of the way.”

Robert stepped back, his lips twisted into a cruel grin. “Looks like the game is starting without you,” he said. “Better hurry – I believe it’s your move.”

## Chapter 12

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COLONEL JOSEPH HAWKES waved his men forward and crept silently down the long hallway. His eyes scanned the area ahead, checking for any security devices that hadn't shown up on their initial reconnaissance. The path looked clear.

Heavy boots fell silently on the polished wooden floors as the six members of Alpha Team surged through the apartment, automatic weapons raised and ready. The penthouse looked empty, but one could never be too careful – especially when the owner had secrets to keep safe.

“Campbell, Grayson, check the bedrooms,” Hawkes said, his deep voice barely a whisper. The two soldiers nodded and stalked off down the corridor and out of sight. “You three, check the living room.”

Hawkes kept his weapon up and made for the study, directing the other three through to the living room and kitchen. He pushed the door open slowly, checking for signs of movement, the barrel of his M16 peeking over the threshold. Satisfied the room was secure, he stepped through and glanced around the dimly lit space.

Against the back wall, a large mahogany desk. A slim computer monitor sat on top, a

small red LED signaling the device was on standby. Hawkes heard his radio crackle.

“Sir, apartment secure, sir, over,” a voice said.

Hawkes thumbed the talk switch. “Confirmed. Collect the assets and regroup in the hallway and hold positions. Out.”

The radio fell silent. The colonel shouldered his weapon and removed a USB thumb drive from his front pocket. Quickly, he walked up to the computer monitor and plugged the tiny device into the port along the side of the screen bezel. The LED flashed green and the computer woke up.

The software coded into the USB drive kicked into action. First, it disabled the login screen, circumventing the password protection. Next, it scanned the hard drives for relevant information. Finally, it copied what it could onto its limited storage and sent the rest to a secured cloud server. As a precaution, the software shut down the host computer, ordering it to scrub its own drives.

Once the system had powered down, Hawkes removed the thumb drive and slipped it back into his pocket. He reached for his radio.

“Grayson, bring the device, over.”

“Sir, yes, sir. Over.”

Hawkes smiled. Now for the fun part.

## Chapter 13

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THE BLACK CHEVROLET Suburban screamed out of the parking lot, its V8 revved to the redline. Special Agent Marshall aimed the vehicle toward Pennsylvania Avenue and kept his right foot rooted to the carpet. Director Ward rode shotgun while Leopold and Jerome sat in the back, holding on as the SUV swerved around the corner and barreled forward.

“What the hell happened in there, sir?” Marshall said, both hands on the wheel.

“We got played, that’s what,” Ward said. He turned in his chair to face Leopold. “Blake, I need full disclosure. Anything you might have in your apartment, anything he could use, I need to know.”

Leopold frowned. “How about access to several billion dollars’ worth of assets and resources?” he said. “Banking codes, email accounts, confidential documents, old case files. You name it.”

“Don’t you have protection in place?”

“Of course I do. The penthouse is locked down.”

“Obviously not well enough,” said Ward. “What about your data?”

Leopold shook his head. “My files can’t be accessed remotely, but there’s not much I can

do if someone manually forces their way through my security systems and copies the hard drives, is there?"

"Jesus, Blake."

"You're the one who invited me out here," he snapped. "The only other protection I've got is riding next to me." He glanced over at Jerome. "Like Robert said, we were all looking in one direction while he royally screwed us from another. If he gets hold of the data on my servers, who knows what he could do with it?"

The Suburban hit Pennsylvania Avenue and Marshall steered the vehicle into the fast lane. The speedometer nudged eighty-five.

"Whatever's going on, we need to do some serious damage control," Ward said. "Marshall will escort you back to New York. I need you to figure out what's been taken."

The special agent turned to look at his boss. "Yes, sir. The jet that brought Blake here is still at Reagan. It's refueled and ready to go."

"Good."

"What about the suspect, sir?"

"Still in custody," said Ward. "Whatever his plan, he's not going to be able to do much from inside Level Zero. He's locked down – don't worry, he's not going anywhere."

"He won't have to," Leopold said, leaning forward. "Regardless of what we think is going on, Robert Blake is right where he wants to be."



## Chapter 14

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MARY TIPPED THE driver and climbed out of the cab at Leopold's apartment building. The neighborhood was as quiet and as secluded as New York City could ever be, just a short walk from Central Park. The doorman tipped his hat as he recognized her, opening the front door to let her through. Inside, the heating blasted out on its highest setting and the receptionist, a middle-aged woman with big hair, buzzed her through to the elevators with a bright smile.

"He expecting you this time, hon?" she asked.

"Let's hope not," said Mary, breezing past.

"That bad, huh?"

"Do me a favor: don't tell him I'm coming." She winked.

"Haven't seen him since he came in a few hours ago – I'll make sure to keep quiet." She smiled again and Mary called for an elevator.

Stepping through once the doors opened, Mary punched in the six-digit visitors' code that Leopold had given her and composed herself as the carriage began its ascent. As she reached the top floor, the elevator slowed to a halt. Mary racked her brains for the next code, the one that wouldn't set off the alarms, and was interrupted as the doors slid open on

their own.

*That's a little weird,* she thought. *He must have forgotten to lock up before bed.*

She shrugged and stepped out into the hallway, careful not to make any noise. The apartment was quiet, seemingly deserted, and the lights were glowing just enough for her to see where she was going – essential if she wanted any chance of avoiding the piles of junk scattered all over the floors. Checking around for any signs of life, she crept forward and made for the living room.

Empty. The tall windows looked down over the Upper East Side toward the river, the dark expanse of Central Park in-between. At this height, Mary could make out Hoboken and Jersey City across the water, and she took a moment to soak in the view. Content nobody was hiding behind the sofas, Mary checked the kitchen and the bedrooms. All empty.

*Where the hell are you, Blake?* She headed back for the elevators, wondering whether she should hang around and catch Blake on his return from wherever. She stopped dead as she passed the study, the door wide open. She noticed a red glow from beneath the desk casting strange shadows across the room.

Curious, she stepped inside and took a closer look, getting down on her knees. Strapped to the underside of the desk, she saw a strange metallic device. Cables weaved in and out, something nestled at the center, surrounded by steel and circuitry. Mary's

breath caught in her throat.

*Holy shit.*

Heart thumping against her ribcage, she got to her feet slowly, backing toward the open door. She reached for her phone but found her hand shaking too much. With a studied breath, Mary calmed herself down and located the handset at the bottom of her handbag. She unlocked the screen and nearly jumped out of her skin as the phone vibrated in her palm.

She stood rooted to the spot, a single name flashing up on the display.

“Blake, what the hell is going on?” she said, answering the call.

“Mary, where are you?” Leopold replied, his voice muffled by considerable background noise. Was he on the move?

“I’m at your apartment. Where the hell are you?”

“Washington, D.C.,” he said. “En route to New York. ETA is two hours. Listen, it’s not safe at my place. You need to get out.”

“No shit,” said Mary. “There’s a goddamn bomb strapped to your desk.”

A pause on the line.

“Leopold?”

“Yes, I’m here,” he said. “You need to listen to me very carefully. The apartment has been compromised. I’m with Director Ward of the FBI. I’m going to need to pass you over to him.”

Mary heard muted voices on the other end

of the call, but she couldn't make out the words. Another voice came on the line.

"Sergeant Jordan, this is Richard Ward. Blake and I have worked together in the past."

"Yes, I know who you are," Mary said. "Maybe we can skip the pleasantries and you can tell me what the hell is going on?"

"Long story short; Blake is helping with an investigation. It appears his home has been targeted. Are you sure there's an explosive device in there with you?"

"Are you kidding me? Of course I'm sure. I'm standing right next to it."

"Okay, calm down," he said. "It's very important you don't make any sudden movements. Whoever set the explosive might have designed it to go off if disturbed. You need to stay where you are until we get there."

"Until you get here? What about the damn bomb squad?"

Another pause. Leopold's voice came back on the line.

"Mary, there's something you should know."

"What?"

"He's back."

"Who's back?"

"My father. Those calls, the letters, the company, everything. It was all him. He's back."

"Jesus, Blake." Mary felt her heart thump even harder.

"Whatever he's planning, it's possible he's got the penthouse under surveillance. If we

call the bomb squad and they attempt to disarm the device, whoever he's working with might trigger the bomb remotely."

"Are you insane? You expect me to wait here?"

"I need to figure out what game he's playing," Leopold said. "You'll be safe so long as you stay exactly where you are. He wants me to go back to the apartment. It's unlikely anything's going to happen while we're in the air. But if we tip our hand early and call in the cavalry, we might lose our only chance of figuring out what's going on. Just stay where you are until I get to you, we can decide the next move then."

"I knew it. Insane. Completely insane."

"Trust me, Mary."

"You're really going to try that approach?" she said.

"Ward's with me on this," said Leopold. "He'll arrange for a plainclothes team to keep the building secure. He'll order them to wait downstairs. They'll text your cell when they arrive."

"Text message? How's that going to help?"

"A phone call might get intercepted. The FBI can send an SMS through an encrypted line; hopefully it'll get lost in the noise. In the meantime, just try not to move. Or make any noise."

"Oh, easy enough then?"

"We'll get there soon, Mary."

Mary swore. "Fine, just make sure you get

someone on site who knows what the hell they're talking about."

"We'll get the best, don't worry."

"And hurry the hell up." She bit her lip.  
"Oh, and Blake?"

"Yes?"

"If I make it out of this, which I sincerely hope I do, I'm holding you personally responsible."

"That's..."

Mary hung up.

## Chapter 15

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“WE’VE GOT MOVEMENT, sir.”

Colonel Hawkes looked up from his smart phone. “Report.” The hotel building opposite Blake’s apartment building provided the perfect view of the penthouse, fifty-one stories up. Thanks to the infrared scope Campbell had installed by the window, Hawkes’ team could keep a close eye on their target without resorting to hacking the CCTV feed and running the risk of being detected. Campbell peered through the scope as he spoke. “It’s a little difficult to make out, sir. The rear sections of the apartment aren’t showing up on the thermal imager, but there’s definitely somebody in there, sir.”

“Let me see.” Hawkes strode over to the window and took Campbell’s seat. He put one eye to the scope and surveyed the scene in front of him. Adjusting the optical zoom, he aimed the viewfinder toward the entrance hall. Most of the apartment was bathed in a cool blue, certain sections glowing a muddy red where ambient heat signatures remained; the boiler room, the laundry room, and the plumbing all showed up. Ignoring them, Hawkes focused on the area near the study. That’s when he saw it – a brighter heat signature, definitely human.

“Confirmed,” Hawkes said. “Can we get an ID?”

“Sir, cell phone activity in the area is too high to isolate a signal,” Grayson said, holding up a tablet computer. “I’ve stripped it down to 9-1-1 calls only. If whoever’s in there decides to inform the police, we can pull out their number and run a trace.”

Hawkes frowned. “If they were going to call for assistance, they would have done it already.” He adjusted the scope again, zooming out. “I can’t make out any other heat signatures, but parts of the apartment are dead zones. The walls are too thick. Anything on the security systems?”

Grayson nodded. “We left it disarmed. Anyone using a code to gain entry to the floor should show up in the logs, sir.” He tapped the tablet’s screen. “One entry after we pulled out, sir.”

“The name?”

Grayson squinted. “Record reads ‘Sergeant Jordan,’ sir.”

“We’ll have to thank Blake for his attention to detail,” said Hawkes. “Pull up Jordan’s file.”

“Sergeant Mary Jordan, known associate of Blake’s, works homicide for the NYPD. She could be a threat, sir.”

Hawkes kept his eye on the heat signature. “She’s not making a move.”

“She might discover the device, sir.” Campbell said. “There’s still time for extraction.”



“Negative. The plan is to lie low until Blake arrives. Until and unless she poses a credible threat, we continue to observe. Understood?”

Grayson and Campbell answered in the affirmative.

“Good. Then resume your positions.” Hawkes stood up and returned to his chair.

The hotel bedroom was a mess. Laptops, cables, and myriad other equipment covered the bed and floor, with more gear tucked away in the bathroom. Thanks to some gentle persuasion, the hotel manager had upgraded them to a deluxe room – complete with separate living room and dining area – and the rest of the suite was also being put to good use; the dining table had become a mobile tech lab, the sitting room acted as comms hub, and the bedroom made the perfect surveillance nest.

Hawkes noted with some disgust that the nightly rate for the suite ran almost double the weekly pay he used to receive from Uncle Sam. He tried not to let this bother him. Soon enough, he’d have his pick of the world’s best hotels and resorts, maybe even his own island off the coast of Mexico to live out the rest of his days. No more living from paycheck to paycheck – a lifetime of service was about to pay off. Big time.

“Kowalski, update report.” Hawkes called through the doorway into the dining room. A tall, skinny soldier looked up from behind a mess of wires, screwdriver in hand. He wore a

set of thick-rimmed glasses, dangling carelessly from the end of his nose.

“Yes, sir,” he said. “Phase three is underway, our contact has provided the encryption codes. We’re working on a tunnel now, sir.”

“ETA?”

“Any minute now, sir.”

“Good.”

Kowalski returned to his task and disappeared behind the tangle of cables. The remaining two soldiers, Higgs and Stanton, were stationed in the living room, engrossed in their laptops.

“You two,” Hawkes said, getting up and making his way through. “Do we have our foot in the door?”

Higgs, the larger of the two, looked up from his keyboard. “Feet, legs, arms, head, we’re almost there, sir.” He kept typing as he spoke. “We just need to set the Trojan and we’re good to go, sir.”

“Let’s get this tied up. We need to be ready to move when Blake gets here.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Gentlemen, stay alert,” said Hawkes, returning to the bedroom. “If everything goes to plan, in the next few hours, we’re going to hit the FBI’s most-wanted list and half the planet is going to be after our blood.” He smiled and took a seat. “Let’s try to make sure everything goes off with a bang, shall we?”

## Chapter 16

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LEOPOLD STIFLED A yawn as he climbed out of the SUV, hoping the icy winds outside would wake him up a little. The flight had been largely uneventful, but typical NYC traffic back into the city had stretched his patience a little too far. He was almost disappointed that Agents Smith and Coleman hadn't come to pick them up; he might have enjoyed taking some frustration out on them. Instead, an empty car had been left waiting at Teterboro, the same dull, black Chevy model Marshall had driven earlier, although this one looked a little older. Director Ward had elected to stay behind in D.C. in an effort to coordinate the intel work with Agent Carter, leaving Marshall in charge. He hadn't taken it well.

Now, parked on the curb outside his apartment building once again, Leopold was doing his best to make Marshall feel uncomfortable.

"Blake, I need you to keep behind me while I locate the field team," the agent said, climbing out of the driver's seat.

"You mean those guys inside pretending to be cleaning staff?" Leopold pointed inside, where two men dressed in blue overalls were dusting down the lobby.

Marshall grunted. “Just follow my lead.”

Jerome stepped out of the car, shutting the door behind him. Marshall locked up and marched toward the front doors.

“He’s with me,” said Leopold, as the porter stepped forward to intercept. “This is my new assistant. He’s new, and a little bit clueless, but I’ve got high hopes.”

“Very good, sir,” the porter said, opening the door.

“Just keep the wisecracks to yourself, Blake,” Marshall said, making his way inside. “In case you’d forgotten, your girlfriend’s upstairs – maybe we can focus?”

“She’s not his girlfriend,” said Jerome.

“Why am I not surprised?” Marshall pulled out his badge and approached the nearest cleaner. “Special Agent Jack Marshall, FBI. Is the building secure?”

The man glanced up, feather duster in hand, a look of confusion on his face. Across the room, the receptionist put down her phone and looked over in their direction.

“Well?” said Marshall.

“Mas de que raio estás tu a falar?” The man backed away a little.

Marshall looked over at the other cleaner, who looked similarly flummoxed.

“I said I’m with the FBI. I don’t speak Spanish.”

“Portuguese, actually,” Leopold said, stepping forward. “Relax, I was just having a little fun. This is Felipe.” He gestured toward

the nearest cleaner. "And Frank's over there."

The second cleaner waved nervously.

"What the hell?"

"They look after the building. Do a great job too." Leopold grinned. The two men nodded and returned to their duties.

"We don't have time for this," Marshall said, still holding on to his badge. "We need to find the field team and get upstairs. Stop wasting my time."

"My time is worth more than yours, I assure you." Leopold walked toward the reception desk. "Sorry for the disruption, Carolyn. Busy night?"

The receptionist smiled. "Same old, same old."

"Listen, you get anyone come through here looking to inspect the gas pipes?"

Carolyn nodded, her big hairdo bobbing up and down. "Yeah, two guys came through a little while ago. They had the right paperwork so I let them go on through." She paused. "Is that why the FBI is here? Some kind of gas leak?" A look of concern. "Should we get out now?"

"Hold tight, Carolyn. We'll let you know. Stay on the phones."

She nodded again.

"Do you know what floor they're on?"

"Fiftieth. Just below your apartment." Carolyn picked up the phone again. "Are you sure I shouldn't call someone? We can get this place cleared out pretty quick. You know,

since we had that nice police lady come by and give us all that training. Shouldn't take long – most people are wintering somewhere a little warmer this time of year.”

“Maybe start preparing,” said Leopold. “I'll let you know if we need to move out.”

Carolyn smiled. “Sure thing, Mr. Blake.”

“Gas pipes? What the hell are you talking about?” Marshall marched up to the desk.

Jerome followed close behind. “You want to tell him or should I?” he said.

“Nobody asks too many questions when you say you're coming to inspect the gas pipes,” Leopold said. “And it just so happens a routine check was scheduled almost immediately following our little conversation with Mary.” He looked straight at Marshall. “Is this your first week on the job or something?”

The special agent ignored him. “Are you going to take us up there or not?”

“Be my guest.”

Carolyn unlocked the turnstile and kept one eye on Marshall as Leopold led the three of them through to the elevators. The doors opened and the consultant selected the fiftieth floor.

“What, no access code for the poor guys on fifty?” Marshall said, as the elevator slowed to a halt and opened up.

“Oh, please,” Leopold said, stepping out onto the carpet. “If you're going to raid a deluxe apartment building, you aim for the

penthouse.” He waved the others forward. “I’m guessing our friends are camping in the stairwell, out of sight. Follow me.”

He led them down the hallway and around the corner, aiming for the fire exit at the end of the corridor.

“Get ready, gentlemen.” He pushed open the door to the stairwell, feeling cool air hit his face. At the top of the stairs, two men wearing thick brown jackets stood against the wall, studying their cell phones. They looked up as Leopold stepped through.

“This area isn’t safe, sir,” the taller of the two men said. “We’re investigating a possible gas leak.” He pointed to the letters “NYLD” embroidered on his chest.

“Relax, we know what’s going on,” said Leopold. “Besides, how many gas pipes were you hoping to find in the stairwell?” He looked down. “And dress shoes? I have to say, I’m disappointed at your lack of commitment to the role.”

The shorter man reached inside his jacket, pulling out a handgun. “FBI. Get down on your knees.”

“Calm down. Marshall, would you do the honors?”

The special agent sighed and pulled out his badge. “We’re on the same team, fellas. Director Ward should have briefed you. What’s the situation?”

The shorter man peered at Marshall’s ID before slipping the gun back into its holster.

“Special Agent Simmons,” he nodded, “and this is Special Agent Curtis.” He gestured to his taller partner. “We made contact with Sergeant Jordan via text message, as advised. Based on the description she gave of the device, we’re looking at some kind of remote trigger.”

“Blast radius?” Marshall asked.

“Unknown. Without checking the device myself, it’s impossible to estimate. I’d go so far as to say setting the damn thing off would be a bad move.”

“Very perceptive,” said Leopold. “Now, how the hell do we get her out of there?”

“Sergeant Jordan has checked the entry points and there doesn’t appear to be any proximity sensors. But we don’t know whether somebody’s watching. Entering or exiting the building could be a major risk.”

“Yes, and doing nothing is even worse. The people who are responsible for this want me in their sights. If they are watching the building, they know I’m here already. They also know Mary’s here. Doing nothing is not an option.” Leopold looked over at Jerome. “What’s your take on this?”

Jerome shook his head. “Whether we stay here or go upstairs, the risks are uncalculated. We’re in the dark whichever option we choose. But staying down here doesn’t help Mary.”

“There you have it,” Leopold said. “We move in.”



Simmons glanced at Marshall. “It’s your call, sir.”

Marshall sighed. “Either of you trained in explosives?”

“Both of us, sir. Get us next to the device, I’m pretty sure we can deal with it.”

“Then call it in. Get backup down here and tell them to hold fast at a three-block radius. If someone is watching, I don’t want them getting spooked.” He looked over at Leopold. “Let’s move.”

## Chapter 17

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“WHAT THE HELL took you so long?” Mary stood in the hallway, arms folded. Leopold, Jerome and the three agents filed out of the elevator, treading carefully.

“You can cut that tiptoeing out right now,” she continued. “I’ve been pacing up and down this damn hallway for the last two hours. I’m bored out of my goddamn mind.”

“The threat of a fiery death isn’t enough to keep you occupied?” Leopold said, making his way to the study. “Where is this thing, anyway?”

“Yeah, once the novelty wears off it’s not that interesting,” Mary said. She glanced at the three FBI agents. “Nice disguises,” she said. “Maybe wanna rethink the shoes next time.”

Simmons and Curtis looked at each other but didn’t reply.

“Sergeant? Maybe we can focus on the task at hand?” Marshall said. “We can deal with the pleasantries later.”

“Fine. This way.” Mary pushed past Leopold and led the way into the dimly lit study. “There, under the desk.”

Simmons stepped through and got down on his knees.

“Anything?” Curtis asked.

“It’s not like anything I’ve seen before,”

Simmons said, peering in close. Strapped to the underside of the desk, a jumble of cables and circuit boards were arranged around a steel cylinder. The soft light from the device's display bathed the room in a warm red glow.

"Maybe turn on some lights," Curtis said.

Marshall obliged, flicking the light switch.

"That's better." Simmons pulled a glasses case out of his jacket pocket, slipping the spectacles over his nose. "Internal power source. Wiring suggests RF receiver, for remote triggering. I can't tell what kind of explosives are inside without cracking open the chassis." He looked up. "And I'm not going to even try that without a set of body armor. We need to evacuate the building. Now."

"That's not happening until we figure out what's been taken," said Leopold. "Whoever broke in here was looking for something. This is all just..." he trailed off. "This is all just another *distraction*."

"Then what do you suggest?"

"You said it's unlikely there's any proximity sensors in the house?"

"The device is set to detonate remotely, meaning someone is most likely controlling it manually. There are bound to be safeguards built into the device itself, but you're probably safe otherwise."

"Probably?"

"That's the best I can give you without my equipment and a few hours," Simmons said.

“Even if we try jamming all the radio signals in the area, that could trigger an explosion too. It’s too risky.”

Leopold frowned. “Then you and your friend keep an eye on things in here. I need to figure out what’s missing from the apartment.”

“Fine. Just tread carefully and keep your eyes open.”

“Same goes double for you.” He turned and walked out of the study, beckoning for Jerome and Mary to follow.

“Hey, wait a minute,” Mary said as they left the room. “What the hell is going on? You owe me an explanation.”

“We should check the safe,” said Leopold. “Main bedroom.”

Jerome nodded and stalked off. Leopold turned his attention to Mary. “What were you doing barging in to my apartment at two in the morning?”

“Don’t change the subject.”

“How is that changing the subject?”

“We were talking about bombs.”

“I think they prefer the term ‘explosive devices.’ Just answer the question.”

Mary gritted her teeth. “I came to talk.”

“At two in the morning?”

“You weren’t picking up your phone.”

“I was in D.C. In case you don’t remember, I was busy interrogating my own supposedly dead father. It’s been a bit of a busy evening, all things considered.”

“All I know is you flaked out on me back at the restaurant and I wanted to find out what the hell is going on with you.”

“Going on with me?”

“You know what I mean. All this crap with Chemworks, people in your company going behind your back. You should have better control over what goes on. It’s like you don’t care who gets hurt.”

“This doesn’t sound like you. Did you talk to your sister again?”

“No,” said Mary. “She’s not the only one who thinks you’ve crossed the line.”

“So your mother has an opinion too, is that it?”

“You know damn well she’s got an opinion, and it’s one that makes a whole lot of sense.”

“And what does *that* mean?”

“You’re the genius, you figure it out,” Mary said. “You’re slipping. Something’s getting to you and you need to work out what you want to do. I can’t hold your hand forever.”

Leopold felt his cheeks flush and hoped to God Mary didn’t notice.

“You know I’m right,” said Mary. “You should have known what was going on at Chemworks. You should have seen it coming. And now it’s too late to turn back – and you’re acting as though you don’t even care what they’re getting up to. For all we know, they’re the ones responsible for all this.”

Something in Leopold’s mind clicked. “You’re right,” he said, “I have been slipping.

The signs were all there, pointing to Robert's involvement, but I never let myself see the truth. I got too caught up believing the lies to figure out what was really going on." He took a step forward. "I'm sorry. For everything."

Mary raised one eyebrow. "You? Apologizing?" She softened a little. "Then I guess you must really be as screwed up as everyone thinks you are."

"And then some."

"This person they've got locked up in the dungeons, you're sure it's him? Your father, I mean."

"I'm positive. He's had work done to his face; he's a little older, sure, but it's him."

"Why come back now?"

"Think about what you mentioned before," Leopold said. "That everything is linked. The people behind Chemworks must have had in-depth knowledge of how my company works. They must have had solid relationships with the people on my executive teams. Not to mention considerable funding. It's a little too much to swallow that all this is a coincidence."

"So Robert took over the research division, then handed himself over to the FBI? Why?"

"It's safe to say he's unlikely to have turned over a new leaf," said Leopold. "He's right where he wants to be. The question is: what does the FBI have that he wants so badly?"

Mary shrugged. "My tax returns for the last decade? Hell, it could be anything. How do you fit in to all this?"

“Whatever he’s planning, he needs my resources. That’s why he wanted me out of the apartment. That, and I’m guessing he wanted the chance to gloat a little.”

“How can he control your resources? He’d need...”

Jerome marched back into the hallway, cutting her off. “The safe is empty. He got everything.”

“What’s in the safe?”

Leopold swore. “Banking codes, credit card information, passwords, DNA records, you name it. Everything a person would need to steal my identity.” He massaged his temples. “He’s planning a goddamn takeover.”

“How’s that going to work?” Mary said. “All you need to do is change them all and get in touch with the banks, or whatever.”

“Which brings us back to the issue at hand,” Leopold said, glancing over at the study. Simmons was still on his knees, peering at the device mounted underneath the desk. The LED display started flashing.

“You getting anywhere with that?” Mary asked. “Is it supposed to flash like that?”

The explosive expert looked up, eyes wide. “Blake, Jordan, you better get in here,” he said. “You better get the hell back in here right now.”

## Chapter 18

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“TARGETS IN POSITION, sir.” Campbell looked up from the infrared scope. The hotel room had been cleared, the surveillance and computer equipment packed up into suitcases. The smell of industrial solvent lingered, all fingerprints and DNA scrubbed from the room’s surfaces. Nothing left to chance.

Hawkes hoisted his heavy rucksack onto his shoulders. “Any calls for backup?”

“No, sir.” Campbell shook his head. “They must assume we’re watching.”

“ID on the other three?”

“No, sir. I’ve got Blake, Jordan, and the bodyguard. The others might be FBI.”

Hawkes nodded to Grayson and Kowalski. “Get cleared out. Take Higgs and Stanton and get the gear loaded. We’ll follow behind.”

The soldiers saluted and left. The colonel turned his attention back to the window. “If they suspect someone’s watching, it won’t be long until they figure out where we are. Move over.” He stepped over to the scope as Campbell shifted out of the way. Peering through the lens, he noticed six heat signatures grouped in Blake’s study. The rest of the penthouse looked deserted. He looked over his shoulder at Campbell.

“Start the detonation procedure,” he said.



“Sir? Our orders were...”

“I know our orders, soldier. I’m in command of this operation. We take no chances. Now, start the detonation procedure.”

“Yes, sir.” Campbell took out his cell phone and entered the command. “Device armed, sir.”

“Good,” said Hawkes, turning back to the scope. “The targets are within range. Advise.”

“The blast radius should take them all out, now we’ve got them in a group,” Campbell said. “We should detonate now.”

“Agreed.” Hawkes kept his focus on the apartment. “Get to it, soldier.”

“Yes, sir.”

Hawkes heard Campbell punch the command codes into his smart phone.

“Pass code verified. Permission to proceed?”

“Make it quick.”

The colonel slowed his breathing. He lived for these moments. Shutting out the sound of his own heartbeat thumping in his ears, Hawkes concentrated on the six figures across the street. *The precious final seconds of a man’s life. If only they knew.*

One of the figures started moving, heading for the door. The others followed. Before they could get more than a few feet, a blinding flash burned through the scope, a dazzling white-hot explosion of light. A split-second later, the deafening *whoosh* of raging fire and

the deep, guttural rumble of stonework crumbling and the groans of twisting steel.

From far below, the sound of people screaming.

Hawkes heard the windows rattle as the shockwave hit the hotel building, but he kept his eyes glued to the lens. His vision cleared. The apartment had vanished – in its place, an open wound of charred debris, glowing red and orange in the viewfinder. Thick clouds of ash and smoke poured from the exposed interior, billowing up into the sky.

“We need to move out, sir,” Campbell said. “Emergency teams will be here soon.”

“Wait.” Hawkes switched off the thermal imaging. “I need visual confirmation.”

Blake’s penthouse had been gutted. The walls were black with smoke, small fires burning in every room. The outer wall was gone, along with the plate windows, and most of the furniture lay in pieces. The internal partitions were in ruin, but too much smoke remained, blocking his view.

“Sir?”

“The apartment is too hot to make out any signatures,” Hawkes said, looking up from the scope. “And there’s too much smoke. I need visual confirmation of the kill.”

“I can find a position nearby, sir. Out of sight.”

“Good.” Hawkes got to his feet. “Pack up and move out. Find a suitable vantage point and stay close until you have verification.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Average response time for emergency services is six minutes, so find somewhere fast. Stay low and keep off your phone and radio.”

“If there’s anything left of their bodies, sir, they’ll be carrying pieces out in bags,” said Campbell, packing up the infrared equipment and stuffing it into a rucksack. “I’ll find a position on the roof.”

Hawkes nodded. “Good. When you’re done, get over to the rendezvous ASAP.” He headed for the door. “We’ve got a deadline to meet.”

## Chapter 19

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DIRECTOR WARD FELT his stomach lurch. The call had come through to his cell phone minutes ago on the internal network, but it felt like hours. A voice on the other end of the line asked him something, but Ward couldn't focus.

"Sir? Can you hear me, sir?"

The director shook his head, blinking hard.

"Are you there, sir?"

Ward felt his hands tremble. "Yes, yes," he said quietly. "Thank you for the call." He hung up, feeling his skin growing hot. The corridor felt smaller all of a sudden, the walls pressing in on him, the air thick and unbreathable. Still in a daze, Ward opened the door to his office and stepped back inside, where Burke and Carter were waiting. They stood up as he entered.

"Richard, you look like hell," Burke said. "What's going on?"

Carter kept quiet, trying not to look uncomfortable.

"Richard?" Burke repeated.

Ward sank into his chair and took a deep breath. "That was the commissioner. There's been an attack in New York," he said, feeling his pulse thumping in his ears. "Leopold's apartment was the target."

“What happened?” Carter asked, still standing.

“There was an explosion, large enough to take out the entire floor. Blake and the others were in the apartment when it happened. We’ve lost contact with Marshall and the explosives team.”

“Jesus Christ.” Burke sat down again.

“No other reported fatalities,” Ward continued. “But whatever Blake was after – the older Blake, I mean – it’s safe to assume he found it.”

“Did they recover the bodies? Anything?”

“Emergency teams are dealing with the fires now. The commissioner said the building is still structurally safe, but the whole apartment was burned out. It’ll take them a while to go through the debris.” Ward rubbed his temples. “I’m being kept in the loop.”

“Sir,” Carter said, shifting uncomfortably in her seat, “why is he doing this? Why lure Leopold here, only to send him to die? What kind of monster does that to his own son?”

Ward stood up. “I don’t know, but I’m damned sure not going anywhere else until I find out.” He headed for the door. “Let’s go find out what this bastard knows.”

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“Good to see you again, Director.”

Ward stood in the viewing room, the thick glass separating him from Robert Blake. The

prisoner stood serenely in the center of his cell, hands folded lightly in front of him, still wearing his suit jacket.

“I had expected you a little earlier, but no matter.” Blake smiled. “I trust you have news.”

Carter and Burke stood to the rear, near the door. Ward could hear them breathing, their clothes rustling as they shifted from foot to foot.

“Okay, Blake,” Ward said. “Let’s talk.”

“Be my guest.”

The director stepped forward, his face almost touching the glass. “Six people are dead. Six good people. I want to know why.”

“The way you look at me, Richard,” Blake said, ignoring him. “You have such hate in your eyes. Do you hate me?” He shook his head. “You don’t even know me. You have no idea why I’m doing what I’m doing. If you did, you might change your mind. Some people would call me a patriot.”

Ward clenched his teeth. “All I see is evil. And evil is something I take great pleasure in eradicating.” He felt the anger in his stomach rising. “I don’t give a shit that you think you’re special. I only care that you’re the asshole responsible for the deaths of six innocent people, and I want to know why. That makes you very much at my mercy, Mr. Blake.”

Robert shook his head. “A pity. And I had such high hopes for you.”

“Save it for someone who gives a damn,”

Ward said. “Your days on this earth are very much numbered. Why not make what’s left of your time here a little more bearable?”

“Are you trying to threaten me, Richard?”

“Tell me why a person, even one as messed up as you clearly are, would lure his own son here – only to have him killed later?”

Robert blinked. “An unfortunate outcome. But necessary. I take no pleasure in it, believe me.”

“I think you take great pleasure in it.”

A flurry of movement and Robert was up against the glass, his face pressed up against the pane. Ward flinched, almost losing his nerve. He felt his heartbeat quicken, thumping against his ribs.

“You don’t know a thing about me,” Blake said, his eyes locked onto Ward’s. “You don’t know anything about my son.”

The director held fast, ignoring the compulsion to take a step backward. He had clearly touched a nerve, and was determined to press it to his advantage.

“All you need to know,” Blake continued, “is that I’m where I want to be. This is my design. You only get to know what I want you to find out. Nothing more.”

“Yeah, well good luck with that,” Ward replied. “Because the way I see it, you aren’t going anywhere else any time soon. So you better get comfortable.”

Robert stepped backward and resumed his position in the center of the floor. “You

remember what I said before, director? About looking in the wrong place?”

“Cut the bullshit,” Ward said. “Whatever you *think* you’ve got planned, forget it. If you’re not going to cooperate, I know a nice little place outside of Federal jurisdiction that would suit you just fine. No need for troublesome irritations like trials and due process out there. Just good, old-fashioned iron bars and stone walls. You can rot away in a ten-by-ten room for the rest of your natural life.” He grinned. “Assuming you don’t take the coward’s way out, that is.”

“That’s all very impressive. You’ve been a most gracious host, but I won’t be staying here much longer. I’ve got far too much work to do.”

Ward laughed. “Listen. Let me make this one hundred percent clear for you. You are not getting out. Not now, not ever. And if you don’t answer my damn questions and tell me what the hell you’re planning, I will make it my personal mission to ensure the little time you have left in my company is as painful as humanly possible. I will then make sure whoever runs the shithole we end up shipping you to feels the same way.” The anger started to bubble again and Ward felt his skin flush. “Do you get me, asshole?”

“Now, now,” Blake said, tutting. “There’s no reason we can’t be civil. It’s language like this that makes me glad I won’t have to listen to you much longer.”



“If you get any more delusional, I’ll have you confined to a padded cell,” Ward said, stepping back from the glass. “This facility is sixty feet underground. There are half a dozen security checkpoints between you and the outside world, and several hundred armed federal agents. It’s safe to say you’re here for the long run. Get used to it.”

Robert chuckled softly. “Wrong again, Director.”

Taking a seat, Ward crossed his legs and sighed. “Please,” he said, “indulge me. How does the great Robert Blake intend to escape?”

“Who said anything about escaping? I don’t plan on forcing my way out.”

“Oh, really?”

“I don’t need to escape.” Blake said, a smile forming on his lips. “Because, before we’re done here, you’ll be begging me to leave.”

## Chapter 20

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“WHAT THE HELL just happened?”

Marshall’s voice sounded strained, his breath coming out in ragged bursts. Leopold blinked hard, trying to shut out the ringing noise in his ears, and pulled himself up off the floor. His clothes were badly crumpled, but the force of the blast seemed to have left him largely unscathed. Sucking in a deep breath, Leopold looked around. The room was dark and hot, the air thick with dust, and a throbbing pain shooting through the back of his skull stole his focus.

“Blake, are you all right?” Marshall got to his feet, shaking slightly. He leaned up against the wall for support, barely visible in the low light. “Where are we?”

Leopold blinked again, trying to clear the dust from his eyes. He glanced around the room, noticing four other bodies sprawled on the floor.

“Is everybody okay?” One of the bodies moved. Then another.

“Mary?” Leopold squinted in the gloom. “Is that you?”

“Who else would it be?”

“Where’s Jerome?”

“Here,” a deep voice announced. “How about some light?”

Leopold ran his palm against the wall until he found the switch. The room burst into view, the harsh halogen lights illuminating every corner of the small space. The walls were lined with video monitors, control panels and HUDs taking up most of the space between. Leopold clenched his teeth as the pain in his skull worsened.

“Can somebody answer my damn question?” Marshall said, rubbing the back of his head. “What the hell happened?”

A muffled groan announced agent Simmons’ arrival into the conversation, followed shortly by Curtis, who coughed loudly as he dragged himself up onto his feet.

“What is this place?” Curtis said, brushing the dirt off his clothes.

Leopold straightened his jacket and looked around. “Welcome to my panic room, gentlemen,” he said. “Turns out it makes a pretty good bomb shelter too.”

Jerome smiled. “I told you this place was a good idea.”

“Twelve-inch reinforced steel walls and the latest satellite communications,” Leopold continued, ignoring him. “Fiber-optic connection to pretty much anywhere in the world.”

Marshall tapped a video monitor with his knuckles. “Looks broken.”

Leopold frowned and tried a few buttons. Nothing. “The blast must have taken out the power,” he said.

“So much for the latest technology.”

“We’re alive, aren’t we?” said Leopold.

“Yeah, maybe you want to run that by me one more time.” Marshall folded his arms.

Simmons stepped forward, shaking the dust out of his hair. “Somebody activated the bomb remotely,” he said. “Blake got this place open just in time. We’re lucky to be alive – I’m surprised the blast didn’t take down the roof supports.”

“If we’d been a few floors down, it would have.” Leopold took out his cell phone. “Damn. My handset’s not working, either.”

“Same here.” Marshall held up his phone. “Looks like the blast set off some kind of electromagnetic pulse when your systems got fried. Knocked out anything electrical. Anybody wearing a watch?”

“Dead,” Mary said, checking her wrist. “Looks like you might be right.”

“I think I hurt my leg,” Curtis said, rubbing his ankle. “Any plans on getting us out of here?”

Leopold shook his head. “Whoever set the bomb off must have been watching us somehow. Chances are they stuck around to make sure we were taken out. If they figure out we survived, they’ll find a way to finish the job.”

“We need to get out of here some time,” said Mary. “Unless everybody likes the idea of starving to death in a metal box.”

“Not really,” said Simmons. “Although we’d

probably die of thirst way before that.” He caught Mary’s stare and flinched. “But Blake’s right. We can’t just walk out of here and risk being seen. I assume we *can* actually get out of here?”

“There’s a mechanical backup that should disengage the doors, but we need to be careful. If they think we were taken out in the blast, we have an advantage,” said Leopold. “And if we want to survive this, we’re going to need every advantage we’ve got.”

“Any bright ideas?” Marshall said.

Leopold paused for a moment, considering their options. “If they planted any video surveillance in the apartment, it won’t work now, not after the explosion. This part of the penthouse is pretty far back from the windows, so there’s no direct line of sight, especially if there’s any smoke cover. If they’re using infrared, the residual heat from the blast should mask our presence outside the panic room.”

“So let’s get out of here.”

“We don’t know where they have people watching,” Leopold continued. “We can’t leave the building until we know we’re in the clear.”

“And how exactly are we going to know that?”

“They’re looking for dead bodies, right?”

Marshall nodded.

“So let’s give them some dead bodies.”

“If you’re suggesting a human sacrifice, I

don't think the bureau will support it."

"Leopold's right," Mary said. "They're looking for six dead bodies. The emergency response teams will be here soon, and I'm sure the medical examiner won't be far behind. If they wheel out six gurneys with six body bags, who's going to know the difference?"

"What about infrared? Dead bodies are room temperature after a while, they'll be able to tell we're still giving off heat."

"Nothing a few thermal blankets can't fix," said Leopold. "Standard issue for emergency responders. Wrap up in one of those, and anyone using a scope won't be able to see the difference in temperature." He turned to Mary. "Can you make this happen?"

Mary pulled out her badge. "No problem. Six body bags, coming up."

"Good." He smiled. "Once we get out of here, I'll need you to get Captain Oakes on the phone. We need him in the loop if we want to keep our little secret under wraps." He turned to Marshall. "Same goes for you. Make sure you get hold of Director Ward and let him know what's going on – we'll need the FBI on our side."

"Assuming this works," Marshall said, "the director should be able to keep anyone from sniffing around." He paused. "Speaking of which, there's going to be people out looking for you. And you're not exactly a low-profile kind of guy. People know your face, and they

might react a little to the fact you're supposed to be dead."

"We have procedures in place," said Jerome.

Leopold nodded, ignoring the throbbing pain in his head. "Which brings me on to my next point. I'll need you to call in a few favors."

"What kind of favors?" Marshall asked.

"Your buddies back at the bureau can arrange for flights out of the country, right?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"Get the jet that brought me here refueled and ready to go. Feed them some story about national security, whatever keeps them from asking too many questions. What's the range on those aircraft?"

"The G280 should get you around four thousand miles."

Jerome stepped forward. "That's not going to be far enough. We'll have to make a stop to refuel. Can you handle the paperwork?"

"Where exactly where you planning on going?" Marshall said, arms folded.

"Jerome has protocols in place for this sort of thing," Leopold said, slapping the bodyguard on the shoulder. "Being a high-profile figure isn't all fun and games. I used to think he was being paranoid, but I guess I was wrong."

"Understatement of the year," Mary said.

Leopold turned back to Marshall. "We need to get to Shanghai."

"China? You want to fly to China? Talk

about overkill,” said Mary. “I’m not leaving the country while these bastards are still out to find us.”

“Shanghai is the most populous city on the planet. It makes sense to hide there.” Leopold shook his head. “Well, it made sense to Jerome, anyway. We have a safe house registered under an assumed name and enough supplies to keep us under the radar indefinitely, not to mention some well-placed locals on the payroll.” He met Mary’s stare. “And don’t worry about leaving the country. I need you to stay here and find out what you can.”

“While you run away?”

“I’m not running away. But I can’t offer much help if I blow our cover, can I?” Leopold paused. “Call it a tactical retreat. Just keep your head down and nobody will recognize you. Make sure Captain Oakes has your back and you’ll be fine.”

Mary shook her head. “I guess you want to tell me to trust you again?”

Leopold felt his skin flush. “Something like that, yeah.” He turned back to Marshall. “Can you make this work?”

The special agent nodded. “Get me a working cell phone and I’ll make some calls. We can have you in the air in two hours.”

“It’s the best plan we’ve got,” said Curtis. “I don’t relish the idea of being gunned down in the street.” He glanced around the room. “And I definitely don’t want to spend the rest



of my natural life locked up in here with all of you.” He paused. “No offense.”

“So, we’re all agreed on this?” Marshall said.

Agent Simmons nodded. “Detective Jordan can handle the emergency teams. We’ll make sure this is kept under wraps.”

“I can’t think of anything better right now,” said Mary. “And any plan that lets me get a little payback works for me.”

“Good. Then let’s move out,” said Leopold, fastening his jacket and heading for the door. “The game is just getting started.”

## Chapter 21

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CAMPBELL FELT THE fierce wind bite his cheeks, chilling him deep to his core. Fifty stories up on the roof of a mostly empty office building, the temperature had dropped considerably and the lack of cloud cover only made the situation worse. Ignoring the numbing pain in his hands and face, Campbell assembled his rifle, a customized Barrett, and picked up the infrared scope, aiming it at the remains of Blake's penthouse.

Across the street, the small fires had died down a little, but the residual heat made his job difficult. Blake's apartment glowed a muddy red in the viewfinder, the details of the interior impossible to make out with any degree of clarity. The rifle's scope fared no better – with little ambient light inside the building, the chances of visual confirmation at this range were unlikely. He would have to wait for the emergency response teams to arrive and do the reconnaissance for him.

Campbell sighed and checked his watch. *Where the hell are the paramedics?*

Miraculously, the explosion had caused very little structural damage to the apartment building. This had been the plan, of course – more a show of power than any real attempt at destruction – but Campbell was still

surprised nobody on the streets below had been seriously hurt. Aside from a few rear-end traffic collisions immediately following the blast, and perhaps a few minor injuries from the shattered plate glass windows, there seemed to be very little in the way of collateral damage.

Still peering through the scope, Campbell turned his attention south, in the direction of the nearest hospital. The wind picked up again, filling his eardrums, drowning out most of the noise from the city below, and he increased the lens' magnification. Ahead, barely visible in the dense traffic, Campbell spotted the ambulance, sirens flashing.

*It's about time.*

The traffic parted and the emergency vehicles surged along Fifth Avenue, screaming to a halt outside Blake's apartment building less than a minute later, closely followed by the FDNY and the NYPD. Campbell focused on the main entrance, watching closely as New York's finest streamed through the doors, disappearing from view. On the sidewalk, a handful of armored police set up barriers, keeping back the crowd. Parked at the corner, he saw a pair of unmarked black sedans, probably FBI.

After what felt like hours, although Campbell's watch only registered twenty minutes, he caught sight of movement near the building's foyer. The porter opened the doors and six paramedics stepped outside,

each wheeling a metal gurney complete with black rubber body bag. Campbell switched back to infrared and studied the scene.

The paramedics, police officers, and remaining firefighters glowed red and yellow against the cold, dark background. The six body bags glowed a deep blue, apparently still hanging on to the last of the blast's intense heat.

Still, far too cold to be alive.

Campbell stole one last glance at the parked sedans and disassembled the Barrett, stowing it away in his rucksack along with the infrared scope and tripod. Feeling the harsh wind pick up once more, he shouldered the bag and headed back inside – keen to join the others at the rendezvous point.

After all, there was still work to do.

## Chapter 22

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“SIR, WE’RE RUNNING late.”

Hawkes turned to face Grayson, who sat next to him in the Range Rover’s passenger seat. The other members of the team, Kowalski, Higgs, and Stanton, waited in a second vehicle at the end of the block, out of sight.

Grayson pointed to his watch. “Campbell should have checked in by now.”

“Be patient,” Hawkes said, cranking up the heaters. “We can make up for lost time on the road.”

“Assuming the FBI doesn’t catch up with us first.” Grayson frowned. “Sir.”

Hawkes caught the note of dissent and made a mental note to deal with it later. “Just keep your eyes open, soldier,” he said. “Let me worry about the FBI. You worry about getting us the pass codes we need.”

“They came through, sir.”

“Verified?”

“I don’t think he’d dare mess with us, sir. Not with the leverage we’ve got.”

“Check them anyway. This is not the time for leaving things to chance.”

“I think you made that point very clear, sir.”

Hawkes scowled. “You got something to say, soldier?”

“No, sir.” Grayson shuffled uncomfortably in his seat. “It’s just...” He trailed off, apparently searching for the right words. “Our orders, sir. Blake wasn’t supposed to be –”

“Blake is a risk. I’m running this operation, so it’s my call.” The colonel turned to face front. “Do you get me, soldier?”

“Yes, sir.”

The colonel ground his teeth. Grayson was an excellent tactician and capable lieutenant, but his respect for the chain of command left much to be desired. Gripping the steering wheel, Hawkes let the uncomfortable silence linger a little longer.

Grayson stirred. “Incoming, sir.”

The colonel let his hand drift down to his sidearm. The police were swarming around Blake’s apartment, just a couple blocks away. Hawkes didn’t want to leave a trail, but if anyone spotted them...

“It’s Campbell, sir.” Grayson said, peering at the side mirror. “He’s alone.”

Hawkes allowed himself to relax a little. He heard the rear door open as Campbell climbed inside, slinging his rucksack across the adjacent seat.

“Report.” Hawkes started the engine, hoping the heat from the V8 under the hood would help warm up the interior a little faster.

Campbell sucked in a deep breath. “Paramedics arrived a little late, sir.” He paused. “Visibility was poor, but I checked six body bags leaving the building. Infrared

confirmed it.”

“Good.” Hawkes threw the Range Rover into gear and rolled out into the road. Checking the rear-view mirror, he saw Higgs follow a few seconds behind, his own vehicle’s headlamps cutting through the darkness. He addressed Campbell again. “Anyone spot you?”

“Negative, sir. Everyone was too busy dealing with the crowds.”

“Let’s hope it stays that way,” Hawkes said, steering the Range Rover onto the main road. “We’ve got a long drive ahead of us. Everyone buckle up.”

The colonel pressed his right foot to the floor and the bulky SUV surged forward, quickly getting lost in the busy New York City traffic. Drifting along in a sea of red taillights, Hawkes felt the excitement burning in his chest – in just a few hours’ time, the plan would be well underway, his retirement plans assured.

And there was no going back now.

## Chapter 23

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LEOPOLD STARED INTO the darkness and tried not to breathe. The stink of sweat and rubber flooded his nostrils and his chest burned, the lack of air making it hard to stay focused. He felt his prone body lifted up, followed shortly after by the sound of clattering metal. Nearby, voices shouting something inaudible, the sound of an engine revving. The sensation of sudden acceleration made his stomach lurch.

Bright light flooded his eyes. A face appeared, wearing a look of concern. A female paramedic, short blonde hair, pale skin. Dark brown eyes.

“Looks like we made it,” she said, a smile crossing her lips as she unzipped the body bag. “I’ve got to say, it makes a nice change to open one of these up and not find a corpse.”

Fresh air hit Leopold’s lungs and he sucked in a deep breath. The black rubber bag lay open around him, but the thermal blankets still kept all his body heat contained. Sweat dripped down his neck and back, soaking his shirt.

“How do you feel?”

Leopold glanced around. He found himself lying on a gurney in the back of an ambulance; the air filled with a curious mix of



diesel oil and iodine smells. Ahead, visible through the windshield, the traffic parted and the vehicle rocked from side as it plowed forward.

“Where are we going?” Leopold said, sitting up. “Where are the others?”

“The coroner’s team got here just as we were wheeling you out,” said the paramedic, holding on to the side of the gurney as the vehicle rounded a tight corner. “We managed to squeeze most of you in the vans. Detective Jordan is following in another ambulance.”

“She’ll be glad you’re letting her bunk by herself.”

“I thought she might. I’m Cynthia, by the way.” She held out a hand.

“Leopold.” He shrugged off the blanket. “Pleasure to meet you.”

“We’ve been told to get you to Lenox Hill hospital. Apparently there’s a car waiting for you.”

“Good. How long?”

“It’s just a few minutes.” She paused. “Listen, nobody’s said what this is all about...”

“Best not to ask too many questions,” Leopold said, shaking his head. “It might get you into trouble.”

“Yeah, that lady cop said the same thing. Well, whatever it is, I hope it all works out.”

“Me too.” He smiled, although it felt forced. The ambulance hit a pothole and Leopold felt himself almost thrown from the gurney. “Jesus, doesn’t this thing have

shocks?”

“You get used to it.”

“I hope I don’t have to.”

Cynthia smiled. “Me too. Not that I don’t appreciate the occasional distraction, but I get the feeling hanging around with you might be bad for my long term health.” She turned to face forward. “We’re nearly at the hospital. We should probably get you out of that blanket before you get dehydrated.”

Leopold pulled off the thermal wrap from around his waist and legs as the ambulance rounded another corner. He felt the cool air hit him, relief flooding his body. Tossing the blanket to the side, he held on to the gurney as they slowed suddenly, the hospital’s ambulance bay coming up ahead.

The driver sailed past the main entrance, turning another corner to an underground parking lot. Plunging into the darkness, the ambulance screeched to a dead stop just a few feet from the back wall. The automatic lights flickered on, flooding the basement. A few seconds later, the sound of squealing tires as two coroners’ vans and the second ambulance arrived, pulling up close by.

“Everybody out,” the driver said, pushing open the door and climbing out.

“Looks like this is your stop,” said Cynthia, helping Leopold off the gurney.

“Thanks for all your help.”

“Just try not to make a habit out of it.” She opened the rear doors. “Good luck. Whatever

it is you've gotten mixed up in."

Leopold nodded. "Thanks. I've got a feeling I'm going to need all the luck I can get." He climbed out of the vehicle and stepped out onto the asphalt, feeling the air temperature drop considerably as Cynthia shut the doors behind him. The parking lot was damp, but at least it provided shelter from the wind.

The other vehicles killed their engines. The doors opened and Marshall emerged, looking a little disheveled. Mary followed close behind, wiping her brow with the back of a sleeve. Jerome and the other agents stepped out last, each making their way over to where Leopold stood.

"We're looking for a black Suburban," Marshall said. "One of the paramedics was kind enough to lend me a cell phone while we were getting bagged. The field office said they'd drop the vehicle here."

Leopold smiled. "A black Suburban? Don't you guys ever get bored of the same color?"

The special agent didn't reply.

"Over there," Jerome said, pointing to a large SUV parked at the other end of the lot. Marshall stalked off as the emergency vehicles started their engines and pulled away, rolling toward the main entrance and out of sight, leaving a faint cloud of exhaust fumes in their wake.

"You coming?" Leopold said to Mary.

"Right behind you," she replied.

“Good luck,” Simmons said, arms folded against the cold. He turned to his partner. “This is it for us. We’ve got a lot of paperwork to get through back at the field office if we ever hope to keep this under wraps.”

Curtis nodded. “We’ll get the flight plans arranged and feed the media something about the blast.” He paused. “As of today, you’re a dead man. Congratulations.”

“See if you can lay some groundwork with Captain Oakes,” Mary said. “He’s not going to like hearing it from me.”

“My pleasure. But for now, I think we need to find a cab.”

The two agents nodded curtly and marched off. Ahead, Marshall waved them over, holding a set of car keys aloft.

“Looks like our ride is ready,” said Leopold, turning to Jerome. “I hope China has better weather.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it.”

## Chapter 24

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“MR. BLAKE, SO nice to see you again.” The pilot arched his eyebrows as Leopold stepped out of the Suburban. Marshall turned off the engine and climbed out next, followed by Jerome and Mary. The jet stood ready, taking up most of the hangar space, sheltered from the howling winds outside.

“Captain Gray, a pleasure as always.” Leopold nodded his head. “You and I seem to be getting to know each other rather well.”

“It must be my lucky day,” said Gray. “Let’s get this over with shall we? Will it be the four of you this time?”

“Just these two,” Marshall said, gesturing toward Leopold and Jerome.

“Are you looking to collect air miles, gentlemen? I’d say you’re going to rack up quite a few if this carries on much longer.” Gray sighed. “Your field office was a little vague on the phone. Shanghai, is it?”

“Here are the details, along with the flight codes you’ll need.” Marshall handed the pilot a slip of paper. “You’ll stop to refuel on the west coast; that’ll get you across the Pacific in one piece. We’ll get your flight path cleared with the Chinese aviation authorities. They’ll be expecting you.”

Gray took the note. “I’ll make sure I give

them your regards.” Turning to his passengers, “Are you ready, gentlemen?”

Leopold glanced at Jerome. “Go ahead. Just give me a minute.”

The bodyguard nodded. “I’ll be inside.”

“Five minutes. Otherwise we miss our slot.” Gray turned and marched off toward the Gulfstream. Jerome followed.

“I’ll leave you two alone,” said Marshall, heading back to the Suburban. He glanced at Leopold as he opened the driver door. “Don’t take too long, Blake.”

Leopold ignored him, moving in close to Mary as the special agent climbed inside the SUV and started the engine. Mary sighed and looked up him.

“I suppose this is ‘goodbye’ for a while,” she said. “I’ve got to say, you’re going to some extreme lengths to avoid talking to me.”

Leopold grinned. “I never was one for conversation.”

“We’ll just carry on where we left off when you get back.”

“*If* I get back.”

She rolled her eyes. “Always with the drama.”

“After what’s happened today, who knows?”

“Do you at least have a plan?”

“There are a few leads to chase down with the local payroll when we land. I have to assume nobody’s looking for me out there, but I’ll need to stay under the radar.”

Mary folded her arms, hugging her thin

jacket. “You do what you need to do out there, and then get your ass back home. Marshall and I can handle things while you’re gone. After all, your father’s not going anywhere, is he? We’ll get to the bottom of this, eventually. And then you won’t have to be dead anymore.” She paused. “Well, at least for a while, anyway.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“That was me being generous.”

Leopold smiled. “Fair enough.” He turned to look at the jet behind him, spotting the outline of Jerome in one of the windows.

“You need to get going,” Mary said. “We’ve all got work to do.”

“Yeah, I know.” He looked into her eyes. “Listen, I meant it when I said I was sorry. I’ve had a lot on my mind. It’s – ”

Mary shook her head. “Let’s not open that can of worms, shall we?” She shivered a little. “Look, it’s cold and I’m still dealing with the fact I nearly got blown up earlier. How about we just drop it and concentrate on fixing this mess. Then we can all go back to our lives and you can carry on doing whatever you like.”

Leopold felt his stomach clench. “Sure, if that’s what you want.”

A pause. “It is.”

“Then I guess it’s so long for now.”

“Goodbye, Leopold.” Mary offered a weak smile and turned away, heading back to the SUV without looking back. Leopold bit the inside of his lip, a little too hard, and followed

suit, making a beeline for the Gulfstream and, hopefully, a few hours' restful sleep. The unease in his stomach worsened and his climbed the steps.

"Buckle up," Jerome said, as Leopold stepped into the cabin. "We've got a long flight ahead of us, and I want to go over the plan while we're in the air."

"I guess a nap's out of the question?"

Jerome glared back at him.

"I figured as much." Leopold sighed and took a seat next to the bodyguard, fastening his safety belt.

Captain Gray poked his head through the curtain. "We're all set. I'm taking us out now. Fight time is fourteen hours, with an hour or so to refuel along the way. I'd get comfortable, if I were you." He disappeared back into the cockpit.

With a muffled rumble, the jet's twin engines kicked in and the Gulfstream began to crawl toward the hangar doors. Leopold looked out the window as they hit the runway, the muddy glow of city lights burning the nighttime sky on the horizon. With one final glance, he pulled down the shutter and closed his eyes – offering a silent prayer to a deity he didn't believe in for a miracle he knew would never come.



## Chapter 25

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“JESUS CHRIST, DO you know what kind of shit storm you’re stirring up here?” Director Ward clenched his cell phone in his fist, the chassis buckling slightly under his grip. His office stood empty, Carter and Burke long gone, and the first signs of the dawn light were filtering slowly through the gloom. Having spent all night poring through case files, Ward was in no mood for mincing words. “And why am I only finding out about this now?”

A slight pause on the line. “Sir, we had no choice.”

Ward gritted his teeth. “Bullshit, Marshall. There are protocols in place for a reason. Now you’re asking me to keep this to myself? I could go to prison. Hell, we could all go to prison for this.”

“Sir, we had no way of knowing whether we were being watched, so we took the necessary precautions. Assuming the gamble paid off, whoever set off that bomb thinks we’re dead. That gives us an advantage.”

“That’s only if nobody else gets wind of what you’re trying to pull.” He shook his head. “Jesus, so Blake’s alive?”

“Yes, sir. On his way out of the country.”

“Let me guess, you arranged that too?”

“I had to pull a few favors, sir. Nobody asked too many questions.”

“And where is he headed?”

Marshall didn’t reply straight away. “Better you stay in the dark on that one, sir.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

“Better you don’t know, sir. Like you said, there are protocols.”

Ward sighed deeply, rubbing his temples. After more than a month of dealing with a newborn son, he was used to sleepless nights, but the director knew staying sharp enough to make rational decisions required at least a few hours’ shuteye – a luxury he hadn’t enjoyed in more than thirty-six hours. He decided to give Marshall the benefit of the doubt.

“Fine,” Ward said, finally. “But you need to keep me in the loop. I suppose you and Detective Jordan have some kind of plan?”

“Yes, sir. If we can trace where the explosives entered the country, we might be able to track them. There’s no way anybody could ship something in like this without some kind of cover story. We just need to know where to look.” He coughed.

“You doing okay?” Ward felt his anger lessen; reminding himself what Marshall had just been through. “Any casualties?”

“No, sir. Blake got us into his safe room just before the bomb went off. I hate to say it, but he saved our lives. Just a little smoke inhalation, that’s all.”

“Anyone brief you on the collateral

damage?” Ward recalled his conversation with the Mayor.

“We were out of there pretty fast, sir. The paramedics didn’t seem to know much, either. Was anyone else hurt?”

“Reports are still coming in. Minor injuries, mostly from the panic that ensued after the blast. People are pretty shook up, but mostly okay.”

“You think that was the intention? I mean, there could have been considerably more damage.”

“The explosion was a clean blast. No signs of biological payload and no shrapnel found at the scene.” Ward rubbed his chin absentmindedly. “So, yes – this could have been a lot worse. But perhaps that was the point.”

“You saying we can expect worse things to come?”

“This was a surgical strike, aimed at a very specific target. Or, in this case, targets. According to the explosives experts, the payload could easily have been much more destructive. We have to assume the worst.”

“How does Blake fit in with all this?”

Ward slumped in his chair. “Which one?”

“Either.”

“We still don’t know. Is there anything Leopold or Detective Jordan mentioned that might give us a lead?”

Marshall paused, apparently thinking it through. “I overheard a conversation between

her and Blake just before the bomb went off. Something about an issue at his company. They seemed pretty cagey.”

“According to the grapevine, part of Blake Investments was sold off without Leopold’s knowledge. An inside job. Or, at least, that’s what the Financial Times is calling it.”

“What kind of work were they doing?”

Ward felt his pulse quicken. “Jesus Christ, that can’t be what’s going on here.”

“Sir?”

“The division that Blake lost control of,” Ward stood up, “was a research company specializing in biological and chemical research.”

“What kind of research?”

“Damned if I know. But with all this happening at once, it’s not much of a stretch to assume it’s connected.”

“Connected how?”

Ward headed for the door. “I’ll need you to touch base with the CDC, figure out if they’ve got anything on their radar about possible biological weapons attacks.”

“Sir?”

“Listen – Blake lost control of his company, and a few days later his supposedly dead father shows up? Someone with links to terrorist cells and working knowledge of how his son’s company operates? Not to mention possible connections with the executive board. You can’t tell me this isn’t setting off alarms, Marshall.”

The special agent inhaled sharply. “So we’re looking for any noise about possible attacks? The CIA isn’t going to be very accommodating, sir.”

“Let me worry about that,” said Ward, stepping out into the hallway and making his way to the elevator. “Just get in touch with the CDC and find out what you can.”

“What will you do, sir?”

Ward hit the elevator call button and took a deep breath. “Thankfully, there’s somebody else who might be able to give us some answers.”

He hung up.

## Chapter 26

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“BACK AGAIN SO soon?” Robert Blake stood behind the glass, a passive expression on his angular face. His eyes looked tired, but his tone sounded jovial. Mocking.

Ward didn't bother sitting. “This game of yours, or whatever it is you think you're doing, is over. I've got you in my own personal storage locker. Give me some answers and maybe I'll think about moving you somewhere a little more pleasant.”

Robert glanced around the holding cell and smiled. “This isn't so bad.”

“I can make it a lot worse.”

“I don't doubt you, Director. But the winds are changing. You'll want to be rid of me soon enough.”

“What's your connection with Chemworks?”

The prisoner blinked. “I see you've been doing some research.”

“You orchestrated the takeover, then you show up here. It was only a matter of time before we put two and two together.”

“I can see basic arithmetic didn't stump you for too long,” Robert said. “Bravo.”

“Cut the crap. I know what kind of research Chemworks was involved in. Potential development of biological weapons,

according to the files. Luckily for me, that gives the CIA power to lobby the UN and the EU courts for immediate release of company records. I doubt we'll have much trouble linking you to all this – and you can imagine what the US government does to people planning attacks on domestic soil.” Ward folded his arms. “Or maybe you help me out a little, and I'll see what the Attorney General can do about your long-term living arrangements. And when I say ‘living,’ you know what I mean.”

Robert chuckled. “All very threatening, but by the time the UN decides to help, it will be too late.”

“Why are you here? You could have stayed under the radar.”

“You know why.”

Ward clenched his teeth. “Your son.”

“Indeed. He had information I required.”

“You killed your own flesh and blood for a few banking codes?”

Robert stepped forward. “Oh, it was much more than banking codes, Director. People have died for far less.” He paused, looking the director in the eyes. “Although I had hoped he would stay in the game a little longer.”

Ward glared back, catching what he thought looked like a hint of remorse in the prisoner's tone. The FBI director had seen it before: enemy combatants faced with the realities of what they had done. But if Robert Blake had regrets, he wasn't showing it.

“Lost for words, Richard?”

Ward snapped out of his thoughts. “Just enjoying the idea of you rotting away in solitary,” he said. “This is your last chance to appeal to my generous nature. Tell me about what you’ve got planned. There are no more moves open to you.”

Robert stepped backward, his hands clasped serenely in front of him. “Victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win.”

“Sun Tzu,” said Ward, “isn’t going to help you now. You can’t win this.”

“On the contrary, Director,” Robert said, smiling. “I already have.”



## Chapter 27

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THE MORNING SUN had risen in earnest, blazing its white light across the chilly streets of Washington D.C. as the pair of black Range Rovers pulled up to the curb. The early frosts showed no signs of melting, the eager winds still cold enough to sting Hawkes' cheeks as he stepped out of the SUV and on to the sidewalk. The back streets were deserted, most of the locals out at work or shut indoors, and Hawkes blew into his hands as the rest of his team assembled, his warm breath fogging in front of his face. Dressed in ugly dark suits, handguns holstered to their ribs, the others converged around the lead vehicle and stood ready.

"Do we have confirmation?" Hawkes said, aiming the question at Grayson.

"Yes, sir." Grayson straightened his tie. "The remaining codes came through a few minutes ago, as planned. We should have the most recent iterations, which gives us an hour before they rotate again." He checked his watch. "Fifty-seven minutes and forty seconds, to be exact."

The others checked their own watches and set the countdown. Hawkes pulled out a security pass with the FBI logo printed on the front. "Let's hope Patel came through for us.

For his sake.”

“They look legit, sir. He’s not likely to mess with us.”

Hawkes grunted. “Time to move out.”

The team nodded in unison and Hawkes marched off, crossing the street and heading toward the hulking J. Edgar Hoover building just a few blocks away. With everything that had happened in the last twenty-four hours, the colonel knew tensions would be running high at FBI headquarters – a fact he hoped would keep most of the bureau busy while he and his team completed their mission. Still, in the pit of his stomach, Hawkes felt the familiar unease that accompanied any incursion into enemy territory gnawing at him. Gritting his teeth, he focused his mind on other things.

After thirty years’ service with the United States Marine Corps, a field injury had left the colonel unable to serve. Coupled with what the unit psychologist considered “mental trauma,” Hawkes had been forced to endure the indignity of an early discharge. With more than half his life spent in service, it might as well have been a death sentence. With no family to support, no career left, and no desire to sit behind a desk for the rest of his life, Hawkes had quickly descended into hopelessness. Ten years of sobriety had quickly turned into nightly drinking sessions, then daily. After that, the whiskey never stopped flowing. A mere shadow of the man

he once was, Hawkes had come dangerously close to hitting bottom.

And then Robert Blake had shown up and given him something to believe in again. Had shown him what true freedom meant; freedom from desire, freedom from oppression, freedom from everything modern America stood for. In a country where millions were starving in poverty, he had shown Hawkes that true freedom could only be bought with blood.

And it was time to cash in.

Hawkes held up a fist as they drew up to the FBI headquarters. “Game faces, gentlemen,” he said, turning his head to address the others. “ID badges out, eyes down. Don’t look into any of the cameras, and keep close behind me. I’ll do the talking.”

The team nodded silently. Hawkes turned and headed toward the main entrance, taking the shallow steps one at a time. He felt his pulse quicken, thumping in his ears, and quickly sucked in a deep breath. Reaching the summit, the automatic doors slid open, blasting warm air into the colonel’s face. He caught the scent of floor polish as he stepped inside, the sounds of air-conditioning units humming along in the background. Ahead, the main security checkpoints complete with bulletproof booths, each housing a bored-looking attendant waiting to check visitors’ ID. The employees’ entrances stood a little further back, watched over by an armed guard

dressed in a gray uniform.

Security badge clasped tightly in his hand, Hawkes walked calmly past the nearest booth toward the turnstiles, placing his handgun, wallet, cell phone, and keys into the plastic trays for inspection. The security officer stalked over, producing a metallic wand from his belt. He waved the device over the contents of the tray. Apparently satisfied no contraband was present, he returned the wand back to its holster and turned his attention back to Hawkes. The colonel held up his FBI badge, a painstakingly exact replica complete with photograph ID and barcode.

The guard glanced at the photo and then at Hawkes' face. "All good sir, go ahead." He took a few steps back.

Swiping his card across the reader, the colonel held his breath. A metallic chirp announced the security pass had been accepted, and the turnstile clicked open. Hawkes pushed through, nodding at the security officer as he retrieved his possessions from the tray. The others followed suit, congregating in the hallway.

Hawkes checked his watch. "They bought the IDs, so as far as anyone here is concerned, we're just regular special agents. We should have a pretty clear run of the building, assuming Patel's codes are legit, so move fast and keep your eyes down. Don't draw your weapons unless you're forced. We've got fifty minutes to clear the building and we're behind

schedule.” He glanced at Grayson. “Take Higgs and Kowalski up to the server room. Get in touch when it’s done. We won’t be able to keep this quiet for long.”

“Yes, sir.” Grayson waved his team forward.

“You’ve got eight minutes,” Hawkes said. “Campbell, Stanton - you’re with me. Visiting hours are officially open. Let’s move.”

Grayson marched off in the opposite direction as Hawkes turned and led his team toward a set of double doors. Swiping his security card, Hawkes pushed through the doorway and headed straight for the elevators at the end of the corridor.

The metal doors rumbled open, and Hawkes stepped inside, pulling out his cell phone. He scrolled through his messages as Stanton and Campbell entered, the doors sliding closed behind them. Hawkes found the message he was looking for and punched a sequence of numbers into the elevator’s control panel.

“Seven minutes,” he said, the carriage rocking slightly as it began its descent. “Then all hell breaks loose.”

## Chapter 28

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RICHARD WARD SLAMMED the viewing room door behind him, stepping out into the harshly lit and deserted corridors of Level Zero, anger welling in his gut. Robert Blake had given him nothing, had taunted him with his delusions of escape, and Ward knew he was no closer to understanding what Blake had planned than he had been twelve hours ago. The FBI director sucked in a deep breath, trying to clear his mind, and ran through the facts.

Robert Blake had shown up just a few weeks after masterminding a hostile takeover of a chemical and biological research company, a division of Blake Investments controlled by his son, who had presumed him dead. Further, he had allowed himself to be taken into custody to draw out his son, seemingly for the purpose of gaining access to whatever Leopold had stashed in his apartment. It was too much of a leap of faith to assume these acts were unrelated.

*So, what the hell is he planning?*

Ward sighed and shook his head. Whatever Blake knew, he was keeping it to himself, and the FBI wasn't equipped for dealing with uncooperative prisoners. Thankfully, Ward knew plenty of people who were. *Maybe it's*

*time for a prisoner transfer*, he thought, setting off at a brisk walk toward the lobby. The idea cheered him up a little.

## Chapter 29

---

HAWKES STEADIED HIS breathing as the elevator plunged them deeper and deeper into the belly of the FBI building. Rattling to a standstill, a chime sounded and the doors slid open, flooding the dark carriage with fluorescent light. Ahead, a bright foyer opened up, a fastidious-looking agent manning a reception desk just a few feet in front of a locked door. The colonel glanced at Campbell and Stanton and the two men nodded back silently.

“ID please, gentlemen,” the agent said, looking up from his desk as the three men approached.

“No problem.” Hawkes produced his security pass and badge and looked around. “Looking a little empty around here.”

“Everyone’s on alert since we got the news from Manhattan. Can’t spare the men down here, not when everything’s automated. It’s just me for now.” The agent studied the colonel’s credentials closely before swiping the pass over a magnetic reader. A red light flashed.

“You don’t have clearance for this area, sir,” he said, handing back the security card. “This is a restricted section. You’ll have to leave.”

Hawkes felt his heart thump against the



inside of his chest. *Patel screwed us.* “There must be some kind of mistake,” he said. “Try it again.”

The agent sighed and swiped the card once more. Another red light. “There’s no mistake,” he said. “You’ll have to go back up.”

Feeling the adrenaline surge through his body, Hawkes instinctively reached down for his handgun. The agent must have noticed, immediately flinching and taking a step back. The colonel reacted, drawing his weapon in one fluid motion, index finger held over the trigger. He felt movement behind him as Stanton and Campbell did the same.

“What the hell are you doing?” The agent froze, his hand hovering over his jacket opening. “Who the hell are you?”

“Don’t move,” Hawkes said, his voice steady. He raised the handgun. “This doesn’t have to get messy.”

The agent held up both hands. “Security will be here any second. There’s no way you’re getting out of here alive if you do anything stupid.”

“Bullshit. You’re bluffing.” Hawkes studied the agent’s face. “We both know there’s no cameras outside the cells down here. And you haven’t been able to reach the silent alarm.” He waved the gun at the desk. “You need to let us on through. Nobody needs to get hurt.”

The agent paused, his eyes flickering down, presumably at the alarm button just out of reach beneath the desk. “You’re not going

anywhere without the right security clearance. Even I can't get in there." He tilted his head at the locked door behind him. "Looks like you're shit out of luck."

Hawkes gritted his teeth. "You're one to talk." He took a step closer. "And unless you want to find out what a bullet through the throat feels like, I suggest you find a way of getting us past that door."

"Not going to happen."

"Then it looks like we're going to have to improvise." Hawkes gripped his weapon a little tighter.

Ahead, the sound of locks disengaging forced the colonel to break eye contact. The door blocking their path swung open and a man stepped through. He was dressed in a dark suit, with cropped graying hair and an exhausted look on his face. The man froze in the doorway as he looked up.

"What the —"

Hawkes smiled. "Director Ward, I presume?" He switched focus, aiming his handgun at the FBI director's chest. "Very glad you dropped by. It looks like we're having a little issue with security."

"How the hell did you get down here? Who are you?"

"That's not your concern." Hawkes stepped around the desk and moved toward his new target. "You might be thinking about doing something honorable, but I wouldn't recommend it." He nodded at the agent.

“He’ll be the first casualty if you try anything stupid.”

Ward stood his ground. “Do you have any idea where you are?”

“This place?” Hawkes nodded. “Officially, this place is no-man’s land. An official secret. ‘Level Zero,’ as you like to call it. Catchy name.”

“Just setting foot in here is a capital offense,” said Ward. “What do you think they’re going to do to you for pulling a gun?”

Hawkes laughed. “Who’s ‘they’? I don’t see anyone. I guess you’re all a little busy right now.” He glanced at his watch. *Three minutes.* “Getting inside wasn’t as difficult as most people might think, although running into you has certainly made things a little easier. You people really must learn not to rely on computers for everything.”

Ward inched forward, his hand still resting on the door handle.

“Don’t be a hero,” Hawkes said, aiming the gun at the director’s head. “I’d rather get out of here without leaving a pile of bodies if I can help it.”

“What do you want?”

“We’ll get to that. Right now, you’ve got a guest who’s ready to check out.” He waved the gun toward the door. “I suggest you take us on through.”

“Not going to happen.” Ward shifted his weight.

Hawkes gritted his teeth. “I’ve read your

file, director. You've not seen field action in over a decade. What do you think you're going to achieve?"

"Go to hell."

"Let me tell you how this is going to work. You're going to march us through to Robert Blake's cell and you're going to open it up. Then, you're going to accompany us out of the building. If you don't, people are going to get hurt." He pointed the gun at the agent stood behind him. "Starting with your man here."

"Anyone gets hurt, you're not walking out of here alive."

"Last chance, director. You can lead us on through, or we can kill you both and take your security pass. Your choice."

Ward shook his head. "Go fuck yourself."

Hawkes pulled the trigger. A deafening blast filled the room and the handgun recoiled, sending shockwaves through the colonel's arm. The agent crumpled, his lifeless body hitting the floor hard. Campbell and Stanton took an instinctive step back.

"Let's try this again, shall we?" Hawkes turned his attention back to Ward, whose eyes lay transfixed on the body of his dead colleague. "Eyes on me, Director. Now's not the time to get distracted."

Ward switched his gaze and met the colonel's stare.

"That's better. Time to move." Hawkes stepped forward and brought the butt of his

handgun across the director's cheek, knocking him sideways. Clutching at his face, Ward stumbled to the side and Hawkes waved his team forward.

"Which cell?" Hawkes asked, shoving Ward in the back with his free hand. "This isn't a courtesy call. Pick up the pace." He pressed the barrel of his gun into the director's spine and kept moving.

"Last on the right," Ward said, finding his feet. "But you're wasting your time. I don't have access to the prisoners."

"We've got that covered." Hawkes checked his watch. *One minute.*

"Like you had it covered earlier? Looks like you didn't do your homework."

"Seems to be working out pretty well so far." The colonel increased the pressure on Ward's spine. "Just keep walking."

They reached the farthest cell door and Hawkes ordered the FBI director on to his knees.

"How long, sir?" Stanton asked, handgun still drawn.

Hawkes consulted his watch once more. "Three, two, one..." Silence. Hawkes held his breath, listening.

"Is something supposed to be happening?" Ward looked up at his captors, a wry smile on his face. "Or should I come back later?"

"Keep it up, Chuckles," said Hawkes, aiming his weapon at the director's skull. "I'm begging you. Keep it up."

Ward flinched as a piercing klaxon noise filled the hallway.

Hawkes smiled. *Better late than never.* “Showtime, boys,” he said, as a clunking noise signaled the cell door was unlocked. He grabbed the handle and pulled it open, pushing Ward through into the interview room. Several chairs were lined up in the center of the room, facing an opaque glass wall and another heavy door in the far corner.

“This place is going into lockdown,” the director said, wrenching free of the colonel’s grip. “You’re not going anywhere.”

Stanton and Campbell marched in behind them.

“An unfortunate, but unavoidable consequence. You let me worry about that,” said Hawkes. “Right now, you’ve got more important things to think about.” He pointed the gun at the director’s head one more. “I believe visiting hours are officially open.”

## Chapter 30

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RICHARD WARD STARED down the barrel of his captor's handgun and tried to figure out his options. He was outnumbered three to one. With little field experience in the last decade, a confrontation would end badly. Especially for him. With the alarms sounding, his chances of talking his way out were practically nil. The intruders would be looking for a quick exit. Ultimately, that left him with two options: he could refuse to comply and hope to hell reinforcements showed up in time, or do as they ask and try to come up with a better plan later. The second option at least left him alive long enough to do something productive.

He made up his mind.

"If I open up the cell, it's only going to trigger another security alert," Ward said. He tried to ignore the gun pointed at his face and look his captor in the eyes. "There's cameras in here. Security will be able to find you."

"It's taken care of," the man said. His voice carried an air of authority. Not particularly intimidating or aggressive, just the air of a man who expects nobody to argue. A classic military trait. He looked a little older than Ward, maybe mid-fifties. Maybe a retired vet with a grudge. It didn't really matter, other

than the fact he was clearly the one in charge.

The FBI director looked up at the surveillance camera mounted to the ceiling. No red light. That meant no power.

“What do you want with the prisoner?” Ward asked.

“Not your concern. You’ve got exactly ten seconds to open up, or we’ll have to get by without you.”

Ward knew he wasn’t bluffing. Without his help, they might struggle to open the cell. They’d also have a more difficult time getting out the building. But there was always the possibility they’d figure out a way, especially if the security cameras were compromised. They had already unlocked the main door, got this far. The surveillance team wouldn’t be focused on the holding cells, not if they were flying blind. They’d look for the source of the disruption, probably upstairs somewhere. Too risky to assume these men didn’t have a plan B. It wasn’t worth dying over.

“Fine,” Ward said. He strode over to the recessed panel mounted near the prisoner entrance. The steel door led through into the cell, where Blake was waiting. With a deep sigh, Ward punched in his access code. He considered entering a fake number, but a sharp jab in the back from the leader’s handgun convinced him otherwise. With survival near the top of Ward’s priorities, he figured antagonizing the man with the loaded weapon wasn’t the surest path to success.



A small LED light flashed red and Ward heard a clicking sound. The door opened.

“He’s all yours,” Ward said.

“Cover him,” the man in charge said. One of the others raised his weapon in Ward’s direction.

The leader of the group pushed through the door. A few moments later he emerged with Robert Blake, who didn’t seem particularly surprised to find Ward waiting for him.

“Director,” Blake said, with a cursory nod. “Apologies for my rude departure. I’m sure you’ll understand it was necessary.” He looked over at the man in charge. “Hawkes, if you wouldn’t mind.”

The man called Hawkes nodded. Ward committed the name to memory.

“Let’s move,” Hawkes said. He grabbed hold of Ward’s jacket and shoved him back toward the exit door leading out to the corridor. The alarms still sounded, shrill and urgent. The noise echoed off the hard floors, bouncing off the walls. Ward gritted his teeth and marched forward, heading back to the elevator with the four men close behind.

“And how exactly are you planning on getting out of here?” Ward said, as they reached the reception area. He resisted the urge to glance down at the body of Agent Jameson sprawled out on the carpet. A dark red pool of blood had formed underneath him, staining the fibers.

“The supreme art of war,” Blake said, “is to subdue the enemy without fighting.” He glanced down at the corpse. “Unfortunately, it seems we might have slipped up a little in that regard. But nobody else has to get hurt.” He paused. “You’re going to walk us out of here yourself.”

“And why the hell would I do that?”

“Because the rest of my men are currently upstairs sifting through the FBI’s data storage.”

“And?”

Blake laughed. “And just how many undercover agents do you have in the field right now? It would be a shame if someone leaked their real names and aliases. A real shame. Think how many people would suffer.”

Ward felt his stomach turn a somersault. He turned around. “That’s not possible.”

“Really?” Blake smiled. “We managed to infiltrate this building, got the right codes. Shut off the surveillance. How difficult do you think it would be to get a hard line into the servers?”

“You’re bluffing.”

“Are you willing to take the risk?”

Ward clenched his fists.

“I didn’t think so.” Blake gestured toward the elevators. “Now, if you would be so kind.”

“I’ll track you down, you sick bastard,” Ward said. “If it takes me the rest of my life.”

“Which is getting shorter and shorter the

more you keep talking,” Blake replied. “After this is done, if you still want your vengeance, I’ll be waiting.”

Hawkes lifted his weapon. “Move.”

Ward turned back toward the elevators. Hit the call button. The doors slid open.

“After you.” Blake waved him forward.

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The elevator felt slower than before. Ward figured his nerves were getting the better of him. The four men stood behind him. Hawkes had his hand on his gun hidden underneath his suit jacket. Ward knew the FBI building would be shutting down, all agents called to their emergency positions. Most would stay put, some of the security personnel would be covering the exits, some would be trying to fix the cameras. A few more tracking the perimeter. Ward wasn’t sure how the numbers stacked up.

A soft chime announced their arrival at the ground floor. The doors opened. Ahead, the corridors were full of agents and office workers, all marching calmly through the halls. Presumably back to their posts. Better they kept out of the way while security looked for the source of the commotion. They wouldn’t have to look for long.

The J. Edgar Hoover building was old and crumbling, but the alarm systems were top of the line. If Blake’s men had infiltrated the

server room, someone would know about it. A team would have been deployed. Metro P.D. would have been informed. Reinforcements would be on the way. Blake couldn't hold out forever.

Ward felt one of the men shove him forward. He stepped out into the corridor. A few of the passing agents looked at him briefly, but kept their heads down. Protocol drilled into them from day one. They wouldn't be looking for anything out of place, too focused on getting out of the way. Ward tried to adjust his body language, make himself stand out. It didn't appear to work; everyone kept on marching. He might as well be invisible.

"Head for the lobby," Hawkes said from behind. "Don't try anything stupid. First sign of trouble, we'll release the lists."

Ward complied. The four men might have seemed a little suspicious heading in the opposite direction from the flow of foot traffic, but Ward's presence ensured nobody gave them a second glance. In a sea of dark suits, security would be looking for something, anything, that didn't fit. But they'd be heading for the server room, checking the stairwells and exit routes. Nobody would think to check the public entrance, not with armed guards already stationed outside.

"You'll need to come up with a good reason for breaking protocol," Blake said, his voice low. "Have the man at the main

entrance open up for us. Make sure you sell it.”

Ward felt something cold and hard press into the base of his spine. He didn't need the reminder his life lay on the line. Not to mention the lives of nearly five hundred agents in the field. But was the alternative worse? Was dying here today a better alternative than whatever Blake had planned? Ward had no idea.

But he knew Blake would follow through on his threats, maybe escape anyway. Only a handful of security officers stood between them and the street outside. An escape attempt would mean most of them getting hurt, or worse. Hundreds more to follow once those names and aliases went public. Ward dying, however honorably, would do little to stop that. Martyrdom rarely did anybody any good.

The lobby drew closer. It looked mostly empty, save for a few remaining security officers manning the booths and checkpoints. Two guards stood outside the door, facing the street, no weapons drawn. Just stood, acting as though everything was five by five. Ward smiled. *Public perception is everything.*

Hawkes jostled him forward, his gun still prodding Ward in the back.

“Time to get creative,” Blake said.

One of the security officers stepped forward. Middle-aged, a little overweight, he recognized Ward but asked for ID anyway.

“Sorry, sir,” the officer said. “Gotta check everyone coming through.” He glanced at the men stood behind the director. “We’re supposed to keep everyone inside, sir.”

Ward checked the man’s name badge. “Good job, Mr. Webb,” he said. “These gentlemen are with me.”

“Sir, it’s protocol. You’re supposed to stay inside.” The officer shuffled uncomfortably.

“And who do you think signs off on the protocols?” Ward could tell the man was nervous, probably not used to challenging senior management. His uniform wasn’t FBI, so he was probably a contractor. Maybe even part time. Ward said, “These men need to get out of here. Now.”

“Sir...”

“It’s a classified operation, Webb.” *Classified operation. The catch-all explanation.* “Do I have to remind you the consequences for interfering with a federal investigation?”

“No, sir.”

“Then log our names and let us get out of here. We’ve wasted enough time already. I’ll make sure your boss gets word from me later.”

Webb glanced around. The other guards ignored him, avoiding eye contact. “Yes, sir,” he said, eventually.

The four men held IDs out and Webb checked them, logged the names in a handheld scanner. Ward tensed, half-expecting something to trigger another alert. But the

men had clearly done their homework; the system cleared them after a few seconds.

Webb said, "All done, sir." He stepped to the side.

Ward led them forward, through the turnstiles and metal detectors. He headed for the doors. The two guards turned as Ward opened the door and stepped out. They didn't say anything, just looked the five men up and down.

The director headed for the bottom of the steps. The morning D.C. traffic was a mess, cars lined up all down Pennsylvania Avenue, as far as he could see. They were moving slowly, barely any faster than the pedestrians either side of them. In the distance, Ward heard sirens, faint but unmistakable. They didn't sound like they were going to get to him any time soon.

"Turn left," Blake said, as they hit the sidewalk.

"This is a waste of time," said Ward. "They'll know you're missing from your cell by now. How far do you think you're going to get?"

"Keep quiet," Hawkes said, taking the lead.

Ward found himself boxed in. They walked for a few minutes, covered a few blocks without incident, weaving in and out of foot traffic.

Blake continued, "Down here."

Hawkes veered off to the left and Ward followed, the others close behind. The sirens

were getting louder. The four men kept their heads high, walking at a moderate pace. Nothing about them stood out, nothing to catch anyone's eye. They reached Eighth Street, the J. Edgar Hoover building no longer visible behind them. The road looked quiet, cars parked up near the sidewalk. Very little vehicle traffic. Ward could see the Smithsonian a block-or-so ahead, a few people milling around on the steps.

"Here," Hawkes said, heading toward a black Range Rover with tinted windows. Another, almost identical, vehicle was parked a few cars behind. Hawkes unlocked the doors with a key fob.

"Get in," Blake said.

"Looks like you're a few men down," said Ward, glancing at the other Range Rover.

"Look again."

The other SUV's engine started up, the LED headlamps flicked on. Ward squinted at the windshield. He could see movement inside.

*How the hell did they get out?* He kept the thought to himself.

"Get in," Blake said again.

Hawkes held the rear passenger door open.

"I'm not getting in there," Ward said.

"You don't have much of a choice."

"You aren't going to shoot me in broad daylight. If I get in there, you'll drive out of the city and put a bullet in me."

"If I wanted to kill you, I would have taken



you down a blind alley and left your body in a dumpster,” Blake said. “Besides, I’m a man of my word. I’m sure Hawkes promised to let you live if you cooperated.”

The man called Hawkes didn’t say anything. “Bullshit,” Ward said.

Blake smiled. “You’re no good to me dead, Director. Now, are you getting in the car, or do I have to start being more persuasive?”

Ward didn’t move. *He needs me alive. Keep him talking.* “Where will you go?”

Blake sighed. “Hawkes, do the honors, please.”

The man called Hawkes reached into his jacket, pulled something out. Something hard and metallic, from the feel of it smacking into the side of Ward’s head.

The FBI Director felt his knees give way and two strong pairs of hands wrestle him into the SUV. He noticed the smell of warm leather, and then a spinning sensation, and then he blacked out.

## Chapter 31

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MARY WOKE UP late and felt a shooting pain in her neck. She opened her eyes slowly, and looked around, wondering where the hell she was. She found herself lying on a double bed in a dark room. The curtains were drawn, sunlight visible through the thin material. She noticed four pillows, two of which she'd thrown on the floor during the night. A wooden desk nestled against the opposite wall, or maybe a dressing table; Mary wasn't sure. A chipped wardrobe stood teetering in the corner, an empty wastepaper basket near the front door. The bed sheets smelled unfamiliar and the mattress felt thin.

It took a moment for Mary to remember where she was. She and Marshall had driven out of the city late last night, checked into the first motel they had found that looked like it might not require any ID. Marshall had slapped down three hundred dollars. The clerk had said the room rate was fifty bucks each. Marshall told him to take the difference as a security deposit.

Not exactly subtle, Mary had thought. But effective, and better than the possibility of their names flashing up on a computer screen somewhere. The clerk had shown them to their separate rooms, left them to it, and gone

back to his desk. Mary had said good night to Marshall and passed out on the bed. Now it was late morning, and coffee was most definitely in order.

A sharp knock on the door came and Mary sat up. She pulled off the bed sheets and found herself still fully dressed. Running a hand through her hair, she padded across the carpet and opened up. Jack Marshall stood outside, two take-out cups in hand. He looked refreshed, as if he'd slept well. Mary felt the pain in her neck again and tried to shake some of the grogginess out of her head.

"Thought I'd take the liberty," Marshall said, handing one of the cups over. "I guessed you take it black."

Mary blinked hard. "Good guess," she said, taking the cup in both hands.

"Can I come in?"

"Yeah. Sure, go ahead." She stood back and let him through. Marshall strode inside and pulled out the chair from underneath the dressing-table-slash-desk and sat down.

He said, "You sleep well?"

"Not exactly."

"Me neither."

"Liar." Mary took a sip of her coffee and sat down on the bed. "Coffee's good."

"Gas station across the forecourt had one of those espresso machines."

"Thanks." She looked over at him. Marshall's suit looked freshly pressed, although he hadn't had a chance to grab any

change of clothes, and Mary suddenly felt very aware of her own substandard appearance. She ran her fingers through her hair again, did her best to tame it into something presentable.

“Something on your mind?” Marshall asked.

“Yeah. I was just thinking: what’s out next move?”

“How about breakfast?”

Mary smiled. “No, I mean, we’re supposed to be dead, right? Where do we go from here?”

Marshall got up and headed for the door. “I’m still voting for breakfast.”

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They found a diner a few miles down the highway. Marshall had collected the security deposit from reception, minus a few bucks for “administrative fees”, or so the clerk had said, and stuffed the rest of the bills back into his wallet. A short drive later, they had found a booth at some joint that served breakfast late.

Mary had bacon and pancakes with syrup, more coffee on the side. Marshall ordered poached eggs on whole grain toast and a glass of orange juice. The pancakes tasted good. The cooks served them to order, the smell of fried batter and the sound of hissing griddles filling the place. The diner was packed, but the servers kept pace.

“We need to find Ward,” Mary said, polishing off her breakfast.

“And tell him what?”

“Maybe he’s got a lead.”

“He would have called.”

“Your cell phone working?”

“I had a spare.”

Mary sighed. “You got a better idea? We can’t do much by ourselves.”

“We need to figure out what was in Blake’s apartment. Someone wanted something out of there bad. If we can link his father to this, we might figure out what’s going on.” He paused. “Can you think of anything? Anything at all that Leopold might have in his possession that his father would kill for.”

Mary sipped her coffee. It wasn’t as good as the gas station stuff. “We were working on something before all this happened. A while ago, there was some kind of mess involving an obscure division of Leopold’s company. They were wrapped up in a scandal involving chemical research. Before we knew it, someone on the board of directors staged a coup and sold it off to some private buyer. We weren’t able to trace it.”

“And you think it’s connected?”

“Leopold said whoever orchestrated the whole thing must have had intimate knowledge of how Blake Investments worked. Not to mention a personal connection with the people who worked there. Leopold actually said the only person he could picture

pulling it off was himself.”

“Or the next best thing.” Marshall finished his toast. “Any way to verify this? Anyone on the inside we can talk to?”

Mary gritted her teeth. “I was afraid you might ask that.” She drained the last of her coffee. “I’m going to need to borrow your phone.”

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Back in the Suburban, Mary cranked up the heaters and used Marshall’s phone to dial a number from memory. She was surprised she could still remember the digits after all these years. The call went through, and a female voice answered.

“This is Jordan,” the voice said.

Mary felt herself tense a little. “Kate. Hope this isn’t a bad time.”

A long pause.

“Kate? You there?”

“Yeah, I’m here.” Another pause. “Though I wasn’t expecting to hear from you.”

“I wasn’t expecting it either.” Mary sighed. Felt her toes warm up a little. “I need your help with something.”

“Let me guess; Blake’s up to something again?”

“Not exactly.”

“I’m late for a meeting,” said Kate. “You’ll have to get to the point.”

“Last time we spoke, you tried to warn me

about Chemworks. The company that Blake Investments used for chemical research.”

“Yeah. The WHO has had its eye on them for a long time.”

“You mentioned you had an informant. One who might be willing to blow the whistle.”

“What’s this all about?”

Mary gripped the handset a little tighter. *She’s not making this easy.* “There’s been a complication.”

“I’ll say. At least when Blake ran the damn thing, we could keep tabs on him. Now, we have no idea who’s pulling the strings. Based on what we *think* is going on, that’s not exactly good news.”

“We think your informant might be able to help with that. We have an idea of who might be behind all this.”

“Care to fill me in?”

“Quid pro quo, Kate. Tell me about your informant.”

“You first.”

Mary shook her head. *Really not making this easy.* Marshall looked over at her from the driver’s seat.

“Fine,” Mary said. “But you’re going to be late for your meeting.”

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Fifteen minutes later, Mary finished speaking. The line went quiet for a while. She

turned down the heaters a little. Marshall looked at her again, his eyes quizzical. Mary heard a rustling noise on the other end of the phone and pressed the handset to her ear.

“That’s a lot to take in,” Kate said eventually.

“A lot’s happened.”

“And you’re officially supposed to be dead?”

“For the time being.”

“Gotta say, you don’t do things half-assed, do you?”

“Can you help or not?”

Kate hesitated. “There’s a problem.”

“Isn’t there always?”

“My informant, the one working for Chemworks; I haven’t heard from him in months.”

“Is that unusual?”

“Yes. He would usually send some kind of update on a weekly basis. Since the company was sold, nothing.”

Mary swore. “So I guess we’re screwed.”

“No more than usual,” said Kate. She sucked in a deep breath. “There might be something else we can do.”

“I’m all ears.”

“There have been rumors, unsubstantiated of course. The CDC watch files have records of everything and anything that might represent a threat to public health and safety. They pull from the Coast Guard, local PD, FBI. There’s too much in there for one



department to handle, of course. But some of the leads wind up at the WHO, and some of those wind up on my desk. It's my job to investigate and verify."

"And you've got something?"

"It might be nothing. We got notice of a shipment that came through New Jersey last week. Paperwork raised a few alarm bells."

"Something unusual about it?"

"Not really. Not enough to get any sort of official movement, but the shipment was bound for an address that's shown up a few times in the watch files. It's all circumstantial, of course, but that's my job. Figure out what's real, what's not. With everything you've told me, the timing seems a little suspect."

"And you were planning on telling me this when?"

"C'mon, Mary, we've barely spoken in years. Why the hell would I? I had no idea what was going on until you told me."

"When are you heading out?"

"I hadn't planned on checking it just yet. I had other priorities. But now..."

"Now I think you need to get your ass in gear," said Mary. "When can you get out there?"

"I can be there later today."

"Good. Text me the address, I'll meet you there." Mary hung up and handed the phone back to Marshall.

"Check your messages in a few minutes," she said. "We're going on a little road trip."

“What’s the plan?”

“I’ll tell you on the way.”

Marshall dropped the Suburban into gear and rolled it out of the parking lot. “I’ll need to call in to Washington, let Director Ward know what’s going on.”

Mary nodded. “Sounds like we’ll have plenty to tell him. Find out what support we can expect, if any.” She settled back into her seat and closed her eyes. “We’re going to need it.”

## Chapter 32

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IT WAS ALREADY ten p.m. local time when Leopold and Jerome touched down outside Shanghai. Generally reserved for private and domestic flights, Longhua airport was the smallest airfield within driving distance of the city, making it an ideal spot to touch down without much fanfare. Captain Gray arranged for a shuttle car to take them to the edge of the airfield and wished them luck. Leopold wasn't sure he meant it. Outside, the temperature hovered around a brisk fifty-five degrees and the sky was a muddy blur. The light pollution from downtown Shanghai blocked out most of the stars, but the moon shone clearly through the gaps in the clouds.

The car dropped them by the main gate. The driver hadn't spoken a word. He drove off into the night, leaving Leopold and Jerome alone. They found themselves in a residential area, a wide highway separating them from the rows of apartment blocks on the other side of the road. Despite the late hour, the vehicle traffic was considerable.

"Nice place," Jerome said, stalking off toward the busy streets. "We're going to need a taxi."

"You got any cash on you?"

Jerome stopped and turned. "You're

kidding, right?"

"I don't carry cash. And we can't use credit cards if we want to stay hidden."

"I got a couple hundred dollars, American."

"That'll do." Leopold caught up with him. "When we get to the safe house, I know a place. We'll get some supplies, then go looking for intel."

"One thing at a time," Jerome said. "First priority is finding somewhere to spend the night. I don't relish the idea of sleeping on the streets." He set off again, heading for a bar across the road. The windows glowed bright as people spilled out onto the sidewalk.

Jerome pushed through the doors and Leopold followed. The bar looked full, playing loud music. Leopold didn't understand the words, but the song seemed popular. A few of the more inebriated clientele sang along. He noticed the smell of cigarettes, the national smoking ban obviously not well enforced, and an odor of stale beer, sharp and tangy. Jerome slapped a ten-dollar bill on the bar and asked if the barman spoke English. After a few minutes of negotiation, Jerome borrowed the man's cell phone and called a cab. He handed the phone back.

"Let's wait outside," he said, turning to Leopold. "We're not exactly blending in right now."

"Agreed. And if I have to listen to this music much longer, I'm taking the next flight back home."

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The taxi was an old Volkswagen perhaps five years past its prime, with a torquey -diesel engine that propelled the car forward in uneven lurches. Leopold and Jerome sat in the back, holding on as the driver wove in and out of the packed traffic without dropping speed. On the backs of the seats, small LCD screens played cheerful commercials in Mandarin, Cantonese, and English. A small notice taped to the partition glass said the driver accepted American Dollars, as well as credit cards.

Outside, Shanghai rolled past in all its jumbled brilliance; ancient architecture mixed in with modern skyscrapers, rundown apartment blocks, family-owned food carts, wide highways, and thumping night clubs flashed by. Car horns sounded in unison, a chorus of honking and bleating as pedestrians navigated the packed spaces between bumpers to get to the other side of the road while traffic waited at the lights.

After thirty minutes, the driver wrenched the car through an intersection and pulled up near a hotel complex. He kept the engine running and tapped the meter with an index finger. Jerome handed three twenties over and the driver passed him a business card.

“You call any time, I can be here,” the driver said. “Discount if you pay cash.”

Jerome said he'd think about it.

All paid up, they climbed out of the cab and shut the doors. The driver pulled away and merged with the other traffic, heading back toward downtown. Leopold glanced around, pulled his jacket a little tighter as the wind picked up. He noticed a cool, damp smell mixed in with the rotten-egg stink of sulfuric exhaust gasses. Ahead, an intersection linked up four three-lane roads, with a wide pedestrian crossing through the middle, which none of the cars seemed to notice. The main highway out to Pudong International Airport loomed above them, fifty feet up and on concrete stilts, and the Longchamps Hotel stood to the rear.

“I think it’s about time we checked in,” said Leopold. “Maybe get some room service.”

“In my day, safe houses didn’t do catering,” said Jerome.

“What’s safer than a hotel? Try to relax a little. Nobody knows we’re here.” Leopold headed for the main entrance. “The suite is bought and paid for. And it doesn’t get much more incognito than this.”

He stepped through a set of revolving doors and into the lobby. Jerome followed. Ahead, a lone receptionist waited at her desk. Behind her, a bank of elevators and a single uniformed porter. The decor looked Western, the staff’s clothes looked Western, even the music playing over the sound system was Western. Everything designed to make Americans and Europeans feel at home, a

perfect place for two foreigners to lay low. Hidden in plain sight, lost in a sea of fellow strangers, with an army of hotel employees to keep watch.

Off to the side, a bar was still serving drinks. A dozen or so tired-looking guests sat in the leather armchairs, sipping beer or glasses of wine. A few of them chatted, but most kept to themselves. Leopold headed for the receptionist. She looked up, smiled, and asked for a room number.

“Imperial Suite Four,” Leopold said.

The receptionist checked her computer. “And you must be Mr. Higginbotham,” she said, with a slight accent. “Good to see you again, sir. I hope you enjoy your stay.” She handed a plastic key card over. “Please let me know if you need anything. Anything at all.”

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“Higginbotham?” Leopold said, unlocking the door to the suite. “I thought I was supposed to be Hardcastle.”

“I change the names every few months,” Jerome said. “Plus, you don’t really look like a Hardcastle.”

“What does it matter what I look like?”

“Higginbotham suits you better.”

“Fine. And who are you supposed to be?”

“The guest list has me down as Armstrong.”

“Why do you get the good name?”

“It’s just a name. Relax.”

“Whatever. Next time, I get to pick.” Leopold opened the door and stepped inside. The suite looked spacious, Leopold guessed around fifteen-hundred square feet, with a large living area, eat-in kitchen, balcony, and two bedrooms. The decor was simple yet tasteful, with Western and Chinese influences. The plate glass windows presented a fine view across the city, the gentle roar of the heavy traffic below just about audible through the thick glass. Even at this late hour, the neighborhood was bustling.

“We’ll get some sleep, then head out in the morning,” Jerome said. “And we’ll need some cash, some IDs, couple of prepaid phones.”

“Cash first. The rest will come easy after that.” He paused. “What’s the cover?”

“We’re board members for a motion picture production firm shooting in China. I’ve got the room on a long term lease, under one of the shell companies.”

“How long until someone traces us?”

“No way to be sure. If your father got his hands on your personal data and he’s looking in the right place, maybe a few days. But he won’t be looking for you, not if he thinks you’re out of the picture.”

“Just to be safe, we’ll try to find somewhere else in the morning. God knows how long we’re going to be stuck here, I’d rather not have to sleep with a gun under my pillow.”

Jerome grinned. “Knowing you, that’s a



perfect way to get your head blown off. I'd rather avoid you dying twice, if I can help it."

"No promises," Leopold said, heading for the bedroom.

## Chapter 33

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AN HOUR OUT of Baltimore, Hawkes turned off the Pulaski Highway and hit the back roads. The Range Rover handled the shift in terrain seamlessly, and the colonel kept one eye on the rear view mirror. The second vehicle kept pace, a few car-lengths behind them. Outside, the Maryland countryside rolled past, all green and wet and empty. Blake sat in the passenger seat, Campbell sat in the back. The unconscious Richard Ward lay slumped next to Campbell. Hawkes heard him stirring.

The colonel hadn't expected him to wake up for another half an hour, but now was as good a time as any. This wasn't the movies; a solid hit to the skull could put a man down for hours, then hours more dealing with nausea and disorientation. No jumping up on your feet after a serious concussion. Hawkes wondered how quickly Ward would recover.

"Time to make a stop, I think," Blake said.

Hawkes nodded. They had spent most of the journey in silence. The radio was on, some local station playing old rock music that Hawkes figured was as good a choice as any for a short road trip. Somehow, it matched the scenery.

Blake said, "Pull in here. Wake him up."

Campbell nudged the FBI director with his elbow as Hawkes rolled the vehicle to the side of the road and killed the engine. A few seconds later, the second Range Rover followed suit. Ward groaned and sat up, blinking.

“Welcome back, Director,” Blake said, turning in his seat.

Ward lifted a palm to his face.

“You might feel a little out of sorts for a while. Try not to panic.”

“Where the hell am I?” Ward asked.

“The middle of nowhere,” Blake said. “As I said, I’m not planning on killing you, but I’m afraid we don’t have room for passengers.” He nodded at Campbell and Campbell opened the rear passenger door.

“What are you doing?”

Blake smiled. “We passed a gas station a few miles back. You can phone for someone to pick you up. Better get moving.”

“Why are you letting me go?”

“Killing you doesn’t benefit me right now,” Blake said. “And you’re no threat to me. Consider this a gift.” He nodded at Campbell again.

Campbell unbuckled Ward’s seatbelt and shoved him out the door. The director landed hard on the blacktop and sprawled out on his back.

“You’ll get your motor skills back soon enough,” Blake called out. “This is a good opportunity for a little practice. You might

want to move before another car comes along.” He turned to Hawkes. “Get us out of here.”

The colonel started the engine, dropped the transmission into Drive and pulled away, tires spinning. The rear vehicle followed. Blake turned the radio down a little. A Creedence song was playing.

Blake said, “You look like you’ve got something on your mind.”

Hawkes shook his head. “No, sir.”

“Spit it out.”

The colonel gripped the wheel a little tighter. He could feel Blake’s eyes boring into him. “Nothing important, sir. I’m just not a fan of loose ends.”

“We need Ward alive. For now.”

“He could be a liability.”

“Perhaps. But he’s the only person who can follow the trail of bread crumbs we left. We’re not working in a vacuum here. We need eyes on us. Every good show needs an audience.”

“Yes, sir.”

Blake settled back in his seat. “Speaking of loose ends, tell me what happened in New York. I gave you very specific instructions.”

“It was unavoidable, sir.”

“How, exactly?”

Hawkes felt Blake’s eyes on him again. He chose his words carefully. “They brought bomb technicians with them. We risked them figuring out how to defuse the device.”

“And you calculated this risk personally?”

“Yes, sir.”

Blake sighed and nodded. “Give me your hand, Colonel.”

“Sir?”

“You heard me.”

Hawkes held out his hand and Blake took it.

“You know, Colonel, when a person lies, their blood pressure increases. An unavoidable consequence, and one that is easy enough to detect.” He paused. “Slow down a little.”

Hawkes complied, dropping the Range Rover down to fifty. He felt Blake grab hold of his index finger, holding it tight. He felt his pulse rate quicken, his finger started throbbing from the increased blood pressure. The colonel kept his eyes on the road, reduced their speed to forty.

Blake continued, “While I’m sure you did what you thought was necessary for the good of the mission, you disobeyed a direct order. Leopold Blake was not to be harmed.”

“I had no choice, sir.” Hawkes felt the pressure on his finger increase.

“I’m sure you didn’t. But for every action, there are consequences.” He paused. “I do, however, applaud your focus. I’d like to see just how focused you can be.”

“Sir?”

“Whatever you do, Colonel, keep your eyes on the road.”

Hawkes yelled out as Blake wrenched his

finger up and to the side. He felt the crunch of bone. Pain shot through his skull. He kept his free hand on the wheel, desperately trying to hold the vehicle steady. The SUV rocked from side to side and Hawkes took his foot off the gas, a thousand needles stabbing through his brain. He pushed the intense pain from his mind and concentrated on keeping the vehicle on the road. He felt the traction control and steering assist kick in, coaxing them back into a straight line. The Range Rover swerved, but kept to the blacktop.

Blake let go. “Very good.” He let the colonel’s hand drop. “You can speed up a little now. We’ve got a deadline to meet.”

Hawkes gritted his teeth and nodded. “Yes, sir.” He eased back onto the gas. The pain in his hand increased. He tried to ignore it, steadied his breathing. Deep breaths in, slow breaths out. The throbbing intensified, sending waves of agony all up his arm and into his shoulders. It felt like a proximal phalanx base fracture. Agonizing but manageable. The next two hours were going to be hell, but Hawkes was damned if he was going to let it show.

“I’ll get us there just fine, sir,” he said.

## Chapter 34

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MARSHALL PULLED THE Suburban over to the side of the road, still talking on his phone. Mary yawned and stretched, the two-hour drive taking its toll on her tired body, and glanced out the window. The Port of New York and New Jersey stretched out ahead, spilling over toward the Hudson River and the Atlantic Ocean a little further south. The largest port on the East Coast, third largest in the US, the operation handled upward of five million cargo shipments each year. Mary figured it would be easy enough to sneak something through, even with modern security and scanning systems. It was never possible to check everything.

They were in some kind of industrial area, maybe a half mile or more from the waterfront, with warehouses and storage depots on either side of the road, fenced off behind tall metal gates or sealed up behind steel shutters. Most of the structures looked like they had seen better days, but their designs favored function over form. Structurally, they were sound. Mary glanced around, took in the view. She couldn't see any other traffic, no signs of life. Other than the distant sounds of the city, the air was silent and dull.

Marshall killed the engine and hung up the phone. He turned to face Mary and she noticed a trace of worry in his eyes.

He said, "We've got a problem."

Mary glanced up at him. "So, what else is new?"

"I'm serious. Something's happened." He hesitated. "Robert Blake escaped."

Mary blinked hard. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"It happened this morning," Marshall said, shaking his head. "Nobody knows how, exactly. They're still checking the security tapes. The alarms went off, triggered by someone apparently accessing the main servers. Caused a building-wide shut down. Blake got out in the confusion."

Mary closed her eyes, took a deep breath. "How? No way he could have pulled that off from inside his cell. He couldn't have been working alone."

"No doubt. He must have had help. Nobody can get in and out without the right security passes."

"You've got a leak?"

Marshall sighed. "Looks that way. But it gets worse."

"How could it be worse?"

"Nobody's seen Director Ward since the alarms went off. He's MIA."

Mary rubbed her temples. *Shit.*

"Prevailing theory is whoever got Blake out must have got hold of Ward too. In the



meantime, Deputy Director Burke is running the show,” said Marshall. “Suffice to say, he wasn’t exactly overjoyed to hear from me. You know, once he got over the fact I wasn’t dead.”

“Ward didn’t brief him?”

“Guess he didn’t have time.”

“What did he say?”

Marshall took a moment. “We can trust Burke, if that’s what you mean. He agreed we need to find out more. Off the record, of course.”

“No official support on this?”

“Not yet. We don’t have any evidence right now. There’d be too many questions, ones we have no chance of answering.”

Mary folded her arms. “Then we’d better go find something we can use. The location Kate sent through isn’t far from here. We should get moving.”

“Agreed,” said Marshall. “Let’s just hope the trip was worth it.”

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Mary spotted the car within a few seconds. They had left the Suburban a little further up the road, parked out of sight, and now she and Marshall were on foot. They had headed south, Mary checking the directions her sister had sent through, and were now on Tripoli Street.

“That her?” Marshall asked, squinting

ahead.

Mary nodded. The car was an old Ford, white, and a little run down. It stood about two hundred feet away, parked up near an old storage unit housed behind a tall wire fence. This unit looked even shabbier than its neighbors, adorned with hastily sprayed graffiti and with a rusted-over corrugated steel roof. It was the equivalent height of a two-story building, though it probably didn't have a second floor, and looked large enough to house four or five city buses side by side within. The white Ford seemed to be the only vehicle on the lot.

"Looks like her car," Mary said. "Guess she hasn't traded up in a while."

"Perfect vehicle for her kind of work. Bland, almost invisible."

"The FBI could learn a thing or two." Mary smiled and quickened her pace.

"Maybe. But you'd struggle running down a perp in a beat-up sedan."

Mary laughed, almost catching herself by surprise. She felt a smile linger on her lips for a few seconds. Things were starting to look a little better. The weather had improved, her fatigue had taken a back seat, and Marshall was turning out to be a pleasant road-trip companion. He'd even paid for breakfast. *Not bad to look at, either.* Mary stole a quick glance behind her and caught his eye. He smiled.

"Something on your mind?" he said.

"Nothing important." Mary turned back to

face the front, feeling her cheeks get hot. “Keep your eyes open. Kate’s probably hiding around here somewhere.”

“What does she look like?”

Mary didn’t reply. Up ahead, she spotted an open gate in the fence. “This way,” she said. “She must have driven in through here.”

Leading the way, Mary marched through the entrance and into the mostly empty lot, scanning the area for movement. Her brain whirred, trying to process her environment, but it proved more difficult than usual. Between finding out about Robert Blake’s escape, Director Ward’s apparent kidnapping, and the prospect of seeing her sister for the first time in years, Mary found it tough to focus.

They reached the car and Mary slowed her pace. Her hand drifted instinctively to her hip before she remembered she hadn’t taken her off-duty weapon from her apartment the night before. She made a mental note to blame Leopold for that one.

“I’ve got you covered,” Marshall said from behind her. “Let’s try not to draw too much attention. Keep it slow and natural.”

“This isn’t my first time at the rodeo, you know,” Mary said, feeling a flash of irritation. “Just make sure you’ve got my back.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Mary caught the note of sarcasm. “And don’t call me ‘ma’am.’”

A scuffling noise made both Mary and

Marshall flinch. Marshall reached for his weapon, his hand at his hip.

“Am I interrupting you two?” A woman’s voice sounded from somewhere in front of them. Mary heard the sound of footsteps and a figure appeared from around the corner of the warehouse. She was dressed in casual clothes; slim-fitting jeans, dark blue halter top and a light raincoat. Her hair was shoulder length and brown and she stood a little under five eight. Mary felt her stomach lurch.

The woman took a few steps closer and then stopped, folding her arms. “What’s up, sis?”

“Kate,” Mary said. “Making a grand entrance, as always, I see.”

Kate ignored her and looked over Mary’s shoulder. “Who’s your friend?”

Marshall took a step forward. “Special Agent Jack Marshall.” He kept his hand on his hip.

“Relax,” said Kate. “I’m unarmed. Not that I’d be particularly interested in shooting anybody.” She glanced at Mary. “That’s more *her* thing.”

“Let’s keep this professional, shall we?” said Mary, pushing any remaining irritation from her mind and switching into cop mode. “How about you give us an update on the situation?”

“Like I said, the CDC sent us a bunch of red flags and I’m following up. This place,” she jerked a thumb at the beat up warehouse, “came up plenty of times on the network

chatter. I wouldn't have paid it any attention if it weren't for the Chemworks fiasco, but the leads match up. So I figure this is a good place to start looking."

"Doesn't look like much," said Marshall.

"That's kinda the point."

"Security?"

Kate shook her head. "I've scoped it out best I can, and all I've seen is a big ol' rusty padlock. Not that I was expecting anything high tech."

"Why?" Marshall sounded surprised.

Mary decided to join the conversation. "State-of-the-art security systems require you to be plugged into the telecom grid," she said. "Any number of law enforcement agencies could pick up the signal, even if they found a way to reroute it. Besides, having a bunch of fancy cameras stuck onto a crappy shed like this is going to draw unnecessary attention." She paused. "The real security of a place like this is anonymity."

Marshall nodded. "Okay, so how do we get in? I'm guessing they didn't leave the key under the door mat."

"Leave that to me," said Kate, striding over to her car and popping open the trunk. "I've got a key of my own."

## Chapter 35

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“STILL AWAKE?”

Leopold heard Jerome’s deep voice and looked up. The hotel suite was bathed in dim yellow light from the automatic systems, dropped down to the lowest ambient setting, and Leopold sat in the living room. He had tossed and turned in bed for over an hour, sleep clawing at him, but had been unable to settle. His brain hadn’t stopped whirring since his head had hit the pillow.

“Can’t sleep either?” Leopold replied, eyeing the glass of Scotch he had poured himself and left on the coffee table. It was half empty.

“I heard you get up.”

“You’re always on duty, aren’t you?”

“Kinda have to be with you around.” The giant bodyguard settled down on the opposite couch, the frame groaning slightly under his weight. “Something on your mind?”

Leopold picked up the crystal whisky tumbler and took a sip of the musky liquid. It tasted like Scotch should taste, peaty and full of warmth. “Isn’t there always?”

“Come to any conclusions?”

“Only questions.”

“Well, that’s not so bad. You need questions before you can get answers.”

Leopold snorted. "Since when are you so philosophical?"

"Like I said before, maybe it's time we reevaluated my job title."

"You're still not getting a raise."

Jerome cracked a smile and settled back into the plush leather. "What questions did you come up with?"

"There's the obvious ones, of course. Like how the hell my father managed to convince the world he was dead for the best part of two decades, and what made him do it. And why he's decided to show himself now." Leopold took another hit of Scotch. "And why go to all the trouble to draw me out of the apartment only to have me killed once I get back there? Why not just shoot me in the back of the head? It all seems so..." He trailed off.

"Unnecessary," said Jerome.

"Right. And the only explanation I can fathom is that he never intended for me to be killed in the first place. Which invites the question: why does he want me alive? Why *not* have me out of the picture?"

"He *is* you father, remember."

"By blood, sure. But if those files the FBI showed me are even partly true, none of that counts for much. I need to understand *why* he's doing these things. Then maybe I can figure out what he's planning."

"Any thoughts?"

"He must have scouted the apartment back

in New York at some point. No way he'd assume everything he needed was in there."

"We're out often enough. Even our security systems aren't impenetrable. And with your father's resources..."

"Exactly. So he knew that I had everything he needed to take control of my assets stashed in the penthouse. But he needed a distraction. And, for some reason, he needed to get inside the FBI headquarters."

Jerome frowned. "They must have information he wants."

"So, while everyone thinks I'm the main target, he's actually hitting two places at once. Setting the explosion makes for a nice distraction."

"Or maybe a show of force. A sign of things to come."

"Let's hope Mary and her new friend figure that out in time. Otherwise we're stuck here sitting on our hands."

Jerome sighed. "It's late. Maybe figure this out in the morning when your head's in the game."

"My head is always in the game."

"Except we're not winning."

"We will. We always do. We're just going to need some help."

Jerome nodded. "Any ideas where to start?"

"A few. We'll get started in the morning. I think I know someone who might be able to help. Assuming I don't get shot before I get a chance to ask."



“Sounds like a safe plan,” said Jerome, sarcastically.

“It’s the only one we’ve got right now. And I’m damned if I’m going to sit here and let everyone else fix this situation without me.”

“What did you have in mind?”

“Sun Tzu said that the supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting,” said Leopold, getting up and draining the last of his drink. “But personally, I think it’s time for a serious ass kicking.”

## Chapter 36

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ANY TRACES OF the morning dew had long since vanished, and Richard Ward started to feel the heat even though summer had come and gone. The sun was hiding behind a thick coat of clouds and it wasn't exactly warm, but the humidity out in the open country felt oppressive. The damp air hung stifling and sticky, and the director knew he wasn't exactly dressed for a hike in his tailored suit and black leather brogues. He had loosened his tie, but he could still feel the sweat trickling down his back as he strode through an overgrown meadow toward the silhouette of an old farmhouse on the horizon. Or, what he hoped was a farmhouse.

The gas station had been derelict, the pumps all grimy and the registers unmanned. Nobody had bothered much with boarding up the place; a simple padlock and some spray paint over most of the windows seemed to have done the trick. Ward wasn't sure whether Robert Blake had known the gas station would be of no help, but the director wouldn't have put it past him.

A two-hour hike along the highway, all for nothing. And now, Ward was stomping over some Godforsaken farmland in the hope of finding someone with a telephone, and maybe

a cold glass of water and something to eat.

The FBI could have someone at his location within an hour once he found a phone. Less, if Burke could get one of the choppers. Ward kept that thought in his head as he felt his leg muscles start to burn. He pressed on, scaling the hill toward the summit, keeping the farmhouse firmly in his sights.

Ward's brain spun as he marched. He hadn't yet figured out why Blake would want him alive, but he knew it probably had something to do with the information his men had pulled from the FBI servers. If they had managed to get hold of the alias lists, hundreds of agents' lives would be in jeopardy. That was some serious leverage, and Ward suspected Blake wanted him alive long enough to use it.

But for what?

The director shook off the feeling of unease spreading through his body. He figured whatever was going to happen couldn't be avoided. No sense in worrying about it until he knew what it was. And then, with any luck, he'd be in a position to do something about it rather than being stranded in a field in the middle of nowhere with his finger stuck up his ass.

From somewhere far ahead came the sound of a big engine revving. Ward ignored it and pressed on.

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The farmhouse seemed typical for the area; white timber frame with four columns supporting a sheltered porch area. The decking looked worn, with patches of moss and rot forming in the corners, but otherwise it appeared stable. The paintwork was chipped, no doubt the product of years of hot summers and cold winters, and the curtains were drawn across the windows.

Farmland stretched out all around, endless green, brown, and yellow fields rolling out toward the horizon, some a little patchier than others. A line of trees to the side followed the landscape as far as Ward could see before joining a denser mass of forest a few miles north. Whatever crops they were growing here weren't doing so well. He couldn't make out any farm equipment or livestock, either.

He turned his attention back to the house. The porch door hung open slightly, a bug net covering the doorway behind. Ward couldn't see through it into the interior, but it looked like somebody was home. The smell of something cooking wafted out into the still air, and the director felt his stomach grumble.

Again, he heard the distant sound of a revving engine. He looked across the expansive yard, but couldn't see anything except for a few outbuildings. Shrugging, he headed for the front door and knocked hard on the frame.

Then he waited.

When nobody answered, he tried again.

The sound of the engine got louder. Ward ignored it and knocked again.

Still nothing.

Ward heard a deafening rattling noise and nearly jumped out of his skin. He whipped around to see a tractor headed straight toward him, engine spinning wildly. Black smoke poured out the exhaust. It must have made its way up behind the line of trees, the noise of the heavy diesel muffled by the leaves. Ward squinted for a look at the driver, but the reflective windshield obscured his view.

The tractor rolled to a stop a few feet from him and the driver got out, leaving the engine running. The man, whoever he was, started walking toward the house. He wore dirty coveralls over a muscular frame and didn't look a day under sixty. Ward heard a scuffling noise behind him, catching him off guard. He wheeled around, wondering what the hell was going on.

His eyes settled on a double-barreled shotgun leveled at his head.

## Chapter 37

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“WHAT THE HELL are you planning on doing with those?” Mary eyed the hefty set of bolt cutters Kate had pulled out of her trunk. She was holding them in both hands and they looked heavy.

Kate smiled. “I told you, this is my key. I can assure you, it’s damn effective.”

“We can’t just go around breaking into private property.”

“Why the hell not?”

Mary groaned. “It’s always the same with you. Always rushing in head first without thinking about who you’ll end up hurting.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Mary felt her head get hot. She resisted the urge to raise her voice. “You know exactly what I mean.”

Marshall seemed to decide it was time to steer the conversation in a different direction. He stepped toward Kate, palms up. “Listen, uh, ma’am...”

“My name’s Kate. Don’t call me ‘ma’am.’”

Marshall glanced sideways at Mary. “Wow, you two really are sisters.”

Mary could have sworn she noticed his mouth twitch into a tiny smile. She wanted to slap it right off his face.

“Mary’s right,” he continued. “There’s due

process to follow. We need a warrant. And to get one of those, we need some evidence. More substantial evidence than your rumor mill and a few loosely connected dots.”

Kate rolled her eyes. “Don’t give me that rulebook bullcrap.” She glared at her sister. “I get enough of that from her.”

“Wouldn’t hurt you to listen once in a while,” Mary said.

“Ladies, please,” said Marshall, arms folded. “Look, we need something to justify us going in there. Otherwise, everything we find is going to be inadmissible in court.”

Kate groaned loudly. “What kind of world are you living in here? If something really is going on with Chemworks, then a speedy trial is the least of our concerns. We won’t even make it to a judge if we don’t figure out what’s going on.”

“I can’t authorize this,” said Marshall.

“I don’t need your authorization. Far as I can see, I’m a civilian working for a nondomestic intergovernmental organization. I’m not bound by the same rules as you, meaning if I find something, you can still use it as evidence. And second, you two are supposed to be dead. What the hell are you going to do to stop me?”

Marshall opened his mouth to speak, but apparently couldn’t think of anything to say.

Kate slung the bolt cutters over her shoulder and started walking toward the locked door. “Didn’t think so.”

Mary saw Marshall glance at her, as though looking for an explanation. Mary just shrugged. "She's got a point."

Marshall grunted.

"You two coming or what?" Kate called from around the corner.

Mary and Marshall followed. They found Kate standing next to a steel sliding door. It was a little under seven feet high, maybe four feet wide, with a heavy padlock securing the slide handle. Smaller locks secured the bolts at the top and bottom of the frame.

"What do you figure?" Kate said, hoisting the bolt cutters and positioning the blades over the larger padlock. "About two thirds of an inch thick?"

Marshall nodded. "Looks about right."

"I'm probably gonna need your help, then." She waved him over.

Together, they forced the bolt cutter's handles together with considerable effort until the padlock snapped off and dropped to the floor with a dull *clunk*. Kate looked up at Marshall and grinned.

"One down, two to go."

The other locks fell more easily, and Marshall heaved the metal door open once the bolts were loose. Mary peered inside. The interior was dark, smelled a little damp, like a basement after heavy rainfall. She felt her hand drift down to her hip again.

"Allow me," said Marshall, stepping forward. He pulled out his sidearm and held it



up as he inched closer to the opening. “Stay behind me until I give the all clear.”

Mary saw Kate roll her eyes. Taking a deep breath, Mary followed Marshall and stepped into the warehouse, her sister bringing up the rear.

She heard a dull clicking sound and some overhead fluorescent strip lights buzzed into life. The blubs flooded the floor space in a harsh neon light, making everything look a little blue. Mary blinked a few times to get used to the glare.

She looked around. Metal shelving units were stacked wall to wall, packed full with what looked like hard-shelled Samsonite suitcases. At least, they were about the same size and shape. They were marked with a company logo, the text underneath reading “LS Coventry Electrical”. Against the far corner, straight ahead of them, a small room had been fenced off using cubicle walls, the kinds found in any one of a million corporate offices. An open entryway and a desk, but no roof. Mary could make out a small workstation and a computer monitor inside, some bunched-up cables and a lamp.

Marshall stayed up front, moving cautiously, his weapon still drawn and pointing straight ahead. He moved smoothly and silently, no doubt the product of decades of training and field experience. Mary wondered how good a shot he was.

Not that it was a competition.

Marshall held up a fist and they stopped. He indicated Mary and her sister should stay put. They complied. Marshall disappeared around the corner of one of the shelving units, leaving the two of them alone.

A few minutes passed. Mary bit her lip, glad they were being forced to keep quiet. She wasn't sure what she'd find to talk about, anyway.

There came the sound of footsteps and Marshall reappeared, holstering his sidearm. He looked a little relieved.

Mary said, "All clear?"

"Yeah. Place is deserted." He glanced around. "Any idea what these things are?"

"I'm guessing they're probably not luggage."

Kate leaned in a little closer to one of the objects. "How about we open them up?"

"Could be booby trapped," said Marshall.

"Not likely. They obviously contain something that's designed to be taken out. Unless this is the world's largest suitcase closet." She grinned. "Nobody's supposed to know they're here, right? So, why bother with a trap? We'd have tripped it when we came through the doors if there was one. Besides, you think you're gonna be able to get a HAZMAT squad down here to open it for you? I remember you waffling on about evidence and all. As in, we don't have any."

"Good point." Marshall strode over to the nearest case and picked it up in both hands,

straining a little under the weight. He said, “Whatever’s in here, it’s not vacation clothes.”

“Get it open,” said Kate. “If you can. Otherwise I’ve probably got something else in the trunk we can use.”

“Looks like a simple enough catch.” He fiddled with the handle and Mary heard a satisfying *click* as the mechanism opened.

“Voila,” said Kate.

Marshall lay the case down on the hard floor, got down on one knee, and opened it up carefully. Mary thought she saw his expression tense a little, but if he felt nervous, he was trying not to show it.

Mary brushed a hand through her hair absent-mindedly. “Anything interesting?”

Marshall didn’t reply right away. He was still kneeling down, one hand on the outer casing, peering inside. He looked up after a moment.

“What is it?”

Marshall kept his eyes on the contents of the case. “I think we’ve found something.” He turned the case around.

Mary felt her stomach jump into her throat. Kate took an instinctive step back. Nestled inside a pouch of thick black foam, a complicated-looking mess of wires with a red digital display stared up at her. Two clear plastic receptacles were fastened to opposite sides of the circuit board, each filled with a different color liquid – one red, the other green. A steel cylinder nestled in the middle, hooked up to the main power supply. The

device looked familiar – close in design to the model she'd seen in Manhattan. But this one looked like it had been given a few upgrades.

“Shit,” said Kate and Mary in unison. They both glanced at each other.

“That’s putting it mildly,” said Marshall. “If the payload on this thing is anything like we saw at Blake’s apartment, there’s enough here to level a few city blocks. At least.”

“We need to tell someone,” said Mary. “Get this place locked down.”

“Agreed. But we need some time.”

“Time for what?”

“Think about it,” said Marshall, getting to his feet and leaving the open case on the floor. “This is going to be a jurisdictional nightmare. We’ll have the New Jersey State Police, the NYPD, the Coast Guard, the FBI, and probably the CIA to worry about once this gets out.”

“The more, the merrier, right?” said Kate.

“Not exactly,” said Mary. “First thing I’d do if this was my call, I’d firewall this place, ring-fence the other departments out. We can’t afford to get caught up in the red tape. Not with everything we know.”

“This *is* your call,” said Marshall. “Sort of, anyway. But you’re right. If we call this in, we’re going to get shut out. Especially given our current circumstances, being dead and all.”

Kate sighed. “So, just get what evidence you can and then call it in. We don’t need to

have a debate every time there's a decision to be made."

Marshall and Mary glared at her.

"What? You know I'm right," she said, folding her arms. "Go check out the computer. There's bound to be something on there. Then you can get the cavalry down here and hope your friends at the Bureau can cut you a little slack."

Marshall bit his lip. "It's your call, Detective." He looked at Mary.

"It's 'Sergeant,' actually," she replied. "I just like to get my hands a little dirty, that's all." She allowed herself a brief smile. "Let's check it out."

They headed for the makeshift office, and Marshall took a seat at the desk. He checked the monitor and computer tower for any obvious monitoring devices before tapping the space bar on the keyboard. The monitor flickered into life. He accessed the desktop and double clicked on a file folder. A pop-up box jumped onto the screen, demanding a security code.

"Looks like a network password," he said. "I can get into some of the computer's system settings, but the files look like they're stored in the cloud. Even if we take the hard drives, there's nothing useful on them. I can't access any of the data without the password."

Mary peered over his shoulder. "I thought this place was supposed to be off the grid."

"It is. There's no hard line, but that doesn't

stop anyone using wireless.” He pulled out his cell phone. “You can piggyback off a mobile data plan if you activate the Wi-Fi hub feature. If you’re using a prepaid phone, it’s almost impossible to trace if you’ve got GPS turned off.”

“Can you crack the password?”

“Not without a little help,” said Marshall. “If I can get online, I can plug this computer’s IP address into our decryption software. I should be able to get through the security layers, depending on what level of encryption they’ve used on their servers. If it’s standard SSL or TSL, we shouldn’t have a problem.” He grinned. “You can thank our friends at the NSA for that one.”

“We can thank them if it works,” said Mary. “How long is this going to take?”

“Maybe twenty minutes to get through the security, another minute or two to grab the files. If this works, I can be in and out before Blake realizes his servers are compromised.”

“They’re going to notice?”

“This is a professional operation. They’ll see me snooping around the moment I crack the encryption. It’s unavoidable. But, if I’m fast enough, we can get everything we need before they can stop us.”

Mary gritted her teeth. “Better get started, then. And let’s hope nobody shows up in the meantime.”

Marshall offered a mock salute. “Yes, ma’am.”

Mary slapped him on the shoulder. “Just try to stay focused, okay?”

Kate coughed, a little louder than necessary. “If you two are finished batting eyelids at each other, maybe big sis and I can go check out the rest of this place.”

Mary felt her cheeks get hot – for the second time that morning. She hoped to hell nobody noticed.

“Yeah, I got this,” said Marshall. “See if you can find anything else before we call this in.” He took a deep breath. “Just keep your fingers crossed.”

Mary nodded and followed Kate back out onto the floor. She could hear Marshall typing something onto the keyboard, but resisted the urge to turn her head. She didn’t want to give Kate any more ammunition.

“So...” Mary began, searching for words.

Kate looked back at her, a look of impatience in her eyes. “Listen, sis. You don’t have to pretend to talk to me, you know. I get I’m only here because you needed my help.”

Mary stopped walking. “You were expecting a warm reception?”

“Not exactly.”

“So, what’s the problem?”

Kate sighed, short and sharp. “Nothing. No problem.”

Mary didn’t reply, but she noticed her sister bite her bottom lip, looking like she wanted to say something else. Mary decided not to press it.

“Let’s just get this over with, okay?” she said, eventually. “Then you can go back to your life and I can go back to mine.” She paused, thinking about the last words she said before Leopold climbed onto the jet. She felt a rush of anger, but shook it off in a hurry.

“Something on your mind?” Kate asked.

“Nothing you need to worry about.” Mary started walking again, heading toward the back of the warehouse. She waved her sister forward. “Come help me search this place and make yourself useful.”

Kate smirked. “Yes, ma’am.”

Mary groaned and kept on moving. It was going to be a long twenty minutes waiting for Marshall to hack into the computer files, even without Kate there making her feel like she wanted to punch through the walls. Mary almost wished the bombs would detonate and put her out of her misery.

Almost.



## Chapter 38

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HAWKES CRADLED HIS broken finger carefully, using his good hand to check for further damage. He felt the base of the proximal phalanx where the bone joined with the metacarpal and noted that the swelling had confined itself to the knuckle area. The break felt clean, although it would be difficult to tell for sure without an x-ray.

Still, it stung like a bitch. And the throbbing was getting worse. Hawkes knew he wouldn't be using his right hand for anything productive for at least a few weeks. He wondered how that would affect his marksmanship, among other things. Hawkes pushed the thought out of his head. No sense in worrying about something he couldn't change.

The ride to NYC had been blessedly uneventful, and the shock of the broken finger had kept the worse of the pain at bay for a good hour. By the time they had hit city traffic, however, it was a different story.

Hawkes had endured well enough, but it wasn't a journey he'd like to repeat any time soon. Thankfully, their final destination boasted better equipment than the Range Rover.

The *Thanatos* was a private yacht, 312 feet

from bow to stern, sixty-eight feet at its widest point, with a top speed greater than thirty knots. With more than forty million dollars invested in custom surveillance equipment, the vessel was easily the most connected private ship on the planet.

Currently, it was moored up in a commercial slip at one of the farthest corners of New York Harbor, where the Hudson emptied into New York Bay. With the Staten Island Ferry service and passenger ships from Red Hook and Bayonne coming through several times an hour, The *Thanatos* blended perfectly into the background, hiding in plain sight.

Hawkes had rolled the Range Rover into the cargo bay, waited for the other car to join them, and then followed Blake up to the bridge – a double-height room stuffed with navigation systems, a panoramic view of the harbor and the New York City skyline visible through the plate glass windows. Most of the controls were automated, but Hawkes knew some human interaction was still required – although he himself hadn't a clue what any of the dials meant.

The ship's usual complement of forty-six crewmembers had been largely reduced, leaving a skeleton command of a little over a dozen to oversee the ongoing operation, now Blake's sole focus. More than enough people to get the job done.

Blake had assembled the crew leaders

upstairs, leaving a handful of operators to keep an eye on the systems in other parts of the ship, and was preparing to address the room.

Everyone looked a little tense.

“Things are progressing well,” Blake said after a few moments of silence. He started pacing the carpet. The sun had broken free of the clouds and light streamed through the tall windows behind him. The effect was unnerving.

He continued, “Despite some unforeseen developments, we’re right where we need to be. The biometrics and encryption codes you retrieved from the apartment proved successful. We now have full control of Blake Investments’ assets, foreign and domestic.” He paused. “We also got what we needed from the FBI. But it’s only a matter of time before they figure out what we took from them. We need to be in place before that happens.”

Hawkes heard someone clear their throat nervously.

“Yes?” Blake stopped pacing.

Campbell coughed again. “Sir, the devices are ready to move out. They made it through the containment yard without incident thanks to a little creativity with the TEU registry. There are depots positioned across the city. We can be mobile and en route with the payloads within the hour.”

Blake nodded. “Good. We can finish this

briefing later. Get moving and report back when the devices are in place.”

Grayson snapped a salute and turned on his heel, heading for the exit. The others followed, with Hawkes at the rear.

“Wait,” Blake said, as the colonel reached the door. “Not you, Hawkes.”

The colonel suppressed a groan. He had hoped to avoid any more broken bones.

“I need to go over a few things. Your attention would be welcomed.”

Hawkes detected a note of sarcasm. He headed back toward Blake, squinting a little as the sunlight intensified.

“Yes, sir?” he said, drawing close.

“I’ll need you to have your man go through the tactical files we retrieved. I assume he’s up to the task.”

“He got us into the FBI, sir. It’ll probably be child’s play.” Hawkes offered a grin.

Blake remained expressionless. “Good. We need to understand the evac routes and plan accordingly. We’re pissing into the wind otherwise. You’ll need to liaise with the field team once they have the devices in transit, make sure they’re in the optimum positions.”

Hawkes nodded. “Anything else?”

“The other documents, the ones we found on the company databases. Did you locate the military tenders?”

“CAD drawings, tech data, you name it. The company made at least a dozen bids that fell within the search parameters. And we’ve

got the details locked up.”

Blake smiled, his skin glowing pink in the light. “Then get our client on the phone. He’s going to want an update.”

“Yes, sir.” He turned to leave. A buzzing noise stopped him in his tracks, coming from one of the consoles. The comms unit flashed impatiently. Blake picked up the receiver and held it to his ear.

Hawkes saw his expression darken. Blake hung up.

“One of the operations leaders picked up something from our storage unit in New Jersey,” said Blake. “The network should be offline, but someone’s hooked the system up to the grid.” He paused. “It looks like we’ve got some uninvited guests.”

“Your orders, sir?”

“We have enough units at the other locations. We can stand to lose this consignment. Find out what’s going on and take care of it. Just make sure there’s no fallout. I don’t want any traces at the scene.” Blake turned and walked to the window. He stared out over the harbor.

“Make sure your burn it, Hawkes. Burn it all.”

## Chapter 39

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“I’M IN!”

Marshall’s voice echoed through the warehouse, bouncing harshly off the metal walls. Mary turned her head back toward the makeshift office and saw the special agent standing up, the top of his head just about visible above the cubicle walls. She broke into a jog and headed straight for him, Kate following close behind.

“You guys find anything?” Marshall said as they arrived. He sat back down in the chair and took hold of the mouse, spinning around to face the monitor, which displayed a page full of documents and folders with strange-looking file names. He looked pleased with himself.

“We didn’t find anything,” said Kate. “Well, unless you count the other three-dozen shelves filled with explosives.”

Mary rolled her eyes. “Never mind us. You got through? Anything useful?”

“I only just broke through the security. Let’s take a look, shall we?” Marshall accessed one of the file folders and opened up a document full screen. It appeared to be some kind of blueprint; a technical drawing for something Mary didn’t recognize. She saw text on the page, but couldn’t understand the language.

The characters looked Chinese or some other kind of Asian script – not exactly Mary’s area of expertise.

“What the hell?” Marshall leaned in to the screen a little closer.

“You know what that is?” asked Kate.

“Not exactly, but it looks familiar.” He scrolled through the document. “Looks like some kind of specification sheet. Hard to tell from the pictures, but it looks like a design for an ECU.”

“ECU?”

Marshall nodded. “Electronic Control Unit. They use them on engines to coordinate pretty much everything hooked up to the system. You’ve probably got them on your car.” He looked at Kate. “Well, maybe not on yours.”

“Thanks a lot.”

Mary sighed. “How does this help us?”

“I don’t know yet. I’ve started an email transfer so we can take a closer look once we get somewhere safe. But it all depends what kind of ECU we’re talking about. This is pretty complex, but if this blueprint is part of a larger set of documentation, we could be looking at vehicle specs here.”

“What kind of vehicle?”

“No idea. But I’m guessing it’s not your average passenger car.”

Mary opened her mouth to reply, but cut herself off. She spotted something flashing on the screen, a small red icon in the bottom

right corner. She pointed it out. “What the hell is that?”

Marshall froze. “Shit. This doesn’t look good.”

Mary got the impression that was an understatement.

“What?” Kate took a step forward.

“I think we’ve been spotted,” said Marshall, moving the mouse cursor over the flashing icon.

Mary saw the screen go dark, flickering slightly like an old TV set. Static appeared, a haze of black and white with no sound.

“Is this picking up a signal or something?” said Kate, her eyes narrowed.

“It doesn’t work like that,” said Marshall. “You’d need an analogue signal. This is all digital. Someone’s sending through a feed.” He clicked the mouse. “Dammit, I’m locked out.” He hammered the keyboard with an index finger. “I’d only just started the transfer.”

“How much did you get?”

Marshall looked up at Mary. “No way to know until we get to a working computer.”

“Then we’d better get moving,” she said, turning to leave. “And let’s get the bomb squad down—”

A piercing noise interrupted her, a wailing siren about two octaves too high for a regular alarm. The kind of sound that makes a person wince. She whipped around, searching for the source. The echoes caused by the harsh



surfaces didn't help. She stepped outside the office and glanced about, feeling her pulse start to quicken.

"What's going on?"

Mary could hear Kate behind her, but she kept her gaze straight ahead, her stomach twisting up into knots. A few feet in front of her, the case that Marshall had left open on the floor was emitting a blinking red light.

She walked forward, carefully. Got down on her knees and tilted her head.

"The noise is coming from here," she called out, trying to make herself heard over the noise. "The cases. They've got some kind of alarm system."

"They're all turned on," said Marshall, jogging over. Kate followed, any trace of her former annoying self now completely vanished. She looked as terrified as Mary felt.

Kate looked at the device, pushing a strand of dark brown hair out of her eyes. "Shouldn't they be counting down or –"

The digital display blinked into life. There were no numbers, just four oddly shaped letter Xs where the digits should have been.

Marshall jumped back. "No countdown for us," he said, looking toward the exit. His body was tensed up, coiled like a steel spring.

He said, "Run."

Mary was already way ahead of him. Instinctively, she grabbed hold of Kate's jacket and yanked her forward, breaking into a sprint and aiming for the door. She heard

Marshall follow suit, but kept her eyes forward, increasing her pace. The piercing wail of the alarms intensified, Mary's adrenaline making every one of her senses work on overdrive.

She reached the door, almost slamming straight into the metal. Letting go of Kate, she fumbled with the slider. It wouldn't budge.

"What are you doing? Get us out of here!" Kate jumped in, lending her weight to Mary's efforts.

"It's stuck!" Mary looked over at Marshall. "What the hell are you waiting for?"

The special agent lunged forward, adding a third pair of hands. Mary thought she could hear a whirring, mechanical noise coming from behind them through the cacophony of alarms.

"Get... this... damn... thing... open!" Mary shoved her full body weight against the reluctant slider and felt the metal give way. She heard a grinding screech and the latch finally relented.

"Move!" She flung open the door, catching a waft of fresh air as the parking lot burst into view. "Now!"

The three of them tumbled out of the exit, and immediately broke into a sprint, heading for the nearest cover – Kate's old Ford.

The sound of Kate's and Marshall's footfalls faded from Mary's mind as she kept her eyes fixed on the car. She knew she was a

strong runner, but the twenty feet of open blacktop looked like an impossible distance.

Time slowed. Mary heard something to her rear – a deafening roar that rattled her skull. Before she could process what had happened, she felt something hit her from behind. The impact knocked the wind out of her lungs and she felt herself lifted off the ground.

The last thing she saw was her sister's beat-up old car, still agonizingly out of reach, and then there was only darkness.

## Chapter 40

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LEOPOLD CAUGHT THE scent of fried pork as he and Jerome crossed the bustling street. They had taken the metro to the end of the line earlier in the day, and were now in one of the poorer parts of the Songjiang district, a few miles south of the town center. Like most of the more run-down areas of Shanghai, the slums had been demolished to make way for modern buildings, forcing the poorer inhabitants to move further toward the outskirts.

The same proved true here, and the shops and apartments of the Songjiang Xincheng developments looked like blurs on the horizon as Leopold and Jerome ventured deeper into the packed neighborhoods that had sprung up around the edges of the district. It was getting late in the evening, but the streets still teemed with people.

Leopold had tracked down their contact's address using the hotel's shared computers, meaning the chances of anyone tracing the signal were unlikely. After a half-hour wait, an incoming secure message from someone calling himself Huang Bo had told them to pick up some cash at a drop point in Songjiang and wait for further instructions.

The money had been easy enough to find –

nearly five thousand dollars in small bills stuffed into a brown paper bag and wedged under the floorboard of an abandoned restaurant just off Cangfeng Road. A handwritten note had been attached, giving them an address nearby along with a name and photograph of another local contact.

“It’s just up here,” Leopold said, quickening his pace as they crossed the road, narrowly avoiding an old VW bus trundling noisily along the cracked asphalt. The bus threw up a cloud of yellow dust as it passed by and Leopold wrinkled his nose against the stink of exhaust fumes.

He stepped onto the sidewalk, weaving in and out of the other pedestrians. Most of the area’s inhabitants seemed to be trudging in the same direction, eyes down, making progress slow. A woman carrying a box of oranges pushed past, muttering something under her breath. Her words sounded like an entirely different-sounding dialect to the Mandarin he had heard spoken at the hotel. The smell of cooking pork mixed with the salty odor of roasted spiced peanuts as a vendor pushed a rickety cart past them, disappearing around a corner.

“The Huangma Clubhouse,” said Leopold, pushing through the dense crowd and calling over his shoulder. “I told you I’d find it.” He gestured across the street as they reached the end of the block. “Right where I said it would be.”

Jerome sauntered up, towering over the other pedestrians on the sidewalk. “You got lucky.”

“You call this lucky?”

“Figure of speech.”

Leopold glanced down at the handwritten note. “We’re looking for a Kang Sheng,” he said, switching his attention to the photograph. “Hopefully he won’t be too hard to spot.”

Jerome frowned. “Let me guess – dark hair, medium height?”

“Something like that.” Leopold grinned.

“Who is he?”

“I guess he’s the club owner.”

“Which usually means something else around here.”

“Relax. Let’s just get a couple of drinks and see if we can track him down. I’m sure it’s nothing too sinister.”

“Sure, because you always mix with the most trustworthy people.”

Leopold ignored him and headed straight for the club. “You coming or what?”

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The Huangma Clubhouse stood four stories high, the front of the building trussed up like a second-rate casino. A gaudy yellow-and-red sign hanging above the double doors announced in both English and Chinese that the establishment was open twenty-four

hours, and neon strip lights blinked and flickered silently within the sheltered entryway.

Leopold pushed through a pair of blacked-out glass doors and stepped inside the club. The smell of state cigarette smoke hit his nostrils. He looked around, giving his eyes a moment to adjust to the gloomy lighting.

The Clubhouse had been decked out as a karaoke bar, with a raised stage toward the rear wall and seating arranged facing it. There were maybe a dozen tables, all empty, each with two or three chairs. There was music playing, but nobody was singing just yet – Leopold figured the evening crowd probably wasn't feeling too melodic.

A handful of patrons gathered around the bar, which stretched half the length of the side wall, lined with stools. They were dressed in dark cheap-looking suits. A few booths were installed nearby for those seeking privacy. Two of them were occupied, but overall the place was mostly dead.

“Can you see him?” asked Leopold, as Jerome caught up.

“Not from here. It's a little dark.”

“Let's get closer, then. Maybe get a round in.” Leopold pulled the wad of cash out of his pocket.

Jerome hissed. “Put that away. You want us to get mugged?”

“Why? Is five thousand a lot of money?” Leopold smiled, hoping the bodyguard would catch the note of irony in his voice. It

appeared he didn't.

"Just let me do the talking," said Jerome. "And stand behind me."

"Fine. Just don't scare anyone off. We need their help, remember? Otherwise we're stuck here."

"Follow my lead." Jerome took the photograph of Kang Sheng from Leopold and stalked off toward the bar.

Leopold followed, keeping his gaze on the men standing at the bar. A few of them looked over as Jerome approached. They didn't look particularly hospitable. One of the men, slightly taller than the others, left his drink on the bar and stepped forward. He was wearing a dark suit, white shirt and no tie. He held up one palm.

"*Nǐ bù huānyíng*," he said. Leopold didn't understand the words, but the sentiment was clear: *You're not welcome here.*

Jerome ignored him.

"*Qù nǐde!*" There were a few murmurs from the man's friends. They were beginning to stir.

The man let his suit jacket fall open, revealing the dark outline of a holstered gun. Jerome didn't flinch. He unbuttoned his own jacket. The man glared up into Jerome's eyes, then his gaze flickered down toward the hip. He looked back up again.

Jerome held up the photograph once more. The man muttered something incomprehensible, then nodded in the direction of the booths.



The murmurs stopped. The man went back to collect his drink and sat back down on the barstool. He took a long drink and kept his eyes down.

“See, that wasn’t so hard,” said Jerome, heading for the booths.

“He was about ten seconds away from shooting you,” said Leopold, following.

“My gun was bigger.”

“It’s all about size with you, isn’t it?”

Jerome ignored him and kept walking. Just across the floor, two of the booths were full. Nine people in total, most of whom were wearing the same ugly suits. Some had their jackets off. One man sat in the center of one booth, wearing a white tee shirt and jeans and nursing a complicated-looking cocktail. He looked bored.

Jerome headed straight for the man in the tee shirt. The men in the suits noticed him approach and got to their feet.

“You Kang Sheng?” Jerome asked.

The man in the tee shirt looked up at the suit standing closest to him and said, “Get rid of them.” He waved his hand dismissively.

The man lurched forward, both hands reaching for Jerome’s jacket lapels, presumably in an attempt to wrench him off his feet. It was a dumb move, poorly executed. The position of the booth’s table made it worse, getting in the way of the man’s movements, severely reducing his momentum.

Jerome sidestepped the attack effortlessly,

grabbing hold of the man's outstretched wrist as he did so. With a casual flick, Jerome twisted his attacker's arm behind his shoulder, altering the direction of travel. With one final shove, the bodyguard forced the suit face down onto the table. He drew his gun from its holster and pressed the barrel into the base of the man's skull.

"I said, are you Kang Sheng?" Jerome asked again.

The man in the white tee shirt sighed impatiently. "This is my private club and my private time," he said, in heavily accented English. He pushed his drink away. "You are not welcome here. Please leave."

"You attacked first," said Jerome, pressing the gun against the man's head a little harder. "We're not going anywhere."

"You pushed your way into a private club and refused to leave. It was a reasonable response." A pause. "But, as you wish." He muttered something in Chinese to the other suits. They nodded and shuffled out of their seats, making their way toward the bar. A few of them glanced back at the table as they left.

"Are you more comfortable now?" the man said, once his companions had retreated. "You can put away your weapon."

Jerome let his attacker stand up. The man flexed his shoulders, muttered something under his breath, and stalked off to join his companions. He kept his eyes down.

The man in the white tee shirt took a sip of

his drink and looked up at the new arrivals. "Now," he said, "who the hell are you?"

Leopold held up the handwritten note he had found at the money drop. "We were given your name by Huang Bo. Does that name mean anything to you?" He scanned the man's face for any sign of recognition.

"Why didn't you say so in the first place?" The man slapped his palms down on the table. "You must be Blake. And you..." he looked at Jerome. "I don't know who you are. My name is Kang Sheng, as I'm sure you already figured out." He grinned. "Come, take a seat."

Leopold obliged. Jerome holstered his sidearm and perched at the end of the bench.

"So, how can I be of service?" asked Sheng, taking another sip of his drink. It was bright pink, with a long straw and a paper umbrella.

"You're familiar with our situation, I assume," said Leopold.

"First, I believe you have something for me," Sheng said.

Leopold sighed and fished out the bag of cash. He took half and laid it on the table. Sheng took the money, folded it up, and slipped it into his jeans' back pocket. He didn't seem to care if anyone noticed.

"You have an American problem," Sheng said, eventually. "And you are stuck here." He smiled. "There are worse places to get stuck."

"We need eyes and ears, yes. We're flying

blind right now.”

“A man of your resources can’t arrange this himself?”

Leopold pushed back a flash of irritation. “Those resources are currently unavailable to us. We need someone who can get us reliable intel from the US without raising any red flags.” He paused. “But you already know this.”

Sheng sighed deeply. “Do you know who runs this place?”

“A shady bar in one of the poorest parts of Shanghai? Yeah, I can take a guess.”

“The Liang Shan family owns this district. I pay them the usual protection money, they leave me alone. I don’t make trouble for them, because I keep my eyes down and my nose clean.”

“What’s this got to do with us?”

Shen took another swig of his cocktail. “The Liang Shan family are part of the 14K Group Triad. They have interests all over the world, but particularly in Canada and the Pacific Northwest of the United States. Mostly human trafficking, some counterfeiting.”

“Why does this matter?”

“Well, let’s just say the Canadian border, with its thousands of miles of unmonitored entry points into the US, is an attractive spot for certain...” he paused. “For certain *holidaymakers*. And you can imagine your government doesn’t like the idea all that

much.”

Leopold sighed. “Get to the point.”

“When your government sticks its nose in over here, who do you think they talk to? They find out who the families work with. They apply pressure.” He scowled. “When the CIA shows up, you don’t really have much of a choice.”

“You’re an asset?”

Sheng drained the last of his cocktail. He lowered his voice. “Not by choice. They made it clear I either help them, or they make sure the Liang Shan family finds out I’ve been talking to outsiders. I didn’t have any other option.” He took a deep breath. “But, such is Chinese business.”

Leopold looked around the empty bar. “And business is booming, obviously.”

Shen ignored him. “So, of course, I send them what information I can, and they leave me to my work. My *other* work.” He grinned. “So, maybe this is a way I can help you and square my debt with Huang Bo.”

“You have a CIA handler?” Leopold said, with mounting interest. “I’ll need you to arrange a meet.”

“I can get a message out.”

“Today. As soon as possible.”

“A deal, then.”

Leopold nodded. “Set it up. But I’m not going into this blind – give me all the details you have on your handler. I don’t want any surprises.”

Sheng shrugged. He found a pen and scribbled something down on his cocktail napkin and handed it over. “Here. But you should know – she’s not to be trusted.”

Leopold studied the words written on the napkin and felt his stomach clench as he read the name Sheng had given him. “Isabel Kane,” he said. “Your handler’s name is Isabel Kane?”

Jerome raised an eyebrow. Sheng tensed up a little.

“You know her?” Sheng asked.

“Yeah, I know her,” Leopold said, folding the napkin and slipping it into his pocket. “And let’s just say, I don’t think she’s going to be too happy to see me.”

## Chapter 41

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RICHARD WARD EYED up the shotgun leaning against the wall of the spacious farmhouse living room and took a deep breath. A man and a woman sat on the couch opposite him, the farm owner and his wife. They looked to be both in their late fifties. The husband was lean and muscular, but the wife took up two seats. She was wringing her hands nervously.

“We didn’t mean to scare you,” said the husband, putting one hand on his wife’s shoulder. “But Cheryl gets kinda trigger-happy when she’s in the house by herself.” He offered an apologetic smile. “And we don’t get too many people like, uh... like *you* in these parts.”

Ward said, “You mean, black people?”

The wife inhaled sharply.

“No,” the husband said. “I mean, people dressed up in fancy suits. We don’t get many guests, especially ones who walk right on up without checking the courtyard first. What were you thinking?”

“I’m sorry,” said Ward, relaxing a little. He glanced at the shotgun again.

“Don’t worry,” the man said. “It’s only loaded with rock salt. We use it to scare off animals. Wouldn’t have done much more than

lay you out on your backside for a little while. Mighta stung a little at that range, though.” He chuckled. “My name’s Hal, by the way.”

“Nice to meet you, Hal. My name’s Richard.”

Cheryl smiled a little. “We keep the other shotgun with the real shells upstairs,” she said. “I was never going to use it on you. Promise.”

“Well, it’s all water under the bridge,” said Ward. “And, like I said, I’ll be out of your hair soon.”

“Your friends picking you up?” Hal asked.

“Yeah. They won’t be far off by now.”

“Are you sure they’ll be able to find this place? It’s a little remote out here. Easy to get lost. Though, I guess you know that.”

“They’ll be fine,” said Ward. “They, uh... they’ve got sat-nav.”

Hal changed the subject. “So, what kind of business you in?”

Ward hesitated. “Uh... insurance.”

“Oh? Sounds interesting.”

“It isn’t.”

Hal and Cheryl both nodded silently. Hal opened his mouth to reply, but something caught his attention. A low rumbling noise coming from somewhere outside filtered through the walls. It was getting louder. Ward recognized the sound immediately – Burke had sent the chopper.

He smiled.

Hal got up onto his feet. “What the hell is that?” He headed for the door. “Cheryl, I’m



going to go check it out.” He left the room.

Ward followed him through, caught up with him in the hallway. “Listen,” he said, “I just wanted to thank you for letting me use your phone. You got me out of a real situation.”

“You’re welcome,” said Hal, reaching for the door handle. “I’m guessing you needed the help.”

Ward heard the rumbling noise get louder. The chopper couldn’t have been more than fifty feet away, judging by the racket. He had to raise his voice a little. “Well, thanks. And like I said, it’s kind of a long story.”

“Ain’t none of my business. I always find it’s best not to ask too many questions, just in case you don’t like the answers.”

“That’s good,” said Ward, almost shouting. “Because, after you open that door, you’re going to have a whole bunch of them.”

## Chapter 42

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MARY'S EYES FLICKERED open. She found herself lying face-down on asphalt, a high-pitched whistling in her ears. Her confusion was quickly replaced with an agonizing pain in her back and shoulders. She blinked hard, trying to focus. She could see the parking lot, and not much else. Everything looked a little blurry.

*What the hell...?*

Mary tried to sit up, but the pain proved too much. With considerable effort she rolled onto her back and looked up into the sky. She closed her eyes again, trying to remember what had happened.

She scuffling noise somewhere behind her.

“Is everyone okay?” A male voice.

*Marshall.*

Everything came flooding back at once. Images flashed through Mary's head, making her wince. She glanced down at her arm. It was all red raw and sticky, the skin almost peeled away. She must have been thrown a considerable distance over the rough asphalt.

*That's going to sting tomorrow.*

“Mary? You okay?” Marshall's head appeared in her field of vision. “You in one piece?”

Mary stared up at him. The special agent

looked a little bruised and battered, the elbows on his jacket were ripped to shreds, but he seemed otherwise uninjured.

“Kate. Where’s Kate?” Mary ignored the tugging pain in her arm and shoulders and forced herself up onto her feet. “Kate?”

“Over here, sis.”

Mary looked over at her sister. She was sitting on the blacktop, cradling her left arm in her right, a bright red gash across her cheek. She looked a little dazed, but sounded lucid.

Mary felt a wave of relief wash over her, quickly overshadowed by the pain in her back. She got to her feet shakily, and made her way over.

“Jesus, Kate,” she said, as she got a little closer. “You look like hell.”

“You’re one to talk.”

“What the hell happened?”

Marshall made his way over to the two women. “Someone activated the explosives remotely. Thankfully, the warehouse contained the most of the blast. We got hit by the shockwave. It could have been a lot worse.”

Kate groaned. “It doesn’t feel like it.” She flexed her injured arm and winced.

Mary took her hand and felt along the bone, all the way up to the shoulder. “Doesn’t look broken. You’ll live.” She helped her sister up off the ground. “Maybe next time you won’t go charging in head first.”

Kate blinked hard, stared back at her. “Are you freakin’ kidding me? You’re choosing *now*

to have this argument? Again?”

“It’s not an argument. It’s a fact. Going in without backup put us all at risk. I should never have listened to you.”

“Yeah, but you did. You knew as well as I did that our only chance to find anything was to go in ourselves. You can’t blame me for this. Take some damn responsibility.”

“Our only chance to find anything?” said Mary, raising her voice. She tried to keep her anger in check, but Kate wasn’t making it easy. “Look where it got us. We lost everything.” She took a deep breath. “I should have stopped you.”

“If you had, we’d still be sitting around on our asses waiting for the cavalry to show up. We don’t have the time to play by your stupid rules, Mary. We’re not kids anymore.”

Mary clenched her fists into tight balls. “Then stop acting like one.”

“Why don’t you drop the act,” said Kate, stepping in close. “We both know what your problem is. So, spill it. I’m tired of dealing with your bullshit.”

Marshall cleared his throat. “Maybe this isn’t the time to deal with family issues,” he said. “This place is going to be crawling with police any minute. We need to figure out what we’re going to tell them.”

Mary felt her fists shaking. She forced herself to calm down. “You’re right.” She glared at Kate. “We should deal with one problem at a time.”

“We’d better call this in,” said Marshall, looking around the parking lot.

Mary followed his gaze to where the warehouse once stood. The sheet metal and concrete blocks forming the walls and roof had been scattered across the blacktop, leaving only a charred pile of burnt rubble. The steel shelving units had melted and warped, like old candles. A plume of black smoke billowed up into the air, soot and ash carpeting the asphalt where it fell to the ground. Kate’s old car looked mostly unscathed, most of the damage concentrated around the area near the storage unit.

“How long were we out?” asked Mary.

Marshall checked his watch. “Maybe a few minutes. Hard to tell. But the emergency services will be here soon – no way this went unnoticed.”

“We need to be here when they arrive. Maybe they can get something off the computer.”

“Unlikely,” said Marshall. “The hard drives will be fried and the data we needed was stored in the cloud anyway. We won’t be able to trace it.” He sighed. “I think I managed to get something transferred to my email before we got locked out. It might not be much, but it’s a start.”

Mary nodded. “I’ll make the call to Jersey P.D.,” she said. “You see if you can get Deputy Director Burke on our side before this story goes public. Maybe we can contain it, figure

out what we're dealing with." She looked at Kate. "And we better get you checked out."

"I'm fine," said Kate. "Just a sprain. Looks like you took the worst of it."

Mary glanced down at her ruined arm. "Nothing some antiseptic and a few painkillers can't fix. We've got more important problems right now." She held out a hand. "I'll need to borrow your cell phone."

Kate hesitated, and then fished out a small handset from her jacket pocket. The screen was cracked. "It's an old model," she said. "It doesn't have internet, but it's solid as a rock. Should still work."

Mary took the phone, then turned to Marshall. "Get Burke on the line." She glanced over at the smoking ruins of the warehouse. "I've got a feeling whatever Blake's planning is going to happen soon. We need to be ready."

## Chapter 43

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NIGHTTIME HAD FALLEN in earnest and Songjiang was a teeming mess of streetlights. The dense streets looked even more crowded than they had earlier in the day, the houses almost leaning up against each other. Narrow alleyways wound through the buildings, a jumbled mess of dusty paths and dark hiding places.

Leopold and Jerome waited outside an old apartment block around the back and out of sight. The complex appeared mostly concrete; no paint on the outside, and the only entrance was secured with a locked iron gate. Some of the windows were smashed through, but a few of the apartments seemed to have tenants, judging by the dim light coming from some of the windows.

The vehicle traffic sounded distant and muted, most of the district's cars and buses confined to more popular parts of the town. The only noises came from inside the houses and bars – muffled chattering and the soft *thump thump* of music lost in the breeze.

“This definitely the right place?” asked Leopold, starting to feel the cold.

Jerome nodded. “This is the address Sheng gave us. Assuming Kane shows up.”

“Let's just hope she doesn't hold a grudge.”

“She never seemed the type to forgive and forget.”

Leopold sighed and stuffed his hands into his pockets. The city’s dense architecture kept the place warm during the day, but the temperature had dropped significantly since they had left Sheng’s clubhouse.

His mind wandering, Leopold wondered whether Mary had enjoyed better luck back home. He felt a pang of regret and tried to shake it off. Things had been strained between them for a while, and Leopold was beginning to wonder whether there was any hope for reconciliation. Beyond even that, he wasn’t even sure what had changed or what had gone wrong – though he felt pretty sure it was mostly his fault.

*Always a safe assumption.*

The breeze changed direction and Leopold caught the scent of women’s perfume. He glanced at Jerome, who seemed to have noticed it too, and both men scanned the darkness for any sign of movement.

“You’re out of your depth, Blake,” a female voice said, making Leopold jump.

He wheeled around and noticed Jerome do the same. A woman stood in the alleyway in front of them, dressed in what looked like a knee-length coat, the shadow of the apartment complex shielding her from the dim street lamps. Leopold couldn’t see her face, but he recognized the voice.

“Kane, a pleasure as always,” he said, as



earnestly as he could manage. “Glad you could make it.” He saw Jerome’s hand drift down toward his belt.

“I wouldn’t, if I were you,” said Kane, taking something from beneath her coat. Leopold heard a metallic *click*.

“Consider it a professional courtesy I didn’t shoot you on sight,” she said, stepping forward into the light. She held a semiautomatic pistol in her right hand, what looked like a Beretta. “Keep your hands above the waist, please.” She glared at Jerome.

“Ms. Kane,” said Jerome, nodding. “Nice to see you again.” He held both palms up. “Relax. We’re here in an official capacity. Sort of.”

Isabel tilted her head, apparently considering her options. Finally, she holstered her weapon and buttoned up her coat. Her hair looked longer than it had before, but still the same shade of fiery red Leopold remembered. She looked like she’d packed on a few pounds of muscle, but she was still lean and trim, and a little under five-seven. An imposing figure, even when not holding a lethal weapon.

“Sheng got in touch,” Kane said. “Why are you in Shanghai? I assume it’s not a vacation.”

Leopold told her. He expected a reaction, but Kane remained as impassive as always.

“Sounds like karma finally came back to kick you in the ass,” she said, when Leopold had finished. “What’s this got to do with me?”

“There are people I care about who could get hurt. I can’t just sit here and wait for them to sort out my mess.”

“Why not? That’s your usual method of approach, right?”

Leopold sighed. “What happened to you wasn’t my fault.”

“Bullshit. You compromised an ongoing investigation to suit your own agenda.”

“Your investigation was flawed.”

Kate gritted her teeth. “This isn’t the time or the place. We need to find somewhere more private.” She glanced around the dark alleyway. “This area isn’t secure.”

“Fine,” said Leopold. “Take us wherever you want. The only thing I care about is are you going to help us?”

“Sure, I can help,” said Kane, smiling. “But you need to do something for me first.”

## Chapter 44

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KANE HAD A vehicle waiting nearby, an old VW Passat with a broken heater. She drove them across town and parked up near an office block just on the outskirts of Sonjiang's central business district. Killing the engine, she climbed out and waved Leopold and Jerome out of the car.

"What is this place?" asked Leopold. "I'm guessing the CIA isn't looking to set up a recruitment office."

"Let's just call it our interview room," said Kane. "You'll find it more than adequate."

They walked around to a side door and Kane punched a code into the wall-mounted keypad. She pushed through and led the two men upstairs. On the second floor she unlocked another door and ushered them through into an empty rental unit. There were some desks and chairs and sofas set up.

"Nice place," said Jerome. "Homey."

"Sit down here." Kane gestured toward a pair of facing leather couches set either side of a glass coffee table.

Leopold and Jerome obliged, settling into one of the sofas. Kane sat down opposite.

She said, "How much do you know about the 14K Groups?"

"Only their Triad affiliations," said Leopold.

“Based mainly in Hong Kong, but with operations across the world.”

“As I’m sure Sheng mentioned when you saw him, the Liang Shan family is the dominant group in Songjiang. But they’re not the only players in Shanghai. Not by a long shot.”

“He might have mentioned it.”

“What he probably didn’t mention,” she continued, “is that the Liang Shans are just the tip of the iceberg. Sure, we keep an eye on their human trafficking efforts, but that’s not a huge concern for us. At least, relatively speaking.”

“I assume this is leading somewhere?”

Kane nodded. “Our biggest concern, long term, is the effect Chinese interests might have on US economic stability. I’m sure you’re aware of the current level of borrowing..”

“Over fourteen trillion in the red?” said Leopold. “Yes, it’s hard to miss. And so is the fact that China is our largest creditor.”

“Right. It hasn’t escaped our attention that the level of US debt that China has been purchasing has stepped up significantly in recent years. Add to that, Chinese corporations buying up huge chunks of American businesses, and it starts to ring alarm bells.”

“So, what’s this got to do with me?”

“Chinese corporations are state owned, obviously. There is some... *concern* about the level of economic clout that the Chinese

government has over US interests. Political tension aside, if the shit ever hits the fan..."

Leopold sighed. "China potentially has the ability to destabilize our economy."

"And I don't need to tell you the effect that would have."

"Complete chaos. And that's putting it mildly. Freezing credit, removing capital from the system, sending prices skyrocketing, bankrupting businesses and eliminating jobs – essentially forcing the U.S. to fall into a depression. But we're not at war, Isabel."

"We're always at war, Blake." Kane leaned forward in her seat. "And I'm dangerously short of soldiers." She smiled. "That's where you come in."

Leopold shook his head. "I'm supposed to be out of action, remember? What can I do? More importantly, what's in it for me?"

"You need a way to sort out your mess back home, I need a way to sort out my problems here." She paused. "What I'm about to tell you is classified. I'm sure I don't have to remind you what that means."

"Yeah, yeah. Who am I going to tell anyway?"

Kane hesitated a moment before continuing. "The Liang Shan family forms part of the Liugong group, one of the larger 14K Triad organizations operating outside of Shanghai and Beijing. Aside from the usual activities, particularly counterfeiting of US currency, the Liugong group is heavily

invested in the American stock market.”

“What kind of investment?”

“On the surface it all looks perfectly legit. Overseas investment is hardly a reason for concern. The problem is the way they handle their buy side activity.”

Leopold grinned. “Let me guess; we’re talking about a different kind of hostile takeover.”

“Correct. They recruit graduates from Project 211 finance and economic universities, China’s equivalent of the Ivy League. These graduates are courted by the Liugongs, then recruited into the 14K Group and sent overseas. Thanks to a few well-placed assets, these graduates get the top analyst jobs on Wall Street, which gets their foot in the door for positions with plenty of influence.”

“Sounds tenuous, Isabel.”

“It’s nothing new. The Soviets planted moles in the US during the Cold War and the Iranians have sleeper agents all over the world. It takes years to see results, but that makes it all the more difficult to detect. This is the same thing – only it’s focused on one specific goal: funneling financial data back to investors in China. It’s insider trading on a global scale.”

“And this insider information gets used to strengthen China’s financial hold.”

Kane nodded. “Right.”

“So, this brings me back to my original question: what the hell do you want me to do about it?”

“We can’t hope to wipe out the problem overnight. But, like you, we need eyes on the ground.”

Leopold frowned. “You mean you need a spy?”

“We have a candidate. I spent six months bringing him over to our team, and now we need a way to install him in a more useful position.”

“You’re planning a *coup d’état*?”

“It’s a violent business,” said Kane. “Group leaders get taken out by rivals all the time. We just want to use the situation to our advantage. But we need a way to get our foot in the door. That’s where you come in.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“You know the American stock market. You know how to manipulate the numbers, see the investments. The Liugongs don’t have anyone on native soil that can do what you do. That will make you useful to them.”

“Get to the point, Isabel.”

“I’ll get you a meeting with the Liugong bosses. If you pass muster, they’ll present you to the Dragon Head. He’s their link to the main Triad leadership ring. Once we know their location, we move in. Take out the whole lot of them; make it look like a rival group. Our man moves up the ladder.”

Jerome shuffled uncomfortably on the couch. “Dragon Head?”

“It’s a cute name, sure,” said Kane. “But he’s the leader of the local group. And he’s a

ruthless bastard.”

“This is just sounding better and better,” said Leopold. “And if I refuse?”

Kane shrugged. “Then you’re on your own. Good luck getting reliable intel from the US without someone noticing you. I assume the whole point of being here is to stay under the radar.” She smiled. “Well, that’s what I do for a living. The choice is yours.”

Leopold glanced over at Jerome. The bodyguard shrugged.

“You want to make things right, I don’t see we have much of a choice,” he said. He looked at Kane. “What protective measures will you have in place?”

“We’ll have eyes and ears on Blake’s location and a tac team on standby. But once he’s inside, we can’t do anything to protect him.” She addressed Leopold. “You’ll have to convince them you’re worth keeping alive.”

“How?”

“They’ll want proof you know what you’re talking about, so make sure you bring your A-game. We’ll provide you with a cover.”

“Then what?”

“Once they’re satisfied you can make them some money, they’ll need sign off from the Dragon Head. Once he’s in the room, we make our move.”

Leopold stood up. “And how will you know when that happens?”

Kane remained seated. “We obviously can’t put any kind of bug on you – they’d find it.



But our man will be there. He'll get the message out."

"And then you'll help me get a comms channel back to the US? Help me track down my father?"

Kane smiled. "Oh, I can do better than that," she said, getting up from the couch. "I can help you take the bastard down."

## Chapter 45

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“I NEED AN update. Make it quick.”

Hawkes watched Robert Blake pull a bottle of expensive-looking Scotch down from a shelf above his desk. He had two crystal tumblers out. He poured himself a measure and left the other glass empty. They were in Blake’s private office, at the bow of the ship. The room was a little smaller than the bridge, but more comfortable. It had a thick carpet and old wooden furniture, the tall windows offering an unobstructed view of the harbor outside.

“I have a meeting in five minutes,” Blake said, lifting the drink to his nose. “Tell me it’s good news.”

Hawkes nodded. “We dealt with the New Jersey issue. The technicians sent a kill command using the same connection the intruders set up. The whole place is just a pile of smoking rubble by now.”

“Confirmed?”

“I had Schwartzman check the satellite feed.”

Blake took a sip of his Scotch. “And will this be traced back to us?”

“Unlikely,” said Hawkes. “The computer down there won’t have anything useful on it, even if they can recover the drives. And the

devices are molten steel by now.”

“And the payloads?”

“The compounds were unmixed when the blast hit. We designed them so they’d burn up in their separate forms. Even if there’s trace residue, it’ll take the forensics team days to isolate, then even more time to connect the dots. If they’re even looking. They’ll be chasing their tails for weeks trying to figure out what happened.”

“Is there a chance the chemicals mixed before detonation?”

“No, sir. Otherwise, we’d know about it. It’s all part of the self-destruct safeguard. It’s designed to prevent anyone figuring out what the payload was.”

Blake nodded. “Good. And have you managed to track down who breached our systems?”

“Hard to be sure, sir,” Hawkes said. “We’re assuming they had physical access to the computer station, otherwise they wouldn’t have been able to get it on the grid. Assuming the explosion took them out, we’ll know as soon as the coroner identifies the bodies.”

“And if they got out?”

Hawkes sighed. “The self-destruct protocol was designed to operate on a countdown coupled with an alarm. It was supposed to prevent any accidental detonation. If they got out in time, we don’t stand much chance of tracing them.”

“No matter,” said Blake, taking another sip

of Scotch. “Dead or alive, they won’t figure out what’s going on until it’s too late.” He paused. “To be sure, have someone check the local surveillance cameras. See if you can get access to the feeds. We might see them coming onto the site and ID them that way. I’d prefer to avoid unnecessary loose ends, but keep your focus on getting the next phase underway.”

“Yes, sir. My team has the devices en route to the drop points. Estimate four hours to get them in place. Another twelve to twenty-four hours to get the network initiated.”

“Good.” Blake downed the last of his drink and set the empty tumbler down on the desk. “I need to update the client. Go find out more about our uninvited guests and report back once the devices are primed.”

“Yes, sir.” Hawkes turned to leave.

Blake caught him as he opened the door. “It’ll be over soon, Hawkes,” he said. “More than two decades of planning. It all comes down to the next twenty-four hours.”

Hawkes nodded. “This country has a lot to answer for, sir. I know we’ll make it count.”

“I don’t expect all of us will make it, Colonel.”

“A worthy sacrifice, sir.”

Blake smiled grimly. “I’ve made enough sacrifices to last ten lifetimes.” He reached for the telephone. “It’s time to repay the favor.”

## Chapter 46

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THE EMERGENCY SERVICES had arrived as expected, and Mary had convinced Kate to let the paramedics check her injuries. She appeared to have suffered a sprain, but no broken bones. Marshall had called in to the field office and arranged a briefing session. Jersey P.D. had checked his I.D. and let them go. They had left Kate's old Ford in the parking lot in case the forensics team needed to sweep the chassis for particulates, and then regrouped at Marshall's Suburban.

Kate sat in the back still nursing her injured arm. Marshall headed out of the neighborhood aiming for the Holland Tunnel and lower Manhattan. He had ditched his shredded suit jacket in the trunk along with his tie and was talking to someone through his phone's Bluetooth headset. Mary noticed his shirt looked a little tight, but she wasn't complaining. She sat next to him in the passenger seat trying to ignore the stinging pain in her arm. The wound was superficial and the paramedics had done a good patch job, but it still hurt like hell.

Marshall hung up the phone and removed his earpiece. "They found Ward," he said.

Mary felt a sense of relief flood through her. *The first good news we've heard all day.* She

allowed herself a smile.

“Is he okay?” she asked.

Marshall nodded, keeping his eyes on the road. “He got picked up somewhere in Maryland. They brought him to the New York City field office, at his request.” He smiled. “Whatever happened to him out there, it sounds like he’s not ready to throw the towel in just yet.”

“That’s just as well,” said Mary. “We’re going to need all the help we can get convincing people what we saw back there. Can you set up a meet?”

“Already done. Though your sister will have to wait outside.”

Mary glanced back at Kate, who rolled her eyes.

“Relax. I’ll survive,” she said. “It’s not exactly my scene, anyway.”

“Fine. Just stay out of trouble,” said Mary.

“Coming from you...”

Marshall steered the car onto the I78 and put his foot down. “We’ll be there in less than thirty minutes,” he said. “How about we try not to kill each other until then?”

Mary sighed. “No promises.”

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The Jacob J. Javits Federal Building was an ugly gray tower located in Federal Plaza, just a short walk from the New York City Supreme Court. At forty-one floors, it was the tallest

federal building in the United States, and the FBI field office looked out over the streets twenty-three stories up. Marshall eased the Suburban up to the security gate and presented his pass. The guard waved him through, and Marshall headed for the underground parking lot. He found a space near the elevators.

A short ride later, the elevator opened up into a modern-looking foyer, complete with a bored-looking receptionist.

Marshall signed himself and Mary into the systems, and told Kate to take a seat.

“We’ll be as quick as we can,” he said. He glanced at her arm. “How you holding up?”

“I’ll live,” said Kate, wincing slightly as she sat down on one of the padded chairs. A television had been bolted to one of the walls playing a local news report – some kind of economics feature. Kate gazed up at the screen. “I’ll just sit here and learn about exchange rates.”

“We’ll come get you soon,” said Mary. She turned to Marshall. “Lead the way.”

The special agent took Mary through a set of double doors, swiping his pass on the card reader mounted to the frame. They walked down a few empty corridors, and then took a right turn to hit the conference rooms.

Director Ward was waiting for them.

“Sir, good to see you,” Marshall said, shaking Ward’s outstretched hand. “We were worried about you for a moment there.”

The director smiled. “Takes more than a country hike to keep me down.” He gestured toward one of the empty rooms. “Through here, please. I want a full report.”

Marshall and Mary followed him through. They waited for Ward to take a seat at the long table, then sat down opposite. Ward leaned forward, palms down on the wood.

“So,” he said. “Start from the beginning. What happened after you got Leopold out of the country?”

Marshall and Mary took it in turns to brief the director. Mary was surprised how easy the words flowed, as though they were speaking in sync. Ward remained impassive throughout, only nodding along as they talked. When Marshall had finished describing the situation at the warehouse, Ward finally spoke.

He said, “And you’re sure Blake has something to do this?”

“I don’t work with coincidences, sir,” said Marshall. “We linked Blake to the Chemworks takeover and we linked the warehouse in New Jersey to Chemworks. We have a source inside the WHO. She confirmed it. She took us there.”

Ward glanced at Mary. “And this would be your sister?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Are her sources reliable?”

Mary nodded. “Whatever people say about Kate, she’s good at her job. She took CDC intel and ran down the leads herself. I’d stake



my career on it, sir.”

Ward smiled grimly. “You might have to, Jordan.” He looked back at Marshall. “So, if you’re taking the lead on this, it looks like we’re going to have to explain how you two escaped the blast at Leopold’s apartment.”

Mary nodded. “I have contacts at the press. We can make sure something leaks.”

“The story’s been front page news since it happened,” said Ward. “People are uneasy. They assume it’s a terrorist attack.”

“They’d be right.”

“And what about Leopold? He could be an asset. He’s no good to us halfway around the world.”

Mary took a deep breath. “He’s out of our sphere of control,” she said. “I don’t doubt that his access to Blake Investments’ records could point us in the right direction, but we can’t get hold of him securely. It’s too risky. If his father knows he’s alive, he’ll see us coming a mile away.”

“He’s already seen you coming,” said Ward. “In case you forgot about New Jersey.”

Mary grimaced. “How could I forget? I’ve nearly been blown up twice this week already. It’s not something you forget, believe me.” She paused. “But Blake won’t know who was at the warehouse, and he’ll assume we didn’t find anything. He doesn’t know about the connections we found through the CDC and he doesn’t know about Kate. Chances are, he’ll assume we know nothing. That gives us

an advantage.”

“Not much of an advantage.”

“We need anything we can get.”

Ward sighed. “Did you manage to retrieve anything from the computer? Anything at all?”

“I’ll need a secure workstation,” said Marshall. “I was in the process of transferring files when we had to cut the visit short. I might have picked up something useful.”

Ward stood up and headed for the door. “I’ve got a laptop you can use. It’s hooked up to the encrypted network.” He waved them forward. “Come with me. I want to see what this bastard is up to.”

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Ward had appropriated a slim MacBook Pro from one of the special agents in charge and had cleared himself a small work area in one of the meeting rooms. The space was already piled high with old case files, sheets of paper littering the desk and floor. The director had clearly been busy since his arrival.

“Coleman wasn’t too happy, believe me,” said Ward, booting up the silver laptop. “I had to threaten to take over his office just to get this damn computer off him.” He chuckled. “Poor bastard looked like he was about to have a fit.”

“Allow me, sir.” Marshall took control of the keys and logged into the FBI portal. A

few keystrokes later, he had located the email. “Only a few megabytes made it through,” he said. “But there’s several dozen files, so we might get lucky.”

“Pull them up on the screen,” said Ward, leaning in close.

Marshall opened up a PDF document. “More CAD drawings and spec sheets,” he said.

“Can you figure out what they’re for?” asked Mary.

“Definitely not the same drawings we saw at the warehouse. Some kind of wiring diagram, but it’s not for an ECU. At least, not the kind we’re used to seeing.”

“Then what?”

He scrolled down a little further. The next page was all text – a series of complex-looking equations that Mary didn’t understand.

Marshall exhaled deeply. “Damn.”

“What’s the problem?”

“This is a little beyond me.” He turned to Ward. “Sir, I recommend we send this for analysis. I can’t be of much help here.”

The FBI director nodded. “I know someone we can use. I have a team trying to figure out what Blake stole from the servers during his escape. I pulled some of the old case files, too. Some of them mention one or more of Blake’s old identities. I’ve read through them, and there’s something about them that just doesn’t make sense. I can’t put

my finger on it.” He paused. “We’ll know more when the analysis team gets done. Call me paranoid, but I don’t think the list of aliases is all he took from our databases.”

“Sir?”

“They left me alive, Marshall. I was a loose end and they let me live.” He stared at the text on the screen. “That means I’m still useful to them. There’s something we’re missing and I’m supposed to find it.”

Mary gritted her teeth and resisted the urge to swear out loud. “This is all a game to him, isn’t it?”

“A game we’re losing,” said Ward, nodding. “They expect me to find something. A trail of bread crumbs. They want me to figure out what they’re planning. So I can appreciate the stakes.”

“You sound very sure, sir,” said Marshall.

“It’s what I’d do,” said Ward. “I’d want the enemy playing catch-up. That way, they wouldn’t see me coming until it’s too late.” He closed the laptop lid. “But we’re not going to let that happen. We’re going to figure out what this son of a bitch is doing, and we’re going to get to him first. And we’re going to make him pay.”

## Chapter 47

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MARY HAD LEFT Marshall with Director Ward and flagged down a cab outside the FBI building with Kate in tow. A few minutes of uncomfortable silence later the driver dropped them off at Mary's apartment in West Village. The neighborhood felt a little quieter than usual.

Mary ushered her sister up the stairs to her sixth-floor apartment, unlocked the door, and stepped inside. She drew a deep breath, tiredness seeping over her as the familiar warmth of home set in. She resisted the urge to flop down on the bed and fall asleep.

"So, what's the plan, sis?" Kate absentmindedly opened the refrigerator and peered inside. She sounded a little spaced out.

"The plan is for you to get some rest while Marshall and I follow up on some leads."

"You want me to sit here while you have all the fun?"

Mary nodded. "You don't sound too good."

"Hey, we all got a knock to the head. I don't see you making a big deal out of it."

"I'll get a checkup when this is all over. But you're a civilian. They won't let you have access to any of the FBI intel. It's been difficult enough for Ward to get me in the room. So, you might as well stay here and try

to recover. You've got a messed-up arm, and who knows how much blood loss."

Kate reached up and touched the gash on her cheek. "It's just a scratch."

"All the same, there's nothing more you can do except try to get the CDC to step up their game. Maybe they can help us figure out what was in those explosives. Whatever those chemicals were, they weren't released into the air after the place went up in smoke. So they probably burned up during the blast. We need to understand what we're dealing with."

Kate looked like she was going to argue, but apparently decided otherwise. She took the carton of milk out of the fridge and took a swig.

"Ugh, get a glass," said Mary. "You always used to do that."

"Yeah, and it always bugged you." Kate grinned. "Well, seeing as I'm going to be stuck here for a while, I'd better make myself at home."

"Sure, go ahead."

Kate took the carton of milk and headed for the sofa. She slumped down onto the cushions and found the TV remote under a pile of clean laundry.

"The maid not working this week?" she said, turning on the television.

"Very funny." Mary left the tiny kitchen and settled down on the sofa next to her sister. "Listen, about earlier..." she trailed off.

Kate sighed and changed the channel.

“Forget it,” she said. “Nearly getting blown up makes everyone a little edgy.”

“No, I’m serious. I know we haven’t talked much since... well, not in a long time.”

Kate hit the mute button. “I know, sis. And I don’t blame you.”

“I just... I don’t understand why you weren’t there. We needed you. Mom and I both needed you.”

“I know.”

Silence.

Mary shifted uncomfortably in her seat. “I just need to know why.”

“You will. But it’s not for me to tell you,” Kate said. “I think you need to have a conversation with mom.” She picked up the remote, pointed it at the television, and turned the sound back on.

Mary sighed. She knew the conversation was over. Standing up, she left her sister watching the local news station and headed for the bathroom, their conversation nagging in the back of her mind.

She instinctively looked around for her phone before remembering she needed to find a replacement. She swore under her breath and resolved to call her mother the first chance she got. Something about Kate’s explanation didn’t feel right.

*Talk to mom? What’s she hiding?*

Mary shook the thoughts away. She had more important things to focus on right now. Her mind drifted to Marshall and she glanced

at her reflection in the mirror. Staring back at her, Mary saw a stranger with tangled hair, mottled bruises over her shoulders and neck, and dark circles under her eyes. She splashed some water on her face and ran a brush through the knots. The effect was negligible.

Swearing again, Mary gave up and decided to take a shower.

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The hot water and change of clothes helped, and Mary emerged from her bedroom half an hour later feeling like she had just woken up from eight hours' sleep. Her mind felt clearer, sharper.

Kate lay sprawled out on the sofa, unmoving. The news report had finished, and the TV had switched to some daytime soap opera Mary didn't recognize. She peered over the back of the couch. Kate snored gently, still fast asleep.

Quietly, Mary rummaged through her bedroom drawers and found an old blanket. She returned to the living room and draped it over her sister. Returning to the kitchen, Mary checked the cupboards for her spare cell phone and found the old blocky handset next to a bag of dried pasta. She checked the phone for charge and was pleasantly surprised to see at least a few hours' worth of battery life left.

*God bless old technology.*



Mary scribbled a quick note giving Kate her phone number and stuck it to the fridge. Leaving her set of spare keys on the countertop, she grabbed a jacket, crept quietly out the door and headed downstairs, eager to get back to Marshall for an update on the case.

Mary smiled. For some reason, her arm wasn't hurting quite so much anymore.

## Chapter 48

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HAWKES STOOD OUTSIDE the Roosevelt Island Tram Station on the corner of East 60<sup>th</sup> and Second Avenue. Ahead, the Queensboro Bridge sprawled out into the distance, out across the East River toward Queens. The traffic sat nose to tail, as usual. Foot traffic was dense, pedestrians weaving in and out of stationary cars as they waited at the lights. Everyone kept their heads down, or, if they were behind the wheel, stayed focused on the car in front.

*Hiding in plain sight.*

Hawkes caught sight of Grayson up ahead, near to where the Queensboro Bridge began its slow, sloping ascent. He wore a black rucksack slung over his shoulder. A cordoned-off area stood to the side, where a team of city contractors appeared to be working on some underground pipes. Grayson nodded at Hawkes and disappeared behind the barriers.

The colonel glanced around, checking for any signs he was being watched, before breaking into a fast walk and crossing the street. He caught up with Grayson near the bridge underpass, and the two men took refuge behind the thick concrete piers, obscured from view.

Grayson knelt down and laid the rucksack

on the ground. He unzipped it, and fished out one of the devices they had shipped in from Queens. Or maybe Brooklyn. They all looked the same.

He checked the wiring for damage. Like the others, this unit had two transparent tubes holding a different-colored liquid in each. One red, one green - Isopropyl Aminoethylmethyl Phosphonite and a simple Sulfur suspension. The liquids were dyed, of course. Hawkes figured either to make it easier to identify the separate compounds, or, more likely, for aesthetic effect. In the center of the mass of wires, a metal tube housed the explosives.

Once the device was armed, the two liquids would mix, isomerizing the usually harmless chemicals. The resulting compound, a deadly variation of VX gas, would be released into the atmosphere.

The effects would be catastrophic. Less than one milligram of the toxin coming into contact with human skin would be enough to kill. Heavier than air, the gas would stay low for maximum effect.

With at least three hundred devices clustered in strategic points of the city, the resulting devastation would essentially cut off any escape, the low-lying clouds of gas preventing anyone from getting off Manhattan Island.

Following the dispersal of the modified VX into the target areas, the devices were primed to detonate. Nothing too powerful, but

enough noise and destruction to keep the HAZMAT and bomb disposal teams on their toes.

“First unit primed and ready,” said Grayson. “This should take care of the bridge. Once the first casualties go down, the NYPD will close off the road.”

Hawkes nodded. “One down, two hundred ninety-nine to go. If the men are in place, get back to the truck and start on the rest. And keep moving – I don’t want us getting any parking tickets.”

“Yes, sir. Remote sequence is set up. We just need to get the other units in place.” He stood up.

“Keep low and slow, soldier,” said Hawkes. “We’ve got until the morning to get everything in place. Make every minute count and do it right.”

“Yes, sir.” Grayson zipped up the black rucksack and slung it over his shoulder.

“Move out,” said Hawkes. “And stay frosty. In less than twenty-four hours, this will all be over.”

Grayson nodded. The two men split up and headed back to the tram station, disappearing into the crowds.

## Chapter 49

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MARY CHECKED HER brick of a phone for the fifth time in as many minutes. No calls. Which meant either Kate was still fast asleep, or just not speaking to her. Neither explanation would have been a surprise. Mary had taken a cab back to the FBI field office, and, after a heated discussion with the security guard, had managed to get Marshall to come down and let her through.

He had taken her back up to the twenty-third floor, and now he, Mary, and Director Ward were poring over the results from the Jersey P.D. forensics preliminary field report, huddled around Ward's desk.

"I had to pull a few strings to get this fast tracked," said Ward, hooking his borrowed MacBook up to the office projector. A blown-up image of the report jumped onto the six-foot canvas screen on the far wall. "So, let's hope there's something useful in here."

Mary glanced at the projected image. "How much could they have found so soon?"

"The CSI team have some initial theories," Ward said. "Based on the information you gave us, I told them what to look for. This is all pending the usual lab tests, of course. But it might shed some light."

Marshall shuffled uncomfortably in his

chair. “Okay, do we know what we’re dealing with here?”

“Like I said, we’ve got some theories,” said Ward. “I described the explosives to the Jersey field team. Told them we might be dealing with some kind of chemical weapon. They did some initial scans at the scene and found Sulphur dioxide and sodium hydroxide residue in the atmosphere and on the surfaces.”

“Which means?”

“Can’t say for sure. But Sulphur is a commonly used in chemical weapons design. They mix the primary toxin with Sulphur prior to exposure.”

Mary frowned. “And the sodium hydroxide?”

“It’s apparently used as a neutralization compound,” said Ward, pointing at the screen. “According to the report, it can destroy certain chemical agents or render them inert.”

“What kind of chemical agents?”

“That’s where we’re a little stuck,” said Marshall. “It could be one of any number of weaponized nerve agents. That we know about.”

Mary felt her stomach lurch. “Is there any chance these chemicals would be present if we weren’t dealing with dirty bombs?”

Ward shook his head. “Unlikely.” He paused. “If you’d stumbled across a soap factory, I might be a little more optimistic. But based on what you found in there...”

“Is there some kind of antidote?”

“Without knowing the nerve agent’s exact composition, we’re stuck. If there are other bombs out there, and they go off somewhere as densely populated as New York City, thousands will be contaminated. Maybe more.”

Mary took a deep breath and tried to focus. “So, we’re flying blind?”

“It could be a lot worse,” said Marshall. “At least we know what to look for.”

“In a city the size of New York?” said Mary. “Assuming the stockpile in New Jersey wasn’t the only one, there could be hundreds of bombs out there. Even with the whole of the NYPD on alert, we can’t possibly find them all. Not with all the ground we’d have to cover.”

“We have to assume there are more,” said Marshall. “The New Jersey site was uncontaminated. The combination of intense heat and the sodium hydroxide removed any trace of whatever the hell was in those chemical containers. It was a self-destruct protocol. Meaning they were expendable.”

Mary rubbed her temples. She could feel a headache coming on. “Okay,” she said, “let’s assume the worst. But that still doesn’t help us find the others. They could be hidden anywhere. How do you expect us to sweep the entire city?”

Marshall and Ward glanced at each other.

Mary sighed. “What? What am I missing here?”

“There’s more,” said Ward. “As I thought, the list of FBI undercover aliases wasn’t the only thing Blake took from the bureau’s servers. The tech team in D.C. managed to figure it out.”

“Let me guess,” said Mary. “Bad news?”

“You could say that.” Marshall leaned forward in his chair. “Before Blake’s men left the building, they managed to gain access to our emergency protocol files. He managed to get his hands on first response and evacuation procedures for every major city in the United States.”

Mary swore. “That means...”

Ward nodded. “That Blake knows exactly how the emergency services are going to respond to any major threat. He knows the evacuation routes, the response protocols. Everything from hurricane warnings through to nuclear attacks and terrorist threats. He’ll be one step ahead.”

“And that’s what he wanted you to find?” said Mary.

“Maybe,” said Ward. “I guess it doesn’t matter. Even if we called the mayor right now, there’s no time. We wouldn’t be able to put another strategy in place.”

Mary felt her brain start to spin. The pieces were slowly falling into place. First, Robert Blake orchestrated the takeover of Chemworks. Second, he used their research division to develop a chemical weapon that can’t be traced. Third, he took back control of



his son's company and used its resources to orchestrate the most devastating attack on US soil since 9/11.

And New York City was just the beginning.

"We can't let this happen," said Marshall.

"It's already happening." Ward sighed. "So, if you've got any bright ideas..."

Mary stood up. "There is one possible upside to this," she said.

Marshall looked up at her. "We're all ears."

"If Blake is using the city's emergency protocols to anticipate our response, we should be able to work it backward. Think about it – he'll use those documents to pinpoint the locations that will do the most damage. Escape routes, bridges, tunnels... basically, any area that's been mapped out as a potential way off the island."

"Meaning we know what he knows."

Mary grinned. "All we have to do is look at the protocols – locate the key evacuation points, the places most people will try to use to get away. That's where he'll be focusing, and that's where we'll start looking. I can have five hundred cops and a bomb squad ready to move out in less than two hours."

Ward and Marshall looked at each other again.

Marshall said, "See, I told you it was a good idea to bring her along." He flashed Mary a smile.

"Make the call," said Ward. "If we're going to find these bastards, we're going to need to

move quickly.” He unhooked his laptop and headed for the door, almost tripping over one of the old case files littering the carpet. “Come on, you two. Let’s hustle.”

“Yes, sir.” Mary followed Ward out the door, with Marshall close behind. She was careful not to stumble over any of the loose paper.

Marshall asked, “Sir, did you find anything useful in the old reports?”

The FBI director stepped out into the hall and headed back toward the reception area. He turned his head as he walked. “Nothing concrete,” he said, quickening his pace. “But something about those files doesn’t add up.”

“Sir?”

Ward swiped his keycard at a set of double doors and pushed through to another empty corridor. “We’ve got reports going back thirty years,” he said. “And there’s no mention of Blake, or any of his aliases, until more recently. Suddenly, there he is. Top of the Most Wanted List, a little over fifteen years ago. Then, again, no trace of him. Just reports of targets matching his description, coinciding with ongoing investigations. The guy just vanished.”

“He had considerable resources at his disposal,” said Marshall. “Even if he wasn’t able to access his bank accounts, he must have had enough stashed away somewhere.”

“I don’t doubt it,” said Ward. “But what I don’t understand, is how can a man go from a

nobody to the FBI and CIA's most wanted fugitive overnight? With no prior activity that we know of. No warning signs, no nothing. Not even a damn parking ticket."

Marshall shrugged. "Maybe he was just careful."

"Maybe. My gut's telling me it doesn't feel right. But none of that matters." He stopped walking as they reached the next set of doors. "Whatever might have happened, our only concern now is to bring this asshole down."

## Chapter 50

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THE NYPD HEADQUARTERS at 1 Police Plaza stood just a couple of blocks away, and Mary had insisted Ward and Marshall join her to brief Captain Oakes. The captain was in the middle of a meeting when they arrived, holed up in his office on the fourth floor with two dour-looking men in suits.

Mary rapped on the glass door and stepped through. Oakes looked up, his chubby mustachioed face taking a moment to register what was going on. The two suits glared at her.

“Jordan, this is not a good time,” said Oakes, his portly frame mostly hidden behind his desk.

Mary ignored him. “Whatever this is,” she glanced at the two suits, “it can wait. We’ve got more important problems.”

One of the captain’s visitors cleared his throat. “Ah, Sergeant Jordan, I presume?” He offered a disingenuous smile and stood up. “Speak of the devil. My name is Jarvis Hooper. This is Phillip Janson.”

Mary eyed the two men, folding her arms. “I need a moment alone with the captain, gentlemen. If you wouldn’t mind.”

Hooper glanced at Ward and Marshall, still standing in the doorway, then fixed his eyes

back on Mary. He pulled out his I.D. and held it up. "We're with Internal Affairs," he said. "We've been hearing some interesting stories about you, Sergeant. We need to speak with you about the incident in the Upper East Side."

"You mean, the bomb blast that nearly killed me?"

"Yes. That's the one."

Mary gritted her teeth. As a cop, she was used to dealing with the I.A., but Hooper's timing couldn't have been worse.

"I'm concerned about your lack of concern for official protocol," he continued. "Maybe we should sit down and figure this out."

"Like I said, not a good time."

Hooper smiled again. "I'm afraid it's not a request, Sergeant."

Oakes sighed heavily. "Better just get it over with, Jordan."

Mary frowned. "Sir, this really isn't —"

"That's an order, Jordan."

Ward stepped forward. "Listen, you need to postpone whatever this is for another time. We've got more important problems."

"Who the hell are you?" said Oakes, his mustache quivering slightly.

"We spoke on the phone." Ward fished out his own I.D. badge.

Mary felt her spirits lift as she noticed Oakes' jaw drop.

"Uh, Director Ward..." the captain said.

“Yes, uh, of course, sir. Sorry, I didn’t realize...”

“Just get these men out of here.”

Oakes glared at the two I.A. officers. “You heard the man.” He tilted his head toward the door. “We can pick this up another time.”

Hooper opened his mouth to say something, but apparently didn’t think it was worth the effort. The I.A. officer fastened his suit jacket and nodded at his companion.

“We’ll be in touch.”

The two men left the office, closing the door behind them a little harder than was necessary. Marshall, Ward, and Mary waited until they had disappeared from view before taking the spare seats. Marshall remained standing.

“So, uh... what’s the problem, sir?” Oakes asked, sitting up a little straighter.

“I’ll cut to the chase, Captain,” said Ward. “We think there’s going to be a terrorist attack in Manhattan. We’ve found evidence that chemical weapons might be used.” He paused. “Worse of all, we have reason to believe the perpetrators have access to the city’s emergency evacuation procedures.”

Oakes’ eyes bulged slightly.

“Captain?”

“Yes, uh...”

Mary interjected, “Sir, we need to mobilize an explosives disposal unit and get our men on the ground actively searching for any signs of danger.”

“What’s the response time for your bomb team?” asked Ward.

Oakes ran his hands through his thinning hair. “Holy crap. This is...” He straightened up. “We can have the explosives team on the premises in less than fifteen minutes. Organizing a mass search might take a little longer.”

Ward nodded. “Good. Make it happen. I want the team assembled and ready for briefing as soon as possible. We’ll need to pull in other departments on this, and you can count on FBI support. But with your men outnumbering ours several hundred to one, I think the NYPD can take the lead.”

“I’ll have to get the commissioner on board, but...”

“Leave Bill to me,” said Ward. “Find yourself a team leader and get this moving. The politics can wait.” He looked at Mary. “I can recommend Sergeant Jordan for the job. She’s the one who got us this far.”

“Jordan?” Oakes stared at Mary, his eyes a little wider than usual. “She’s never led a team as large as this before.”

“And she’s also the only one who knows what these people are capable of. She’s by far the best candidate.”

Mary felt her cheeks tingle with embarrassment.

“Fine.” Oakes took a deep breath. “You know what you’re doing, Jordan?”

“Yes, sir,” said Mary. “I’ll speak to ESU and

the bomb squad.” She stood up. “We’ll need a base of operations. I’d recommend getting the RTCC cleared out.”

Oakes nodded. “Hackman won’t like it. If he gives you any grief, send him my way.”

“Yes, sir.” Mary headed for the door.

“Oh, and Jordan,” Oakes called out, “don’t go thinking the I.A. is finished with you. Do this by the book, or I’ll find someone else.”

Mary gritted her teeth and nodded. She left the room, resisting the urge to slam the door behind her.



## Chapter 51

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FIVE A.M. ROLLED in slowly, and the sun wasn't showing any signs of rising as Leopold, Jerome, and Isabel Kane approached the derelict apartment block.

The Songjiang industrial neighborhood was empty, quiet. That part of town was largely in disuse, although Kane had insisted the Liugong bosses were holed up in an abandoned tenement building, just on the outskirts.

Ahead, the soft orange glow of streetlamps blurred the skyline. The evening chill had intensified, and Leopold wished he had brought more substantial clothing. Jerome and Kane didn't appear to have noticed the cold.

"You all set, Blake?" Kane asked, as they took refuge behind a wall at the end of the street. Her breath fogged in front of her face.

Leopold nodded. "I go up there, knock on the door, say your man Li Huan sent me. You'll wait for the signal, then move in." He paused. "Speaking of which, where the hell is your team?"

"They're already here." She smiled and glanced off to the side.

A shuffling noise, and Jerome reached for his gun. Kane put a hand out to stop him. Three figures emerged from the darkness,

dressed in dark clothes and what looked like body armor. Each carried a submachine gun, as well as a holstered sidearm. They walked slowly toward Kane, muzzles down.

“Gentlemen, I’d like to introduce Wang, Liu, and Chen.”

The three men stayed still and quiet, hands still on their weapons.

Leopold frowned. “Your team is three people?”

“Plus me,” said Kane. “These men are Shanghai born and bred. They know the area better than anyone.”

“Chinese nationals?”

Kane smiled. “You weren’t the only one to come up with the recruitment office idea.”

“You expect to get this done with just the five of us?”

“This is my tactical assault team. We’re not exactly working on an unlimited budget here, so we make do. Five is plenty. We have superior weapons and the element of surprise.”

Leopold sighed. “Let’s hope it’s enough.”

“Just hold up your end and we’ll do the rest. When the time comes, we’ll move in fast. Make sure you keep your head down.”

“And exactly are you going to know when the time’s right?” said Leopold.

“Li Huan will be there with you every step of the way. While we couldn’t bug you, we’ve got him set up with a wireless transmitter. He’ll let us know when the Dragon Head

shows his face, and we'll take them out. Just make sure you make a good impression."

"If Huan's there already, what do you need me for?"

Kane sighed. "I need intel on their operations. Until now, everything we've had on them is just a theory. Your job is to get me proof. If you can get past the guards, you're obviously on the right track. So don't screw this up."

"And what exactly am I supposed to be doing once they get me in there?"

"Hell if I know," said Kane. "But you can bet your ass it will have something to do with making them money. You know all about that, so I'm sure you'll manage just fine."

"I'm touched."

"Don't be. You're here to do a job. I get what I need, and in return, you'll get what you need. Believe me, you're not exactly my number one choice, but beggars can't be choosers."

Leopold grinned. "I'll take that as a compliment. And, assuming we get out of this alive, how exactly are you going to help?"

"You want eyes on what your asshole of a father is doing," said Kane. "I can do one better. I can get you on the ground, incognito. You said you don't want to sit on your ass and let everyone else take the heat? I've got the resources to help you make that happen. You get the chance to make up for all the mess you've caused."

“Details, please,” said Jerome. “Or I’m pulling the plug.”

“This isn’t really the time, Jeeves,” said Kane.

“Details.”

Kane glared at him. Jerome held her gaze. The three men with the submachine guns shuffled uncomfortably.

“Fine,” said Kane, eventually. “There’s an old air base about fifteen miles from the city limits. The CIA has access through one of its overseas shell corporations. Thanks to a hefty retainer, we can get in and out of Chinese airspace without anyone asking too many questions. I can get you on that plane, and back to US soil, and nobody would be any the wiser.”

Leopold shook his head. “And the minute someone recognizes me, it’s all over. We came here to avoid that.”

“It won’t matter,” said Kane. “I’ve got my contacts, remember? The shit’s already hit the fan. The FBI is gearing up for something major and I’ll bet the NYPD is kicking up a storm too. Whatever’s going to happen, it’s going to happen soon. If you want to make a difference you need to be there.”

“And you’re going to help me? Forgive me if I don’t take your word for it.”

Kane scowled. “My first responsibility is to my country. This isn’t about you. I’ve already had my orders to haul ass back home. This is the last chance we have to take down the

Triads before I ship out. If you want in, you're going to help me first."

"You already knew what was going on in New York?"

Kane nodded. "If I'd told you that, we probably wouldn't be here right now." She grinned. "The FBI tried to keep us shut out as long as they could, but nothing stays a secret for long. It's all hands on deck, so if you want a chance to redeem your sorry ass you'd better make this happen." She nodded in the direction of the derelict apartment block. "You've got thirty minutes. Make it count."

## Chapter 52

---

LEOPOLD RESISTED THE urge to look back as he approached the building. It was an eight-story block of apartments and the lights were out. The walls were concrete, crumbling a little, covered in graffiti and crude drawings. Most of the windows were smashed in.

Glancing up, Leopold counted four security cameras, modern enough to be at odds with the shabby exterior. He guessed they were probably infra-red, given the lack of ambient light, and hoped to hell their range wasn't extensive enough to catch the heat signatures of Kane and her team as they waited at the end of the street.

Leopold approached the front door. It looked in better condition than the rest of the building – solid steel, with an intercom mounted on the frame. He took a moment to compose himself, running through the plan in his head.

Step one: get inside. Step two: convince the Triads he wasn't worth killing. Step three...and that's where things got a little hazy.

Still, it was too late to turn back now.

Leopold took a deep breath and hit the intercom button. He heard a loud buzzing noise, followed by empty static. He waited. Almost thirty seconds passed.

He reached for the buzzer again, but was cut short as a metallic screeching sound indicated somebody was opening the door.

The steel doorway swung inward, revealing the outline of a muscular man dressed in jeans and a black tee shirt. His head was shaven and he wore a chunky gold chain around his neck. The medallion swung from side to side as he opened the door. He also sported a gleaming silver pistol holstered to his belt, what looked like a Desert Eagle .44.

“*Nǐ shì shuí?*” the man asked.

Leopold glanced down at the man’s weapon, then up at his face. “You speak English?” he said.

The man growled. “Who the hell are you?” he said, in a strong accent.

“Li Huan sent me.”

Another grunt. The man stepped to the side and ushered Leopold inside. He said, “Keep walking. Turn right at the end of the corridor.”

Leopold obliged and headed down the hallway. He didn’t hear any footsteps following him, meaning the big guy had probably gone back to keep watch at the door.

At the end of the corridor, the hall opened up into a large reception area. The room was a complete mess – it looked like someone had knocked down several partition walls to make a larger space, and hadn’t bothered patching up afterward. The floor had been partially carpeted, the rest bare concrete, and the walls

were stained with more unintelligible graffiti.

Even more disconcerting was the group of heavily armed Triads stood in the center of the room, around a dozen men in total, all of them glaring at Leopold with a mixture of contempt and intense dislike. A couple of them muttered something Leopold couldn't hear. Then one of them stepped forward.

"The American! You here for the job, yes?" the man said. He stood a little shorter than the others, but no less lethal-looking. He was lean, with an angular face, and wore a knife and pistol.

Leopold looked him up and down. "Yes," he said. "Li Huan sent me."

"Good, good," the man said. "I am Lo Ping. I'll need you to put your hands on your head, thank you." He nodded at three men stood behind him. They marched forward and began patting Leopold down.

"Just procedure," Ping said. "Looks like you're all good."

The three men nodded simultaneously and retook their positions.

Ping continued, "So, you some kind of business superstar, yes? You help make us good money, we'll take care of you."

"Yeah, something like that," said Leopold. He kept his eyes on Ping, trying his best not to pay any attention to the array of weaponry his colleagues were making a point of brandishing behind him.

"The let's get started, huh?" said Ping. "You



do good, maybe we find something useful for you to do. You don't do good..." he chuckled. "Well, you make sure you do good, huh?"

"Yeah. Do good. Got it." Leopold offered a mock salute and immediately regretted it. A couple of the armed goons shuffled impatiently.

"This way," said Ping, turning around. He led the way past the group of onlookers to a makeshift workstation toward the back of the room. It was an old desk, with an ancient-looking computer tower perched on the end. A bulky CRT monitor took up most of the remaining space, leaving just enough room for a keyboard and mouse. A tatty desk chair stood waiting, some kind of dark stain on the cushion. Leopold tried not to think about what might have caused it.

"Sit here," said Ping, pointing at the chair. "I'll go fetch Zhang and Huan. They will see what you can do."

Ping smiled, revealing pointy white teeth, and left Leopold alone at the desk. The three men who had frisked him hung back, keeping their distance. The rest of the group shuffled off, chattering to themselves quietly.

"Nice place you got here," said Leopold, settling into the chair. "It's got that shabby-chic look. Really popular these days."

No reply.

"Yeah, this place would sell for a fortune back in New York. Even with the missing walls, it still beats the hell out of Queens."

Leopold grinned.

Still nothing.

Leopold sighed and turned his attention to the computer. It was an old Hewlett-Packard, with what looked like a 56kbps modem hooked up to a port in the back. He tapped the space bar and the screen flickered into life, revealing a Windows 95 desktop, complete with a desktop wallpaper of a woman dressed in a bikini straddling a motorcycle.

*Classy joint*, Leopold thought, opening up one of the folders.

“I see you’re getting yourself acquainted,” a voice from behind said.

Leopold spun around in his chair. Two men stood a few feet away. Both wore dark suits, no visible weapons. They looked like typical middle management. Neither seemed a day older than forty, but Leopold couldn’t be sure.

“Good to meet you in person, Mr. Carter,” one of the men said. He was the taller of the two. “I am Li Huan. We spoke on the phone.” He offered a shallow bow.

“Pleasure to meet you,” said Leopold. He shifted his gaze to the other man. “And you must be Zhang.” He stood and held out a hand.

Zhang ignored it. “Let’s skip the formalities,” he said. “I don’t have time to waste. Huan says you might be of some use. Prove it.”

“What do you want me to do?”

Zhang stepped forward and leaned over

Leopold, taking hold of the computer mouse. He clicked through a few file folders and found a spreadsheet file. He opened it up.

“This is a record of New York Stock Exchange and NASDAQ activity going back eighteen months,” Zhang said, handing over control of the computer to Leopold. “I want you to find us a trade.”

Leopold glanced at the screen. “This is the S&P 500?”

Zhang nodded. “Find me something good. What do you like?”

“Give me a minute. It’s a lot of data.” Leopold highlighted the spreadsheet cells and created a pivot table. “I need to get all these numbers into something I can use.”

“Make it quick.” Zhang glanced at his watch. “Five minutes.”

“You’re kidding, right?” said Leopold. “You want me to analyze five hundred rows of data and give you a stock pick in five minutes?”

“Four minutes fifty-six seconds.”

Li Huan shuffled uncomfortably. The three armed heavies gripped their weapons a little tighter.

“Okay, okay, I get the picture.” Leopold returned his attention to the computer screen.

He configured the pivot table to show historical averages for the top-performing thirty stocks going back eighteen months. He stuffed the data into a chart and looked at the trend lines.

Nothing exciting.

Ignoring the top performers, Leopold decided to test a theory. He located firms trading on both the NYSE and NASDAQ exchanges and eliminated the domestic firms from the sample. Next, he focused on the top ten by share price.

“Three minutes,” said Zhang.

Four of the top ten were Japanese companies. Three were British, three German. Leopold homed in on the Japanese stocks.

“Okay, I’ve got something,” said Leopold, swiveling around in his chair.

“Go ahead,” said Zhang. “Impress me.”

“This is all theoretical. But there’s a chance something like this would work.” He turned back to the screen. “The Japanese market took a massive hit a few years ago thanks to the earthquake and tsunami that knocked out a significant portion of the east coast. Naturally, the economic damage was severe and the Yen plummeted.”

“Get to the point, Mr. Carter.”

Leopold sighed. “The point is, the Japanese market recovered quickly. Too quickly. These four companies especially have seen greater-than-average growth during a time of exceptional hardship. That growth has overestimated the value of the company stock.”

“We’re not a Forex operation, Carter,” said Zhang. “We don’t trade in currency fluctuations, if that’s what you’re getting at. Give me something solid.”

“I’m not suggesting you bet on the currency,” said Leopold. “There’s no way these four corporations saw this level of investment without some kind of embedded derivative keeping the value of the stock tied to the Yen. No US investment firm in their right mind would buy Japanese stock that wasn’t, especially at these levels.”

“So what?”

“It means that the derivatives have grown faster than they should. The value of the Yen will catch up soon enough, meaning the American investors will lose out in the exchange rate and they’ll start selling. More importantly, these big investors will have a portfolio insurance policy in place. As the value of their stock drops, the policy will force the shares to be sold every time there’s a downtick.” Leopold paused. “And there’s going to be a hell of a lot of downticks if this level of unsustainable growth continues. Within months, not years.”

Zhang leaned in a little closer and peered at the numbers on the screen. He said, “You want us to short the stock?”

“Like crazy,” said Leopold. “The second you see the Yen shift the wrong direction, pump everything you’ve got into this. You can stand to triple your investment.”

“If your predictions come true,” said Zhang.

“Without access to the companies’ filings, a robust analysis, and a few hours alone with

the Tokyo Stock Exchange records, I can't be sure. But based on the information you gave me..."

"Not good enough," said Zhang. "We have analysts who can do this. They would have noticed if it was a viable option. What do you know that they don't?"

Leopold frowned and looked up. "I suspect most of your analysts weren't working in a room full of heavily armed Triads. It's quite an incentive, I can tell you."

"I know people who made a fortune when the Japanese market took a dive in the nineties. If we're going to expose ourselves to that much risk, I'm going to need better than triple."

"You're kidding," said Leopold.

"Do I look like I'm kidding?" Zhang checked his watch. "You now have forty-five seconds."

"Look, you stand to make the most money on a market turn. All I can do is try to predict where and when that might happen."

Zhang nodded at one of the armed men standing behind him and held out his hand. The man unholstered his sidearm, what looked like a Glock, and handed it over. Zhang checked the chamber and turned his attention back to Leopold.

"Thirty seconds," he said, pressing the gun against Leopold's head. "You're running out of opportunities to impress me, Mr. Carter."

Leopold felt the cold metal against the back

of his skull and felt his pulse rate quicken. He tried to concentrate. The numbers on the screen didn't mean a damn thing if Zhang was looking for some kind of Hail Mary. The kind of investment opportunity that only came around once every decade.

"Okay, okay," said Leopold, shifting his line of thinking. The gun pressed up against his head wasn't helping his concentration. "Forget the figures. You'll make the most money on a market turn, right? So, instead of trying to predict when they might happen, why not engineer them yourselves?"

"Twenty seconds."

Leopold continued, "Short of figuring out how to create your own natural disasters, you can start smaller. Disrupt trading, you disrupt the market." His mind began to whirl. "We're talking insider trading on a socioeconomic scale. We're talking trading in fear. Fear makes people dump stock. So make people afraid."

"Ten seconds."

"There was a bomb attack in New York this week. Rumors are flying around. There might be something big going down." Leopold looked up at Zhang. "You look like the sort of people who might want to take advantage of that situation."

"How do you know these things?" asked Zhang.

"Like I told Li Huan, I've got contacts in the right places. FBI, NYPD, Wall Street. I have information you can use."

“What’s the projected return?”

Leopold felt Zhang push the gun against his skull a little harder. He took a deep breath, feeling his hands begin to shake. “If the whole market takes a dive? Hard to say. If you put all your capital into commodity stocks like gold and you short as many of the blue chip shares as possible, with enough leverage and deep OTM options you could be looking at eight hundred percent or more if the market drops by three to five points. If you time it right. Just look what happened after 9/11.”

Zhang relaxed a little. He checked his watch again. “Three seconds to spare.” He smiled. “The last person we had come for an interview didn’t do so well.”

Leopold thought about the dark stain on the chair cushion and suddenly wished he were sitting somewhere else.

“Come with me, Mr. Carter,” said Zhang, lowering the Glock and handing it back to its owner. “There’s someone I’d like you to meet.”



## Chapter 53

---

CHUNG MON WAITED impatiently in his well-heated office, keen to get the morning's meeting over with. Nicknamed Mo Dedong, thanks in part to his physical resemblance of Chairman Mao, the Liugong Triad boss had a reputation for brutality – a reputation he was keen to reinforce. And he hated being kept waiting.

Born to a Hakka family in the region now known as Szechuan, Chung had been ostracized most his life. Despite humble upbringings, his family's circumstances had only given him the drive to fight harder and faster to get what he wanted – and coming from nothing gave Chung the hunger to keep pushing for more.

The 14K bosses had brought him in a little over seven years ago after his predecessor had met an untimely end at the hands of a rival faction. Chan Yuen Muk, the previous Dragon Head, had run things differently. With a focus on the cocaine and heroin business, the risks had been high and the payoffs low, especially after the suppliers' and distributors' cuts were taken into account. With demand having plummeted since the last market downturn, Chung had known things needed to change.

His idea had been a simple one: to use insider information to play God with the world's largest stock markets. With the likelihood of sensitive information being traced across borders almost zero, the risks were low. Even if the Americans' SEC found out, they were powerless to do anything about it. Only the hapless Finance and Economic graduates he shipped over to Wall Street, London, and Tokyo had anything to lose, and who would believe them anyway?

The 14K bosses had been pleased. But the inevitable curse of early success is increased expectations. Chung had struggled to keep pace with his masters' ever-increasing hunger for results, and the last quarter had been the first time the Liugong Group had failed to post an increase in profits.

And Chung knew what that meant for the prospects of his long-term health. Now, his only hope was to adapt his approach and aim for the big payouts – but he needed more than an army of scrawny graduates to make that happen. He needed someone with seasoned skills, preferably without any concern for banking ethics. He figured, given the right price, that shouldn't prove too much of an issue.

Chung paced the carpet, and almost didn't notice his office door swing open. His second in command, Zhang, stood in the entryway, with the newcomer Huan and some *gweilo* white man Chung had never seen before.

“The foreigner looks promising,” said Zhang, in Cantonese.

Chung shuddered. His language of birth was Hakka-Chinese, and he had forced himself to learn Mandarin as a child. He still found Cantonese disagreeable, the language of the poor. People with whom Chung had no desire to associate himself.

Still, traditions were traditions.

“Good,” said Chung, eventually. “Show him in.”

Zhang shoved the *gweilo* into the room and told him to sit down. Then Zhang and Huan left the room, shutting the door behind them. Chung noticed the new guy looking a little shaken as he departed, but the Triad boss chalked it up to nervousness. It wasn't always easy, this line of work.

Chung gestured toward the empty seat opposite his desk and the American sat down.

“You risked a lot coming here,” Chung said in English. He sat down behind the desk. “Why?”

The American shrugged. He was wearing casual clothes, had scruffy hair and two-day stubble. Definitely didn't look like the sort of person who knew how to make money, but Chung knew appearances could often be deceptive.

“Call it boredom,” the American said, eventually. “Call it whatever you like. I'm barred from working in the financial markets in the US, so naturally I needed to find

somewhere a little more...accommodating.”

Chung smiled. Say what you want about the People’s Republic of China, but this nation was truly becoming the land of opportunity.

“Huan said he’d hook me up, so I figured I’d drop by. Looks like you guys could do with a little help.” He grinned. “I’m your man.”

“You performed well enough for Zhang to let you through,” said Chung. “And that’s a good start. But I’ll need something more than trust to give you control of our portfolio.”

The American nodded. “You want a demonstration.”

“You catch on fast.”

“What are we talking here?”

“We’ll see what you can do with three million US,” said Chung. “Then maybe we expand our reach a little.”

“Three million? You want me toying with pocket change, or do you want results?” The American slumped back in the chair, obviously a little too at ease.

Chung bristled, but fought the urge to retaliate. If the American was as good as Zhang apparently thought he was, it would be best to keep him happy. At least for now.

“You are unproven,” Chung said, “and therefore a liability. I shouldn’t need to lecture you about risk.”

“Greater risk equals greater reward.”

“It also equals greater risk of a bullet through your skull.”

The American sat up a little straighter.

Chung continued, "There are other forces at play here. We are not the only group making a run at the stock market. I expect results, but I'm a patient man. I focus on the long play." He hesitated. "You will start with three million. You will invest as you see fit. But I expect to see results. If you succeed, we will give you more to invest on our behalf. You'll get a cut of ten percent from the profits."

The American shook his head. "Twenty percent."

"You're not in a position to negotiate."

"Funny. I was about to say the same thing about you."

Chung opened his mouth to answer but a series of loud noises cut him off. Somewhere outside the office, the sound of gunfire rattled and boomed, echoing off the hard concrete surfaces. Chung tensed, his survival instinct kicking in. He heard a gurgling scream, then more gunshots. Someone was shouting something in English.

The American didn't flinch. Chung realized too late what was happening and lunged for his desk drawer, where he kept his gun. He fumbled with the handle as the noise outside intensified, but couldn't get it to budge.

Locked.

Chung glanced around frantically for the key. He heard another muffled scream and the sound of something heavy slamming against the door.

“If you’re going to do something,” said the American, “can you hurry it up a little?”

Chung bit down a scream of rage and gave up with the drawer. He jumped to his feet and lunged at the *gweilo*, giving up any plans involving the SIG Sauer locked away in his desk.

He grabbed hold of the American’s jacket and drew back a fist. He let his instincts take over, drawing on fifty years’ experience inside Shanghai’s most ruthless crime syndicate. The adrenaline rushed through him, feeding his aging muscles. Whatever happened next, at least he’d go down fighting.

*An honorable death.*

Chung threw his fist forward, aiming for the American’s nose. He heard a splintering crash, and the office door exploded from its hinges, sending shards of wood flying across the room.

His concentration wavering, Chung didn’t notice the American writhe out of his grip. The *gweilo* ducked and shoved forward, sending the Triad boss stumbling backward into his desk. Chung yelped as his back slammed into the hard wood.

There was movement in the doorway and a figure stepped through into the office. He saw a white woman with bright red hair, dressed in dark combat clothes. She was holding a submachine gun in both hands.

Chung ignored the pain stabbing through his body and clenched his fists. Taking a deep

breath, he closed his eyes and composed himself.

*All of life is a dream walking, all of death is a going home.*

Chung opened his eyes and let out a roar. Pushing off from the desk, he charged at the woman with the submachine gun, his mind sparking off a thousand frantic thoughts at once.

She raised her weapon and fired a burst of shots, hitting him squarely in the chest. He went down hard, his vision spinning as he hit the carpet. No pain, only a vague sense of disorientation.

Then his heart stopped beating.

In the split second before his death, Chung Mon felt a smile cross his lips. Then there was only peace.

## Chapter 54

---

“YOUR TIMING IS impeccable.” Leopold glanced down at the body of the Triad boss and then back at Kane.

“Did you get anything useful?” Kane shouldered her weapon.

“You could say that.”

“Spill it.” She turned to face the door. “Walk and talk. We need to get out of here.”

Leopold followed her outside the office. The reception area outside had been ripped to shreds. Bullet holes littered the bare walls, the bodies of the gang members slumped all over the floors. He noticed Zhang, his suit all bloody and torn, lying up against the desk. The computer had been blown to pieces.

“They gave me a list of stocks,” Leopold said, “and asked me to advise some trades.”

“Anything suspicious?” asked Kane, stepping over one of the bodies.

“They weren’t interested in my first proposal. They got a little more excited when I suggested a different tactic.”

“What was your first proposal?”

“Taking advantage of currency fluctuations and embedded derivatives.”

Kane blinked. “I won’t bother pretending I know what that means. What was your second proposal?”



“Fear.”

“Come again?”

Leopold took a deep breath. “The market drops when the public gets uneasy. The simplest way to predict that is to be the cause of the unrest.”

“You’re advocating terrorism?”

Leopold shrugged. “It’s an effective plan.”

Kate opened her mouth to reply, but her team’s arrival cut her short. They appeared to have finished checking the building.

“Area secured,” one of them said, shouldering his weapon. Leopold couldn’t remember his name.

“Damage report.”

“Fifteen down, including the Dragon Head.” He kneeled down and picked up a shell casing. “We should make sure they find these.”

Kane glanced back at Leopold. “We picked up a crate of ammo from the same guy who supplies some of the rival gangs,” she explained. “Just in case.”

“Very thorough,” said Leopold.

“Speaking of which...” Kane turned as she noticed Li Huan approach. He looked a little shaky.

“You holding up okay?” Kane asked.

Huan nodded. “I wasn’t sure the boss would be here. I met with Zhang, as usual, but today is the first time I’ve met Chung.”

“Well, they always say you never get to make a first impression twice.” She looked

him up and down. “Better get ready.”

“Are you sure we’ve got to do this?” Huan asked.

“Afraid so.”

“Do what?” Leopold asked.

Kane unholstered her sidearm. “It’s got to look authentic. We can’t sell the story of a rival gang with Huan here looking like he’s just come out of the spa.”

Huan screwed up his eyes. “Just make it quick.”

“Are you sure you’re ready?”

“Yeah. Get it over with.”

Kane aimed the pistol at Huan’s shoulder. “I’m only going to clip you. When the others find you later, just say you hid.”

Huan nodded feverishly, his eyes still bunched shut.

“Ready? Three... Two...”

Kane fired. With a yelp, Huan spun around as the round slammed into his shoulder. He was lifted off his feet and landed hard on the cold ground. Eyes wide, he clutched at the wound, a pool of blood already forming on his shirt.

“Y-you said y-you were just going to c-clip me,” he said, gasping for air.

Kane stepped over and knelt down. She inspected the wound. “Didn’t catch any major arteries.” She lifted his arm carefully, making him wince. “Bullet went straight through. Keep pressure on that, you’ll be fine.” She stood up and turned to address her team.

“Clear up any evidence we were here. Make sure Huan is comfortable, then let’s move out.”

The three men nodded. Two of them marched off toward the back of the room, while the third helped Huan to his feet, presumably to find a suitable hiding place.

“You were saying?” said Kane, holstering her weapon.

“Uh...” Leopold couldn’t shake the image of Huan pirouetting through the air like a ragdoll in a hurricane.

“You were giving me a reason not to leave your sorry ass behind,” said Kane, brusquely. “Better make it quick.”

“Okay,” Leopold said, collecting his thoughts. “These guys are looking for some serious action. I showed them a relatively safe way to make some cash, but they wanted more.”

“Sounds like a typical triad to me.”

“No, this was different. More than just greed. It was almost as if these guys were desperate.”

“And?”

“And they seemed pretty interested in my idea about taking advantage of public unease to make propitious trades.”

Kane nodded. “Leveraging the bomb attack to make money as the stock market takes a dive. Yeah, I got that much. It’s smart.” She paused. “Pure evil, but smart.”

“They wouldn’t be the only ones to ever

profit from human misery,” said Leopold. “There were five new billionaires the day after the Twin Towers fell. All they’d have to do is figure out when and where the next major attack might happen, and...” he trailed off.

Kane looked at him. “What?”

Leopold felt his pulse quicken. “Jesus, it all makes sense.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“The data he stole from my apartment, the company accounts...”

“Blake. Spit it out.”

Leopold turned and headed for the door.

“What the hell are you doing?” asked Kane, catching up and matching his pace.

“Where’s Jerome?”

“Outside. Watching the perimeter.”

“Good,” said Leopold, quickening his step. “You’d better call ahead and get that plane fired up – we need to get back to New York. Now.”

## Chapter 55

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MARY AND MARSHALL stepped out of the elevator and headed down the hall. The RTCC, or Real Time Crime Center, was an information center housed on the eleventh floor of 1 Police Plaza, and was the NYPD's pride and joy. The center, built in 2005, had been designed to house an immense data warehouse of more than thirty-three billion public records, as well as provide real-time access to CCTV feeds and satellite imagery.

The sound of the air conditioning and the *click clack* of keyboards were the only sounds Mary could hear as she and Marshall stepped into the control room. Mary felt a blast of chilled air against her skin, the HVAC systems obviously working overtime to keep the processors cool.

The control room took up a large proportion of the floor. A sealed off area with wall-to-wall computer monitors and workstations, the RTCC housed a dozen-strong team of expert operators. Mary noticed the giant view screen mounted to the far wall, displaying a variety of different surveillance feeds from around the city. The whole place reminded Mary of the way NASA's control rooms looked in the movies, only about a fifth the size.

Some of the operators looked up as they entered. The team supervisor, Jean Hackman, sat at his desk just a few feet from the door eyeing his visitors with obvious displeasure. He was thin, middle aged, and balding, and wore a short-sleeved white shirt, no jacket. Mary wondered how he hadn't frozen to death.

"I was told I should expect you, Sergeant," Hackman said, irritably. "I understand you want me to drop everything and help you out."

Mary walked up to Hackman's desk. "I've got the commissioner's support on this," she said. "We need your team focused on a priority case."

"And what might that be?"

Mary told him. Hackman didn't say anything for a few moments.

"You don't do anything half-assed do you, Sergeant?" he said, eventually. Standing up, Hackman crossed the floor to one of the computer terminals. The operator looked up at him.

"This is Walters," Hackman said, waving Mary and Marshall over. "She runs our Strategic Surveillance Unit. She can hook you up with the CCTV network and get you real-time satellite feeds."

Walters, a young, slightly plump woman with dark hair, nodded in response.

"I'll brief everyone in full later," said Hackman. "I need you to work with Sergeant

Jordan on a potential bomb threat.”

“No problem, sir,” said Walters.

“I’ve got a list of likely hot zones,” said Mary. “Can you get us eyes on the locations?”

“Shouldn’t be a problem,” Walters said. “Send the details to my workstation, I can set you up.” She turned her attention back to her computer monitor. “I can get you a live satellite feed, assuming we stay in geo-sync.”

“Geo-sync?”

Walters nodded. “We don’t actually control the satellites, but we can piggyback off a certain number of the ones cleared for our use. We just have to wait for them to line up with our current location. We’re currently good to go.”

Mary frowned. “How long will we have?”

“I’ll check. But at least a few hours. I’ll be able to tell you if we’re going to have any drop out. I can also get you real-time updates in the field, if you give me your cell details.”

“Will they work on this thing?” Mary held up her chunky mobile phone. “It’s a little old school.”

“If it can receive SMS messages, we’re all set.”

“Let’s hope so.” Mary dropped the handset into her jacket pocket. “I’ll need you to pull up a map of the potential target areas, then issue an all-personnel bulletin. We need as many officers as possible working the scenes. We might get lucky and find something.”

Walters looked up at her. “And if they do

find something?”

“Tell them to call in the location and wait for backup,” said Mary. “Under no circumstances should anyone try to move the devices themselves. I’m on my way to brief the bomb squad now.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Mary flinched, but let the comment slide. She headed for the door, Marshall keeping pace.

“You ready for this?” he asked as they walked.

Mary nodded. “As ready as I’ll ever be.” They reached the door and stepped out into the hallway. “Let’s just hope we’re not too late.”



## Chapter 56

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MARY PREPARED TO address the room full of people, keenly aware she was running out of time. The New York Police Department Bomb Squad, an elite team of thirty-three detectives, or *bomb technicians*, as they preferred to be called, had hauled ass across town and were now waiting patiently for their orders.

Lieutenant Torres, the squad leader, was a tall, brusque man of around fifty, with cropped salt-and-blond hair and a muscular physique. Mary had checked his file while she waited for him and his team to arrive. Torres had assumed the role of lieutenant after his predecessor retired, well stocked with hard-earned overtime, the year after the Twin Towers fell.

He had run a tight ship ever since.

Mary had requisitioned a briefing room on the fourth floor of 1 Police Plaza, and the place was crammed full. All thirty-three bomb technicians stood present and alert, including Torres, and all listened intently as she and Special Agent Marshall outlined the situation.

“These are the areas we need to focus on,” said Mary, pointing at a projected image of Manhattan on the wall behind her. “Based on our intel, we believe that the threats will be

contained to these key points.”

Torres cleared his throat. “They look like live evacuation routes,” he said. “How do we deal with any public backlash?”

“We want to avoid starting a panic,” said Mary. “If the general population finds out what we’re doing, our chances of finding the devices in time drop to almost zero. We can’t risk anyone finding out, so try to stay under the radar.”

“I need to put the safety of my men first.”

Marshall nodded. “We understand, Lieutenant. Your men can concentrate on reconnaissance for now. Once we find the devices, then we break out the gear. Until then, we’ll need you in plain clothes. I assume that won’t be an issue?”

Torres frowned. “We can issue the light body armor. It shouldn’t be too obvious underneath a jacket. But the first sign of imminent danger, we’ll need to clear the area. I suggest you make sure you have a plan in place for when that happens.”

“If the worst happens,” said Mary, “we need to focus on containment. But let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

“I understand the explosion at the apartment block in the Upper East Side may be connected,” said Torres. “If my men had been called out, we might have a better idea of what to expect.”

“We don’t believe the apartment block was a true representation of what we can expect

here, Lieutenant. We understand the devices we're looking for contain a nerve agent. The explosives are a secondary payload."

"Then the bomb that went off earlier was what? Some kind of diversion?"

Marshall stepped forward. "We believe it was designed to wipe out a specific target rather than cause widespread casualties. These bombs are a different story."

"I suppose it's out of the question to get the HAZMAT team on the scene," said Torres.

"Until we find the devices, HAZMAT will stay out of sight. Our primary goal is to locate. And, based on our intelligence, we believe there may be several hundred devices scattered throughout these hot zones." Marshall pointed at the projector screen. "Can you and your men handle this, Lieutenant?"

Mary suppressed a smile. Marshall was good. Using the bomb squad leader's professional pride as leverage was a risky move, but it seemed to be working.

Torres grunted. "We can handle it. Just make sure you hold up your end. I'm going to need real-time intel on this. Thirty-three men and a handful of officers isn't going to cut it without some major support."

"It's in hand," said Mary. "And we've already found eighty-seven officers to support you on the scene. I suggest you split off into small teams. I'll assemble our personnel and have them report to you. They're good

people, but they need you to tell them what to look for.”

Torres nodded. “Anything else, Sergeant?”

“That’s it for now, Lieutenant. I’ve registered your cell phones with RTCC. Our analysts are working on trying to figure out what kind of chemical agent we’re dealing with. Expect updates once you get out there.”

“We’re all set.” Torres turned to address his team. “Move out – we’ve got work to do.”

The Bomb Squad responded in unison, with a deafening “Yes, sir!” and hustled out of the room. Torres held up the rear, shutting the conference room door closed behind him, with a cursory nod to Mary and Marshall as he departed.

“You getting your sister in on this?” asked Marshall, once he and Mary were alone. “She could help us coordinate with the CDC if she’s got the contacts. We’re going to need all the help we can get.”

“Kate was passed out last time I saw her. I don’t know if she can do much from my apartment. And I don’t want her out in the field – I’ve put her in enough danger already.”

Marshall put one hand on Mary’s shoulder. “We’re going to need her expertise,” he said. “Nobody else understands how nerve agents work better than she does. Kate’s a real asset.”

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

“Listen, if we’re going to do this, I need to know – what’s the deal with you two? Anything I should be worried about?”

Mary pulled away, letting Marshall's hand drop from her shoulder. "It's just family business. Nothing that's going to affect my judgment."

"It's already affected you. If this were anyone else, they'd have had Kate on the phone an hour ago. If we're going to trust each other, I need to know what's going on."

Mary hesitated.

"Look, I get it," said Marshall, looking into her eyes. He still had that annoyingly comforting smile on his face. "Family can suck sometimes. But, take it from me, it's better to have more people out there watching your back." He paused. "I never had a family to count on. The bureau has been my only home ever since I was old enough to sign up."

"You never had a family?"

He nodded. "Parents died when I was five, and I never had any brothers or sisters. I've been through the system. Believe me when I tell you, family needs to stick together."

Mary sighed deeply. *Damn, he's good.*

"So, you know all about me," said Marshall. "Care to fill me in a little about you?"

Mary leaned up against one of the desks. "I guess when you put it all in context, it's not so bad." She hesitated, collecting her thoughts. "Our dad died a few years ago. Cancer. Kate was on assignment at the time, stuck somewhere in central Africa. She couldn't get a flight out in time. Missed the funeral. Our mom was crushed, as you can imagine. Losing

a husband like that..." She trailed off. "Though we all knew it was coming, when Kate never showed up it just made everything feel so much worse. Like she didn't care. Like our father meant nothing to her."

Marshall didn't say anything. He just kept quiet.

Mary continued, "And she could have found a way to get in touch, even if she couldn't get back home in time. Something, *anything*. Even just a phone call. Or a letter. But nothing."

"Did she ever offer any kind of explanation?"

Mary shook her head. "Kate and my mom always argued a lot. My sister was a lot more like our dad, and I was more like mom. It created a lot of friction. Stupid stuff. But, the week before Kate shipped off to Africa, she and our mom had a massive fight."

"And you blame Kate for that?"

"Kate can be a little...blunt. Stubborn, too." Mary felt her eyes tingle, and she fought back the urge to well up. "She was always just like dad."

"And you miss him."

"Every day. Every goddammm day." Mary bit her tongue. *This isn't the time to get emotional.*

Marshall put his hand back on Mary's shoulder. "People always have a need to find someone to blame," he said. "It's not your fault. And you shouldn't feel bad about the way things went down. But I figure Kate's

probably even more torn up about it than you are.”

“Well, now you know,” said Mary, forcing herself to switch back into cop mode. “I’ll give her a call and get her in on this, if you’re so sure she can help. We won’t have any problems.”

“Good.”

“But I meant it when I said I don’t want her in the field. Got it?”

Marshall smiled and nodded. “You’re the boss.”

## Chapter 57

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THE CIVILIAN CARGO aircraft was a modified Xian Y-7, an old design based on the Soviet Antonov AN-26. The fuselage had been altered to allow for larger fuel reserves, but the airplane was otherwise indistinguishable from any other civilian freight carrier.

Leopold, Jerome, and Kane were strapped into the Y-7's uncomfortable seats, and Leopold gripped his armrest a little tighter as the aircraft hit a wave of turbulence. He tried not to think about the hundreds of different ways the plane could fall apart in the sky. They had been cruising over the Pacific for a little over an hour and the deafening sound of the plane's twin turbo-props was beginning to grate.

"We've got another nine hours of this," said Kane, obviously finding Leopold's discomfort amusing. "So you'd better make yourself comfortable."

"Easier said than done," said Leopold, gritting his teeth. The noise of the engines and the rocking of the cabin were beginning to make him feel nauseous.

"Well, I'm sorry we couldn't roll out the red carpet and get you a private jet. But the CIA is working on a budget."



Jerome shuffled in his seat. “We’ll be fine. Let’s just try and get some sleep. We’re going to need it.”

“Easier said than done,” Leopold repeated. He sighed impatiently. “What happens when we land?”

Kane leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. “Relax. The hard part’s over. You got me some good intel on the Liugongs, I’ll make sure everything goes smooth.”

“Forgive me if I don’t take your word for it, Isabel.”

Kane opened her eyes again. “Fine. I probably wouldn’t trust me either.” She took a breath. “We touch down near Spokane to refuel. Then it’s another five hours to New York. I’ve arranged for a vehicle to take us the rest of the way.”

“We’re going straight to the NYPD?” Leopold asked.

“My orders are to provide field support. Deputy Director Burke will run interference.”

“Burke? The FBI are playing ball?”

Kane grinned. “They tried to shut us out, of course. But nothing stays hidden for long. The CIA doesn’t have any jurisdiction over domestic threats, but we’ve got the expertise in dealing with shit-bags like your dear old dad.” She paused. “No offense.”

“None taken.”

“What’s the plan once we get back to the city?” asked Jerome.

“The most recent intel is the NYPD and

FBI are stepping up their investigations. Their intelligence suggests a widespread chemical attack is the most likely threat. At last check in, the bomb squad was mobilizing.”

“Chemical attack?” said Leopold. “What kind of chemical?”

“Classified,” said Kane. “You don’t need to know the details. You’re useful insofar as you can help us track down your father. Make sure you stay useful.”

Jerome scowled. “Whatever chemical agent they’re using,” he said, “it’s likely a compound created by Chemworks. In case you forgot, we’re the resident experts. I’d say we definitely need to know, wouldn’t you?”

Kane held his stare. “Like I told you, last check in confirmed a chemical attack was the most likely outcome. That was all.”

“So find out more.”

“The CIA isn’t running a damn chat line,” Kane said. “They send me secure messages, I simply confirm receipt.”

“Get them to send you the information.”

“From here? Couldn’t if I wanted to. I need a cell signal.”

Leopold sighed. “So, we’re going in blind?”

“If the situation calls for it, I’m sure whoever’s leading the New York team will tell us what we need to know. Until then, assume our priorities are to locate and contain any threat.” She glared at the two men. “And make sure you keep back. I don’t want civilians getting in the way. You’re coming along on an

advisory basis only, understand?”

“We can help,” said Jerome.

“Like hell you can,” said Kane. “Look what happened last time.”

Leopold straightened up in his seat. For some reason, the turbulence wasn’t bothering him so much anymore. “Isn’t it time you let that go?” he said. “It’s ancient history.”

“Your screw up nearly cost me my job. How the hell do you think I wound up in Shanghai? It’s not exactly my idea of a dream destination.”

“Maybe we should talk about this another time,” said Jerome. “We’re going to need to work together on this. We can go back to hating each other when it’s all over.”

“I can live with that,” said Kane, looking at Leopold. “I’ll need you to brief Deputy Director Burke when we get to New York. If your father is planning what you think he’s planning, that might help us find him. Assuming you’re right, of course.”

“It’s the only logical explanation,” said Leopold. “My father has money; that much is obvious. What he doesn’t have is a relationship with Wall Street. He’s got the entire cash reserves of Blake Investments at his fingertips. Which means he’s got access to our hedge funds too. If he’s playing the market, he could stand to make a fortune a hundred times over.”

Kane frowned. “So, this all comes down to money.”

“Money, revenge, power, politics. The reasons are always the same. Maybe this is all four.”

“His motive doesn’t matter. All that matters is we stop the son of a bitch before he gets the chance to hurt anyone else.”

Leopold felt his stomach clench. He glanced over at Jerome. “We need to warn Mary,” he said.

“Ah, Sergeant Jordan,” said Kane. “You two make quite the couple.” She smiled. “Another one of your friends left sorting out your messes?”

“If she’s in danger, she needs to know what’s at stake. This is all my fault. I can’t let her get hurt.”

“Listen carefully, Blake. I don’t care how you feel about this woman. Even if we could find a cell signal, nobody’s sending any messages without my express permission.” She leaned forward in her chair. “I trust exactly two people in this world. One of them is me.” She paused, looking at the two men sat opposite her. “The other isn’t on this plane.”

“We’ll brief Mary as soon as we get back to the city,” said Jerome, interjecting. “If she’s involved in the search, she’ll know what’s going on.”

Leopold took a deep breath and nodded. It wasn’t worth arguing. Kane was their ticket back to New York, and antagonizing her wasn’t going to achieve anything productive. There was too much at risk to let his personal

feelings get in the way, regardless of how much danger Mary faced.

She's smart enough to figure out what's going on, he thought, settling back into his seat. She'll have the situation under control. Just like always.

He closed his eyes, letting the thrum of the aircraft's engines take over. As he tried to fall asleep, a single thought played on his mind.

*Forgive me.*

## Chapter 58

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EIGHT P.M. HAD come and gone by the time Hawkes returned to *Thanatos*. His men were still working the streets; hitting the exact coordinates the colonel had given them, moving the truck every twenty minutes. Unloading the cargo, distributing the devices. Keeping a low profile, moving slowly and methodically.

*Hiding in plain sight.*

Robert Blake was waiting for Hawkes in his office. He was pacing the carpet.

“You’re late,” Blake said, as Hawkes closed the door behind him.

“Your message came at a bad time. We had to rotate the schedule to take into account NYPD patrols.”

“I trust your source has been thorough in his reports.”

“Yes, sir. The police and FBI have mobilized a task force. The bomb squad is working the case too.”

Blake stopped pacing. “Then it looks like Director Ward is living up to his reputation.”

“We shouldn’t have let him live.”

“That was my call, Hawkes. We need him to find the bread crumbs. Everyone needs to know what’s at stake here.” Blake frowned. “Just remember what happened last time you

disobeyed an order of mine.”

Hawkes felt his broken finger start to throb again. “Yes, sir.”

“With most of the men out on the streets, I need you here to help coordinate our activities.”

“What did you have in mind, sir?”

Blake walked to his desk and sat down. “The stock market opens at nine-thirty a.m. tomorrow morning. We’re expecting it to peak a little after midday. We’ve got a lot of work to do in the first few hours to make sure our clients’ investments pay off.”

“How can I help?”

“It’s all about timing, Hawkes. It’s imperative that nobody finds the devices until after our little lunchtime show. By the time the news hits, I want the market at its peak. That’s where we stand to make the greatest impact, understand?”

The colonel nodded. “The devices are primed and ready, sir. There’s little chance anyone will stumble across them before the deadline hits.”

“Good. Until then, I need you downstairs in the command center. We’re running a skeleton crew, and I want to make sure your men are coordinated properly. If the NYPD are sniffing around, we need to stay one step ahead. Understand?”

“Yes, sir. I’ll make sure the satellite link is up and running. We’ll have eyes on our people at all times.”

“And before you leave, I need you to transfer the contents of our cloud server to our clients’ accounts. I think it’s time we paid them their bonus.”

“Yes, sir.” Hawkes turned to leave. He paused. “Sir, I just wanted you to know, whatever happens tomorrow, it’s been an honor.” He snapped a salute.

“The honor is all mine, Colonel,” said Blake. “This country’s government has betrayed us both.” He smiled, the soft light highlighting his scars. “I think it’s time they find out what that feels like.”



## Chapter 59

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MARY SUCKED DOWN a deep breath of cold New York City air and kept moving, trying to warm herself up. She and Marshall had taken a team of eight police officers and were combing a six-block area just off West 42nd and 10th Avenue, a short walk from the Lincoln Tunnel. It was their second search perimeter of the evening, and, so far, they'd turned up nothing.

"Briggs, I need you to keep your head down," said Mary, catching up to one of the rookies. He was rifling through a dumpster, making too much noise.

Briggs looked up. "Sarge, we're a little in the dark here." He looked up at the glass-black sky. "Literally."

Mary nodded. The streetlamps seemed a little dimmer in this part of town, away from the more residential areas of Hell's Kitchen a little further north.

"Do what you can with what we've got," she said. "We can't risk anyone finding out what we're doing here. If we start a panic, God only knows how this is going to work."

"Yes, Sarge."

Mary left him to it. Briggs continued his search of the dumpster, a little quieter than before. As she crossed the street, Mary caught

sight of Marshall up ahead, deep in conversation with one of the other officers, a man named Harris. He stalked off in the opposite direction as she drew closer, muttering something under his breath.

“What’s his problem?” Mary asked.

Marshall sighed. “I guess he doesn’t like taking orders from a Fed.”

“Tell him to talk to me if he’s got a problem. We’re a team here. It needs to stay that way.”

The special agent changed the subject. “Found anything?”

“Zip. We’re either looking in the wrong places, or we’re not looking hard enough.”

“If the devices we’re looking for are anything like the ones we saw in New Jersey, they’re small enough to be stashed anywhere.”

Mary frowned. “There must be something we can do to speed this up.”

“The analysts are working on it. They’ve already tried scanning for wireless frequencies, heat signatures, that sort of thing. But, whatever these things are using, they’re running cold.”

“For now,” said Mary.

“I guess we’re just going to have to start thinking out of the box.”

Mary nodded. “We’ve got a wide area to sweep. Even if we all work all night, we don’t have enough people to cover all the areas Ward highlighted. If we can find one of these damn bombs, maybe Kate can help us figure

out what to do next. Until then, we're flying blind. We're just going to have to hope we get lucky."

"I usually find that people make their own luck," said Marshall. "If we follow protocol, we'll find something."

"You hope."

Marshall smiled. Even in the low light, Mary could see his face light up. Despite everything that had happened, she was glad for his company. The only thing she couldn't figure out is how he still managed to look so good after the day they'd had.

Mary shook the thoughts out of her head. *Now's not the time for fantasizing.*

"We've got a long night ahead of us," Marshall said, breaking the silence. "How about we check out the next area together. Two eyes are better than one, right?"

"Sounds good to me," said Mary, smiling back at him. The special agent turned and headed down the street and Mary followed, suddenly not feeling quite so cold any more.

## Chapter 60

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THE SUN HAD risen fully when the old cargo plane touched down outside Fairfield, New Jersey, and Leopold gripped his armrest a little tighter as the aircraft rocked and rattled to a screeching halt. He glanced out the window and noticed they were in the middle of nowhere.

Kane unbuckled herself and stood up. "Our ride should be waiting outside," she said. "It'll take us an hour to get into Manhattan this time of day. Let's hustle."

Leopold unstrapped himself and followed her to the front of the cabin. Jerome followed suit, and Kane wrenched open the hatch. A blast of fresh air blew inside, and Leopold felt the cool breeze on his skin.

Kane lowered the boarding ladder and waved them forward. "If you're waiting for the red carpet we might be here a while," she said, before her head disappeared from view.

Leopold and Jerome clambered down after her. Outside on the blacktop, a car was parked up waiting for them. Unsurprisingly, a black Suburban, complete with tinted windows.

Kane knelt down by the front wheel and found a set of keys. She opened up the car and climbed into the driver's seat. Leopold climbed in next to her, while Jerome settled

into the back.

“The government really needs to think about leasing some more efficient transport,” said Leopold, buckling up. “What does this thing get? Twelve miles to the gallon?”

“More like ten,” said Kane, firing up the engine. “This unit has a modified 6.2-liter V8. Supercharged, of course.”

“Of course.” Leopold heard the engine let out a deep roar as Kane shifted into gear and set off.

“Nearly seven hundred horses; this baby should get us there in record time.” She put her foot to the floor.

Leopold felt himself forced back into his seat as the souped-up Suburban surged forward.

He said, “Where is ‘there,’ exactly?”

“Here, take this.” Kane fished a slim cell phone out of her pocket and tossed it onto Leopold’s lap. “Standard-issue encrypted handset. Open up the GeoFix app and punch in Sergeant Jordan’s mobile phone number.” She turned to look at him, one eyebrow raised. “I assume you know it by heart.”

Leopold opened his mouth to reply, but couldn’t think of anything to say. He swiped the smart phone’s screen and found the app, and then entered Mary’s cell number.

“Give it a minute,” said Kane. “It should be able to find us a trace. You think she’ll be helping with the search?”

“If I know Mary, she’ll probably be leading

it,” said Leopold. “But I don’t know what help we’ll be if we don’t know where the bombs are.”

Kane reached the end of the airstrip and hung a right, heading for the main gates. “Well, you’ve got less than an hour to figure it out,” she said. “You’d better make the most of it.”

## Chapter 61

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MARY HELD BACK a yawn and stretched her arms over her head. She could feel a burning pain in her lower back and her legs felt like she'd just finished running a half marathon. Based on the amount of ground she and Marshall had covered overnight, that likely wasn't an exaggeration.

She noticed three of the eight officers they'd requisitioned up ahead, moving slowly through the morning crowd and checking recessed porches, trashcans, and other potential hiding places. They looked about ready to collapse.

"No word from the other teams," said Marshall, sidling up next to her. She glanced at him, wondering how the hell he still looked as though he'd woken up from ten hours' sleep.

"Nothing from RTCC either," she said, absent-mindedly running her fingers through her hair. "We've scoured the whole damn neighborhood and nothing. Maybe we need to expand, check some of the less obvious areas."

Marshall yawned loudly, the first time he'd shown any signs of being even slightly worn out. "The morning rush hour's come and gone," he said. "But maximum exposure would be around lunch time. More people on

the streets at that time of day.”

Mary glanced at her watch. “That gives us less than three hours. I’m not even sure I can stay awake that long.”

“We’ve made it this far, another few hours —”

“Is probably going to kill me,” said Mary, cutting him off. “Maybe we should take a minute, catch our breath.” She stopped, perching on an empty bus stop bench.

“Couldn’t hurt,” said Marshall, sitting down next to her. Mary caught a hint of his cologne as he shuffled up next to her.

“So, any bright ideas?” she asked.

Marshall hesitated. “Well, maybe one thing.”

“Shoot.”

“We’ve tried thinking like cops,” he said. “Followed the protocols. But maybe we should start thinking more like them. More like criminals.”

“These guys are obviously smart.”

“So are we.”

Mary considered his point for a moment. “You’re saying we’re underestimating them?”

“Kinda goes without saying. Otherwise we’d have found something.”

“When you put it like that...” Mary sighed and glanced up and down the street. They were sitting in a quiet area just off Hell’s kitchen – a mostly residential neighborhood, but with direct lines of traffic out of Manhattan. The Lincoln Tunnel, the main



funnel to New Jersey from this part of town, was only a few blocks further south. In other words, the perfect place to lay a trap.

The street was busy with pedestrians but very little road traffic – mostly empty cars parked up on the side of the road. The resulting lack of space meant most vehicular traffic avoided this part of the city whenever possible. The cars were mostly old models, not very expensive. A few of them were a little beat up, but nothing major. Mostly scratched paintwork, a handful of crumpled fenders.

Marshall yawned again. “There’s something we’re missing here.”

Mary nodded silently. She focused on one of the cars parked up opposite them – a brown Corolla with faded paint.

“Something on your mind?” Marshall asked.

“You guys check the cars like I told you?”

“Yeah. Undercarriage and wheel arches.”

Mary turned to look at him. “What about *inside* the cars?”

“How would that work, exactly?”

“Think about it – a street full of cars, nothing about them stands out. They’re right in front of our eyes all the time, so we don’t notice. The perfect place to hide something, especially if you need it to be near populated areas.”

Marshall smiled. “That makes sense. Target the cars parked here overnight, maybe cut the

fuel lines so they won't start. But how can we search that many vehicles? It's not like we can start smashing in all the windows and hope people won't notice."

"You ever had your car broken into?"

"I live in D.C. Of course I have." Another grin.

Mary stood up. "Follow me. I think I know how we can make this work." She pulled out her cell phone and headed for the brown Corolla across the street and Marshall followed.

Mary dialed the RTCC command center. Walters picked up, her voice a little strained after more than fifteen hours of working the phones.

Mary cleared her throat. "This is Sergeant Jordan. I'm on west forty-second and eleventh. I need you to pull some surveillance footage."

A pause. "Okay, I've got three cameras near you. Angles aren't too hot, though."

"Go back forty-eight hours," said Mary, reaching the other side of the road. She looked up and down the street at the rows of parked cars. "I need license plate numbers of any vehicle that hasn't been moved since that time."

"Give me a minute," said Walters.

Marshall caught up. "What's the plan?"

"We can't search all the cars," said Mary, one hand over her phone's mouthpiece. "But we can narrow the search down by figuring

out which cars haven't been moved in a couple of days. If Blake's men are as smart as we think they are, they'll have targeted vehicles that don't get used much."

She heard a rustling noise and Walters came back on the line. Mary pressed the phone to her ear. "You got something for me?"

"Based on the angles we've got, I can see three vehicles that haven't been moved in forty-eight hours."

"Great. Text me the license plate numbers."

"On it."

Mary hung up. Her phone vibrated with an incoming text message. "Okay, let's get started," she said, holding the screen up so Marshall could see.

"We're looking for a white Hyundai, license plate ADL-4682," he said, reading aloud.

Mary looked down the street. "Over there." She pointed at a white sedan about thirty feet away. Marshall broke into a jog and Mary followed, weaving in and out of the pedestrians as she kept pace. Most people kept their heads down, ignored her and Marshall completely.

Typical New York mentality, thought Mary. Everyone minds his own business.

They reached the car, checked the plate. Mary glanced down at the driver's side window.

"See there," she said, pointing at the rubber strip between the door and the glass, where she noticed a slight indentation in the seal.

“Looks like someone’s forced something through there.”

“A door jimmy?”

Mary nodded. “My thoughts exactly.”

“I’m not seeing the appeal,” said Marshall, peering through the window. “If these guys are using gas, wouldn’t the car keep everything from getting out?”

“Not everywhere inside the car is airtight,” said Mary. She walked round to the front of the vehicle. “The radiator needs moving air to work properly. The intake grille is completely open. Look.”

Marshall squatted and peered into the engine bay. “I don’t see anything out of place.”

“We need to get the hood open.”

“That’s not going to work without a warrant.”

“You said we need to start thinking like criminals,” said Mary. “These guys don’t need warrants. And we don’t have the time. Look, if I’m wrong, I’ll take the heat. But if I’m right, this could make all the difference.”

Marshall stood up again. “So, you’re thinking these guys break into the cars, pop open the hood, then hide the devices inside the engine bay?”

Mary nodded. “You’ve got to admit, it’s pretty smart.”

“Only if you’re right. And only if they don’t get caught doing it.”

“This is New York. There are a dozen

carjackings a day. That we know about.” She smiled. “It’s practically expected, especially in this neighborhood.”

“Okay, fine. But how are we going to get in there without people noticing?” He glanced up the street. “Someone might make a scene.”

“We can get the equipment we need out here fast enough,” said Mary. “That should make it easy to get the doors open without anyone noticing. Until then...” She unholstered her gun.

Marshall took a step back. “You’re kidding.”

“I’m not going to fire it,” Mary said, rolling her eyes. She pulled out her I.D. badge. “If anyone asks, I’ll just tell them it’s police business.”

Before Marshall could say anything else, Mary checked her safety was on, and then slammed the butt of the gun against the driver’s side glass. The window shattered but stayed in one piece thanks to the protective coating. The noise made a couple of nearby passers-by look up, but they all kept on walking.

“See? I told you nobody would care,” Mary said, pushing the ruined window through. It fell onto the driver’s seat, spilling tiny crystals of broken glass onto the fabric.

She reached through and unlocked the door, then leaned into the car and located the hood release switch. She found it nestled underneath the steering wheel and pulled on it. There was a muffled *thunk* and Mary saw

the hood pop up.

“Nice job,” said Marshall. “Could have used a little more finesse, but effective. I’ll give you that.”

“It’s not my first time,” said Mary, winking.

They headed round to the front of the car and Marshall lifted the hood, fixing it in place with the prop rod. Mary glanced into the engine bay.

“I don’t see anything,” Marshall said.

“You give up too easily.” Mary leaned in close, peering into the dark recess. She caught a whiff of old engine oil and gasoline.

“See anything?”

“Hang on.” Mary looked underneath the engine block, focused on the sump. There wasn’t much light. “There’s definitely something here,” she said. “Hand me your cell phone.”

Marshall obliged. Mary swiped the screen and activated the flashlight, aiming it at the dark space in front of her.

Then she saw it.

A small, dark package, roughly the size of a laptop, nestled underneath the sump. She could make out a tangle of wires, and two transparent cylinders filled with colored liquid. One red, one green.

“Holy shit.” Marshall peered in over her shoulder.

“Those would be my feelings exactly.”

“We’d better call this in,” said Marshall. “Let the others know what to look for. Maybe

we can find them all in time.”

Mary stood up straight and turned to face him. “Maybe. But that doesn’t mean we can disarm them. They’ve no doubt got some kind of failsafe.”

“At least we’re one step closer. And it’s all thanks to you.” He looked at her. “I knew you’d pull this off.”

Mary felt her cheeks get hot. She looked into Marshall’s eyes and, just for a moment, forgot about where she was. Forgot about the danger. Somehow, it felt like everything was going to be okay.

And then reality set back in.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” she said, trying to ignore the butterflies in her stomach.

*Seriously? Butterflies?* She forced herself to keep her mind on topic. *If Leopold were here, he’d...* her train of thought went down another path. And suddenly, all she felt was a clawing sense of guilt.

*Maybe he’d still be here if I hadn’t been such an asshole to him. Or maybe I’d be over there with him. Wherever the hell ‘there’ is...*

“Mary?”

Marshall’s voice snapped her back into the moment. “Yeah, sorry. Just thinking what our next move is. Maybe there’s some way to self-destruct these things, like we saw in New Jersey.”

“It might do a little damage to the car,” said Marshall, “but better than the alternative.” He took back his cell phone and punched in a

number. "I'll call this in to the RTCC. You get the bomb squad out here, and have Briggs and his men start checking out the other cars. You still got the license numbers?"

"Yeah." Mary consulted her own mobile, texted the plates to Briggs and the others. "When you've talked to Walters, get Director Ward on the phone. I think he needs to know what we're dealing with here. Maybe he found something in those old files of his that can help."

"Let's hope so," Marshall said. "If we knew what the end game was, maybe we could figure out Blake's next move. Assuming total annihilation isn't the objective here."

"That would make a nice change," said Mary.



## Chapter 62

---

THE SUPERCHARGED SUBURBAN barreled down the I-495 toward the Lincoln Tunnel. Leopold glanced at the speedometer. It was nudging ninety-five.

“Relax,” said Kane. “The license plate is tied to the police database. We won’t have any trouble. How far out are we?”

“At this speed? Less than ten minutes to Mary’s location. Assuming we don’t hit traffic.”

“Any bright ideas on what we tell them when we get there?”

Leopold nodded. “If I were planning a large scale attack, I’d make sure the whole world was watching when it happened. The city is at its busiest around lunch time, which gives us...” he checked the time on the cell phone Kane had given him. “Maybe two hours.”

“Until what?”

“The first wave will be focused on making a scene. A shock and awe campaign to get the media’s attention. After that, I’d issue my demands. It doesn’t really matter what I ask for. Whatever keeps attention away from my real goal. Then, I’d watch the NYPD and the FBI chase their asses for a while. Once the news of the first attack hits, we’re going to see

some major movement in the stock market as investors get panicky and unload their higher-risk assets. That will have a domino effect, and it'll only get worse once they find out about all the other bombs. Once the market drop reaches critical mass, there'll be nothing we can do to stop it."

Kane smirked. "So what? A bunch of rich assholes get a little less rich. I'm more concerned about the threat to ordinary people's lives."

"It's not just the rich that suffer in a market crash," said Leopold. "And, being a rich asshole myself, I know what I'd do if I was in my father's place." He paused. "I'd want to be as close as possible to the action. I'd want to make damn sure everything went down perfectly."

"You think your father's somewhere in the city?"

"I'd bet my life on it."

Kane gripped the wheel a little tighter. "It might just come to that."

"How do you plan on tracking him?" Jerome asked from the back seat.

Leopold turned his head. "That's where Director Ward comes in. With the right equipment and the right pressure from the right people, we stand a chance of narrowing down the search. There's only so many places a person can use to run operations like this. If we act fast, we stand a chance of stopping him before it's too late."

“You’d better be right,” said Kane, slowing down a little as the tunnel entrance loomed ahead. “Otherwise we’re driving straight into a death trap.”

## Chapter 63

---

HAWKES TOOK ANOTHER gulp of coffee and rubbed his eyes with his good hand, trying to stay focused. The operations hub onboard *Thanatos* was empty – more than a dozen workstations abandoned. The only other soul working in the belly of the ship had finished his shift two hours earlier, and had retired to his quarters. He wasn't due back for another hour.

The colonel had picked out the only office – an eight-by-eight room surrounded on all sides by Smart Glass, positioned in the center of the room, about thirty feet from each wall. The delicate glass remained transparent most of the time, until an electric current was passed through, turning it opaque. Hawkes had turned it up to its highest setting, and he now sat alone in the dimly lit room with only his computer for company.

The desk supported three monitors, each displaying a satellite map of different areas of Manhattan. Hawkes could keep track of his men as they moved through the city, each operative marked by a pulsing red dot. The markers had now converged along Henry Hudson Highway, and were headed south from Washington Heights. It looked like they were moving fast.

*Right on schedule.*

Hawkes stifled a yawn and drained the last of his coffee. It had gone cold. Holding back his exhaustion, the colonel accessed his workstation's operating system and noticed a conference call going through, linked into Blake's office upstairs.

*Beats watching the dots move*, Hawkes figured. He isolated the audio stream and slipped on a pair of headphones. Blake had apparently left the stream unencrypted. The feed came through loud and clear.

"...and we're expecting results," a male voice said, in a heavy accent. Hawkes couldn't place it, but the man sounded Middle Eastern.

"In less than two hours, you'll have all the results you ever wanted," another voice said. The colonel recognized it as Robert Blake's. He sounded a little drained, the last few days obviously having taken their toll.

*So, the man's not a cyborg*, Hawkes thought.

Blake continued, "I trust you received your bonus?"

"The documents? Yes. We thank you," a third voice said. The accent sounded Japanese or Chinese. "We only hope you can live up to your other promises."

"Rest assured, gentlemen. Everything is proceeding as expected."

"Good. We'll be in touch again when this is over."

Two of the three lines went dead. Blake's line stayed active. Hawkes heard him

breathing.

“I trust you heard all that, colonel?” Blake said.

Hawkes flinched.

“I can see your workstation on my console.” Blake paused. “Relax, it’s nothing you shouldn’t have heard. We’re in this together, remember?”

The colonel cleared his throat. “Yes, sir. Just keeping myself in the loop.”

“I’d expect nothing else.” Blake hung up.

Hawkes breathed a sigh of relief and slipped off his headphones, switching the monitor back to the view of Manhattan. The pulsing red dots were getting closer. In a few hours, everything would be over. A better life awaited them all.

And after all the years spent planning, waiting – Hawkes knew they had earned the right to live in peace. Enough blood had been spilled to last a thousand lifetimes. What difference would a few more lives make? Hawkes turned off the monitors and closed his eyes, listening to the steady beat of his own heart.

*In the end, sometimes the only justice is the one you make for yourself.*

## Chapter 64

---

“IT’S WORKING,” MARSHALL said, pressing his cell phone to his ear. “Seven more devices found. All hidden inside the engine bays.”

Mary looked over at him. She was on her phone also, on hold for Director Ward. “Seven isn’t going to cut it,” she said. “There could be hundreds more.”

“We’ll keep looking.”

There came a scuffling noise through the speaker and Mary turned her attention back to her cell. Richard Ward came on the line.

“Jordan, I need an update.”

“Yes, sir. We’ve found nine devices in total. They’re right where we thought they’d be – lining the evacuation routes. If we try to get people off the island, we’re going to have thousands of casualties.”

“Then the only remaining question is what Blake’s planning to force us to consider evacuation protocols,” said Ward. “He must have something up his sleeve to get everyone panicked enough to consider getting out.”

“We’re working on it, sir.”

“You’re running out of time.”

Mary gritted her teeth. *You don’t have to tell me.*

“You had any leads on what Blake’s end

game is?” asked Ward.

“No, sir.”

“What’s your sister’s take on this?”

“Haven’t spoken to her yet, sir. Now we’ve located some of the devices, she might be able to –”

“Get her on the phone,” said Ward. “Get a conference call going; I want you two working together on this.”

Mary sighed. “One moment, sir.” She put the director on hold and dialed her sister’s cell phone from memory. Kate picked up on the fourth ring.

“Sis?”

“Kate, we need your help.”

“It’s about damn time.”

“Where are you?”

“At your apartment. I borrowed your laptop, hope you don’t mind.”

“You need to get out of the city,” said Mary. “It’s not safe here.”

“Bullshit. We’re in this together, sis. I’m not abandoning you. Not again. This is where I belong. Hell, if I knew where you were, I’d be out on the streets helping you out.”

Mary sighed. “You’re a stubborn idiot, you know that, right?”

“Runs in the family.”

Mary smiled. “Listen, I’ve got Director Ward on the line. He thinks...*We* think you can give us some insight on what Blake might be planning.”

“You find any of the devices?”



“Yeah. Nine of them.”

“They like the ones we saw in New Jersey?”

“As far as I can tell.”

Kata paused. “It’s not good news, sis.”

“What? What did you find?”

“I managed to log in to my department’s secure servers and check out the research I’d put together on Chemworks.”

Mary took Ward off hold. “Director, can you hear me?”

“I’m all ears, Sergeant. Your sister on the line?”

“Yeah, I’m here.”

“You figure out what’s in those bombs?”

“I’ve got a pretty good idea,” said Kate. “A few years ago, Chemworks was working on a transgenic method of producing the enzyme Butyrylcholinesterase. They used genetically modified livestock to figure out a way to produce higher quantities organically. It was a pretty big breakthrough – Butyrylcholinesterase can offer protection from organophosphate nerve agents. The kind found in Sarin or VX gas.”

“And let me guess – someone decided to take the research in a new direction,” said Mary.

“Looks like it. I think we’re looking at a modified version of VX. A more effective version. There’d only have to be a miniscule amount in the atmosphere to cause death. In this case, unlike regular VX, it’s just as deadly if inhaled. Usually, the worst effects come

after contact with skin. But if Blake's chemical is more resistant to Butyrylcholinesterase, even one or two milligrams inhaled would be enough to cause paralysis, even death." She paused. "Basically, I'm saying if even half of one device's payload is released into the atmosphere, it could contaminate an entire neighborhood. Worse, depending on the wind conditions."

"Is there an antidote?" asked Ward.

"Without figuring out how they synthesized the agent, we won't know for sure."

"So, if these things go off, there's nothing we can do?"

"Short of issuing a couple million HAZMAT suits, not really."

"Keep looking," said Ward. "If you can find out anything that might help, I need to know. In the meantime, Jordan, I want you and your teams to keep searching the streets. I want every last one of these goddamn bombs found."

"Yes, sir," said Mary. "Did you find anything in the case files that might help?"

"I'm working an angle. It might not amount to much, but I'm getting close to finding some answers. I'll brief you when I have more." He hung up.

"You get that, sis?" said Mary. "Do what you can. But stay inside. Understand?"

"You got it. I'll call you if I find anything." Kate hesitated. "And Mary?"

"Yeah?"

“Stay safe, okay?”

“You know me.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

Mary smiled. “I’ll be in touch.” She hung up.

“What’s the word?” asked Marshall, slipped his own phone back into his jacket pocket.

“Based on Kate’s research, it looks like we’re dealing with modified VX,” Mary said. “Once the two chemicals mix, a single device could take out thousands of people. And there’s no way to stop it unless the bomb squad figures out how to disarm them. If that’s even possible.”

Marshall frowned. “We’ve combed this area. We’re not going to find anything else. It’s time we pulled out and let the bomb team do their job.”

“This neighborhood links up to one of the busiest routes in and out of Manhattan,” said Mary. “If anything happens, we need to be here to help keep people safe.”

“And we can do our job better if we’re out of the firing line. We can coordinate this just as well from the RTCC.”

Mary stared at him. “Are you freakin’ kidding me? You want to run away?”

“This isn’t running away,” said Marshall, his voice raised. “Try to think logically. We’re the ones in charge of keeping people safe. We can’t do that if we’re stuck in the middle. Maybe we can stop this happening, but we can’t do it from here.”

“I swore an oath to protect and serve this city,” said Mary. “I’m not going anywhere.” She clenched her fists. “If you want to run away, nobody’s stopping you. But you’ll be doing it alone.”

“Mary, think about this.”

*You’ve got to be joking.* She resisted the urge to yell. “Look, you do what you want. I can’t ask you to stay, but I’m not going anywhere. People’s lives depend on what we do here today, and I’m damn sure not going to leave them to die.”

“Mary...”

“This conversation is over.”

Marshall opened his mouth to reply, but a loud noise cut him off. Somewhere nearby, the sound of squealing tires and the roar of a big engine. Mary turned and glanced behind her.

“What the hell?” Marshall took a step back as a huge black SUV skidded around the corner, wheels throwing up a plume of white smoke. A few pedestrians jumped out of the way, screaming obscenities at the driver. Mary instinctively reached for her hip as the vehicle rushed toward them, its engine revving madly.

“Keep back,” she said to Marshall, as she unholstered her sidearm.

The SUV lurched as whomever was driving turned the wheel, forcing the car to skid. It came to a screeching halt six feet from where Mary stood. She raised her weapon, aimed it at the passenger’s window.

The door opened and a man stepped out. A little scruffy looking, with unkempt hair and dark stubble.

Mary froze.

*You've got to be kidding me.*

Leopold Blake locked eyes on her and smiled. "I thought about sending a postcard," he said. "But I figured you'd want this particular message in person."

Mouth hanging open, Mary kept her gun held up. She shook her head, taking a moment to let the situation sink in. The smell of burnt rubber filled her nostrils. "What in God's name are you doing here?" she asked.

Leopold shrugged. "Figured I could help." He glanced around, noticed the black skid marks on the road. "Sorry about the mess."

Mary lowered her weapon, a weird sensation working its way up into her chest. Leopold just stood there, that same goofy grin plastered on his face.

"You need a moment?" he said, breaking the silence.

Mary forgot about where she was for a second, and allowed herself a smile. "You're a total asshole, you know that?"

"I know."

"But I'm glad you're here."

The grin spread even wider. "I know."

Mary shook her head, failing miserably to keep the smile off her face. *Definitely an asshole*, she thought. *But he sure knows how to make an entrance.*

## Chapter 65

---

LEOPOLD FOUGHT BACK his impatience as he waited for the RTCC analyst Walters, or whatever her name was, to come back on the line with some good news. He had given her a list of search parameters, and was now waiting for the results.

Following their arrival, and after a few cursory introductions, Leopold, Jerome, and Kane had outlined their theories and borrowed Mary's cell phone. Jerome and Kane had linked up with the nearby police team, and were helping search the area. The FBI agent, Marshall, was standing close by. He looked irritated.

"You got something for me?" Leopold asked, as the RTCC analyst came back on the line.

"I've run it through the system," she said. "I cross referenced any locations that have a direct satellite link, an encrypted comms link, and are off the main grid."

"What did you find?"

"Checking the five boroughs and Jersey City, there are ninety-three possibles."

Leopold sighed. "Okay, scratch off any locations that are registered to active US corporate entities or the government. You should be able to cross reference the

addresses with the SEC database.”

“One moment.”

Leopold heard the *click clack* sound of typing.

“Thirty-seven possibles.”

“Now, remove any of those within one mile of the hot zones.”

“Twelve possibles.”

“Give me a minute,” said Leopold. Mary glanced at him. She still looked mad.

She said, “What are you trying to find?”

“Anyone trying to pull off something this big is going to need to be close by. Close, but out of harm’s way. I’m looking for buildings my father might be using to coordinate the attack. I’m down to six possibilities.”

“What if he’s not using a building?” said Mary.

“He’d need power, a satellite feed, comms link...”

“And he’d also need a way to get out quickly. Maybe he’s mobile.”

Leopold smiled. “Walton, you there?”

“It’s Walters, sir,” she replied.

“Any of those addresses look a little weird to you, Walters?”

A pause. “Weird?”

“Yeah. Anything stand out?”

“Not really,” she said. “We’ve got a few commercial properties registered to a group of companies in the Bahamas, but it doesn’t look like any of them are in use.”

“Okay, let’s start again. Go back to the

ninety-three coordinates you found before.”

“Done. What am I looking for?”

“Are any of those targets moving? Or not tied down to a permanent address?”

Another pause. “We’ve got six vessels registered to the Staten Island Ferry service, maybe a dozen cargo ships on the move, a few more docked up. Based on their tracking records, they all look legit.”

“Anything on land?”

“Negative.”

Leopold felt his pulse quicken. He lowered the phone and looked back at Mary. “How difficult would it be to get in and out of the city on a ship?”

Mary shrugged. “Not very. Assuming you had the right documentation, you could come and go pretty easily. The Coast Guard keeps an eye out for anything out of place, but it’s mostly a skeleton operation. There’s no official border checks this close to the mainland. Anyone with a landing permit is good for twelve months.”

Leopold put the phone back to his ear. “Walters, any of those hits turn up near private harbors or marinas?”

“Fifteen possibles,” said Walters. “New York Harbor area.”

“Okay. Any of those private vessels?”

“Three hits.”

“Out of those three, any of them registered to foreign business entities?”

“All three,” said Walters.



“Where did they sail in from?”

“Two domestic. The other arrived from Tokyo late last week. The vessel’s name is *Thanatos*. It’s currently moored up near Greenville Yard.”

“Walters, you’re a genius.” Leopold grinned.

“Uh, thank you.”

He hung up. “We’ve got a possible hit,” he said, addressing Mary. “Private vessel came in from Japan last week, moored up near Greenville Yard. It’s off the main power grid and it’s got all the comms equipment my father would need to pull this off.”

“You’re sure?” Mary asked.

“With a name like *Thanatos*, I’d be damn surprised if I was wrong. Safe to say my father has a taste for the dramatic. And the Greek personification of death is about as dramatic as it gets.”

Mary glanced at Marshall, who hung back. He shrugged. “It’s your call.”

“Get Director Ward on the phone,” she said, turning back to Leopold. “His number’s on the call history. We’ll need him to run point with the police commissioner and get us some tactical support.” She checked her watch. “We’ve got less than an hour before the lunch time crowds start clogging up the streets – and that location is thirty minutes away.”

Leopold nodded and found Ward’s number. He dialed it. Ward picked up.

“Jordan – you found anything?” he said.

“Mary’s busy right now,” said Leopold.

“Blake? What the hell are you doing here?”

“I’ll tell you all about it later when you buy me dinner,” said Leopold, stalking off back toward the Suburban. “Right now, I need you to listen.”

## Chapter 66

---

WARD STOOD WAITING for them in the RTCC control center when they arrived, ten minutes later. The room was stacked with computer monitors, the air conditioning cranked up to the maximum setting. Leopold felt the blast of cold air as he and the others stepped inside and made their way over to the conference room.

Ward waved them through and told them to take a seat. He shut the door.

“Who’s your friend?” he asked, looking at Kane.

Leopold settled into one of the chairs, leaned both elbows on the desk. “This is Isabel Kane,” he said. “She’s with the CIA. Oh, and she really doesn’t like the FBI right now.”

“You guys up to speed?” Ward didn’t sound surprised.

“No thanks to the Bureau,” Kane said. “But I think I get the picture. Bad guy planning bad things.” She glanced at Leopold. “His fault.”

“Not exactly,” said Mary, folding her arms. Leopold thought for a second she might be sticking up for him.

“And how are you involved again?” she asked.

“That’s classified.”

“Of course it is.”

Kane opened her mouth to respond, but Ward cut her off.

“Not the time, ladies,” he said. “Leopold, you have a possible location?”

“Yes. A commercial slip near Greenville Yard. If we get moving, we can be there in less than thirty minutes. Do you have our support?”

Ward nodded. “ESU has a SWAT unit primed and ready. Just waiting for the order.”

“Then make it,” said Leopold. He glanced at Jerome, who sat opposite. “We’ll need to be involved.”

“Not going to happen,” said Ward. “No civilians.”

“This isn’t a request.”

Mary sighed. “Leopold, you’re not exactly trained for this kind of thing. Maybe you should stay here, where it’s safe.”

Leopold shook his head. “We need every advantage we can get. I know how my father’s mind works. I can help.”

“He won’t expect to see Leopold alive,” said Jerome. “I hate to say it, but that could give us an edge.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be the one keeping him out of trouble?” said Ward. “Isn’t there some kind of bodyguard oath or something?”

Jerome shrugged. “Nothing anyone here can say will stop him from going. At least this way, I can keep an eye on him.”

Ward looked at Mary. “It’s your call, Jordan.”

“Why is it her call?” said Kane. “Who put her in charge?”

“I did,” said Ward. “Deal with it. If you’re going to help, then help. Otherwise, go back to Langley.”

Kane bristled, but didn’t say anything. Mary took a moment.

“There could be tens of thousands of lives at risk here,” she said, eventually. “As much as I hate admitting it, their needs come first. Even if I have to put more people in danger, even a slim chance of stopping a major terrorist attack is worth it.” She looked over at Leopold. “You’re in. Just make sure you keep out of trouble. And follow orders.”

“Don’t I always?”

Kane stood up. “Enough chit-chat. It’s time we put a plan together and move out.”

“I’m all ears,” said Mary. Leopold suspected she didn’t mean it.

“Blake’s plan is to destabilize the stock market, right?” said Kane. “If he succeeds, he’s opening the door for other vulnerabilities. There are countless groups out there looking for ways to mess with us – I don’t want Blake setting any precedents. If Director Ward’s intel is correct, and he has the emergency evacuation protocols, then it could take us months to put new ones in place. Until then, there’s nothing stopping others from trying the same thing. It’s imperative that we make

sure that doesn't happen."

"Your point?"

"My point is that this isn't some Boy Scout reconnaissance mission. This is a full-blown smack down. We need to show these assholes that nobody messes with the United States. Our end goal should be to take these bastards down. No prisoners."

Ward folded his arms. "If they surrender, we take them in."

"They're not going to surrender," said Kane. "This is all-or-nothing for them. They'll die before giving up."

"Let's hope you're wrong," said Ward. "But you've got a point. We need to plan for the worst."

"I recommend two teams. The first will mount a frontal assault, while the second will infiltrate from the rear. Blake and his men will be preoccupied with keeping the main attack at bay, he won't notice the others."

"In theory," said Mary.

Kane smirked. "Theory's all we got right now." She looked at Leopold. "And I want *him* part of the frontal assault. Once Blake realizes his son is out there, he'll slip up. Get distracted."

"Out of the question."

"Look, I know you two have a *thing*," Kane made air quotes with her fingers, "but we need to do what's best for the operation. We can't let out personal feelings cloud judgment. You should know that, Jordan. Leopold makes

a fine distraction, one that we can use to get the others inside.”

“I told you – it’s not going to happen.”

Leopold stood up. “It’s okay, Mary. She’s right. The whole point is to keep my father preoccupied. I’m in a unique position to make that happen.”

“I don’t like it,” said Jerome. “What’s to stop him from killing you? He’s already tried that once. That we know of.”

“We have a highly trained SWAT unit to keep us safe. All we need to do is find a well-covered position and defend it until the secondary team gets inside. They’re the ones taking all the risk, not us. We’re just there to wave our arms and make noise.”

Jerome frowned. “I’d like to go on record and say I think this is going to get you killed,” he said. “But I suppose you wouldn’t listen anyway.”

“It’s time I learned to fix my own messes,” said Leopold. “I’m not letting other people die because I wasn’t willing to help. This is happening.”

“Finally, the guy shows a little backbone,” said Kane. “And, don’t worry. You’re right. It’s the secondary team that’s going to be taking most of the heat.”

“And who’s going to lead them?” asked Mary.

“I have fifteen years’ tactical combat experience,” said Kane. “And five years running my own operations. I’ll take point. I

can get us inside.”

“CIA has no jurisdiction here,” said Ward. “It’s Sergeant Jordan’s final decision.”

Mary leaned back in her chair. “Hell, if she wants to get herself shot at, I’m all for it. So long as she knows what she’s doing.”

“I got his ass back here, didn’t I?” said Kane, pointing at Leopold.

“What’s your problem with him?” Mary asked. “Anything I need to be aware of?”

“Nothing that’s going to get in the way of what needs to be done. I’m sure if we get out of this alive, he’ll tell you all about it.”

Leopold felt all eyes on him. For a moment, nobody spoke.

Mary broke the silence. “Speaking of getting out alive, what do you plan on doing once you get inside?”

“In order for the devices to activate at the right time, they’ll need to be controlled from a central location,” said Leopold. “We should be able to shut them down from inside *Thanatos*. In theory.”

Ward checked his watch. “It’s nearly eleven. If we’re going to do this, we need to move out.” He headed for the door. “Get down to the basement. The SWAT team is assembled and waiting with transport.”

“Weapons?” asked Kane.

“All taken care of. You can pick yours up downstairs. Let’s move out.”

Leopold waited for Mary and Jerome to get to their feet before following Ward and Kane



out the door. The tension was palpable, but there was no turning back now. He had meant what he said about fixing his own problems, and wasn't about to go back on his word. Not with everything that was at stake. Whatever might happen, however the operation went down, he knew he had a lot to answer for.

He only hoped he was up to the task.

## Chapter 67

---

HAWKES LOOKED UP from his desk as Robert Blake entered the office. The Smart Glass was still set to privacy mode, blocking out the view of the room outside.

“The team just got back, sir,” Hawkes said. “Washington Heights was the last drop point.”

Blake crossed the floor and stood behind the colonel’s chair, glancing over his shoulder at the monitors. “Good,” he said. “I trust the remote activation protocols are ready to go.”

“Yes, sir. Fifty-three minutes before the Times Square device releases its payload. Thirty minutes after that, it’s primed to detonate. It’ll be one hell of a show.”

“What’s the response time for that part of the city?”

“Six minutes, sir. If they’re not already looking for us.”

“You have a line to the media?”

“Yes, sir. The prerecorded video will hit the blog and streaming sites immediately after the first device goes live. I’ve set up the RSS feed to alert the journalists we selected. Within twenty minutes, this thing will go global.”

Blake nodded. “Our trades are ready?”

“The Blake Investments fund is at your disposal, sir.”

“Excellent work, Hawkes. Once this gets started, we’re going to have the entire country looking for us. It won’t take them long to figure out where we are. The distraction will only work for so long.”

“The cell signal we’re using to control the devices uses the same frequency range as the mobile phone network. It will take them some time to isolate and trace it back to us. But once the final sequence is programmed in, we can move out of range. We can be in international waters within an hour.”

Blake headed back for the door. “Once the team checks in, I want you all upstairs. This place needs to be locked down. I don’t want any unwelcome guests snooping around.”

“Yes, sir.”

Blake left the room. Hawkes took a deep breath and checked the monitors. The team had boarded less than ten minutes ago and were waiting in the mess room.

The colonel got to his feet. He could feel his heart racing, beating a frantic rhythm against the inside of his chest. Shaking off the nerves, he took a deep breath and headed for the door, checking his watch as he stepped out into the main control room.

*Fifty-one minutes. Game time.*

## Chapter 68

---

THE BALLISTIC ENGINEERED Armored Response Counter Attack Truck, or BearCat, was a twenty-foot-long nine-ton armored vehicle powered by a three-hundred-horsepower Caterpillar diesel. Two SWAT unit officers sat up front, dressed in dark body armor and helmets, navigating the hulking vehicle down the I-78 toward Greenville Yard.

Leopold, Jerome, and Mary, sat in the back with six other SWAT officers. The interior was spartan; a pair of facing benches with no seat belts the only notable feature. Kane and Marshall were riding in the second BearCat, a few car lengths behind them.

“ETA is less than ten minutes,” said Mary, shouting over the noise of the engine. “We’re going to have to slow on approach. Satellite surveillance gave us a well-covered spot about two hundred feet from the ship – we’ll approach on foot from there.”

Leopold flinched as the BearCat lurched to the side, overtaking a slow moving mini-van. He glanced out the inch-thick window as they passed by.

“Not exactly subtle,” he said, turning back to face the other passengers. “What if they see us coming?”

Hunter, the SWAT unit commander sat

opposite, looked back at him. “Relax, you’re in good hands,” he said. “The approach is well covered. We can get close without straying into open ground.”

“And when we get on board?”

Hunter smiled. “My men and I will keep you safe, don’t worry. Just remember what I told you. Stay slow, stay low.”

“When do I get my gun?”

Jerome rolled his eyes.

“You’ll be issued a weapon once we get there,” said Mary. “But the plan is that you won’t have to use it. We need you and Hunter’s team to draw attention, that’s it. So don’t try anything stupid.”

“Assuming he doesn’t shoot himself in the foot,” said Jerome, “I’ll make sure he stays out of trouble.”

“What about Kane?” Leopold asked.

“Her team will approach through the water,” said Hunter. “Intel got hold of the ship’s specifications – there are emergency ladders at the bow and stern, both port and starboard. Once we get the target’s attention, Kane and the others will board and make their way to the bridge.”

“It’s risky,” said Leopold. “What if they’re expecting us?”

“We’ll be ready for them.” Hunter glanced around the passenger bay. “Won’t we, fellas?”

“Yes, sir!” the other SWAT unit officers responded in unison.

“Just let them do their job,” said Mary. “It’s

what they're trained for."

Leopold nodded. He felt the BearCat speed up.

"And I need to know – what's the deal with you and Kane?" Mary asked.

"It's a long story."

"Just give me the CliffsNotes."

"Is it really that important?"

"If we're going to trust her with our lives, then yes. Spill it."

Leopold sighed. "It was a few years ago. Kane was assigned to a team looking into money trails linked to ISIS militants in Syria. I found out some of the Blake Investments subsidiaries were under investigation." He paused. "Completely unfounded, of course. But let's just say, I went out of my way to make life difficult for her."

"You obstructed a federal investigation? I'm surprised Kane didn't have you arrested."

"She tried."

Mary shook her head. "You're unbelievable."

"Thank you."

"I didn't mean it as a compliment."

Leopold grinned. "Look, it's all water under the bridge. Hopefully, after this, she'll let it go. I did her a favor, after all."

"Speaking of favors, how the hell did you manage to get back into the US without anyone noticing?"

"Classified, I'm afraid."

Mary groaned. "Fine. Tell me some other

time. We've got more important things to focus on right now."

Up front, one of the SWAT officers turned around in his seat. "We're getting close," he said, voice raised. "Game faces, people. Five minutes."

"You ready?" asked Mary.

"As I'll ever be," said Leopold. "Let's just hope this little father-son reunion goes as planned."

Mary shook her head. "There's a first time for everything."

## Chapter 69

---

THE DRIVER KEPT the BearCat at low speed and headed for the slip, and Leopold peered out the tiny window and took in the view. To the north, the bright blue waters of the New York harbor glistened in the midday sun, dotted with the dark silhouettes of cargo ships and ferries going about their business. He could make out the jumbled skyline of Manhattan in the distance, and Jersey City just across the water.

The vehicle rumbled to a dead stop and the driver killed the engine. Leopold saw the second BearCat pull up next to them.

“Time to move,” Hunter said, reaching for the rear doors. “Let’s hustle, people.”

He wrenched the doors open, and Leopold felt the cool breeze hit his skin. The SWAT unit filed out, and Leopold followed, with Mary and Jerome at the rear.

Outside, the rest of the unit waited. Kane and Marshall stood nearby, another seven SWAT officers next to them. Kane waved them over. She was dressed in tactical gear, like most of the others. Marshall was still wearing his suit.

They were parked up in what looked like an old shipping yard. Steel containers were piled up near the waterfront, providing ample cover



for the bulky vehicles. Several disused cranes littered the scene, their metal arms reaching up into the sky. A handful of freight trucks stood close-by, shut up behind a wire fence, waiting to be loaded.

Peering past the nearest container, Leopold took in the rest of the scene. About two hundred feet to the east, he could see half a dozen large ships moored up. They were mostly cargo vessels, from the look of them, but Leopold noticed what he assumed to be *Thanatos* at the far end. It was a modern-looking yacht only slightly smaller than the other ships, moored up parallel to the slip. He could see what looked like a cargo hatch, easily the size of a barn door, roughly level with the blacktop.

Running the perimeter of the yard, a gray metal fence kept the cargo areas separated from the loading bays. A locked fence kept the two zones secure.

“Everyone check weapons,” said Kane, examining her own sidearm. “And huddle up. We don’t have long to run through this.”

Hunter addressed his men. “Split into your two teams. Seven with me, seven with Agent Kane. You know your groups.”

The SWAT officers stepped into line, forming two groups. They each sported a submachine gun, Leopold figured MP5s, as well as a sidearm. A few of the officers looked a little edgy.

“The objective here is disarmament and

neutralization,” Kane said. “This is not a hostage situation. We are not here to negotiate. Lethal force *will* be used, if necessary.”

“My team will board the vessel first,” said Hunter, addressing the congregation. “We have two civilians with us. Our objective is to provide a distraction and make sure they don’t get hurt. Once we’re on board, follow me to cover. We’ll hold our position while Kane’s team infiltrates from the rear.” He looked at Leopold and Jerome. “Collect your body armor and weapons now, gentlemen.”

“I’ll need some armor,” Mary said.

“You’re staying put, Jordan,” said Kane. “I need you and Marshall to run tactical from here. You’re linked up to our headsets – the radios are inside the vehicles.”

“This is my operation. I’m going in.”

“Wrong again,” said Kane. “This is a tactical operation now, which means it’s out of your hands. I need to do what’s best for my men, and that means you two stay here. Ward cleared it with your captain. Deal with it.”

“We’re more use out here,” said Marshall. “Someone needs to coordinate the teams. We can get them a direct line to the RTCC. It’s the right call.”

“If anything goes wrong, we need someone who knows what they’re doing feeding us intel,” said Kane. “The decision is made. You two are the best candidates for the job. Can you handle it?”

Mary clenched her jaw. “Fine. But if anything happens, I—”

“You’ll be the first to know,” interrupted Kane. “And you’ll need to make sure we’re in a position to handle it.”

Mary checked her watch. “We’ll talk about this later. Right now, time is not our friend.”

“Gentlemen, I’ll need you to suit up,” said Hunter, changing the subject. He handed Leopold and Jerome an armored vest each. They slipped them on.

“You’ll need these too,” Hunter said, holding up two handguns, complete with holsters. “SIG Sauer P226. Just check the safety.” He looked at Leopold. “You know how to use one of these?”

“Firing range twice a week,” said Jerome. “Not that he’s much of a shot, but we won’t have any problems.”

“Glad to hear it,” said Hunter. “Don’t fire unless absolutely necessary. Let us do our jobs and we’ll keep you safe.”

“Relatively speaking, of course,” Leopold added.

“We’ll use the fence as cover and approach on foot,” said Kane. “Once Hunter’s team engages the targets, we’ll move in from the water. Everyone remember their training and we’ll be in and out.” She checked her watch. “We’ve got less than thirty minutes. Let’s move.”

Kane and Hunter broke into a jog and headed for the fence. The others followed.

Leopold strapped the P226 to his hip and took one last glance at Mary as he left.

She said, "Try not to get shot."

"If I didn't know better," said Leopold, "I'd say you were worried about me."

"I changed my mind. Get shot all you want."

Leopold laughed. "See you soon, Sergeant."

"Good luck." She leaned in closer, put one hand on his shoulder. "There's something I wanted to say before... you know."

Leopold nodded. "Tell me when this is over."

Mary nodded. "Just try to keep your head down. I'll be watching." She pulled away.

"I'll be back before you know it." He turned and broke into a run, fighting hard to keep a smile from spreading across his face.

## Chapter 70

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“THE COUNTDOWN IS set, sir,” said Hawkes, addressing Robert Blake from behind his desk. “There’s no going back now.”

The colonel had gathered his team in Blake’s office for a final briefing, and the dozen-strong unit looked ready to drop. A full night’s work behind them, and they weren’t out of the woods yet.

“Then it’s time we got ready to leave, gentlemen,” said Blake. “I want this ship prepped to move out in two hours. Make the necessary arrangements.”

“Yes, sir.” Hawkes turned to leave, but stopped short as a piercing siren filled the office.

Blake swore and turned on his computer monitor. “Colonel, I thought you said your men wouldn’t be followed.”

Hawkes shook his head. “I had tabs on them, sir. I didn’t register any tails.”

“Then how the hell do you explain this?” Blake turned the monitor so the colonel could see.

“That’s not possible, sir.”

“It’s very possible, colonel,” said Blake, “as you can plainly observe.”

On the computer screen, Hawkes saw a team of emergency response officers

approaching on foot, moving fast. They were carrying automatic weapons and wearing body armor. There looked to be two men wearing plain clothes.

“Someone screwed up,” said Blake, through gritted teeth. “But I don’t have time to deal with that now. Make this go away.”

The team snapped to attention, all signs of tiredness vanishing in an instant.

“Grayson, get a team up on deck,” said Hawkes. “If these bastards set foot on this boat, I want you to mow them down. Understand?”

“Yes, sir.” He turned to the others and picked out six men, then turned and headed for the door, one hand already on his weapon.

Blake stood up, fists shaking. “We’ve got less than twenty-five minutes to make this work. Get this boat moving; I don’t care what you have to do, but we’ll have to finish this from a new location.”

“Sir, maybe we should abort,” said Hawkes. “If they’ve located us, more will follow.”

“We will not abort!” screamed Blake. “I’ve spent too many years waiting for this moment. Take those bastards out and do your job, Colonel!”

Hawkes flinched, but managed to keep his composure. “Yes, sir.”

“And get the hell out of my office.”

The colonel nodded and left, taking the remainder of the men with him. As they reached the corridor, he stopped.

Kowalski was the first to speak. "Sir, what are your orders?"

Hawkes took a deep breath, let it out slowly. "This is it, gentlemen. Do-or-die time. They won't be looking to take prisoners here."

"Works for me, sir."

"Good man. I want you to get the engines ready to go. Then, take the men upstairs. Grayson will draw the intruders inside. I want you waiting. Understand?"

"And you, sir?"

Hawkes smiled grimly. "If they get past you and Grayson, they'll have to deal with me."

Kowalski nodded and headed off, taking the rest of the men with him. Hawkes waited until he was alone, then unholstered his sidearm and checked the magazine.

*Ten rounds. One in the chamber. Whatever happens, nobody's taking me alive.*

With one final glance around him, Hawkes headed out.

## Chapter 71

---

LEOPOLD GASPED FOR breath as the team reached *Thanatos*, his lungs burning. The two-hundred-foot sprint from the BearCats would have been enough to get his blood pumping on a good day, but after a sixteen-hour flight and with an extra fifteen pounds of body armor weighing him down, the results were disconcerting.

Hunter raised a fist up ahead and the unit halted, weapons raised, a stone's throw from the hull of *Thanatos*. Leopold glanced around. The ship appeared deserted – no activity that he could see and no lights on inside.

“Any chance of waiting for air support?” said Leopold.

Hunter turned round, his expression passive. “Even the director of the FBI doesn't have that sort of pull. You're lucky to have us as it is.”

“It's not that I'm not grateful...”

Hunter ignored him and turned his attention back to his men. “This is it, fellas. We'll be vulnerable on the ladders, so let's get this over with before they spot us. On my mark. Three, two...”

Leopold noticed the others tense up.

“One!”

Hunter broke into a run and headed for the



ship. The rest of the team followed, keeping pace. Hunter reached the side of the hull first and launched himself onto the nearest rung before hauling himself up faster than Leopold would have thought possible.

The other SWAT officers were close behind. Leopold reached the ladder last, a little after Jerome, and took a moment to look up. He guessed around forty feet to the deck, maybe a two-minute climb. He took a deep breath and started moving.

## Chapter 72

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MARY FIDGETED IN the front of the BearCat, her fingers drumming on the center console. Marshall sat next to her in the passenger seat. He kept quiet. They had an open comms link through to the RTCC and the audio fed through to the speakers.

“I’ve got a satellite in position for the next thirty minutes,” Walters said, her voice coming through a little distorted. “Hunter’s team has reached the ship. They’re boarding now.”

Mary drummed her fingers a little harder. “Any signs of life?”

“Negative, Sergeant. No movement.”

“I’m not even sure if that’s a good sign,” said Marshall. “Maybe we’re in the wrong place.”

“Or maybe they’re just walking into a trap,” said Mary. “Once they’re on deck, there’s nowhere else to run.”

Marshall didn’t reply. Director Ward’s voice came through the speakers.

“Jordan, you there?” he said.

“Yes, sir.”

“Sorry about the hard call. Kane insisted on leading the operation, and based on her experience...”

“Don’t mention it, sir.”

“Well, for the record, if it was me, I’d want

to be out there too.”

Mary decided to change the subject. “Any new intel for us, sir?”

“I’ve spent the last eighteen hours on those damn files,” said Ward, “and something just isn’t adding up. Robert Blake just appeared out of nowhere. We’ve got zero intelligence on him prior to his disappearance. That kind of slip up just isn’t normal.”

“What do you think it means?” asked Marshall.

“It’s almost as though somebody’s erased him from the records,” said Ward. “But I’ll be damned if I know how that could have happened.”

“Maybe Blake did it himself,” said Mary. “If he can get inside the FBI, maybe he can erase records. He had access to the servers, who knows what else he could have done without us knowing.”

“Normally, I’d agree with you. But the only problem is, these are physical copies. Printouts. They’ve been locked in storage for nearly twenty years, and nobody’s had access. The only possible explanation —”

Another scuffling noise. “Sir, sorry to interrupt,” said Walters, “but we’ve got movement onboard. It looks like our hosts are coming out to greet us.”

Mary stopped drumming her fingers and sat up a little straighter. “Can you see how many?”

“Negative.”

“Any noise on the radios?” asked Marshall.

Mary checked the auxiliary input channel on the stereo system. “Nothing. Walters, can you –”

A screech of static feedback cut Mary off midsentence.

“We’ve got shots fired!” said Walters. “Hunter’s team has engaged.”

Mary swore. “Marshall, get Kane on the radio. Tell her to get her ass moving.”

“On it.”

“Walters, keep that damn satellite overhead. I’ll need you to call in backup to this location. Director, you think we’ve got enough probable cause for that air support now?”

“I’ll see what I can do.” Ward hung up.

“I can give you another twenty-five minutes,” said Walters. “I’ll try and get you more.”

“Do it.” She turned to Marshall. “You got Kane?”

“On the line.” He held up the radio mic.

“Kane, you copy?”

“Loud and clear, Jordan. I heard shots fired.”

“Hunter has engaged. Repeat, Hunter has engaged. Move out.”

“I read you, Jordan. Radio silence.” Kane switched off her comms channel and the line fizzed with static.

Mary felt her pulse quicken. She had the sudden urge to jump out of the car and take her chances onboard *Thanatos* with the others.

If anything happened because she was stuck in here...

“You’re right where you need to be,” said Marshall, apparently sensing her mood. “You can’t help them if you get killed. Which is what will happen if you go out there now.”

“I understand the logic, Marshall,” she said. “But that doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

“I’m just saying..”

“How about you keep it to yourself? Those aren’t your friends out there getting shot at. I can do without your pep talks.”

Marshall sighed, but stopped talking.

*Finally, thought Mary. I thought he’d never shut up.*

## Chapter 73

---

LEOPOLD FLINCHED AS the first rounds screamed past his ear and slammed into the deck behind him. Hunter's team responded instantly, making a break for the nearest cover – a sheltered gangway that led to the stern of the ship. Jerome grabbed hold of Leopold's sleeve and dragged him after them as another burst of rounds exploded from somewhere above.

Jerome threw Leopold forward as they reached the gangway, and Leopold almost fell into Hunter as he and his men regrouped.

“So much for the element of surprise,” said Hunter.

Jerome nodded. “I made two of them. They're up on the bridge.”

“Anyone hurt?”

“They're trying to funnel us into a trap,” said Jerome. “Nobody's that bad a shot.” He looked at Leopold. “Well, nearly nobody.”

“I agree,” said Hunter. “We can't stay here. We need to find a place to hole up and keep them occupied.” He glanced around. “If we can get up to the bridge, maybe we can hold it long enough for Kane's team to do their job.”

“You want us to go at them head on?” said Leopold.

“They won't be expecting it.”

“Yeah, there a reason for that.”

Hunter ignored him. “There’s an access door a little further down.” He pointed down the gangway. “It should lead up to the bridge.”

“How do you know for sure?”

“I don’t. But there’s no time to argue.” He turned to his men. “Let’s move!”

They reached the access door at a full sprint, and Hunter wrenched it open. They spilled inside, Hunter taking point. He held up a fist.

“Nobody move,” he said. “I think I hear something.”

Leopold glanced around. The room was dimly lit, leading through to a corridor a few feet ahead. He strained his ears, listening out for any signs of movement, his SIG Sauer suddenly feeling heavy against his hip. He unholstered it.

“Don’t fire unless you have a clear shot,” whispered Jerome. “If you get a ricochet you could wind up killing yourself.”

“I wouldn’t want to spare them the trouble, I guess.”

“Area looks clear,” said one of Hunter’s men. He stood a few feet ahead checking the corridor.

Hunter nodded and waved the others forward. Leopold watched them file through into the hallway, and started to follow. Jerome put one hand on his shoulder.

“Hang back,” he said. “This doesn’t feel right.”

“Is it supposed to?”

“Just give them a second.”

“To do what? If –” Leopold never got to finish.

A deafening burst of gunfire from nearby, and Leopold heard someone cry out in pain. He saw one of the SWAT officers thrown backward past the door opening. He hit the floor, hard. Didn't get up. Hunter shouted something, but his words ended up lost in the cacophony.

Leopold ignored his better judgment, gripped his handgun a little tighter and edged forward as another blast of gunfire sounded from somewhere outside. There was another cry of pain, but he didn't recognize the voice. He felt Jerome grab hold of his sleeve.

“What the hell are you doing?”

Leopold turned his head. “I can't just leave them out there to die.”

“You go out there, you'll be joining them.”

“I don't care; this is all my fault.”

Jerome yanked him backward, held him fast with both hands. “Listen to me, he said, pulling Leopold close. “This is *not* your fault. You are *not* Robert Blake. You are *not* going to die for him. You understand?”

Everything went silent.

Jerome relaxed his grip a little.

Leopold strained his ears, but struggled to pick out any sounds of movement as a high-pitched ringing blocked out everything but the beat of his own heart. A shadow moved



somewhere behind them.

He looked up at Jerome. “Looks like we’re about to test that theory.”

## Chapter 74

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HAWKES HEARD THE call come through from Grayson and hauled ass back to Blake's office. Kowalski and his men had got the engines and navigation primed and ready – *Thanatos* was good to go.

*Not a second too soon.*

Hawkes reached the office and burst through the door, out of breath, not bothering to knock. Blake sat behind his desk, as usual. He appeared to be checking the monitors, and looked up as the colonel approached.

“Sir, they've taken out the SWAT team,” said Hawkes. “There were two survivors.”

Blake glared back at him. “I told you to take them all out.”

Hawkes took a moment to catch his breath. “Sir, I think you're definitely going to want to speak to these two.”

## Chapter 75

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LEOPOLD FELT SOMETHING hard jab him in the base of the spine and he stumbled forward, almost tripping over the stairs as he climbed up towards the top deck. Jerome glanced back at him from above, a look of concern on his face. A dark bruise had formed underneath his right eye.

It was six against two, and Leopold knew they were beaten. No weapons, no chance. His father's men had forced them into a corner and Hunter had taken the bait. He and his team had paid dearly.

"Keep moving," one of the armed men said. He and his companions were dressed in plain clothes, but it looked as though they had lightweight armor beneath their jackets. They each carried submachine guns and sidearms – MP5s and Glocks.

"Up here." The apparent commander shoved Leopold forward as they reached the top of the stairs. "Take a right."

"Listen, fellas," said Leopold, feeling his jaw throb where one of them had hit him. "I think maybe we got off on the wrong foot."

"No talking," the commander said. He shoved Leopold again. "In here."

They reached a solid oak door at the end of the corridor and one of the men stepped

forward and opened it. He waved them forward.

Leopold followed Jerome inside.

The room was spacious and well furnished. Tall windows took up most of the far wall, presenting a panoramic view of the harbor. Six other armed men stood off to the side, hands resting against their weapons. One of them was grinning. An ornate desk stood against the side wall. One man stood next to it, a well-built military type with cropped hair, and another sat behind a set of computer monitors. Leopold felt his heart skip as he recognized the face.

“You’re supposed to be dead,” said Robert Blake, his scarred features forcing themselves into a smile.

Leopold kept still. “I could say the same about you.”

“I’m glad you’re here to see this. I’ll save you the usual rhetoric, except to say that there’s nothing you can do.”

“A shame. I usually enjoy the bad-guy speeches.”

“Sorry to disappoint you.”

“I assume you’ve figure out how this ends,” said Leopold. “You can’t run from this.”

“I’ve been running for the last twenty years. This is my final stand. Today will be my legacy.”

“I’d rather you left me a grandfather clock or something.”

His father laughed. “I told you before, this

is a game you can't win," he said. "I've been two steps ahead from the beginning. You've been outmaneuvered and outplayed."

Leopold flinched as a high-pitched siren filled the office. Robert Blake frowned and turned his attention to the computer monitors. The well-built man next to him did the same, his eyes wide with surprise.

"What the hell?"

Smiling, Leopold looked into his father's eyes. They stared back at him, cold and empty.

"Remember what you said about distraction?" Leopold said. "Well, it turns out you're not the only one with a game plan."

## Chapter 76

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ISABEL KANE HAULED herself onto *Thanatos'* deck and made straight for cover as the rest of her team followed. She moved slowly, weighed down by her wet clothes, leaving small puddles of water in her wake.

Radios off, Kane had no idea how Hunter's team was faring. But the lack of any audible activity made her nervous.

*Assume the worst, stay alive.* She repeated her personal mantra in her head and gripped her MP5 a little tighter. Thanks to the zip-sealed plastic carrier the SWAT team had used while waiting in the water, her weapon was as dry as a bone.

*Unlike the rest of me.*

Kane had studied the vessel's schematics on the drive over. Although a custom design, it seemed to be based on a standard Lubecker Flender Werke layout. That meant the navigation and systems master controls were most likely located in the center of the ship, on the lowest deck. Assuming Blake hadn't reconfigured the entire structure of the vessel, that's where the comms systems would be housed.

Waiting for the rest of her team to catch up, Kane headed for the nearest access hatch.

## Chapter 77

---

LEOPOLD KEPT HIS eyes on his father. Robert Blake was on his feet, screaming at his men. Any sense of calm had vanished – he looked ready to explode.

“Sir, they’ll try for the control room,” the well-built man said, his voice steady and measured. “We should relocate. Now. We can hold the area with the men we’ve got, but only if we get there first.”

“Take these two with us,” said Blake, getting his anger under control. “There’s still time.”

“Sir, we still have a chance to get out of here. I can launch the lifeboats. We might be able to –”

“I’m not leaving this ship, Colonel.”

The man called Hawkes nodded. “Yes, sir.” He turned to face the other men. “Kowalski, Grayson – you heard him. Let’s move out.”

## Chapter 78

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KANE TOOK THE stairs two at a time, her ears straining over the noise of the ship's engines. She wondered why they weren't moving already, but shook the thought out of her mind.

*Stay focused.*

Her team of seven behind her, Kane reached the foot of the stairs, following the signs to the control room. At the end of the hallway she saw a set of locked glass doors. She turned and addressed one of the SWAT officers, a man named Carlson.

"Everyone get back," she ordered. "This is going to get loud."

Carlson and the rest of the team obliged. Kane turned and aimed her MP5 at the glass. She fired a controlled burst of rounds, shattering the door. She aimed a boot at the pane and kicked it through, sending shards of glass flying across the floor.

"We need to move fast," she said, stepping across the threshold. "If they don't already know we're here, they will now."

Carlson followed her through. "I'll need you to cover me while I take a look at the control systems," he said, pointing toward a bank of computers against the far wall, surrounded by stacked server units locked up



inside Perspex cabinets. “And we’ll need to get Sergeant Jordan and Agent Marshall back on the radio. We’ll need their help.”

“Copy that,” Kane said.

She moved fast, kept low. The room was dimly lit, maybe a dozen workstations set up around a central office. The room in the middle was surrounded by glass, a single desk in the middle. The entire area looked deserted.

They reached the far wall, six men covering the approaches, Carlson heading straight for the computers.

Kane said, “How long do you need?”

Carlson peered at the controls. “It’s not a system I’m familiar with. Get me a line through to the RTCC and maybe I can make something happen.”

Kane glanced at one of the monitors. “Copy. We’ve got less than fifteen minutes, according to this. Better make them count.”

She pulled out her radio and turned it on.

## Chapter 79

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HAWKES ARRIVED DOWNSTAIRS first. He gripped his UMP submachine gun in both hands as he approached the broken glass door, waving the rest of the men forward. The younger Blake and his bodyguard were cuffed, following behind with Kowalski and his team taking up the rear.

The control room looked empty, emergency lighting basking the area in dim light. The workstations and the center office blocked the colonel's view to the comms systems at the rear, but the shattered glass was evidence enough they weren't alone.

Hawkes gritted his teeth and decided to try an alternative route.

## Chapter 80

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“GET JORDAN ON the line!” Kane hissed the words as quietly as she could. Carlson was hunched over the computer console, punching something into the keyboard. It seemed to be having no effect.

Harper, one of the other SWAT officers, held up his radio. “I’m trying, but there’s too much damn interference, same as yours. I’m not getting through either.”

“Then find somewhere with better reception,” said Kane. “We’re not shutting this thing off without some help.”

“The comms systems or the servers must be interfering with the signal.” He took a few steps to his left, stepping around the five other unit members toward a more open area. “Maybe if I –”

Harper was cut off in midsentence as a blinding flash of light erupted from the other side of the control room. The SWAT officer buckled and dropped to the floor, dropping the radio. It skidded away across the polished surface and out of sight. Harper groaned in pain and lay still, barely breathing.

Kane flinched and ducked down, as another barrage of gunfire exploded from across the room, shattering several of the abandoned computer monitors. The screens popped and

fizzled as their plasma displays ignited violently.

“Hit the floor!” she screamed out, getting on to her belly.

“Just give me a minute,” Carlson shouted, tensing up as another volley slammed into the wall nearby. “I can do this. Just keep me covered.”

“How the hell did they get so close without us noticing?” said Kane, hands over her head as glass flew all around.

“Must be a way in here we don’t know about,” said one of the officers. Kane couldn’t remember his name.

“Shit. Well, never mind that now – just return fire, dammit!”

The SWAT officer darted from cover and let off a burst of rounds. The others followed suit.

“You see how many?” Kane asked, as he returned to his position.

“Negative. At least six, but there could be more.”

Another burst of fire from the opposite end of the room confirmed his suspicions.

“I’m nearly through the first layer of protection,” said Carlson. “But I’ll need the RTCC to hook up and decrypt the rest. How’s that comms link coming?”

“Little busy right now,” said Kane, shouting over the racket. Another computer monitor exploded a few feet away, sending sparks flying. The SWAT officers returned fire, trying

to hold their position.

“We’re dead in the water if you can’t get us through,” said Carlson. “Better make time.”

Kane swore loudly, but she knew he was right. They needed the RTCC to provide the decryption, and then maybe they’d stand a chance of shutting the devices down remotely. It was no good sitting tight waiting to run out of ammo.

She peered around the corner, her body obscured by the bank of computer servers. Another volley of bullets screamed past her ears, and she tried not to pull away.

*No direct line of sight, she thought. They’re firing into the dark. Hoping to get lucky. Hoping we’ll run out of ammo before they do. She smiled. They’re getting desperate.*

She noticed one of the empty desks, just a few feet away. The shattered computer monitor had fallen on to the floor and some holes had been punched out of the wood, but the workstation still looked like it would make acceptable cover – and maybe get her far enough away from the server station to get a decent radio signal.

Kane drew in a deep breath, got to her knees, and pushed off with her feet. She coiled herself up into a ball, and rolled across the floor.

There came a satisfying *thump* as she collided with the desk, and Kane scrambled underneath it as another burst of rounds flew past her. She waited for Blake’s men to aim

for the workstation, fill it full of holes. But the bullets kept on flying wide.

*They didn't see me. Still no line of sight.*

Kane pulled out her own radio and tested the frequency. She tried opening up a line.

“Jordan, this is Kane. Do you copy?”

No reply.

“Jordan, do you copy?”

Another blast of static, then Kane heard a female voice. It came through distorted, but just about audible over the noise of gunfire.

“Jordan, is that you? Do you copy?” Kane practically screamed down the microphone.

“Copy. This is Jordan. What’s your situation?”

Kane smiled. Maybe she wasn’t going to die down here after all.

## Chapter 81

---

“KANE, I HAVE you online with the RTCC. What’s your status?” Mary held the radio mic tight in her hand, her knuckles going white. “I hear gunfire. What’s your status?”

Kane’s voice came onto the line, a little distorted but understandable. “What the hell do you think my status is?” she said. “I need you to run a decryption protocol on *Thanatos*’ systems. We’re nearly through. We can use it to shut down the bombs.”

Mary looked over at Marshall.

“Are you near the computer now?” he asked.

“Negative,” said Kane. “Had to get away so I could get a signal. Something’s jamming us.”

“What’s near you?”

“Other than a bunch of heavily armed terrorists?” Kane paused. “Carlson’s trying to hack the main computer. There’s a bank of servers currently preventing us from being mowed down.”

“They put out a pretty strong magnetic field,” said Walters, joining in from the RTCC. “You’ll need to shut them down so we can speak to Carlson on the radio.”

“Just one question,” said Kane. “How the hell am I supposed to do that?”

“You see any wires?” asked Walters.

“Yeah. Bunch of wires sticking out of the stacks.”

“It’s pretty simple. Keep yanking them out until the lights go off.”

A pause.

“You’re shitting me.”

“The servers are just data storage units,” said Walters. “You can still access the comms systems without them. Based on the large amount of storage, the servers probably use the old spinning platter technology. Same as us. Once you stop the spinning, you’ll stop the electromagnetic field.”

“When you put it like that...”

Mary interrupted. “Ward’s working on getting you backup. But we’ve got no ETA.”

“By the time they get here, it’ll be too late,” said Kane. “I’ll be back in touch soon.”

The line went dead.



## Chapter 82

---

LEOPOLD DUCKED BEHIND a desk as a hail of rounds flew overhead. He heard a yelp of pain from somewhere close by and he heard someone hit the floor hard. He glanced to his left. Hawkes had taken a team to the far side of the room. The rest had split into two-man groups and had taken refuge behind the other workstations.

Glancing back toward the shattered door at the far end of the room, Leopold tried to map out a way through that didn't involve getting shot in the back.

"Don't even think about it," said Jerome. "If you break cover, you won't make it five feet."

Leopold frowned. He and Jerome were cuffed at the wrists, disarmed, and stuck in the middle of a firefight. All things considered, the plan could have been going better.

"We can't just sit here and do nothing," he said, leaning in close so Jerome could hear him over the noise of gunfire and shattering glass.

"I agree."

"So, what are we going to do about it?"

"Look over there." Jerome jerked his head to the right.

Leopold followed with his eyes. Two of

Hawkes' men were stationed about fifteen feet away near the side wall, attempting to edge their way forward. The SWAT unit's suppressing fire did a good job of keeping them at bay, but they were slowly closing the gap.

"If we can cross the floor without getting killed," said Jerome, "maybe we can do something about those two."

"Any other ideas?" said Leopold.

"Not unless you've got a weapon stashed under your shirt."

"The last time I checked, no."

"Then I'm afraid we're out of luck." He spread his wrists out in front of him, flexing the chain holding the cuffs together. "Follow my lead."

"Hang on, don't –"

Jerome ignored him and started moving. He kept low, heading for the two men.

Leopold took a deep breath. *It's now or never.* He pushed off with his feet and followed, keeping as close to the polished floor as he could, resisting the urge to screw his eyes shut as another volley of bullets screamed past him, slamming into the side of the desk where he'd been taking cover a moment before. They tore half the side of it away, sending splinters of wood flying up into the air.

Ahead, Jerome kept moving. Hawkes' men hadn't noticed their approach – they were too busy dealing with the SWAT unit. Leopold

steeled himself, ignored every instinct in his body, and followed.

Jerome arrived first and aimed for the man on the right. Leopold forced himself to move faster, tensed, and threw himself forward, aiming for the one of the left. He heard a grunt of surprise as he collided with his target, sending both men tumbling into the middle of the floor, out in the open.

With a burst of effort, Leopold managed to roll onto his back and maneuver the man in front of him, using his body as a shield. Another explosion of gunfire, and the man shuddered violently, taking several direct hits to the abdomen. He didn't get up.

Leopold heard another grunt of pain and he looked over at Jerome. The bodyguard was still crouched low behind the desk, the chain holding his cuffs coiled around the second man's neck. Jerome yanked hard, and the man fell still.

Leopold resisted the urge to stay on the floor. He grabbed his fallen opponent's weapons: a submachine gun and a pistol. With one final effort, he forced himself to his knees and launched forward, landing hard next to Jerome. The impact knocked the wind out of his lungs.

"Interesting tactic," said Jerome, looking at the bullet-riddled body.

"I won't be trying it again in a hurry."

"Wise decision." He peeked his head out from behind the desk. "With those two out of

play, I count four down. Nine more to go.”

“How many good guys left?”

“At least one out of commission. That leaves seven. And they’ve got shelter. So long as they can keep these guys at bay, they can hold their position until they run out of ammunition.”

“How long until then?”

“Not long.” He unhooked the second man’s submachine gun and sidearm. “But maybe we can improve the odds a little.”

## Chapter 83

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KANE DASHED OUT from her hiding place and rejoined the SWAT unit, her ears ringing. She got Carlson's attention, her radio still clasped in her hand.

"RTCC thinks the server banks are interfering with the signal," she said. "If I shut them down, we should be able to get you on the line."

"Do it," said Carlson. "Six minutes left. We're not going anywhere."

Kane nodded and turned her attention to the stacks. They were six feet high, seven cabinets in all, lined up side by side. At least half of the server trays were out of commission thanks to stray bullets, but the rest were lit up, blinking away merrily. She stowed her radio, dashed for the nearest Perspex unit, and wrenched the door open with all the strength she could muster, snapping the lock.

Inside, coils of brightly colored wires linked the drives. Kane started pulling, sending up sparks of electricity as she yanked the cables out of their sockets. Two of the SWAT officers glanced up at her.

"A little help?" she said.

They nodded. Leaving their squad mates to continue defending their position, the two

men followed Kane's lead.

"How's it going back there?" Carlson said, still focused on the computer screen in front of him.

"Almost done," shouted Kane, flinching as a stray round ricocheted off the interior wall a few feet from her head. She kept on yanking. "Try your radio now."

Carlson obliged. "Still nothing. Keep trying."

"One minute," she said, moving to the next cabinet. She forced the door open. "Hey, can that thing access the security cameras?"

"Yeah, should do. Why?"

"Can you get me eyes on this room?"

Carlson paused. "Hang on." He punched something into the keyboard. "This might take a moment."

Kane wrenched out another bundle of cables. "Try your radio again."

"Still nothing."

"Goddammit."

Carlson kept his focus on the screen. "Okay, the network drives are down, but I can get us a live feed through the cameras. Hang on." He typed something else into the computer.

"Last one," said Kane, forcing open the next cabinet. She disabled the drives, then turned to face Carlson. "That's it. Try your radio again."

Carlson held it up to his ear. "It's still not getting through," he said, frowning.

Kane tried her own radio. She heard a crackling noise coming through the tiny speaker, barely audible. If a signal was there, it was still too weak to be of any use.

“You got me those cameras?” she asked, trying to mask her frustration.

“Yeah, we’re live,” Carlson said, waving her forward.

Kane got to her feet and made her way over. “This the control room?”

“You can see the server banks here,” Carlson said, pointing at the monitor. “Bad guys here, here, and here.”

“And who the hell are those two?” Kane asked, pointing at two blurry figures dressed in familiar-looking clothes. They were creeping forward, keeping close to the side wall.

“Is that...?”

*Holy hell.* Kane peered at the fuzzy image. “That’s Leopold all right,” she said. “What the hell is he doing?”

## Chapter 84

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LEOPOLD CREPT FORWARD, head down, and followed Jerome. The SWAT unit had reduced the frequency of their return fire, probably to conserve ammo. On the far side of the room, he could hear Hawkes and his team on the move, making their way closer to Kane's position.

*Time's running out.*

Ahead, another two-man team, less than ten feet away. They were crouched on the floor, facing front. Jerome kept low, pressed on, approaching them from behind. He reached the next empty desk, stepping around the shattered computer equipment.

"Hold it," hissed Jerome, one palm out behind him. "Wait for the right moment."

Leopold sidled up next to him. "And that would be?"

Another burst of fire from behind the server units, and Jerome rolled out from behind the desk, taking aim at the two men up ahead. He let off a controlled burst of rounds, the noise lost in Hawkes' return fire.

Jerome rolled back behind cover. He looked up at Leopold, grinning. "Two more down. Seven to go."



## Chapter 85

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A WOMAN'S VOICE stuttered over the radio and Kane jumped in surprise. She pulled out her handset and held it up to her ear.

"Kane? This is Jordan. Do you copy?"

"I never thought I'd say this, but I'm glad to hear your voice, Sergeant."

"Likewise."

"Looks like we're good to go," said Kane. "Get Walters on the line. Let's shut this thing down."

"Copy that."

Kane slapped Carlson on the shoulder. "See, I told you this would work."

"Four minutes," Carlson said. "We're not out of trouble yet."

"Do your thing."

Carlson nodded and picked up his own radio. He pressed the mic button. "I need RTCC support. The second layer of encryption will take too long to get through manually. I need a little help."

The radio fizzled. "This is Walters," a woman's voice said. "Can you get me your IP address?"

Carlson reeled off a string of numbers.

"Give me a minute," said Walters. The line went quiet.

"Looks like Blake is pulling his weight for

once,” said Kane, glancing at one of the monitors. She turned and got the attention of one of the other SWAT officers. “There’s a group of seven clustered around the north-east side,” she said. “With the others out of commission, we can flank them.”

The officer nodded. “Beats sitting here.”

“Take three men and make your way over from the west. If you can get behind them, this is all over. I’ll cover you from the front. Everyone else can lay down suppressing fire. Copy?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Move fast,” said Kane. “And try to stay alive.”

## Chapter 86

---

HAWKES GRUNTED IN frustration and checked his magazine. He was running low. Of more concern, he hadn't heard any movement from the men on the other side of the room – meaning they were either dead, or out of ammunition. Neither scenario filled him with confidence.

The control center didn't exactly present a prime location for a firefight, at least not for anyone trying to retake the area from enemy hands. The sheltered server station and comms panel made for excellent cover, and moving through the wasteland of shattered computer monitors and empty desks made progress slow. It was almost impossible to get a flanking position without taking heavy casualties.

Hawkes closed his eyes and took a deep breath. If the SWAT unit managed to break through the encryption Kowalski had set up, they could disarm the devices remotely. If that wasn't bad enough, the comms panel had a direct link to the ship's engine and navigation systems, as well as surveillance feeds and the satellite link. It had been designed to provide a tactical advantage if the ship were ever boarded, but it seemed that the strategy had worked too well.

Glancing behind him, Hawkes waved Grayson over. Kowalski, Higgs, and four others were nearby.

“Sir?” Grayson said, positioning himself behind the desk.

“We don’t stand a chance of getting out of here without taking these assholes out,” said Hawkes. “They’ve got the advantage of a strong defensive position, not to mention the potential access to the ship’s major systems.”

“What are your orders, sir?”

“Short of hoping they run out of ammunition before we do, we’ve got two options. We either haul ass out of here and take our chances, or we go for a full-on assault. We might get lucky; we might not. If not, we go down fighting.”

“We knew the risks, sir. And I speak for my men when I say we aren’t running anywhere.”

Hawkes smiled grimly. “My thoughts exactly.”

“I’ll get everyone ready, sir. Just give the signal.”

Hawkes heard a rustling sound, coming from somewhere across the room. Peering out from behind the desk, he saw a shadow move across the floor, fifty feet away near the opposite wall.

*They’re coming.*

He turned to Grayson. “Looks like that call’s been made for us, soldier. Engage on my mark.”

## Chapter 87

---

LEOPOLD FLINCHED AS he caught movement out of the corner of his eye and he raised his weapon. The UMP submachine gun felt heavy in his hands, cumbersome and overly complicated. He wasn't entirely sure he even knew how to fire it.

He felt Jerome tense up next to him. "Hold your position," he said. "We've got friendlies coming in."

Leopold peered out from behind the workstation. Sure enough, up ahead, he saw four SWAT officers approaching. They were moving fast, sticking close to the wall, just a few feet away. One of them noticed him and held up a fist. The others stopped.

"We should lend a hand," said Jerome, whispering.

Leopold nodded. "Then I'm going to need something I know how to operate." He tossed the UMP onto the ground and picked up the Glock.

The SWAT officer waved him forward. Jerome led the way, keeping to a crouch.

"Seven men," Jerome said, once he'd reached the unit leader. "Tight cluster, east side. About twenty feet from the comms panel, based on what I could make out. If we spread out, take cover, we can take them

down.”

“Agreed. We managed to get a feed to their security cameras. They’re blocked in, nowhere to run.”

“I’ll follow your lead.”

The unit commander nodded and waved his men forward. They advanced, breaking away from the wall and heading single-file toward the other side of the room, using the remnants of the center office for cover.

As they drew within around twenty feet of Hawkes’ position, the unit leader halted. He turned his head, performed some hand gestures Leopold didn’t recognize. The three other SWAT officers crept forward.

“They’re going to fan out,” said Jerome, apparently anticipating Leopold’s next question. “With a wide angle of fire, Hawkes’ position will be compromised.”

“Like shooting fish in a barrel?”

“If the fish were heavily armed mercenaries and the barrel was a multimillion dollar control room, sure.”

Leopold shrugged. “Tomato, to-*mab*-to.”

“Just stay behind me. And try not to get shot.”

The unit commander held up a hand. “Wait for Kane.” He pressed a button on his radio and waited.

Leopold flinched as a burst of gunfire erupted from behind the server units, lighting up the dimly lit room with a blinding flash.

“Now!”

The SWAT team moved forward, three of the officers spreading out to the side as Kane and her team lay down heavy suppressive fire. Leopold glanced ahead, but couldn't make out Hawkes or any of the others.

*Where the hell did they go?*

He didn't have to wait long for an answer. Jerome raised his UMP as Leopold caught a glimpse of movement ahead. Letting out a short burst from the weapon, Jerome crouched and took up a defensive position. His target buckled and twisted, half a dozen rounds hitting him square in the chest, throwing him backward onto the floor. He didn't get up again.

More movement to the east, and the SWAT officers engaged, lighting up the room in a hailstorm of bullets.

## Chapter 88

---

HAWKES LET OUT a roar as he saw Grayson and Kowalski fall, their tangled bodies falling in a heap just a few feet from cover. He checked his watch.

*Two minutes until the devices activate. At least they'll have something to remember us by.*

The colonel knew he was out of options. His gambit had played out badly, and now there remained only one way out. He dropped his UMP to the floor, magazine empty, and checked his sidearm.

*Ten rounds, one in the chamber. An honorable death.*

Hawkes saw movement to his right and got himself ready. Whatever happened, he was taking as many of those assholes down with him.

Ahead, he saw the big guy – Blake's bodyguard – moving slowly toward his position, his attention focused a little off to the side.

*Now or never...*

Hawkes got to his feet and brought his Glock up, letting off a round. The bodyguard flinched, stumbling backward into one of the desks as one of the bullets slammed into his shoulder, forcing him to drop his weapon. His position exposed, Hawkes rushed forward as



one of the SWAT officers opened fire.

The colonel winced as one of the rounds caught him in the leg, but steadied himself and kept driving forward. His momentum carrying him too fast to guarantee an accurate shot, Hawkes kept his Glock lowered and launched himself into the air toward the big guy, ignoring the burning pain in his thigh.

He landed hard, knocking the bodyguard on to the floor. The colonel let out a grunt of pain as his target rolled and sent Hawkes skidding off into the desk.

The bodyguard jumped up to his feet again, quicker than Hawkes would have thought possible. The colonel scrambled off the floor, bringing his gun around. He felt a sharp pain in his hand as his opponent lashed out with his foot, sending the Glock clattering off across the room, out of reach.

Hawkes reached for his knife, drawing it from the sheath strapped to his boot. He held it deftly, lunging forward and keeping the blade close to his chest.

The big guy reacted as expected, twisting to the side to minimize his exposure. Hawkes compensated, shifting his weight onto his injured leg, ignoring the stabbing pain as he kept moving. He forced the bodyguard to follow his circle, using the man's body to protect him from the SWAT officers' line of fire.

The bodyguard attacked. Hawkes lashed out with the knife, hoping to get inside the big

guy's reach. His opponent anticipated the move and blocked it with his forearm, grabbing hold of the colonel's wrist.

Forced out of his stance, Hawke's felt himself stumble. A sharp pain erupted from his already broken finger as the bodyguard yanked it backward, and the colonel let out a roar.

He felt a blow to his inner knee joint, and found himself falling to the floor. As he went down, Hawkes kicked out with his good leg, catching his opponent in the shin.

Twisting onto his back, Hawkes hoisted himself back upright. Every muscle in his body screamed – a mixture of pain and adrenaline making his hands shake.

He lunged forward again and the bodyguard dove out of the way. Hawkes compensated, but too late. He saw the flash of gunfire and the colonel felt something punch into his chest, knocking the wind out of his lungs. He stumbled backward, gasping for breath, and fell to the floor.

Hawkes looked up. Leopold Blake glared down at him, holding a Glock in his right hand. The barrel was still smoking.

The colonel smiled weakly. "You've got your father's instincts," he said, barely able to force out the words. "I can see why he had hope for you."

Blake's son said something, but Hawkes couldn't make it out. The room had shifted into blackness, a blurred vignette clawing its

way across his field of vision. There was no pain any more, only a peaceful haze.

The colonel closed his eyes.

*An honorable death.*

## Chapter 89

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MARY GRITTED HER teeth, gripped the radio mic a little tighter and tried to resist the urge to scream down the line.

“Ninety seconds,” a male voice said, barely audible over the sound of static and gunfire.

Walters was on the line with him. “I’ve routed the IP address through the FBI servers. Their encryption program is light-years better than anything we’ve got. You can thank Director Ward for that one.”

“You can thank me if it works,” said Ward. “How much longer?”

“I’ve got the link set up, the program has dedicated full CPU resources to us. It shouldn’t be...” Walters paused. “Got it! Carlson, can you confirm remote access?”

“Affirmative. You have control. Sixty-eight seconds.”

“Stay with me,” Walters said. “I can see your screen now. I need to locate the remote activation protocols.”

“Jordan, you there?” Ward asked.

“Yes, sir.” *Of course I’m here. I’ve been stuck in this damn chair for the last twenty minutes.*

“Good. Listen up. I think I figured it out.”

“Figured what out, sir?”

“Why Robert Blake is missing from our records. I found the answer. It explains

everything – how he knew all about our covert operations, our procedures. Why he’s doing this.” Ward paused. “And I’m afraid it’s not good news.”

## Chapter 90

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LEOPOLD HOLSTERED HIS Glock and followed Jerome and the others to meet up with Kane. He noticed Jerome's shoulder, where a pool of dark blood had formed on his shirt.

"It's just a flesh wound," said Jerome. "Bullet went straight through." He winced. "Stings like hell, though."

"We'll be out of here soon," said Leopold. "Just take it easy."

"You're the boss."

They reached the comms panel and Kane waved them forward. "We're not out of the woods yet, gentlemen," she said. "Less than a minute until those bombs go off, and the geniuses at the RTCC haven't figured out how to shut them down."

"Any casualties?" asked Jerome.

"One man hit," Kane replied. She glanced over at one of the SWAT officers – a man of about thirty, slumped up against one of the server units. "Harper, you still with us?"

Harper nodded slowly, his breathing labored.

"We're nearly out; just hold on," she said. "Carlson, what's your status?"

"Forty seconds," said Carlson. "They've found a way through, but it's taking time."

“Stay here and hold your position,” said Kane. “I’ve got more work to do.” She turned to leave.

“Where are you going?” asked Leopold.

“Your father is still onboard this ship. I’m not letting him slip away.”

“You can’t go after him yourself,” said Jerome. “It’s not safe.”

“I need my team here, in case there are any more surprises. And you’re no good to me in your current condition. How much blood have you lost?”

Jerome narrowed his eyes. “I feel fine.”

“Which is great, right up until the point you pass out during a firefight and leave my ass out in the open.”

Leopold stepped forward. “Take me with you.”

“You?” Kane seemed to consider it.

“I did manage to take down Hawkes. Two guns are better than one.”

“Your father is just one man,” said Kane. “And I was trained for this, remember?”

“Just one man who managed to evade capture for twenty years and kill dozens of people,” said Leopold. “I’m not doing this for your sake. I’ve earned the right to end this on my terms.”

Kane hesitated. She glanced at Jerome.

“This isn’t his call,” said Leopold. “And right now, he’s not in any condition to stop me. I’m not asking permission.”

“Leopold...”

“Jerome, this is my fight. My chance to make up for a lifetime of bad decisions. You’re not going to stop me.”

The bodyguard smiled. “I wasn’t going to,” he said. “I was only going to tell you to stay safe. If anyone’s going to get hurt,” he glanced at Kane, “make sure it’s her.”

“Thanks a lot,” said Kane. She turned to Leopold. “You coming or what?”

Leopold nodded, picked up a radio handset, and headed for the exit. “Just try and stop me.”



## Chapter 91

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MARY HEARD WALTERS come back on the line, cutting off Director Ward midsentence.

“Sir, sorry to interrupt,” she said. “It looks like I’ve found it.”

“Copy that,” Carlson said. “Try and shut it down. You’ve got eleven seconds.”

“I’m working on it.”

Mary heard the sound of frantic typing.

“Nine seconds,” Carlson said.

“Almost there.”

“Eight, seven...”

“Rerouting the signal now. Waiting for confirmation.”

“Six, five...”

“Still waiting.”

“Four, three, two...”

Mary gritted her teeth, glanced over at Marshall. The special agent looked to be doing the same. Neither of them spoke.

“One...”

“I’m through!” Walters shouted down the line. “Disconnecting now; the signal is blocked.”

Mary let out a yelp of triumph, Making Marshall jump. She hammered on the BearCat’s dashboard.

“Dammit Walters, don’t freak me out like

that!" she said, grabbing hold of the radio mic. "You're going to give me a heart attack!"

"Confirming the devices are disconnected," said Carlson, the relief in his voice shining through despite the bad signal. "They're still live, but without a signal from the encrypted line, they're not going to go off any time soon."

"Cutting it close there, Walters," said Ward. "But congratulations. We couldn't have done it without you."

"Thank you, sir."

Mary grinned. "Kane, you there?"

No reply.

"Kane? You copy?"

Carlson broke the silence. "She's gone after Robert Blake," he said. "We've taken out his people, but he's still unaccounted for."

"Any casualties?"

"One man down. GSW to the abdomen. He's still breathing, but we'll need immediate medical support."

"I'm on it," said Walters.

"She's going after him alone?" asked Mary.

"Negative. She's taken Leopold with her."

Mary froze. "You're kidding me. He's not combat trained."

"But Kane is," said Marshall, putting on his best diplomat tone. "He's in good hands. Blake's father doesn't have the training she does."

"Unfortunately, that might not be the case," said Ward.

“Sir?”

“It’s what I was trying to tell you before. I found another file – one that fills in the gaps. And, like I said, it’s not good news.” He paused. “Leopold and Kane are walking right into a trap.”

## Chapter 92

---

KANE FOUND THE concealed entrance Hawkes had used to gain access to the control room and wrenched the door open. Outside, a narrow corridor led toward the side of the ship, before branching off in both directions – presumably leading to the bow and stern. It was brightly lit, quiet.

“Follow me and keep quiet,” she said, unholstering her sidearm and setting off at a brisk walk.

Leopold obliged, his own weapon drawn, and the two of them made for the end of the hallway.

“Turn right,” said Leopold. “The bow is the easiest egress point. It’s closer to ground level. If my father is looking for a way out, that’s where he’ll be.”

“Good enough reasoning,” said Kane. She didn’t look back, kept walking, turned right at the end of the corridor. She moved fast, and Leopold struggled to keep up.

About halfway down the long hallway, the path branched off again. Leopold noticed a sign pointing toward the bridge and, presumably, a way up to the deck.

“Turn up here,” he said. “We can get a better vantage point.”

“Carlson should be able to get the security

feed up and running again,” said Kane. “If your father’s around here, we can get eyes on his location.”

Leopold nodded. A crackle of static blasted through his radio and Mary’s voice came on the line.

“Leopold? Do you copy? There’s something you need to know about your father. Ward dug out more intel. Copy?”

Kane stopped a few feet short of the turning and whipped around. “Blake, turn that damn thing off. You’ll give away –”

She never got to finish. Leopold flinched as a loud explosion filled his ears, and he took an instinctive step back. Kane’s eyes bulged and she dropped to one knee, a crimson spray of blood erupting from her leg.

A flash of movement behind her, and a man’s arm reached down and wrapped around Kane’s neck, hoisting her to her feet. The other hand held a pistol, pressing the barrel against her skull. Leopold looked at the intruder’s face, anger welling inside his stomach.

“Apologies for the rude introductions,” Robert Blake said, reaching down and taking Kane’s gun off her. “But I’m a little pressed for time.”

Mary’s voice burst through the radio again. “Leopold? Do you copy?”

“Ah, that must be Sergeant Jordan,” said Blake, his scarred face lit up in sharp relief by the harsh overhead lights. He focused his gaze

on Leopold. “Perhaps you’d be kind enough to patch me through.”

Leopold glared back at him, his Glock raised.

“Oh, please,” said Blake. “Let’s not pretend you have any intention of using that. Get me a channel open, or your friend is going to have a matching bullet hole in her head.” He pressed the gun against Kane’s head a little harder, making her wince.

Leopold gripped his Glock a little tighter, but acquiesced. He lifted up the radio and held down the push-to-talk button.

“I thought so,” said Blake. He raised his voice a little and continued, “Is that Sergeant Jordan on the line?”

“Who the hell is this?” Mary said back.

“I’ll give you two guesses.”

“Blake? What the hell have you done with Leopold?”

“My son is still in one piece, I can assure you. I couldn’t say the same for the redhead.”

“If you hurt —”

“Now’s not the time for idle threats, Sergeant. I’ve done my due diligence. You and my son seem to care about each other, so how about you help me out. Maybe you’ll see each other again.”

Leopold kept one hand on the radio, operating the button. He used his other hand to keep the Glock trained on his father’s head.

“Listen up, Sergeant. I know the drill — whatever support teams you’ve called in, I

want them to back off. The redhead and I are going for a little trip, and if I see so much as a single blue light, I'll put a bullet in her. Understand?"

No reply.

"Do you get me, Sergeant?"

Another crackle of static. "Copy that," said Mary. Leopold could hear the anger and frustration in her voice, but knew it was nothing compared to his own. He felt his hand shake, and he gripped his Glock a little tighter.

His father continued, "You can send in one medical officer to deal with your wounded. But anyone else comes close, you know what will happen. Check me."

"Check."

Leopold frowned. *He's allowing medical personnel?* Staring at the ruined face of the murderer who was once his father, Leopold tried to picture a happy memory. Any memory. But only flashes of emptiness remained. Whoever this man was, he was responsible for the deaths of countless people – Leopold's own mother one of them – and any mercy he showed was only a way to help him get what he wanted.

"I believe you mentioned Director Ward," said Blake, tightening his grip on Kane as she began to lose the strength to stand up. The pool of blood had gotten larger, spilling down onto the floor.

"Yes."

“And I trust he found the bread crumbs.”

A pause, then: “Yes.”

“So you know why I’m doing this? You know how this began.”

“Yes.”

“Then perhaps you’d like to enlighten your audience.”

No reply.

“Sergeant Jordan, I’d recommend you make it quick – before your redhead friend loses too much blood and I have to take another hostage. You can probably guess who that will be.”

Mary hesitated. “What you’ve done doesn’t justify –”

“Just read out Ward’s findings. I don’t have time to argue with you, and neither does Leopold.”

“You were studying at Harvard during the seventies,” said Mary. “You majored in economics and politics. You were fluent in five languages, proficient in six others. You had a head for numbers and were a first-rate athlete. After graduation, you were approached by the...” she trailed off.

“Go on, Sergeant.”

“You were approached and recruited by the CIA.”

Leopold felt his stomach do a barrel roll. His hand started shaking more violently as his grip on the Glock intensified.

Mary continued, “You were well trained and worked undercover for eight years before



you left the service. They considered your family too much of a risk. You took up a similar role domestically with the FBI as an asset. Your job was to feed information about financial irregularities that might affect US interests at home, especially those potentially linked to terrorist activities on American soil.” Mary paused.

“You’re missing out the good part,” said Blake.

“You threatened to go public when you learned the then-director had gotten himself wrapped up in a scandal of his own. Money was allegedly flowing from the Middle East and Central Africa, direct to one of his offshore accounts. You were never able to prove it. Shortly after, you disappeared. Since then, your activities have been focused on supporting radical political groups overseas.”

Robert Blake smiled. “It all sounds so benign, the way you people draft these things.” He stared at Leopold. “You were never meant to get hurt. What happened in New York was outside my control.”

Leopold glared back at him.

“When the FBI powers that be found out what I knew, they arranged a little get-together. Unfortunately, your mother was with me at the time.”

“They tried to kill you,” said Leopold. “Can’t say I feel too sorry for you right now.” He kept the gun steady.

“They succeeded in killing your mother.

They succeeded in taking away everything I'd spent my life building. I had to disappear." He tilted his scarred face up toward the light. "As you can see, I was prepared to go the distance."

"You killed innocent people."

"There's no such thing as *innocence*. I've suffered enough to have learned that lesson well. I only wish I'd had the chance to teach you, as well."

"We're nothing alike. I would never..." Leopold shook his head. "Nothing justifies a terrorist attack on a city full of bystanders. Whatever this government might have done to you..."

"Collateral damage," said Blake. "A necessary sacrifice. This country needs to learn that actions have consequences."

"I agree." Leopold stepped forward, his Glock still aimed directly at his father.

"You've had enough chance to use that on me," said Blake. "If you had the stomach to kill me, you would have already. But you're weak. You don't have the courage to do what is necessary."

"You mean like you tried to do *what was necessary*?"

Leopold stopped dead. He looked at Kane – she looked to be fading fast. Digging deep within himself, Leopold knew his father had a point. Killing a man in the heat of battle – in self-defense – was one thing, but he truly didn't know if he had it in him to take the

shot now.

Even if it meant putting Kane's life at risk, Leopold didn't know if he could do what needed to be done. And maybe that *was* a weakness. Or maybe his greatest strength.

He doubted it.

"Sergeant Jordan?" Blake called out, "I think we're ready to part ways, don't you?"

"You'd better hope to God I don't catch up with you, asshole," said Mary. "You'll be crapping out teeth for a week."

Leopold couldn't help but grin as he heard Mary's voice. She had a knack for boiling down complex emotions into an easy-to-understand string of obscenities.

"Charmed, I'm sure." Blake turned his attention back to Leopold. "Now, unless you're going to shoot me, I need to be going."

Leopold kept the gun steady, his mind racing. His finger hovered over the trigger, but the same doubts held him back.

*I don't have what it takes.*

*I don't have the courage to do what's necessary.*

*I can't take a life in cold blood.*

Blake backed away slowly. "Don't follow me. If I see you, or any of your friends, Ms. Redhead will be the first to die."

*Don't be a coward.*

*Take the damn shot.*

*She doesn't have to die.*

"And then I'll be back for Sergeant Jordan," Blake continued. "You know I'll find her. I'll take pleasure —"

Robert Blake never got to finish his sentence. Leopold fired his weapon, sending a single round screaming into his father's skull. He was dead before he hit the floor.

## Chapter 93

---

MARY HEARD THE shot go off over the radio and the line went dead. She felt her heart leap into her throat. Before Marshall could stop her, she unbuckled her seatbelt and jumped out the BearCat, sprinting at full speed toward *Thanatos*, her mind focused on only one thing:

*Don't you dare die on me, Leopold. Don't you dare.*

## Chapter 94

---

ROBERT BLAKE LAY on the hard floor, a single red mark in the middle of his forehead. His cold gray eyes stared up at the ceiling, lifeless and unmoving.

Leopold stared down at his hand, still holding onto the gun. It was shaking. He dropped the pistol and felt dizzy. Then he heard Kane speak.

“Blake, you going to just stand there or what?” Her voice sounded ragged and weak, but the contempt came through loud and clear.

Leopold made his way over to Kane, stepping over his father’s prone body, trying not to look at it. He heaved her up onto her feet, surprised at how heavy she felt in his arms.

“You’ve lost a lot of blood,” he said.

“No shit.”

“I can see you’re still feeling okay.”

“Just get me the hell out of here, Blake.”

Leopold wrapped her arm around his shoulder and grabbed hold of Kane by the waist, supporting her weight.

There was movement behind them, and Leopold turned, his muscles tensing. He relaxed a little as Jerome appeared at the end of the hallway, a field-kit bandage wrapped

around his injured shoulder. He started sprinting toward them.

“Medical team is on the way,” Jerome said, as he drew up close. “Carlson got the cameras working again. I figured you might need some help.” He looked down at Robert Blake’s body, then at Leopold. “Are you okay?”

“Nothing a lifetime of counseling won’t cure.”

Kane grunted. “Listen, fellas – if it’s all the same, can we do this later?”

Jerome nodded and took Kane’s other arm, wrapped it around his neck. He had to stoop a little to keep her from toppling over.

“Medevac is briefed on the situation,” said Jerome. “Let’s get up on deck, meet them there.”

Leopold nodded and started shuffling forward, heading for the bow of the ship.

“Just hurry up,” said Kane. She looked up at Leopold. “And, just in case I pass out before I get a chance – thank you for saving my life.”

“Sure thing. I guess that probably makes us even now.”

“It’s a step in the right direction.”

Leopold smiled. With one final glance at his father’s body, he grabbed hold of Kane a little tighter and stepped up the pace.

## Chapter 95

---

LEOPOLD AND JEROME reached the top deck fast, dragging Kane alone beside them, despite her protestations. She had lost a lot of blood, and time was not their friend.

They reached the exit hatchway and Leopold pulled it open, feeling the fresh air rush in. Heaving Kane's body with them, he and Jerome crossed the threshold and stepped out onto the deck, taking a moment to catch their breath.

"I need a minute," said Kane, her voice weak. She leaned up against the wall.

"The med team will be here any minute," said Leopold. "Just hang on a little longer." He paused as he heard a noise off to the starboard side, and he wheeled around. The sound intensified.

"Someone's coming," said Kane, her eyes flickering.

Tensing up, Leopold felt his hand reach for his holstered weapon. Jerome did the same, taking a step to the side. There was movement, and Mary's head appeared over the side of the ship. She hoisted herself up and off the ladder.

Jerome stared at her. "Mary?"

Without saying a word, Mary marched toward Leopold, her eyes never leaving his.



She moved fast, crossing the distance in long, determined strides.

Kane blinked hard. “Jordan, what are you doing here?”

Mary ignored her and kept walking, moved past Jerome and aimed straight for Leopold. She drew up close, grabbed hold of his jacket.

“Listen,” he said. “About everything that’s happened... I –”

“Oh shut up, Leopold,” said Mary.

She grabbed hold of the back of his head and pulled him in close, her breath hot against his skin. He felt her lips touch his, gentle at first, then more forceful – her hands wound up in his hair, holding on tight. Driving him forward.

Leopold hesitated, then leaned into her, feeling their bodies melt into one another. He kissed her back, slowly and deliberately, suddenly not quite so surprised at what was happening. He felt himself lost in the moment, all other thoughts fading from his mind.

Somewhere close by, he heard Jerome chuckle. “It’s about goddamn time.”

## Chapter 96

---

RICHARD WARD WAS pacing the floor outside of Jerome's private suite at Jersey City Medical Center when Leopold and Mary finally arrived. The medical team had taken Jerome in a separate ambulance from Kane and the injured SWAT officer, with no room for anyone else to ride along. Instead, the tac-team driver had given them a ride in the BearCat, dropped them both off at the reception area, and then headed back to Manhattan.

Leopold got to Ward first. "Is he okay?"

The director looked like hell, but he managed a smile. "Yes, the doctors are confident he'll be out of here before tomorrow. Nothing a little blood transfusion couldn't fix."

Leopold relaxed. He felt Mary sidle up close to him and squeeze his hand.

"Agent Kane was taken to a secure location," Ward continued, "along with officer Harper. By all accounts, they're both out of danger."

"Can we go in?" asked Mary, squeezing Leopold's hand a little tighter.

"Shouldn't be a problem." Ward turned and opened the door to the room.

Leopold followed him through. The private

suite looked clean and well appointed. The bed had been pushed up against the window, the frame just about large enough to hold Jerome's bulk. The bodyguard was sitting up, reading. He glanced over as his visitors stepped inside.

"I'm just getting to the good part," he said, grinning. "Any chance you could come back later?"

"No chance," said Mary, letting go of Leopold's hand. She rushed over to the bedside and gave Jerome a hug.

"Ouch, watch it. Bullet wound, remember?"

"Quiet, you big baby," said Mary, letting go. "Like this is the first time you've been shot."

Leopold stepped closer. "How you feeling?"

"I've felt worse," said Jerome. "I told them I didn't want any fussing, but at least this gives me a chance to catch up on some reading."

Mary peered in. "What are you reading?"

Jerome snapped the book shut and stuffed it behind his pillow. "Nothing exciting. Just something to pass the time."

Sighing, Mary reached in behind the sheets and pulled the book out. She glanced at the cover.

"*The Black Knight's Bride?*" said Mary, chuckling. "I never knew you were a romance fan."

Jerome grunted irritably. "It's all they had available."

"Sure it was."

“Any news on locating the other bombs?” asked Leopold, changing the subject. He noticed Jerome shoot him a grateful look.

“Lieutenant Torres is working with the RTCC,” said Ward. “Now they know what to look for, he’s confident they should be able to sweep up the rest pretty quick. The local news is running a public-service announcement later, just in case anyone stumbles across one. But the chances of detonation are remote.”

Mary nodded. “We’re still going to have a public outcry on our hands.”

“It’s better than the alternative.”

“And what about the stock market? Any movement?”

Ward shook his head. “The news hasn’t broken yet. There might be a dip tomorrow, but hopefully nothing major.” He turned to Leopold. “I trust you understand the SEC has put a freeze on your company’s investment accounts. Temporary, of course. Pending their investigation.”

Leopold sighed. “Of course they did.”

“But you’ll be glad you know your personal accounts are available to you. Those that the IRS knows about, anyway.” Ward grinned.

“I don’t know what you could possibly be implying.”

“Of course you don’t.” He took a deep breath. “On another subject, I’m going to be interested in what you managed to find out while you were in Shanghai. The CIA is being frosty, but I shouldn’t have any problem

getting clearance.”

“I’ll make sure you get the report,” said Leopold.

“I wouldn’t mind knowing what trouble you got yourself into over there myself,” said Mary.

“Classified, I’m afraid,” said Ward.

Leopold leaned in close to Mary. “I’ll tell you over dinner,” he whispered.

Ward frowned. “I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that.”

“Hear what?”

“Anyway, gentlemen, I have a wife and a son I haven’t seen in days. I think I’ll leave you to it.” Ward headed for the door. “Oh, and Leopold...”

“Yes?”

“I know, given recent circumstances, this might not sound like your idea of a good time, but there’s always a job waiting for you with the FBI. If you get bored.”

Leopold smiled. “If I’m ever in Washington, I’ll make sure to look you up,” he said. “And you have my private number. Call me if you ever find yourself in need of a little outside assistance.”

“Good enough for me,” said Ward. He left the room, closing the door behind him.

Jerome cleared his throat. “So, I guess you two will be wanting a little time alone together.”

Leopold noticed Mary blush. He said, “Are you trying to get rid of us?”

Jerome shrugged. "I like my peace and quiet."

"He just wants to get back to his trashy novel," said Mary. "Maybe it's not such a bad idea?"

Leopold felt her grab hold of his hand again.

She said, "How about we get out of here? I believe you owe me dinner."

"It's only one-thirty," said Leopold.

"Well, that gives us time to work up an appetite."

Jerome raised one eyebrow.

"Come on, let's get out of here," said Mary, pulling Leopold toward the door. "I know a great little place in my apartment building." She smiled. "I'll just have to call ahead, make sure we get a private table."

"You have a restaurant in your apartment building?"

Mary groaned and yanked his arm. "You know, Leopold, for a smart guy, you can be a real dumbass sometimes."

THE END

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## About the Author

Nick Stephenson was born and raised in Cambridgeshire, England. He writes mysteries, thrillers, and suspense novels, as well as the occasional witty postcard, all of which are designed to get your pulse pounding. His approach to writing is to hit hard, hit fast, and leave as few spelling errors as possible. Don't let his headshot fool you – he's actually full color (on most days).

His books are a mixture of mystery, action and humor, and are recommended for anyone who enjoys fast paced writing with plenty of twists and turns.

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