

a WATCH_DOGS Novel

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//N/DARK CLOUDS

JOHN SHIRLEY



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A novel by John Shirley

Inspired by the Ubisoft Game

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The following story contains mature themes, strong language, and sexual
situations. It is intended for adult readers

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For all fans of Ubisoft and Watch Dogs

Watch dog, n

1. A person or group of persons who acts as a guardian against theft or illegal practices or waste.

2. A dog trained to guard property.

3. An individual who sees behind the curtain and is prepared to step forward when the need arises.

CHAPTER ONE

He had been on Aiden Pearce's trail for weeks.

Walking along the waterfront in an early November mist, under a reticent sun half-shrouded by a silky gray screen of clouds, Mick Jeremiah Wolfe was glad to be back in Chicago. Despite the cold and the mistrust and the frustration, it felt *right* to be here. He'd grown up in "Back of the Yards", the neighborhood fringing what had been the old stockyards, and Wolfe felt Chicagoan from his ice blue eyes to the bottom of his booted feet. He still wore the Army boots, and Delta Force jacket—but the Special Forces jacket was shorn of its shoulder patches and insignia. They'd taken all that away from him, after the dishonorable discharge.

Six years "in-country"—first Afghanistan, then Mali and Somalia. Three Purple Hearts, two Bronze Stars, Two Silver Stars. And then...a dishonorable discharge for being stupid enough to listen to the low but insistent voice of his own conscience...

He should have gone with major league cynicism like the other guys.

It is what it is, he thought. For now.

Just find Aiden Pearce...

Wolfe was walking along North Lake Shore, striding along between the freeway and the old red brick buildings, hands in his pockets against the sting of the rolling mist coming off Lake Michigan. Wolfe stretched, a little, as he walked along, trying to look like a relaxed guy out for a good stretch of his legs. The rolling mist tried unsuccessfully to cloak the cars humming between him and the giant inland sea they called a lake. To his left were the old brick tenements that had been turned into upscale condos, apartments with doormen. That view of Lake Michigan was worth money.

The north wind was picking up, out there, clearing up the mist, ruffling the waves. There were sunken ships concealed within the Great Lakes, Wolfe knew; well preserved ships, some of them going back two hundred years. They were unseen monuments to the sunken dead.

And not so very far from here, inland, was another kind of monument to the lost dead: in a Back of the Yards cemetery lay the bones of his father, Colin Wolfe, killed by a bomb blast. Murdered, all those years ago. And why? Because he hadn't bought into the universal cynicism. Killed—and by whom? The triggerman had been shot two weeks later by another thug, in a stupid fight over a woman. There wasn't even a hope of revenge for his father...who'd made the mistake of listening to his conscience...

Only a fool listens to his conscience...

Wolfe glanced up at a light pole, and saw a ctOS camera just under the lamp, swiveling to watch him go by. He smiled at it, giving it a mock salute and continued on his way.

Wolfe didn't mind ctOS in theory. But he knew it could be misused...

He'd like to "misuse" it himself. Or anyway, he wanted to use it for his own agenda...

The City Operating System, ctOS, was liked by most Chicagoans—so far. It fine-tuned the traffic lights to keep traffic flowing; it sent help almost instantly if there was a crash. It monitored electricity use, switching off what wasn't needed; it identified areas of waste, of congestion of every kind. It watched out for crime. It was capable of taking emergency data directly from cell phones with the ctOS crisis app...

But applications like that also made it vulnerable—especially to Aiden Pearce, if the word on the street was right. According to Wolfe's contacts, T-Bone Grady and a man named "Blank", Pearce was the notorious "vigilante" of Chicago hacking. He'd spent his teenage years in street gangs, but in his

twenties, Ex-street thug, Pearce had vanished into the fabric of Chicago, like a sort of avatar of the city, becoming a legend. He'd wreaked his revenge on his enemies...and slipped away into some unknown corner of the Chicago demimonde. Some people thought he was dead; some were skeptical he even existed.

“That guy? Naw, he never existed. Just a story made up by the power structure to justify its own house cleaning...”

Wolfe had heard that claim more than once. But he knew Aiden Pearce was real—he'd known him, when Wolfe was a boy and Pearce a young man, in the Yards. Pearce had been a friend of his father; a friend to Irish liberation causes, just like Colin Wolfe... It was just a matter of finding him. T-Bone had put him onto Blank who had contacted Pearce and set the meeting up.

Now Wolfe was fifty steps from his destination, up at the corner. No one was there yet. Nothing but a piece of paper spinning in a momentary whirlwind.

He glanced up again, hearing a whirring sound as another ctOS camera tracked him. Theoretically it was possible to hack into the ctOS—word from Wolfe's DedSec contacts had it that it was the electronic “alchemist's stone” that Pearce had used to unlock every corner of Chicago. But the Blume Corporation had redesigned it, lately, to frustrate the Aiden Pearces of the world...

Wolfe suspected that, even if half of what T-Bone Grady had told him was right, Blume Corp and the other power brokers in Chicago underestimated Pearce. Chances were, he could still break into ctOS. Pearce still had DedSec contacts —white, gray, and maybe a few black hat hackers. He made deals with them; in turn, T-Bone claimed, they dealt with Blume's new firewalls.

What if my coming here warns Pearce off? If he's tracking me on that camera...

But Wolfe was hoping that Pearce didn't yet know he was being tracked by anyone. If Pearce did see him—would he recognize him? Would he know him for a friend? Or assume he was an enemy?

For all he knew, Aiden Pearce was pointing a gun at him right now, with his finger tightening on the trigger.

The wind rose, the mist swirled, the cars hummed—and then he saw someone walking down cross street toward the corner. The man had red-brown hair, wore an open knee-length brown leather coat, a brown leather baseball-style cap embellished with a cryptic symbol; he wore dark glasses, though there wasn't much glare out here. He had a dark kerchief down around his neck. The man's profile looked familiar.

It had to be. It was Aiden Pearce.

Blank had come through. The derelict had claimed he could get a message to Pearce. The message would be gotten to him via a “drop” on the street, instead of being transmitted—most transmission was too risky, too much chance it could be monitored. The message contained simple coordinates: a Chicago street corner, near the Lake Michigan shore. And five words: *Deep in the Back Yard*.

It was a code that had been used twelve years ago, when Pearce was getting out of the gangs. Pearce had gone from gangbanger to rogue criminal. He worked for himself, picking his targets and striking hard. And some of those targets, not so very long ago now, had pulled Pearce in too deep— and gotten his niece killed. Her murder had been like a pebble rolling down Chicago's rugged hillside...starting an avalanche of crushing stone. A bit farther back, when Pearce was a gangster, Mick Wolfe had been a runner for the Chicago gangs, carrying money, cash from a host of illegal deals.

The cops didn't pay much attention to a grimy twelve year old boy running through the streets with a back pack. If they'd looked in that backpack, they'd have found it packed with cash from dozens of dirty deals. Out of all that cash, Wolfe had gotten only five dollars a delivery.

Wolfe's father, Colin, had intervened with Pearce, asked him to take him out of the life. Pearce had gotten Mick off the street and back in school.

But not before Wolfe had learned the gang's basic code words...including the five words that Pearce used, back then, for his own operations. *Deep in the Back Yard*. It seemed he remembered them. Because here was Pearce.

Was it curiosity that had brought Aiden Pearce here?

Wolfe noticed a van behind Pearce, a gray van trolling the street, coming up slowly behind the vigilante. Was the van a vehicle protecting Pearce—or something else?

Pearce paused on the corner and turned to look narrowly at Wolfe. They were ten paces apart. Wolfe could tell Pearce was trying to remember who Wolfe was.

"Aiden! It's Mick!" Wolfe called. "It's been years but..."

Then his peripheral vision caught a flicker, at that van. He turned to look and saw the van's side door opening, a man leaning out. And the man was aiming a silenced pistol at Aiden Pearce.

"Aiden—get down!" Wolfe shouted.

A hissing gunshot, then another, as Pearce reacted to Wolfe's shout and threw himself down. But even from here Wolfe caught the flash of splashing blood.

Wolfe dug under his coat, pulled his .38, aimed it at the van—but it was speeding away. The license plate had been removed. It was roaring off down the street and if he fired he might hit one of the other cars.

Wolfe put the gun away, got out his cell phone instead, and dialed 911...and frowned. His phone was crackling, the call not going through. The screen on it said *no signal*.

No signal——now? Here?

Wolfe ran to Pearce, and went down on one knee by him. “Aiden!”

Aiden Pearce was sprawled face down on the sidewalk. A small pool of dark scarlet was spreading around him. There was blood all over the back of Pearce’s head. And he was just lying there, completely still...

Wolfe got to his feet and tried his cell phone again. Still no good. He looked around, saw people in cars staring as they drove past. He waved his arms at the drivers. No one stopped.

Got to get help for Pearce. How?

Then he heard a siren. Maybe someone else had seen the attack, called an ambulance. *Sure got here fast, even for ctOS.*

The ambulance was screaming around the corner, screeching to a halt on the street close by the fallen Aiden Pearce.

It was barely stopped before the medics were out, two burly black Emergency Medical Techs in blue and yellow uniforms—on their shoulders patches read *CFR: Chicago’s Fastest Responders*.

A third man jumped out of the back of the ambulance—a lanky white guy in an ill-fitting uniform. The EMT rushed up to Wolfe, a hand outthrust like a football block, making Wolfe step away from Aiden.

“Stay back, sir—”

“He’s been shot, he’s going to need a compress, blood clotter, quick! They fired twice—”

The man was still backing Wolfe up. “Thank you, sir. If you have any more information, give it to the police, they’ll be here pretty soon...”

“Sure, sure. But...”

This medic sure had dirty fingernails for a guy who worked in an ambulance.

There was a name tag on his uniform. *P. COLLINGSWOOD*, it said.

“What hospital are you taking him to?” Wolfe asked.

“Lakeside Hospital, just a few blocks away, sir.”

Wolfe looked past the EMT and saw the other two already had Pearce on a portable gurney. They were wheeling it toward the back of the ambulance, lifting it in. Pearce was still lying face down. He had a cell phone clutched in his hand. Had he called these guys himself somehow?

Wolfe had seen a lot of medical technicians at work, here and overseas in Delta Force—he’d never seen anybody go about it this fast. They didn’t seem to be following procedure.

The first two Emergency Technicians got in the front of the ambulance; the third EMT was jumping in the back, slamming the door from the inside—and the ambulance was moving away even before the door was completely closed.

Wolfe made a mental note of the number on the side of the CFR vehicle: 103.

The vehicle did a tight, tire-burning U-turn and then drove away, careening down the street at top speed.

He heard another siren—a police siren.

Wolfe stared at the puddle of blood on the sidewalk and thought, *No way I'm staying here to answer police questions.*

He had an unregistered gun—and there were a whole lot of questions he didn't want to answer. He turned and strode away, not too fast, slipping between the nearest buildings at the first opportunity.

He looked around the corner of the buildings, back to the site of the shooting. A cop car was just pulling up. Officers were getting out, gesturing at the blood, then looking around in confusion.

Then an ambulance drove up, and stopped in the street by the patrol cars.

Wolfe watched as an EMT got out, and he could read the body language of the EMT and the two cops pretty clearly.

Puzzlement. They seem surprised to find no one there.

#

“But you're sure this is the hospital they'd have come to?” Wolfe asked.

“Yes, I'm sure of it,” the Admissions Nurse told him. She was a squat, thick-bodied woman in a pink-white uniform with a lot of dyed blond hair piled up on top of her head. She sniffed a lot as she talked to him. Allergies.

Wolfe glanced nervously around the admissions lobby. “This place is only, like, three blocks from the hospital...why would they take him anywhere else? You're saying he's not here at all?”

“That’s what I’m telling you, sir! No gunshot victims have been brought in, no one of that description. No one like that at all...”

CHAPTER TWO

I should get out of here. Fast.

Wolfe knew instinctively that his witnessing the shooting made him a target as well. And this hospital lobby was too exposed.

He turned and walked across the lobby and out the door into a slight drizzle of cold rain. He looked around for that van, for anyone who seemed a threat. And for a moment...*everyone* seemed like a threat. That black mailman who was glancing at him as he walked by; that taxi driver pulling up, probably just waiting for a patient leaving the hospital; that lady walking her dog. They all seemed inexplicably sinister in that moment.

Wolfe chuckled at his own nervousness, going quickly down the steps to the sidewalk. He glanced around again, and saw no one else except an old lady with a walker—and decided he probably didn't have to worry about her.

Still, he was going to have to watch his back awhile.

He set off down the sidewalk, thinking.

So if Pearce isn't here...where is he? What the hell is going on?

The EMT had told him that Pearce would be taken here, to this hospital. But no one had been brought here by ambulance for more than half an hour. And last time someone had been brought in, they'd had a broken leg, not a bullet wound. And no one Pearce's age, or color had come in by ambulance. The lobby admissions nurse had been the fourth hospital worker Wolfe had asked. He'd asked the nurses in the ER, he'd even asked a guy mopping up the ER waiting room.

No one named Pearce—no one fitting Pearce's description. No gunshot victims at this hospital. Yet the ER routinely got patients in through the CFR

ambulance company.

So where had the ambulance taken Aiden Pearce?

That ambulance had come *fast*, after the shooting. Maybe that was the assassin's mop up team. Maybe they hadn't been EMT personnel at all...

Chicago's Fastest Responders...

Were they dumping Aiden Pearce's body off a pier right now?

Wolfe walked around the corner, toward the luxury car he'd "borrowed" that morning, electronically hot wiring it from a closed car lot. He'd had to pay a tagger to spray paint the lot's security camera lenses over, before he'd stolen the car. Sixty bucks to the tagger, and it was worth it...why not swipe a comfortable car?

He looked around, saw no one watching the car, which was parked half a block from the Emergency Room. It seemed there was no APB on it yet; might continue that way all day, with luck, if no one inventoried that car lot.

He used the universal car-door remote he'd rigged up, signaling the car's locks. It chirped in response, unlocking, and he hurried to it. He got in, triggered *start*, and drove away, careful not to go too fast or too slow. He didn't want to attract the cops.

The car had a GPS system, voice activated. "Chicago's Fastest Responders, nearest office," he told it.

The GPS responded, informing him that the office was less than a quarter mile away.

He took a right, drove down a boulevard for a couple minutes, and there it was,

CFR: Chicago's Fast Responders: Ward Office 6.

He parked out behind the sprawling one-story cement block building, and went in. "Not taking any more applications today," said the ginger-haired, freckle-faced man behind the counter. The man was poking at a smartphone as he spoke.

"Applications?"

The clerk glanced up at him. "You aren't here for the job?"

"No. Um—a friend of mine was picked up today by CFR. Trouble is—there's some, uh, miscommunication about what hospital he was taken to."

The guy sighed and rolled his eyes. "Not my responsibility."

Wolfe fished a twenty dollar bill from his pants' pocket, folded the bill and tapped it on the counter. "Just take a minute."

The twenty vanished. "Whatever. Where was this?"

He told the counter clerk the street corner and gave Pearce's name—though that might not be the name found on Aiden Pearce, who probably had as many I.D.s as he needed.

The clerk peered into a computer monitor. "Nope. Nobody picked up on the waterfront at all today. Nobody on that corner, nobody on that street. Mostly we've had guys picking up gunshot vics over at Washington Park. As usual."

"Nobody by that name anywhere?"

"Nope."

Wolfe kept asking questions and kept getting nope, nope, nope and no. CFR denied ever picking up anyone on that corner, at that time or any other time today.

“And we got no employees named Collingswood. Not one.”

“And the ambulance number? One-oh-three?”

“Not in use today. Being serviced.”

“Serviced. Right.”

Wolfe turned and walked silently out.

Aiden Pearce had been shot. Then he had disappeared, as if he had been taken away by a ghostly ambulance, and spirited to a ghostly hospital.

Either that, or those guys had been with the assassin...and Pearce was dead. So maybe he was a real ghost, now, instead of the ghostlike vigilante he'd been. A real ghost—for good.

Wolfe decided he wouldn't believe that till there was proof.

He walked out to the corner of the building, preparing to go back and borrow the illegally borrowed car one more time before he abandoned it...

And that's when the dark Crown Victoria pulled up in front of him. Wolfe knew an unmarked cop car when he saw one.

#

Aiden Pearce was quite alive, but was almost wishing he weren't.

It was the burning pain in his head. It was the throbbing; it was the nausea. That's what made him wish he were at least unconscious.

The bullet, he was told, had only nicked his skull. But it had given him a concussion, not a terribly severe one that required hospitalization, but no concussion is good. Scalp wounds appear to bleed a lot of blood, more than they really do, so he'd gushed out impressively.

"Doc" Morrsky, a onetime doctor who'd had his license pulled for selling Oxycodone, had done the diagnosis and stitches, telling Pearce, "Yeah, you're okay, just a scratch and a concussion."

He hadn't offered Pearce any Oxycodone. Right now, Pearce wouldn't mind a few hundred milligrams.

Pearce was lying on a bed in one of his safehouses, on the South Side. His head ached as if it had been shot a moment ago. One of the EMTs had given him a local anesthetic. It wasn't quite enough.

He could hear Pussler in the next room, yapping to his girlfriend on a cellphone——Pussler the fake EMT who'd kept Wolfe back, at the site of the attempted murder.

"Hey baby, I got some cash, I got a job today, we can score for sure," Pussler was saying.

Pearce sighed. Was Pussler, a junkie ex-actor, as much as Morrsky was an ex-doctor, the best he could do?

The other two guys had been the real deal, EM techs from CFR in Pearce's pay—guys Pearce now owed five grand each. Since Pearce had been skimming cash, through hacking, from a couple of gangsters who had no clue who was doing it, he would be able to pay them off. And goofy on dope or not, Pussler had gotten the job done. He was one of Pearce's go-betweens on the street; he'd been on call, had gotten the pre-loaded emergency text, and he'd responded quickly. Because Pearce had suspected someone was stalking him, shortly after he set out for the meeting. So he'd told Pussler to get with the ambulance escape team, and stay close for a getaway with good cover, if he needed it—he didn't expect to be shot.

Stupid, he told himself. *Shouldn't have risked it.*

If someone had set him up—who was it? Pussler just didn't seem that complicated—and for some reason Pearce trusted him. There was Clyde Merwiss—a programmer who worked with Pearce sometimes, had for about four months...But he hadn't known about the meeting.

So——had Mick Wolfe set him up for the gunman?

If Wolfe had set him up, he was a better actor than Pussler. Mick Wolfe had seemed glad to see him. Had even tried to warn him.

Had, in fact, saved his life. Wolfe's warning had given Pearce a chance to duck from the line of fire, so he'd only caught one round, and only glancingly.

Luckily the gunman had seen all that blood splash from the scalp wound and thought he'd done better than a graze...

Pearce had done a hack into the cameras on the street, before getting out of his own car and walking down there; he'd checked to see who was meeting him; who it was, exactly, who knew that old code phrase.

The street camera had shown him a vaguely familiar face. He'd used the ctOS facial recognition system, and it confirmed: Mick Wolfe. Colin's boy, whom Pearce had last seen when Mick was in his early teens...

Pearce took out his smartphone, wiped some dried blood off it, and then went to his ctOS penetration mode...

Time to find out what Mick Wolfe had been up to.

#

“*What'd you say your name was, officer? Actually——could I just see that badge again?*”

A big pink-faced man with a flattop and a square jaw, the detective growled to himself but reached inside his gray suit jacket and pulled out his gold badge again, held it up in his scarred, beefy pink hands. “*Tranter*. Lieutenant Tranter. That enough stalling?”

Wolfe memorized the badge number.

“Sure, detective.”

Tranter put his badge away. “Now fork over your I.D., wise guy.”

Wolfe only had one set of I.D. so far, besides a driver’s license. But he wasn’t exactly wanted for anything. He pulled out his military I.D., hoping the detective was sentimental about soldiers, and passed it over.

“This Army I.D.’s expired.”

“Yeah. I was discharged.”

Tranter handed it back. “I’m investigating a shooting. An...alleged shooting. You were at the hospital, asking about someone who may or may not be involved in the shooting.”

“And you found me here? Man, ctOS is fast.”

“It is. Facial ID. Camera on the street, in the hospital and out front here. Your I.D. card confirms it. But...*weird* thing is, when you got close to that corner, ctOS cameras snowed over. Just lost the picture! We didn’t see what happened after that.”

“Not my fault the cameras fritzed.” This was interesting. Cameras had gone down, when he’d gotten closer to Pearce. That wasn’t Wolfe’s doing. Was it Pearce’s? Had Pearce blocked the local camera feed?

Tranter was looking Wolfe distastefully up and down. Taking in the unshaven jaw, rumpled clothes with disapproval. “Where you going at this instant?”

“Me? Tell you the truth, I was going to commit a misdemeanor. I was going to pee behind the building. Man, I *got* to go. They wouldn’t let me use their bathroom in there.”

“You weren’t going to that car parked in back?”

“Me? No.”

“So the Acura’s not yours?”

“Naw. I look like a guy could own a nice new car like that? I heard freckles inside talking on the phone about his new Acura. Leasing. You wouldn’t believe what he’s paying.”

Tranter nodded, but it was not necessarily a nod of agreement. It might be a “this dude is full of crap” nod.

“What’s your interest in Pearce?” Tranter asked.

“Me? Oh, he was a friend of my dad’s from when we lived in the Yards. I’m trying to find a job, thought he might get me one. Went to meet him on the street—that’s the spot he asked for. But he never showed. Someone said somebody’d been shot...”

“Who said that?”

“A bum. High smelling guy with a big brown beard.”

Better keep all these lies straight...

“I can check your whereabouts, you know. Where you been around town?”

Wolfe shrugged. “Suit yourself. I really got to pee. You going to give me a ticket if I pee right here?”

“What? You’re not peeing here!”

“Okay. I’ll just grip myself and squeeze it shut.” He grabbed his crotch. He didn’t want Tranter to put him in the back of his unmarked cop car and run that license number.

“And don’t do that either!”

“Can’t hold it much longer, detective.”

Thinking about it, Wolfe was pretty sure that if Tranter had already run the plates on the Acura, he’d find out it wasn’t registered or leased to anybody; he’d figure it was stolen, and Wolfe would already be in handcuffs for just being a suspicious person heading toward a stolen car.

Tranter must not have seen any ctOS footage of him getting into that car, either. They hadn’t followed up on him that far. But they *would*...so Wolfe needed to get out of here, first chance.

Third time today he had to get out, fast. At the scene of the shooting, at the hospital, now here. He was feeling like a rabbit. He was still too much a soldier to feel okay about that.

But there was no way he was taking on a Chicago police detective, hand to hand—at least, not today.

“So you heard from a ‘bum’ there was a shooting where you were expecting to see Pearce...”

“Yeah! He saw the name of the ambulance company—if there’s one thing these old alcoholics know, it’s ambulance companies. I had an uncle used to drink all weekend, and one time—”

“Okay, Wolfe, shut up and listen. I’m going to be checking you out. I’m gonna need an address, cell phone number, driver’s license number and if you push it I’ll get your fingerprints.” He took out a small notebook and pencil, wrote down some numbers from the military I.D., and handed the card back. “Come on, start with the address.”

Wolfe gave him the right information—he could always change motels.

“Okay,” Tranter said, putting the notebook away. “Here’s the thing—this Pearce is the subject of an ongoing investigation. Very bad-guy stuff. Do not, repeat, do *not* pursue finding him. Word I got is, the guy is dead anyway. We expect his body to turn up on the shore of the lake any time now. We got patrol boats out watching for it.”

Sounds like bullshit to me, Wolfe thought. Me and this cop are dueling liars.

Tranter went on, “So, waste of time for you to look for the guy. You don’t want to get mixed up in his stuff. Tell you something, you know what the best thing for you to do is, right about now? Go to the bus station, use their restroom, then buy a ticket for a long, long ways away, and use that ticket fast. You know what I mean?”

“Sure do.”

“And no peeing in this parking lot! Now get your ass out of here.”

“You got it, detective. I’m gone. Heading for St. Louis. Or maybe Los Angeles...Never been to Los Angeles. I’ve got a cousin there—”

“Yeah, whatever, just get the fuck out of here.”

Wolfe turned and walked off, hurrying like a guy who needed to urinate.

Hurrying felt right anyway, just now.

#

Pearce used his newest signal-riding program to disguise the source of his smartphone inquiry. It picked up on a wifi PC receiver some distance off, and made it look like that was the source. If he triggered any red flags with his search he didn't want to be traced to this safehouse. Not when he'd already come within an quarter inch of having a bullet through the brain once today.

There was Wolfe's data, now. Military record came up first.

Mick Jeremiah Wolfe. Army, Special Forces, Delta Force. Decorated. Six years deployed...Middle East, North Africa. Classified missions. Electronic Technician. I.T. specialist; microwave transmission tracker...Expert on Satellite Surveillance enhancement...

Classified? That was interesting.

Two stints in a field hospital with wounds from small arms fire. Then volunteering each time to return to operations.

Kid seemed to have done his dad proud.

But...suddenly the record got ugly. Arrest for suspicion of embezzlement of federal funds. Started with a not guilty plea in the military court. Insufficient evidence. Prosecuted for assault, perjury. Pled *Nolo Contendere* for those charges.

What assault? There it was: fistfight with an officer, assault, perjury, resulting in...a year in the United States Disciplinary Barracks up north of Leavenworth. Military prison. And then...

Dishonorable discharge.

Not so proud after all. “Oh kid, what did you do?” Pearce muttered.

Who was this officer he’d gotten into the ruckus with? *Verrick*, the document said.

A *Major* Verrick. Definitely not a good idea to punch out a Major when you’re a mere NCO.

Pearce remembered a dirty-faced boy, maybe thirteen, running up and down the sidewalks. Every so often the boy would see Pearce on the corner, ask cheerily, “What’s up, Aiden?” Young Mick Wolfe wanting to seem like an important guy on the street.

Verrick. The name rang a bell. Pearce did a simple search for the name in Chicago, along with Army, and came up with Roger Verrick, the new head of Blume Security for Chicago. He was also a significant shareholder in Blume and a supposed innovator in security technology. A cross check confirmed it—the same guy. There was his picture: curly brown receding hair, lined face, nearly lipless smile, broad shoulders. Former Major in the US Army, Delta Force, his family had long term investments in Blume, he’d joined the corporation after retiring from the military about a year and a half ago.

That was some pretty damn quick advancement at the Blume Corporation, right out of the box. But then Verrick had inside connections through his family. And maybe he’d brought some military tech out with him to sweeten the deal. Had he smuggled out classified tech? It was possible. That possibility was something to remember.

If Verrick was the new head of Blume Security, he would be very aware of Aiden Pearce. Pearce didn’t have a big problem with the Blume Corporation—in fact, he relied on the company—but there had been Blume factions who had gotten on Pearce’s bad side; factions who had connections with the Club. Namely the Chicago South Club which was otherwise known as the

Irish mob—formerly run by the late, not-so-lucky Lucky Quinn. Quinn’s son was rumored to be planning to take the Club over now...

Had this been a Club attack on him, today? Was Verrick connected with the Club? Could be that Verrick arranged the attempted hit through Mick Wolfe. Maybe Verrick had found out Wolfe had known Pearce and after making a deal with Wolfe, he’d gotten a thug from the Club to take a shot at him.

But if Wolfe had been setting up the hit, why warn the target that someone was about to shoot him down?

Maybe he’d had a change of heart at the last moment.

Pearce’s gut told him that Mick Wolfe hadn’t been involved in the attempted hit, though. There had been astonishment in that voice when Wolfe had warned him. Wolfe had seemed genuinely surprised by the assassination attempt...

But how had they known where he was going to be, if not through Wolfe? Could be that someone watching for “the vigilante” had spotted him driving through the area, and made a call. The tail had responded to the call, and started following him. That faint tingling in the back of his neck had warned Pearce; the van seen once too many times in the rearview mirror...

Before he’d parked and walked over to where he was to meet Wolfe, Pearce looked around for that van, and hadn’t seen it. He’d decided it was safe, but just to be sure he put his phone on camera scramble, once he got onto the block where the meeting was to be. He didn’t want ctOS to know exactly where he was.

He had known he was taking a chance—an unusual chance, going out there. But though the message’s sender hadn’t identified himself, Pearce had suspected that the code phrase had come from Mick Wolfe. He’d heard the kid was back in town—not such a kid, an ex-soldier in his mid-twenties now.

And Wolfe was probably almost the last person alive who knew that code phrase.

Pearce felt he owed something to Mick Wolfe. Because the bomb blast that had taken Mick Wolfe's father out of the picture was just another crime that had been, indirectly, Aiden Pearce's fault. Back in the day, when Pearce was a teen in the South Yards gang, Colin Wolfe had warned Pearce that he was going to the police to give evidence. Colin had been his friend—and he'd given Pearce a chance to cover his tracks, move to another territory.

But a fellow gang thumper had warned the bosses that Colin was going to rat on one of their operations. Same guy who got the job of taking care of the "rat".

And—*boom*. The whole top of Colin Wolfe's house had been blown away, dissolving into a ball of fire and raining debris.

After that, Pearce had done what he could to befriend the kid. He'd come around, from time to time, talking to Mick for the sake of his father, trying to get him to agree to stay out of the gangs. He couldn't be seen with the boy in public a lot but he'd taken him with him on a rented cabin cruiser, out on Lake Michigan, more than once—until Mick had moved to another ward, when his Ma remarried. Pearce had lost touch...

Maybe the kid knew that Aiden Pearce had inadvertently caused his father's death. Not really Pearce's fault, when you thought about it—but still: Maybe Mick Wolfe wanted to punish Pearce for it.

After what happened today, I shouldn't trust Mick Wolfe...

But Pearce's instincts told him that Mick Wolfe wasn't his enemy. And the kid had managed to find him, when no one else had. Which meant that Wolfe was pretty damned effective.

If there was confirmation that Wolfe hadn't set him up, then *maybe* Wolfe could do some work for Aiden Pearce.

Pearce was going to have to keep his grazed head down, keep it all on the extra down low awhile, until he found out who'd tried to assassinate him.

It occurred to him that it might not have been a case of someone just spotting Aiden Pearce and dropping a dime. It might've been one of his own people—someone he worked with, around town. There was a handful of people he trusted...

Had one of them found out where he was going that day?

If so—they'd gotten paid for turning over that information.

And it was up to Pearce to find out who was getting paid—and who was paying that bill...

Because now he had a payment to make of his own.

Or to be precise, *payback*—for someone creasing his skull with a bullet. And in Chicago, payback is a bitch.

#

“Tranter. Come in.”

“Mr. Verrick. Okay to talk about just anything in here?”

“Yeah. I just had the office swept.” He'd had the office checked for bugs that morning. Of course, there were guys like Aiden Pearce supposedly able to listen in on your office phone without putting a listening device directly in it...through some form of wireless hacking. But even Pearce would have to be close to get that done. And they were on the thirty-ninth floor.

It was a big, corner office in the new Blume building, with a view on the lake—anyhow, you could see a piece of Lake Michigan if you leaned over and peered past the John Hancock Center.

Major Roger Verrick, US Army retired, had a nice layout, here, and he reveled in it. He had a big mahogany desk, wall-windows that cornered together nicely, a Picasso lithograph over the leather sofa, a wet bar, and a top grade espresso machine.

Looking at Tranter standing just inside the closed office door, Verrick shifted in the expensive ergonomic chair—he'd hurt his back in an IED attack that'd flipped over the humvee, in Somalia, and it had never perfectly healed, despite the operations.

"You look a bit rattled, Tranter."

"Yeah. The, uh, arrow missed its target, Mr. Verrick."

"*Did* it? Which idiot did you hire? Never mind, don't tell me. We had good intel—only a moron could blow it. Pearce is rarely out on the streets in plain sight these days. How'd our man manage to miss?"

"Someone on the street warned him."

"He missed—so why didn't he take another shot?"

"He took two, thought his second shot nailed Pearce right in the head. Only...he seems to have gotten up and walked away. We're not sure how he got out of there. I guess he could be dead but until it's confirmed...we got to assume a miss."

"Who warned Pearce?"

"Some guy he was going to meet. I didn't know about that. I mean, who it was..."

“Wait. That sounds like you had an encounter with this pain in the ass who warned Pearce.”

“Yes sir.” Tranter looked crestfallen. “We knew Pearce was planning to be in that neighborhood. We didn’t know why. This other guy was on the security camera. We didn’t think he was, you know, important. I didn’t want to just drag him in, make any more noise on the street than we already had. But we found out he was from the same neighborhood—I mean, the Yard. Grew up around Pearce. So...maybe he was more important than we thought...”

“So he was the one meeting with Pearce. And he was the one who warned him. And you were the one who talked to this loudmouth and...let him go.”

Tranter cleared his throat. “Yes sir. He seemed like a...harmless bozo. Maybe a PTSD case out of the war.”

“Indeed. Hold on—the war? Which war?”

“Uh—I don’t know. I saw his Army I.D. Guy was Delta Force.”

“Delta Force?” Verrick sat up straight, ignoring the spike of pain in his back. “Tranter. What was this soldier’s name?”

“Uh...Wolfe. Mick Wolfe.”

Verrick closed his eyes. “Oh my God. *I knew* I should’ve had him killed up Leavenworth.”

“Sir?”

Verrick gave Tranter his coldest stare. “Tranter. You want to keep getting that extra money every month?”

“Yes sir. I do.”

“And you want to continue living, right?”

Tranter stared coldly back at him. Tranter might be corrupt, but he was tough, and Verrick could tell that Tranter wouldn't easily stand for that kind of threat.

But Verrick meant it. First of all, he'd made a deal with the Club—it was important that Pearce go down. But then there was Wolfe. Talk about a loose cannon. He had made a big mistake deciding not to have Wolfe killed in prison. He'd been afraid it would awaken suspicion, and people might start looking at Wolfe's testimony over again. They might start taking Wolfe seriously once he was dead. So Verrick had let him live, confident that destroying the man's career would destroy the man too.

But here he was again, turning up like a bad penny. Maybe trying to use Pearce to get at his former commanding officer, Major Roger Verrick.

And Verrick wasn't going to make any more mistakes. He silently vowed to take out anyone who got in his way from now on. There was more at stake here than covering his ass. From his point of view, the destiny of the world was in the balance.

“You better get on it, Tranter,” he said at last. “I have a lot of people backing me. They'll snuff you out like a twenty-cent birthday candle if you fail. *And you will not fail.* You will see not only that Aiden Pearce is killed...but Mick Wolfe as well.”

CHAPTER THREE

The Hawk. That's what they called the north wind that came slashing down the Chicago streets, this time of year. With the sun gone down, now, the wind was colder, bitterer than ever.

It had started when Wolfe had gone into the seediest bar he could find that still had wifi. He was searching through news on his laptop. On the internet jukebox was an old Stones song about "the girl with far away eyes".

Mick Wolfe listened to the song in a distant way, as he tooled through the web for a way to find a certain son of a bitch. Wolfe was just sitting there at the bar, close to the wall, sipping a boilermaker and searching Chicago news for Verrick.

He glanced at the door whenever someone came in; he was keeping an eye out in case Tranter came looking for him. Tranter—or someone worse.

There on the laptop screen was a picture of Verrick in a powder-blue Italian suit, posing next to a shiny sensor array that was a sample of ctOS-2, the new system Blume Corporation was getting ready to launch. Verrick was Blume's security head, and this was a security sensor, so it was no shock to see Roger Verrick in the picture, trying to smile and pointing at the metal and crystal cluster. Wolfe wasn't seeing much else on Verrick that was up to date.

"Hey," said a sultry voice at his elbow. "I know him! That's the guy from the Upstairs Room."

Wolfe twitched a little, managed not to jump out of his seat and turned to look at the girl.

"Ya didn't even hear me walk up, didja?" she asked, smirking. She had a slight southeast Asian accent, oddly mixed with Chicago working class; was quite small but shapely, her black bob highlighted with silver at the tips, her

lips and fingernails painted silver too; her eyes were almond-shaped and chestnut-colored. She had one fist cocked on her hip. “You sure jumped, soldier boy!” She pointed at the U.S. Army tattoo on his forearm.

“I’m not a soldier anymore,” he said, turning to the laptop. *Not that kind, anyway.* “But you should be, girl, walking up that quiet on people...” Wait, what had she said? “You saying you’ve seen that guy in person, somewhere?” He tapped Verrick’s image on the screen.

“Sure,” she said. “At the Four Clubs. They got a room upstairs—and guess what, they call it the Upstairs Room. Think they’re cute. I could tell you were interested in him, real personal like, the way you were staring at that boring picture. You buy me a Courvoisier?”

That was pretty expensive liquor. But if she knew where Verrick could be found when the bastard was out and about...

Wolfe dug some bills from his pocket. He still had eighty dollars left from the off-the-books construction work he’d done in Kansas City. He put a twenty on the bar. “Courvoisier for the lady,” he told the bartender.

The old man nodded, and shuffled over to get the cognac.

“You can afford Courvoisier?” she asked. “I thought you’d say, how about if I get you a vodka instead! You just got paid, huh? Wanta party?”

“I didn’t say I could afford the Courvoisier,” he said. “But I’ll pay for it.” Wolfe waited till she had climbed up on the stool next to him and had a sip of her drink, then he asked, “So this Four Clubs place...where is it? This Roger Verrick owes me money.”

“I can’t give out the address. That’d get me in trouble. Place is illegal —’course, all the cops know where it is. They’re paid off.”

“Old Chicago tradition.”

“Sure. Anyway...if ya go over to the Loop, ask around near Van Buren, check the scene, I bet ya find it. They won’t letcha in, though. Not unless you got a nice suit at home to put on first—and maybe a razor. You got to look like a high roller to get in there. They got more’n one tough bouncer.”

He’d cross that bouncer when he came to it, he figured. “What’s your name?” he asked the girl.

“Lulu.”

“I’m Mick.”

“Can I call you Mickey?”

“Make you happy, call me Mickey. Look, uh—could you get me into the Four Clubs?”

“Nah, not a chance, they eighty-sixed me outta there ‘cause I wouldn’t let some dumbjacks do something they wanted to do to me. If I go back, Honker’ll pulp my face. That’s what he said he’d do. I don’t even know what pulp your face is but I don’t wanta know.”

“I hear that, alright. This Verrick got anyone special he sees at that place?”

“Sure, if she wasn’t just bragging. Every Friday night, that guy sees Rose Blue. Looks like a model, that girl. Blonde and tall and with the long legs, you know? Dresses in rose color, and blue, when she’s working. Thinks she’s the tippy top, like she got all her clients twisted around her pinky finger...”

Should he try to get into the Four Clubs tonight? He could probably find Verrick if he watched the Blume Building, of course. But he didn’t want to be seen anywhere near Verrick’s turf. Didn’t want to go to that bastard’s center of power unless he had to. It’d be too well protected, too well watched. He needed to catch Verrick off guard.

If a guy wasn't off-guard in the hooker suite of a mob casino, where was he off-guard?

"So how about that party, Mickey?" Lulu said, elbowing him. "It's Friday night, time to let your hair down and your pants too."

"You deserve top dollar, Lulu. Can't afford it. But here...let me buy you another drink." He put one more twenty on the bar. That was half his money gone. "You give me your phone number, I'll get back to you when I get a paycheck..."

"I like that, you're a guy thinks ahead! Not that many guys think ahead. They think 'get into her pants right now'. You're a good guy, Mickey. Hey Harry? Another Courvoisier!"

#

Walking along the southern edge of The Loop, backpack with his laptop in it over one shoulder, Wolfe turned the collar of his coat against The Hawk. Putting up his collar didn't help much. The cold wind stung his eyes, burned his ears, made his lips feel numb.

If he could find that casino, he'd get out of this November wind. But he might get tossed back into it pretty quick.

He looked around, saw nothing that looked remotely like a casino—but since it was illegal, it wouldn't look like one on the outside. There were half a dozen casinos in outlying areas but gambling was still illegal within city limits. Didn't matter, the Four Clubs was run by, guess who, The Club mob, so it didn't *have* to be legal. It just had to be discreet. If Wolfe could find it, he might be able to get Verrick alone...

It was Friday night but not much action in this neighborhood; just the occasional cab passing, and the corkscrewing of trash swept along by the Hawk on this corner of Van Buren. That it was Friday, with Verrick likely at

the Four Clubs, was one piece of good luck. And there was another bit of luck who was now getting out of that cab in front of that old, unmarked brick office building on the corner: a tall, modellesque blonde in a rose and blue outfit. She wore a tight, upscale rose-colored party dress, with a light blue short jacket, with rose-glass necklace, rose purse and pumps.

If that was Rose Blue, and that antiquated four-story office building on the corner was the front for the Four Clubs casino, then he just might be within spitting distance of Major Roger Verrick. Retired....

Wolfe crossed under the raised tracks of the L Train, angling to pass fairly close to Rose Blue—close enough he caught a whiff of her rose scented perfume—but acting as if he were planning to head around the corner of the building. He put on the groggy “lost junkie” act he’d sometimes used in Morocco when meeting his CIA contact. He didn’t have to try hard at the moment to come off like a street person. Lulu was right, he looked pretty shabby.

He glanced past the elegant call girl as the door opened for her—someone had seen her through the peep hole.

“Evenin’, Honker,” she told the bouncer.

Honker was the bulkiest thug in a tuxedo that Wolfe had ever seen—and he’d seen quite a few at high-end casinos. Honker had a face that looked like it was carved from sandstone, and fists that looked like they could crush rock too.

“Hiya, Rose!” Honker said.

Not much chance of getting past that big lug right this second, Wolfe thought.

Delta Force training or not, Honker would be hard to take down. Of course, there was always placing a bullet in the back of the bouncer’s head, if it came to that.

Trouble is, he didn't know what type of guy Honker was. Easy enough to assume Honker was a brute when he worked the door at a mob casino. But for all Wolfe knew Honker could be a family man who couldn't get another job.

Find another way in.

Honker glanced at Wolfe, as he closed the door behind the girl, seemed to discount the "lost junky" immediately—which was how Wolfe had figured it.

Wolfe strolled around the corner, looking up at the roof of the building. Yeah, a couple of Club wiseguys were standing sentry up there. He could see their bundled-up silhouettes, including their AK47s.

Wolfe kept walking, but he drew slowly in toward the building as he went until he was out of the line of sight of the sentries on the roof—unless they leaned over the wall and looked straight down.

Behind the building was a parking lot. There were several limos in it, along with a gold colored SUV that probably belonged to some minor rapper who was into being a Player, several shiny, low slung Porsches and Jaguars, and one late model Escalade. He saw no beaters, no low-income cars, which told him that the employers had to park somewhere else. There was a sign that said Private Parking Only. It didn't say parking for what. A chubby cheeked parking attendant in a black watch cap and overcoat was watching something pink and squirmy on a miniature TV in a little parking lot kiosk. Chances were the parking lot attendant wasn't going to look up from Bikini Bimbos unless another car drove in.

Wolfe turned, walked down the alley close to the back wall of the building. His boots crunched loudly in gravel as he walked toward a patch of light at a back door. Someone was standing there, smoking a cigarette, keeping the door open enough so they could get back in. Which meant the door locked if it closed and this guy didn't have a key. Somebody low-level.

Wolfe glanced up, didn't see the sentries looking down. He walked around the back door as if he were just cutting through the alley—then stopped, staring in sudden recognition at the man in the backdoor. And the man stared back at him with the same mild shock.

It was Kurt O'Malley, an Irish-German guy from the old 'hood. They'd grown up near each other; they'd shared a six pack or two and double dated, occasionally, just before Wolfe enlisted in the Army.

"Kurt? That you?"

O'Malley was wearing a white jacket, white pants. He was a gangly man with a stubby nose, rusty colored hair and a nicely trimmed goatee. He apparently worked as a bus boy at the casino.

He gawked at Wolfe. "Man, I thought you was in prison!"

"Was. Just a year—Leavenworth. I was framed."

"Hey man, *everybody* in prison was framed." O'Malley laughed.

Wolfe chose not to argue. "Listen, Kurt—I need work. I heard in this place you're working at here, pretty much everybody has a prison record."

"The Hell they do!" He sniffed, wiped his nose with a sleeve. "Okay, a lot of guys do. But it's not like it's gotta be on your resume, fuh Chris'sakes. You got to pay Santiago to introduce you to the bosses, and maybe they'll hire you if they need somebody...and maybe they won't."

"Who's Santiago?"

"Kitchen supervisor. You gotta grease his palm and maybe he'll put you up for a job and maybe not. I borrowed a hundred bucks from my Pop to pay him. This dump gets me more cash than a regular dive though."

“Not like they give you benefits.”

“You can drink left over booze and eat leftover food and they pay you in cash. Sometimes you can find a poker chip on the floor, cash it in. You really on the down and outs, huh?”

“Yeah, man.”

O’Malley tossed his cigarette butt into the alley. “You come back tomorrow, and I’ll...”

“I’ll need that talk with Santiago tonight, man. Just let me in, I’ll find him.”

“Can’t do that.” O’Malley started to close the door. “So long.”

“You want to smoke a joint, Kurt?”

The door didn’t quite close. O’Malley stuck his nose out again, and glanced up and down the alley “Never could get you to indulge. So you’re into it now huh?” O’Malley looked over his shoulder. “Uh—sure. Just a sec.” He pulled a mop from where it leaned against the wall inside, used the handle to block the door open. “Gotta make this quick! Just a couple of hits...”

Just one hit. An uppercut to the chin.

O’Malley was out cold. The Delta Force training was still there in Wolfe’s hands. Wolfe caught the slumping man, dragged him inside. The warmth of the building’s back hallway rolled over him as he looked around. No one in the hall but a lot of clackety-clack came from the kitchen down the hall, along with shouts for orders, cooks grumbling. Wolfe could smell food cooking, and coffee.

He dragged O’Malley to a utility closet, opened it, shoved him in with the cleaning products. He pulled off O’Malley’s coat and belt, used the belt to tie

the busboy's hands behind him, then shoved an oily rag into his mouth. "Sorry, Kurt," Wolfe muttered. "I'll try and remember to let you go when I head out..."

Wolfe took off his own coat, put it in his pack, and put on O'Malley's white coat. He found an employee's men's room, got his shaving stuff out of his pack, shaved and cleaned up as well as he could. He hurried out of the bathroom, and went into the kitchen trying to look busy and purposeful. Everyone was too busy to look him over much; he figured if they noticed him carrying a backpack over one shoulder, they'd figure he was on his way to clock out.

#

It was the Oxycodone that did it: made Verrick talkative, made him feel something like friendly warmth toward the girl. The back pain got Verrick the Oxy prescription but he tried not to take it too often. Trouble was, "not too often" was getting more and more often. "Yeah it got ugly in Mali, and uglier in Somalia," Verrick was saying. He looked up at the red silk canopy over the king-sized bed. The lights were dialed down to half so it was dim but not dark. He smelled of chlorine from the hot tub, which still bubbled over on the other side of the room. He was lying on his side, naked, head propped on one hand. Rose had put on her sheer stuff and was kneeling on the white rug in front of the coffee table, getting high. He could hear the sound of the casino downstairs, coming through the curtained window; croupiers calling numbers, the merged murmur of a crowd. Sometimes there were cocktail parties in this big room for visiting Club bosses. They could open the curtains, and watch the action down on the main floor. If he got up and threw open the curtains he'd be visible from the roulette table and the high stakes poker table and the blackjack table—framed in that window stark naked. That'd throw some gamblers off their game. He chuckled at the thought, and went on, "And one day I just got tired of snipers trying to shoot me in the gullet. I mean, I was risking getting capped for what, for an officer's pension, and I said *Fuck this, I'm gonna change things up*. I can quit this and go to work for Blume. Right

after that General Van Ness and I got smashed on his Scotch when I was on leave in Algiers, and he tells me about an outfit called Purity. So it all came together.”

“*Purity* is an organization, Roger?” she asked, as she tapped a powder from a small canister onto the mirrored table.

“That’s...kind of a *lodge*, you might say.”

“Like the Moose Club?”

He laughed. “Kinda! But real secret. And this one is gonna change the world.”

“How?”

How? That was definitely something he wasn’t going to tell her. He wondered if maybe she’d been leading him into talking about this while he was stoned—maybe she was a federal agent?

No. Couldn’t be.

But he should have her capped anyway just to make sure. Maybe later tonight. Shame...but he was getting tired of her anyway.

He looked at her, checking her out through the rose and blue lingerie; her delicate fingers industriously chopping the china white she liked to snort. He’d told her he wouldn’t get into that stuff, but here he was, taking Oxycodone, not that much different. He’d swallowed some Oxy and one other drug...

He was about to put the Viagra to good use when he noticed a bus boy pushing a cart in through the door.

“What the fuck!” Rose said blearily, losing the ladylike diction she put on for customers. “What’s he doin’ in here?”

“Door’ supposed to be locked,” Verrick muttered, instinctively pulling a purple satin sheet to cover his nakedness. “How’d the hell you get in? Get outta here...’

“Oh sorry, sir,” said the busboy. He didn’t sound very damn sincere. With the drug and the dimness it was hard to see the guy’s face. Verrick blurrily noted that there was a small backpack on the lower shelf of the cart.

“We don’t need anything bussed out of here,” Rose said.

“Might need Verrick bussed out of here,” the busboy said, closing the door behind him—and pulling a small pistol from the pocket of his white coat.

“Shit,” Verrick said. His own .25 backup pistol was in his pants, which were lying on the floor next to the hot tub. *Getting sloppy. That’s what the Oxy does to you, you fool! Shoulda had a bodyguard in the hall.*

He didn’t like the bodyguards knowing his private business, though...

“How much are they paying you?” Verrick asked. “You seem like a good man to have around. Tell you what. You could make twice as much working for me.”

“Already worked for you,” the busboy said, reaching over with one hand to dial up the light. He did it without looking away from Verrick; without that gun muzzle wavering. Rose moaned when he did that, and scrambled back from the glass coffee table.

“Wolfe!” Verrick burst out.

“That’s right, Major.”

Verrick looked at his trousers across the room. He tried to figure out how he'd get to them—and that pistol. “Hey—you're going to shoot me, at least let me put my pants on. Rose—hand me my trousers.”

Rose stirred...

“No, uh uh, you make a move, pretty lady, and I'll put a bullet in you,” Wolfe said.

Rose froze.

“How'd you get in?” Verrick said, stalling. Pretty sure that Wolfe was here to shoot him. Maybe someone would realize Wolfe had gotten in...

“Door lock's electronic,” Wolfe said genially. “I came equipped for that. Back door, though—that's an old fashioned lock. So I had to knock some fool out.”

“And you took his place? Resourceful. That offer to work for me still goes.”

Wolfe's soft laughter was bitter. “Oh, I'll *do* something for you, Verrick. You straighten out my life and I very deliberately *won't* put a bullet through each of your knees. And I won't break your spine just above your tailbone. And, I won't drop a dime and tell every fucking reporter in the country what a thieving, treasonous scumbag you are.”

So Wolfe wasn't definitely planning to kill him? That emboldened Verrick. “You already tried smearing me in military court. You sent some letters out from that prison too.”

“They didn't get anywhere, way I heard it. Somebody intercepted them.”

“That's right. I should've...”

“Should’ve what? Had me killed, Verrick? I expected you would. Maybe you could still do it if I decide to leave you alive today. Only you’d have to find me. And you won’t. You won’t find me. But I can always find *you*. You’re a public figure, Major Verrick! You can pile on the bodyguards but it won’t help you—I can find you. You know I can. I’ll either kill you—or I’ll take the dirt I’ve got on you and broadcast it everywhere.”

“If you had any proof of anything, you’d have done that already, soon as you got out of jail.”

Wolfe hesitated—and Verrick saw a troubled flicker in the man’s eyes. So Wolfe was bluffing about having anything on him the press could use.

“I can still take you down, Verrick,” Wolfe persisted. “I promise you. One way or another. But I’m giving you a chance. If you want me outta your life, you clear my name—and I figure you can do it without going down yourself. There was Captain Callahan...”

Rafe Callahan. Army Captain under Verrick’s command, and Verrick’s partner in heisting the warlord payoff money in Somalia. Callahan was dead now. Verrick had him killed, made it look like an al Qaeda car bomb. “How am I supposed to use Callahan to cover my ass?” Verrick asked. “Am I supposed to say he did it all alone?”

“That’s the concept. He’s dead so no harm done if you lay it all on him. You make a public statement, say you got new information, say Callahan stole the money and not al Qaeda. Tell the courts you realized I was right about the money being stolen—I’ll say you weren’t in on it after all. That I was wrong, when I accused you, it was all Callahan. They reverse my discharge, they give me my pension back. My name is cleared. You never hear from me again.”

“So that’s the deal? Okay—what the hell. Sure. Why not? Maybe it’ll clear things up for both of us.”

Wolfe stared at him. Then he snorted. “Look at you!” He shook his head. “No.” Wolfe shook his head. “Nah. I can see it in your face. You’ll never do it. You think it’ll be easier to kill me. You’re wrong about that, Verrick.” Wolfe tilted his head to one side, thinking it out. “Maybe I need to just take you out. At least I can get that much satisfaction....”

Wolfe raised the gun, aimed—Verrick prepared to jump off the bed...

The door burst open behind Wolfe.

It pushed him off balance and he fired the .38 but the bullet went wide, cracking into the headboard.

Rose screamed.

Verrick threw himself off the end of the bed, rolled, grabbed for his pants and his .25...

“There he is!” Honker’s deep voice from the hall.

Verrick looked up to see Wolfe turning to face the big bouncer standing in the doorway—Honker with a billy club in his hand.

Honker looked at Wolfe’s gun—then ducked to one side.

Verrick resumed digging through his trousers, pulling out the .25 caliber pistol...

“Look out, boss!” Luke Kelly was there, suddenly, in the doorway—a muscular but rangy man in a black limo chauffeur’s uniform, he was Verrick’s bodyguard and driver. Somebody must’ve warned him there was trouble in the casino. Good man!

Luke fired his big .45 at Wolfe, missing as Wolfe ducked to one side. The bullet shattered the window overlooking the main floor.

Verrick heard screams from the casino floor as the shot sent big fragments of window glass onto the tables down below.

Wolfe had flattened to the side of the door, pressed to the wall by the light dial.

Verrick raised the gun to fire at Wolfe, pulled the trigger—and realized the damned safety was on. *Shit.*

Wolfe fired the .38 and Verrick felt something tug at his right side. He grabbed Rose and pulled her to her feet between him and Wolfe.

“Roger! Don’t!” she squeaked. “He’s going to shoot me!”

“Shaddup, Rose!”

Luke was in stepping into the room, swinging his .45 toward Wolfe—but Wolfe was hammering down on Luke’s head with the butt of his gun. Luke stumbled back. Verrick fumbled with the .25 with one hand, the other holding the whimpering Rose in front of him.

Then the lights went out. It was dark in there except for a patch of light at the door and a dusty little ray coming through the bullet hole in the window curtains.

People were shouting down the hall. “*We found a guy tied up in a closet and he...*”

Verrick felt his drugginess more, with the lights out—he was dizzily aware of someone rushing past him.

It must be Wolfe. Verrick spun Rose around to keep her shielding him—and then the curtains were gone from the window, flooding the room with light.

Verrick shoved Rose away, turned, stumbled to the window—now he really was standing there naked, though nobody was looking at him—and he saw Wolfe had jumped through, carrying the curtains down to the tables.

There he was, already halfway across the room, that little backpack in one hand, the gun in the other: Wolfe running down the casino's gaming aisles.

Verrick tried to get a bead on him with the small pistol—he fired. Missed.

Wolfe snapped off a shot at a uniformed security guard—knocked the billed cap off the guard's head. The security guard dived down and Wolfe ran past him, out the double doors to the front corridor...

Son of a bitch. The guy might get away.

Verrick looked down at his side. Not a bad wound at all.

He turned, grabbed his pants, shouting. "Somebody get out there and stop that bastard!"

#

Wolfe had to plow his right shoulder into a heavy set black bouncer at the door. The bouncer went *Whoof!*, the air knocked out of him, and fell out of the way. Carrying the backpack, Wolfe opened the door, rushed out into the night air of the recessed doorway, shutting the door hard behind him.

The shiver-inducing blast of the Hawk almost felt good, now. At least that cold slash of air meant he was still alive. It'd been a close thing in there...

He heard shouting from overhead and remembered the sentries on the roof. How was he going to get past those guys? Soon as he ran out from the doorway they'd shoot him down with those AKs...

Then a vehicle came screaming down the streets, sirens blasting. Cops, already?

Maybe turning himself over to the cops was the best thing—he'd be alive, in their custody. For a while. But for how long, with Tranter and his kind around?

Then he realized it wasn't a cop car—it was an ambulance. The ambulance veered toward him and up onto the sidewalk, bouncing when it hit the curb. It fishtailed to a stop with a harsh squeal and the smell of burning rubber.

The rear doors of the ambulance popped open and that EMT with the dirty fingernails looked out at him. "Get in, fast!"

Wolfe ran to the ambulance, and dived in the back, backpack in one hand and gun in the other. Bullets ricocheted off the street behind him as the sentries opened fire. Then the EMT had him by the collar, pulled him in, and slammed the rear doors shut.

The ambulance roared away down the street, driven by another, much larger guy up front. A rear window of the ambulance webbed with a bullet impact, then the columns supporting the L Train tracks were in the way, and the sentries couldn't hit the ambulance.

It swerved around a corner, and Wolfe levered himself to a sitting position.

"Damn, that was close," The EMT gasped, hunched over as he came and sat down on a gurney near Wolfe. "I tell you dude, don't think Pearce is paying me well enough for this shit."

"Pearce? How'd he know?"

"What you think, he hasn't been following you? Them ctOS cameras, those are his eyes, man! Blume thinks they got that thing insulated against

him—naw, no way! The Club still has cameras that watch big shots with the whores in case, it needs to blackmail them. And Pearce can hack the Club's cameras well as anybody's..."

"You going to take me to him?"

"Hey I don't even know where he is—moved to a new safe house. No, I'm dropping you off someplace else you can lay low for a while. But you're going to hear from Pearce. Oh yeah, you can count on that. 'Cause you owe him, now, man. You owe Aiden Pearce bigtime, Wolfe."

CHAPTER FOUR

The mid morning light was coming pearly gray through the filtered window of Verrick's office window.

Tranter seemed puzzled as he squinted at Verrick. "So you don't want an APB out on this Wolfe character after all?"

Verrick shook his head. "If you can get some of the Chicago Cops in that area to look for Mick Wolfe without telling 'em why, fine and good. If they pick him up, they should call you and you should call me. And I'll make it worth their while to turn him over to me directly. But an APB—no. We don't want a general alert—we don't want the media in on it. Because, you know, the Four Clubs isn't legal...aaaaand because *I* was there with a known hooker. All that could come out."

"Oh." Detective Tranter cleared his throat. "Speaking of that high class whore..."

"She taken care of?"

"She's part of a new parking lot on the North side, about five feet down. As of this morning."

"Good, good..." Rose had heard too much of what Wolfe was talking about, which had made eliminating her even more imperative. "Another thing is, Tranter, if Wolfe is caught and he talks to the wrong cops, or to federal agents, you never know what he might say. I don't think he's got anything that'd stand up in court, but..."

Verrick didn't want to go on. It would mean having to explain to Tranter what it was that Wolfe knew too much about. And Verrick definitely didn't want to give Tranter that information.

Tranter never asked about it.

Detective Tranter just stood there, waiting—and Verrick kept Tranter standing there, as if he were an NCO in the presence of a Major. Which was more or less the way Verrick thought of it. He could see rainwater evaporating from the shoulders of Tranter's trench coat, blown in the current of warm air from the heating vent.

“The Club doesn't want any noise made about what happened at the Four Clubs,” Verrick went on. “CPD knows all about the place, of course, but all the right people are paid off. I assume you're getting your cut.”

Tranter shrugged. He wasn't going to confirm or deny it.

“If the media runs a story about the fight at an illegal casino,” Verrick said, “then the CPD is going to have to make surprised noises and raid the place. No one wants that.”

Tranter nodded, slowly. “I heard Wolfe shot you. That right?”

It was Verrick's turn to shrug. “Little bit of something in my side. Went right through. Couple of stitches. Not much of a wound. I've had worse.”

Actually it was bothering Verrick enough, along with his aching back, that he planned to go home after lunch. But he'd needed to put in an appearance here to seem like the iron man for Tranter and Luke—Luke Kelly was out in the hallway, keeping watch, in the unlikely event that Wolfe turned up here. There were three other guys hired from Graywater Security watching over the building—two in the alley, downstairs, one in the lobby. Real professional mercenaries.

Tranter put his hand in his coat, brought out a tissue and blew his nose. “Sorry. I think I'm getting a head cold. So you want to handle Wolfe completely unofficially?”

“That’s right,” Verrick said. “You got a problem with that?”

“No. It’s just...harder to find the prick that way, without all those eyes on the street looking for him.”

“You’re standing in the Blume building, Tranter! We’ve got ctOS in our pockets! And I’m the man with access to every security application ctOS has. Count on it, Tranter. We’ll find Wolfe. And not just him. We’ll run down that loose cannon Aiden Pearce too. We’re starting to suspect that’s who set up Wolfe’s getaway...”

#

It was an abandoned building, one of the old Projects, a ten story tenement long slated to be torn down. Most of the windows were boarded over. A fence had been erected around it, the hurricane wire now mostly knocked down.

That’s where they’d taken Wolfe...

On the outside, that’s how it looked: Just more abandoned projects housing near Washington Park in Black Viceroy territory. On the inside, that’s mostly what it was. Floor after floor with apartments missing their doors, every inch of wall, in halls and rooms, covered with spray-painted and marked tags, with graffiti of all kinds, but especially a lot of Black Viceroy insignias. Each room emptied out, the walls often broken open so copper could be torn out to sell to scavenger companies. Here and there in the hallways you might come across an old overturned doorless refrigerator or splintery bureau. Walk down those scarred up halls and your shoes crunched paint chips.

But on the seventh floor of the old tenement, one apartment was different. The door to the apartment had been replaced—the new one was double layer steel—and the one-bedroom flat had been cleaned out and simply but comfortably refurnished. It was now one of Aiden Pearce’s safehouses—so

Pussler claimed, after giving Wolfe the key and taking his leave, though Wolfe had seen nothing of Pearce since coming here.

The windows were boarded up, but inside there was a working television, a radio, an operating bathroom, toilet paper, towels, plenty of functional electrical plugs with pirated power, a fairly new sofa bed and blankets, a closet in which leaned a nicely oiled pump shotgun and boxes of ammo; a PC on a desk, the PC, interestingly, *not* hooked up to the internet or wifi; a bedroom with a cot and a chest of drawers; a kitchenette with a microwave, its cabinets stocked with canned foods and freeze dried goods, instant coffee, pots and dishes and knives and forks. There was a small clothes washer, in the kitchenette, like something from a recreational vehicle, and a small dryer. There was even a bottle of damned good Scotch in a desk drawer.

Wolfe was availing himself of that Scotch right now, as he brooded on his situation. It was late afternoon following the night of the Four Clubs debacle, and Wolfe was getting antsy. He was fed and warm and comfortable—and restless.

He sat there on the sofa with a small glass in his hand, sipping the Laphroaig, looking at the television news with the sound turned off. He'd seen nothing, not a word, about his personal raid on the Four Clubs. He'd half-expected to see his face on television in a public service warning about an arch criminal with Verrick swearing he was a mad dog killer. But, nope. It was almost disappointing. More than that, it was worrisome. It suggested that Verrick was going after him some other way...

Shouldn't have tried to strike a deal with him, Wolfe thought. Stupid.

He'd known instantly his former C.O. had no intention of following through on any deal. You get crazy ideas, sitting in stir in the federal Disciplinary Barracks. You got desperate notions and programmed yourself with them. Then when they didn't work...what next?

And where did Aiden Pearce fit into it?

“Hello, Mick,” said the television to Mick Wolfe.

Wolfe sat bolt upright, spilling some of his Scotch on the floor.

Aiden Pearce was staring at him from the television screen. No doubt of the identity of this man. Those sharp emerald-green eyes, that dark-brown hair. Pearce’s face was filling most of the screen. It was gazing right at him.

Pearce smiled. “Don’t be spilling that Scotch, Wolfe. Stuff’s expensive.”

“What the hell? Why are you on television?”

“Just something I can do. I’ve rerouted a webcam transmission to this television, just this particular television set. The set has been customized. I’m reaching you through a Local Area Network I’ve set up. There’s a special switching hub—but, never mind. We can talk about all that some other time.”

“I could swear I muted that television.”

“If I can put myself up here you don’t think I can unmute the television?”

“Good point. Feels weird talking to you this way. Like hallucinating.”

Pearce chuckled. “I guess it could feel that way. But I can’t just call you on a cell phone. Not yet.”

“Haven’t got a cell phone currently anyway. I’ve got a laptop. Trying not to use it too much, in case ctOS picks up...Wait—I get how *I* can see *you*. But if you can see *me*...”

“There must be a camera in the room. Yes. But you know where that would be.”

“Webcam in that PC.”

“And a microphone. Pussler naturally didn’t mention that.”

“Pussler—you trust that guy?”

“Didn’t he get me off the street when I was shot? Didn’t he show up for you?”

“Sure, but...he seems like a...uh...waste case.”

“He is. In fact I make sure he doesn’t know where I am most of the time. I’ve left the last safehouse, gone to another he doesn’t know. There is someone else I can’t trust...but I don’t know who it is yet. But it isn’t Pussler.”

“Good to hear. Because he knows where I am. If he decides he wants to make a deal with someone else...”

“He’s on my payroll. And he’s like a stray dog that’s very loyal after you feed it.”

“How many people are on your payroll?”

“A few too many lately. I’m going to be pruning that back. Someone seems to have found out about my meeting with you. Someone on my team. I don’t know who. I didn’t tell anyone. But they must’ve...”

He didn’t seem to want to say what they “must’ve” done.

“How do you finance this payroll?”

“I steal from bad guys. Through hacking.”

“Like—who?”

“Like meth dealers. After I’ve skimmed enough from people like that, I turn them over to...well, I have people I get the information to, occasionally.

Even certain people in the FBI, now and then. They sometimes act on my information and sometimes don't. But it salves my conscience to tell them..."

"I'm down on conscience. I've been screwed over by my own conscience. And my dad was screwed over by his."

"Yes. I know he was. I remember. That's one of the reasons you're where you are at this moment—and it's one of the reasons I'm going to do what I'm going to do."

"Which is what?"

"If I decide it's safe to do it, I'm going to give you a very special tool, to help you in your...your personal mission. At least, I think that's what I'm going to do...But I need more information."

"About?"

"About what you were doing in the Four Clubs, and why Roger Verrick is being so secretive about trying to find you. Why he's using every covert technology at his disposal to find you. I heard you talking about some of it when you were with Verrick—I was tracking you all that day. I read some of your military files...but I didn't get a clear picture. I want to hear the full story, Mick."

"You mean—now?"

"Yeah. Now. This line is secure, I promise you. Every packet from that room is being switched and repacketed and routed again and encrypted and then repacketed before it gets to me. And vice versa."

"Maybe. But..." Could he trust Pearce that far? He'd hoped to get some help from him—but should he tell him everything? "Pussler says I owe you bigtime. What is it I have to do for you?"

“I have a feeling our missions are going to converge, Mick. I got a ctOS shot of you talking to a cop, a police detective named Tranter. I got a lip reading program giving me part of what he said. Which had to do with his advice on you not having anything to do with me. Now why is he telling you that? When I checked him out, I found out he’s connected to Verrick. He’s been having meetings with Roger Verrick—meetings Tranter doesn’t put on his police log. Roger Verrick, whom you nearly shot last night. Tranter seemed to know all about that attempt to kill me, judging by his warning to you. Seems like we just might have the same enemies.”

“But there is something you want...”

“Lots of somethings, probably. First off...I had a scrambler on the cameras, that whole block we were on, where they tried to shoot me. So they couldn’t see me. But they’d followed me there...Trouble with that scrambler, I didn’t get an image of the guy taking the shot at me. But I did get one of the van going down the street, and where it ended up. I traced it to a train station. He got out and I lost him in the crowd after that. Never did get a real good look at him. But I did get a shoddy image when he got out of that van. Not enough for ctOS facial recognition programs. Still...from what I understand, you’re an expert on satellite picture enhancement. Is that right?”

“More or less.”

“I hope it’s more. Same enhancement issue. You know where to get any software relating to that? Something you could use?”

Wolfe snorted. “It’s on my laptop! I knew they were coming to arrest me, in Somalia—so I uploaded stuff that might be useful. Put it up in my own little corner of the cloud. And when I got out of jail I downloaded it onto my laptop. Which I swiped from...well, it doesn’t matter where I swiped the laptop from.”

“You stole a car the other day, too.”

“Yeah. I did.” He decided not to ask how Pearce knew that. “After they busted me, on a bogus pretence, I stopped caring much about the law. But I don’t make a profit on stolen cars, if that’s what you mean. I just borrow them now and then and leave them where they can be found. One of them had a laptop in it that hadn’t been used much...”

“I’ve been known to borrow a few cars myself. Listen—one thing I need from you is to take the scrappy image of the shooter who nearly took my head off. See if you can use that program and your experience to enhance it.”

“I can do that.”

“I’m transmitting it to the PC there. Upload your software to the PC—see what you can do.”

“That PC doesn’t seem to have wifi—”

“I have my own, for that apartment—when I want it to be there.”

“It’ll take me time to run the enhancement.”

“Then do it after you tell me your story...”

“I still feel funny talking to a television.”

“You’re talking to me, Wolfe. Go on. What happened in Somalia?”

Wolfe thought about it. He’d probably be dead now, if it weren’t for Pearce...

Wolfe took a sip of Scotch, and then he took the leap. “I was in an air conditioned trailer, on a CIA black ops base....”

#

I was in an air conditioned trailer, on a CIA black ops base, when I saw the takedown.

I shouldn't be talking about the base, Pearce, but I'll tell you this much: it was pretty well camouflaged on a little Yemeni island called Socatra, in the Gulf of Aden, couple hundred miles off the coast of Somalia. I was Army, Delta Force, not CIA, but we worked closely with the spooks and shared a lot of runways. Special Activities Division, Special Operations Group—I rubbed elbows with all those guys out there. Spook soldiers.

I was running surveillance drones over a compound about five clicks south of the eastern edge of Mogadishu. This was pure surveillance—no weapons on this kind of drone. Keeping it unarmed made it smaller, better for staying covert. I used the drones and the satellite surveillance detailing program to look for possible al Qaeda operatives, and now and then for some of those Gulf of Aden pirate dhows.

I remember being tired of that cramped trailer under its green and black cammie netting; tired of the monitors, tired of wearing the headphones. I was good at what I was doing. I was good at anything digital, electronic, computerized, remote controlled, so that's how I ended up there. But I was starting to miss working in the field. When I was sent on missions into the field I used to set up likely sniper targets using infrared gear. I had to sneak a good distance in-country for that, all on my lonesome. Scary as hell but at least it wasn't boring. Not like sitting in a trailer staring into monitors.

Before I was stuck in the trailer, I got caught out with my ass hanging out three times, when I was in the field—and three times I was lucky enough to fight my way back to the exfiltration point. Another time I saw the enemy moving some prisoners of war, a small group of Navy SEALs. I went outside my orders, took out the al Qaeda guards, got the POWs out of there, and the brass gave me a Silver Star for that. Not a year later the same guys who'd given me the medal were throwing me in the federal slammer.

Why did I get the slammer? It's because of what I saw when I went outside my briefing in my last drone operation. Guess who gave me the briefing? Major Roger Verrick: "You search this area, Wolfe, don't go outside it, we're not risking another drone. Don't get cowboy with those drones. You know what those things cost?"

He'd given me a much smaller area than usual. It bothered me. I was fully vetted, I had top access, it was like he didn't trust me to see some operation.

So maybe I ignored him, and wandered outside the search area a little; yeah, maybe I colored outside the lines. Verrick had been working on my last nerve. Calling me a cowboy, telling me to stay on my leash like a good doggie.

Maybe I should have. But they train Delta Force to think independently.

It was nighttime on the Somali coast, and I was watching the roads from a drone's eye view, infrared scanning, and saw something interesting: a fairly small cargo truck heading south on a highway paralleling the coast—but it was a truck with an escort. There were two unmarked humvees along for the trip, one in front of the truck, and one behind it.

That looked like one of the CIA's little convoys. Why hadn't I been briefed on it?

Then I saw the humvee in front of the truck skid to a stop. The truck had to stop, too, so the humvee in back stopped.

Then four men got out of the front humvee, all at once. I had to move the drone in closer to try to see their faces. They wore paramilitary togs, with no insignia, and cammie blacking on their faces. I zoomed as much as I could. One of them looked at the sky, just for a second.

The driver of the front humvee moved back to the truck's driver, and had the driver open the door. While he spoke to the driver of the truck, another

man moved to the passenger side. Meanwhile the other two paramilitaries from the front vehicle moved toward the rear of the truck. They signaled the rear humvee, which, apparently on their orders, backed up about twenty meters. One of the guys from the front humvee climbed up into the back of the truck—and a moment later jumped out, with an RPG launcher in his hands. Rocket Propelled Grenade...

The RPG gunner had the weapon set up. He fired it straight at the rear humvee.

The rocket hit the humvee solid, right in the grill. The big vehicle exploded—and it was too big an explosion for an RPG: someone had set another explosive in advance, a passive charge, somewhere on the front of that vehicle. Because, let me tell you, Pearce, that thing went up like a can of gasoline under a flamethrower. *Ka-wham*. Pieces of it rained down everywhere.

The man with the RPG looked up at the sky. Could be he sensed a drone nearby. His glance gave me a good shot of his face. I wasn't *sure*, but... Blacking on his face or not, I thought that was Major Roger Verrick, down there.

I caught flashes from the front of the truck and I realized the two men flanking the truck were opening fire through the open doors.

Even from the drone's high point of view I could tell the men inside were shot all to pieces. Had to be.

I thought about calling in a strike on the shooters, or calling in other observers—but I didn't know for sure what was going on. If that *had* been Verrick, there could be an operational reason for all of this. Those guys in the truck and the rear humvee might be anyone...

Maybe Verrick had warned me away from observing this area for legit reasons.

But this sure didn't feel legit.

The killers pulled the bodies out of the cab of the truck, climbed up, and took over...They must've settled down in puddles of blood, on those seats. Not giving a damn.

The two in back of the truck returned to the front, one of them carrying the RPG launcher, and stood by. The truck drove around the parked humvee, and waited a ways ahead. One of the men with the RPG fired at the front humvee. That one blew up too.

Then they tossed the RPG in the brush, jogged up to the truck, and got in the back. And the truck drove off.

I didn't know definitely who most of the guys who'd done the killing were. I had one uncertain I.D.. I didn't know who they'd killed. I didn't know who to turn to.

So I started analyzing the images on my own time.

The faces weren't sharply defined until I pulled in the analysis and enhancement software. There, first guy who'd looked at the sky—Major Roger Verrick. Second guy, Rafe Callahan.

Maybe this had been some a U.S. black ops takedown. Could be that it was something so classified it had a classification level I'd never heard of. There were rumors of accesses like that.

So I didn't say anything, not right away. I'd have to find some discreet way to ask about this.

But I had trouble sleeping for two days, wondering about it. Not feeling right.

Then I heard about the al Qaeda attack on one of our delivery convoys. “Yeah, we lost a buncha guys,” Specialist Gamble was saying, in the mess tent, as he speared roast beef and shoved it into his mouth. He was chewing with his mouth open and gabbing at the same time as usual. “Navy SEALs killed, what I heard. Six good men down. The front humvee hit some kinda IED, then your garden variety terrorists come out with RPGs and they nail the humvees and steal the truck.”

“What was in the truck?” I asked.

“I’m not supposed to say...” Gamble swallowed, drank some milk, and then glanced around.

I knew he’d get around to telling me what he’d heard. He was one of those guys who like people to think they’re “in the know”. He *was* in the know, too, because he was tasked on the ultra-frequency receiver that decrypted intel stuff; he turned it into reports for people in the high access loop.

Now he lowered his voice and went on, “Money! Al Qaeda ripped off more a hundred-forty million bucks in cash. Bundles of cash, piled up like it was nothin’ but notebook paper shipping out of a warehouse! It was going to pay off Somali warlords, see, get them on our side.”

“They shipped it in cash?”

“Sure! Like all that big cash that disappeared into Iraq, years ago, remember that?”

“Uh huh. They never did catch those guys...”

“Well, word is, this was terrorists killed those guys in the trucks and humvees, stole that money intended for the guys who were gonna switch sides against ‘em...But listen, bud, you didn’t hear it from me!”

Terrorists. That was the official story. Only I'd confirmed that was Verrick out there—and Callahan.

So what did I do then, Pearce? Did I leak the stuff anonymously? Did I get myself sent back to the DC, so I could slip right to top levels with what I'd seen—what I'd recorded?

No! Like a dumbjack, I went to my base commander, right there on the island. I took it to General Van Ness, and I told him all about it. I gave him a disk with the goods on it.

Van Ness went white when he heard that stuff. I didn't realize why at the time. I thought he was just worried about guys from his command ripping off money.

About an hour later I was just going over to the drone control trailer when I almost ran into Specialist Gamble—he came off frightened when he saw me.

Whoosh, he turned on his heel and went the other way.

I can read the signs in the military.

So right then I went to the CIA attaché, told her what I'd seen—I can't give you her name. Well, she stared at me for a long moment after I told her the story, then said, "How about some evidence?". I told her sure, I'll get it.

I went to my bunk. The only other copy I'd made of that disk should've been in my personal effects case—it was gone. I went to the trailer, looked in the hard drive of the PC I'd used. Nothing.

Then I realized it was not even the same PC. The one I'd used was missing.

I went back to her, told her what had happened. I said somebody was covering up. She wasn't letting on if she believed me or not. She said, here,

fill out this form...

I did. I heard her talking on the phone to her boss in Washington as I filled out the report. She seemed genuinely concerned I might be telling the truth.

Turned out, that didn't do me any good.

Half an hour later, I stepped out of the Agency's Quonset, and two MPs were waiting there. They put me under arrest.

General Van Ness had "turned me in". He claimed there was evidence that I'd sold classified data to Al Qaeda operatives.

During the preliminary hearing I demanded to know what evidence he had against me. He produced a doctored clip from the disk I'd given him.

They rushed me into military court as fast as they could. Major Verrick came in and perjured himself with about ten large lies, cool as a cucumber the whole time.

My legal rep wanted to bring Captain Callahan in. Rafe Callahan apparently had been drunk ever since the incident, maybe having an attack of conscience.

They couldn't find him for a while. Then they found him in pieces.

He'd gotten killed in a handy terrorist bomb attack while he was on leave. Something arranged by Verrick, I figure.

A handy explosion would've taken care of me too if I hadn't gone to the CIA attaché. But after that it'd look too suspicious if they arranged for me to die like Callahan.

The CIA attaché was on my side. But the attaché couldn't save me from prison and a dishonorable discharge and a ruined reputation. Van Ness and

Verrick put it around that I had some connection with the “terrorists” who’d stolen the cash. They couldn’t prove it but a lot of people believed it.

I had a pretty good military lawyer. But in the end it was a Master Sergeant’s word against a General’s. The General’s version of my disk didn’t seem authentic to any of the I.T. people looking at it, and it was thrown out as evidence against me.

Verrick called me an accomplice to murder, in the hearing. I lost it and slugged Verrick, right then and there, knocked him on his keister. I said *he* was the murderer; he got up and hit me back and then the MPs moved in.

I was convicted of that attack on a superior officer, mitigated by circumstances, and perjury for supposedly lying about what I’d seen, and they gave me a year in military prison. I think I’d have gotten more time, maybe life, but the CIA attaché pulled some strings for me.

So that’s it. Roger Verrick’s a murderer—killed some good American soldiers. And one bad one—Callahan.

And Verrick hoisted more than a hundred million dollars in cash. Somehow laundered it.

I heard he bought a lot of shares in Blume after his discharge, amongst other things. His family already owned a lot of shares. Now Verrick owns a lot more. He doesn’t control the company—but he’s powerful there. So he got himself shoehorned into the security boss job.

That makes him more powerful still. A hard man to bring down.

#

“You see what I mean about having a conscience?” Wolfe said. “It’ll get you.”

“I see what you mean, Wolfe,” said Pearce, from the television screen. “But...I ran from my own conscience, for most of my life...”

“Didn’t seem like that to me, when I was a kid.”

“I tried to be decent. But not hard enough. And when I buried my conscience away people got hurt, Wolfe. People I loved—they got caught in the crossfire of my life. They died and it was my fault. Way I look at it now, in the long run, conscience is pretty much all we’ve got. Otherwise we all turn into Roger Verrick.”

Wolfe snorted. “Verrick!” He winced, remembering the gunfight in the Four Clubs. “I don’t know what I was thinking, confronting him at a mob casino. It was like I was wound up tight by a year in ‘Disciplinary’. The spring all of a sudden...uncoiled. And there I was in the Four Clubs, waving a gun around.”

“Maybe it’s not such a bad thing,” Pearce mused. “You’ve got him off balance now. Worried. A man off-balance makes mistakes. It might force him to show his hand. What we need is to prove he’s hooked in with the Club.” After a moment’s silence, he added, “There are rumors about something else. Something called Purity.”

“Which is what?”

“I don’t know. Some secret organization moving in on Chicago. Doing a search on Verrick, I found a sketchy piece by an investigating journalist, trying to find out just what Purity is. The journalist disappeared—and next time I went online to look at the article again, it was gone too. The journalist claimed Purity is a secret political organization using a front company called Iceberg Investments. And Roger Verrick is one of the names from Iceberg’s board of directors. There’s not much information about Iceberg out there, though. We look into that, maybe we can find out what Verrick had against me—and find some evidence that helps you clear your name.”

“Starting where? Seems like the dirt on Purity’s been cleaned up.”

“Starting with the guy who tried to shoot me. Identify him, maybe we’ll work from there back to Verrick and Iceberg. See what you can do with that image I got from the train station. You’re the expert on long range image enhancement. We get a face, we’ll run it through ctOS facial recognition, see if we come up with something.”

Wolfe figured he was committed now. He’d been looking for Pearce anyway. He shouldn’t let his paranoia put him off his only ally. “Okay. You got it, Pearce. I’ll do it.”

“I’m gonna do some more checking on you. Could be I’ll have that special tool I mentioned for you, pretty soon.”

“When do I see you in person?”

“The time will come. I’ve got to keep my head down now. I don’t know if you heard—but someone recently tried to blow it off my shoulders.”

Then Aiden Pearce’s head and shoulders vanished—from the TV screen. It was replaced by a pink cartoon bear in a toilet paper commercial.

Wolfe sighed and turned off the TV.

CHAPTER FIVE

Roger Verrick was playing videogames that killed things for real.

He loved that idea.

He was in a sprawling, well protected rural house, about a hundred miles southwest of Chicago. But it wasn't an old house—it was the latest in Smart Houses, a home-automation prototype owned by Blume and sometimes used by Blume executives. Verrick was just out there for the weekend, to mix work and play—and to throw his enemies off, if they were setting up an attack on him in town.

The “hunting exercise”, as he called it, was in a comfortable basement, what used to be called a rumpus room, with carpets on the floor, sofas, a refrigerator full of beer—and a wide desk with several monitors set up. Verrick was sitting at the desk, operating the system through a simple mouse, like a PC videogame. Only it wasn't a videogame really—it was a set up for controlling a hunting drone.

The hunting drone was illegal, of course. That was part of the fun. Since the laws were enforced by an Order that Verrick despised, he enjoyed breaking them when he could get away with it. He needed the recreation right now, too. It took his mind off Wolfe—and that ache in his lower spine. Verrick managed not to think about taking the pills when he was hunting—at least, hunting in this comfy way. He had made up his mind to cut back on the Oxycodone. Had to focus on getting all the pieces in places, all the dominoes that would fall over in a long row, triggering the Iceberg Project...

Standing behind Verrick, humming annoyingly to himself and rocking on his heels, was the project's chief technician, Geoff Starling, a former Unmanned Aerial Vehicle designer for the USAF. Post Air Force, Geoff Starling was getting flabby and sloppy. He almost always wore the same one-

piece AF mechanic's coveralls. And Starling didn't bathe enough. Verrick could smell him.

"Starling," Verrick said, guiding the drone not far over the treetops of the woods near the farm, "do step back from me, won't you please? At least a yard back."

"Sir, certainly, yes sir," said Starling, in that obsessive-compulsive way he had. He washed his hands every thirty minutes but rarely washed his clothing or his person.

Starling stepped back, and Verrick focused on slowing the drone till the delta-shaped aluminum and fiberglass UAV was almost hovering over the slightly snow-flecked grove of black walnut and sycamore trees. Of course, he couldn't see the drone directly—he saw an outline of it generated by the program. But his point of view was actually angled down on the treetops from the camera in the base of the drone. "Thought I saw something move down there, between the trees," he muttered.

Verrick slowly slid the wheel on the mouse forward, inching the UAV over a small clearing. There was a little meadow about a hundred feet below. And in entering the meadow, taking delicate steps, moved a deer—a doe, with its mulish ears up and twitching. Perhaps the doe was hearing the distant whirr of the drone and not recognizing the sound. It took a few more steps, looking back and forth, picking its way through dimpled patches of snow...

"There she is, sir, yes sir," Starling said, looking at the screen from behind Verrick.

"Starling—keep quiet, I've got to concentrate."

"Sir, yes sir."

Verrick moved the drone a little more ahead, then right clicked to bring up the drone action menu. He clicked on *reduce altitude*, and the ground seemed

to slowly zoom toward the camera...

Then the deer looked right up at him, her large brown eyes startled. She poised to leap away...

With a flick of his hand he selected the aim cursor, swung the crosshairs to the deer, and clicked on *fire*.

Somewhere, about a half mile from here, the drone—in actual fact—fired a rifle round from the tube on its base. The UAV jiggled in the air with the recoil, but not too much, most of the recoil being redistributed by hydraulic pressure release devices.

The deer was halfway through a leap—and was struck in the rear right leg. It stumbled, fell, then was up again, limping...

“Ha *haaaaa*,” Verrick said. “I got it!”

“Sir, yes sir!” Starling agreed eagerly.

Verrick tracked the deer a little farther as it staggered along, centered the crosshairs on its back, and fired again—right through its spine. The deer went down, twitching.

The deer probably wasn’t dead yet. There were only four rounds in the magazine. He decided to save the other two, in case he could find something else to kill.

“Sir, want me to arrange for that deer to be picked up for food, sir?” asked Starling. He had a taste for venison.

“No, don’t bother. Is that a rabbit, over there?”

Verrick tracked the UAV over to the other side of the meadow, thinking that the next step would be to get someone human out there to hunt; someone

he needed to eliminate anyway. Like, for example, Aiden Pearce. Or a certain former Delta Force sergeant...

Mick Wolfe. How would it be to have Mick Wolfe running like a rabbit through the woods under an armed UAV? Ironical and appropriate. Because Wolfe had used another drone to spy on Verrick's own special acquisitions operation. Wolfe had nearly stopped that money from getting to Verrick—and to Purity.

Sadly, it would be taking too much of a chance to put Wolfe out in those woods to let him run free so he could be hunted down like an animal. There was always a chance Wolfe could get away in a scenario like that.

Verrick wasn't going to take that chance. He was going to make sure Wolfe died at the first chance that came along...

Wolfe couldn't be allowed to interfere with the Iceberg project, nor could Pearce. They were pushy, inquisitive, threatening. They might find out about it, if they were persistent and lucky. And if people involved in the project didn't keep their damned mouths shut.

Verrick spun in his desk chair, to aim a sudden glare at Starling. "You remembering what we talked about, with respect to Iceberg, Starling? High level discretion?"

"Sir, yes sir, I do remember," Starling said hastily, rubbing his hands together in washing motions.

"Just see that we get all those drones ready when we need them."

"Sir, you sure you don't want them weaponized, sir?"

"Yeah. I'm sure. *They're* not the weapons. Just make sure they'll do what they're supposed to. Or you'll be running through those woods out there, under one of your own drones, instead of some dumb animal..."

#

Eight P.M., and Mick Wolfe trudged along a snowy street on the Southside of Chicago, just a few blocks from Washington Park. Cars had made dark, slushy ruts down the middle of the street, past a boarded over restaurant and a liquor store; a truck hissed along through the slush, then turned the corner.

It wasn't thick snow; the snowfall had been sparse. Thinking like a Delta Force operative, Wolfe wondered if snow was to his advantage, or disadvantage, in the coming conflict on this terrain. Probably the latter—anything that slowed him down would increase his risk, if he were being hunted. And he knew he'd be hunted.

He did have one advantage, if Aiden Pearce could be believed. Pearce had gotten back in touch; his face, this time, appearing on the PC where Wolfe had been sitting.

“You’ll find something that looks like a television remote control, in the top drawer of that desk,” Pearce had said. *“That’s a security cam scrambler. Take it with you, and anytime you’re crossing a street it’ll blot out the cameras on the block you’re coming to. It’s designed to look like a glitch in the system.”*

“Take it with me where?”

“You’re going out to a Tech Shack store! I can see the PC is running slow for your program—you’re going to need an external drive to speed things up. I can’t arrange for it to be brought to you, right now. Too risky. You can simply buy one at the Tech Shack—ten blocks north. I recommend you walk there. Don’t trust the cabs, not till you hear differently. You’ll see someone you’ve met once before on the way—Blank. He may have a message for you.”

“But Pearce—”

But then Pearce's image had vanished.

And now Wolfe was trudging back from the store with his small backpack over one shoulder; the external drive was tucked into a plastic bag inside the pack. He'd gotten to the store just two minutes before it had closed.

He looked nervously up the street toward the block of abandoned projects. He wasn't happy about being out after dark, in Black Viceroy territory. He had a gun, but so what? How many Viceroys would he run into? They'd all be armed.

"Wolfe..." came the gravelly voice, from the alley.

Wolfe stiffened, turning toward the alley. Then he remembered what Pearce had said. "Blank? That you?"

"Yeah. Come in here, outta the street lights..."

Wolfe crossed the sidewalk, stepped into the shadows. A silhouette stood there—the man's breath plumed out into a slanting beam of street light. Blank stepped forward, just enough so that Wolfe could see his scar-blurred face, and a bit of his gnarled, burn-reddened hands.

Wolfe shuddered. He'd met Blank once before in a homeless encampment after asking people on the street how to find Pearce. But he hadn't gotten a good look at Blank there, in all the smoke from the campfires and the uneven glow from the flickering flame light. Blank had listened to Wolfe's enquiries, and approached him, claiming he could take a message to Pearce, for a price.

Wolfe had taken a chance—and Blank had come through. Was Blank the one who'd betrayed Pearce to the hitman that day? It seemed unlikely. Pearce seemed to trust Blank implicitly.

"Keep quiet a li'l minute here," came Blank's gurgling voice, as a group of young black men in black and orange hoodies coats went striding by.

Wolfe nodded and looked Blank over.

Blank wore a grubby overcoat that might have been black—or might have turned black; its lower hem was frayed almost like the fringe on a leather jacket; two of its large black buttons were missing. A wide brimmed, dented slouch hat angled almost rakishly on Blank's head, half hiding one eye—instead of a hat band, the hat had a battery powered electric light strapped on it, a surprisingly powerful light, now switched off. Blank's brown eyes were all that remained intact of his face—the rest of it had been burned away. Pink scar tissue from the old burns overlapped like bandages of raw flesh across his cheeks. His mouth had been burned lipless, and his snagged, blackened teeth were perpetually visible. His nose was mostly burned away; one of his eyelids was just a parchment-like scrap of skin; his eyebrows were just a memory. His face looked, to Wolfe, like a face in a drawing that had been mostly erased by a hurried artist. There *was* no clear cut face there. That was one reason he was called Blank.

There was another reason, Wolfe knew. Blank lived off the grid, even when he walked around within the grid.

Many homeless people actually had cell phones. Cheap phones were given to them by family, or social services. They often used free computers in a library, or borrowed a friend's laptop. Some homeless were ex-I.T. workers who'd been laid off one too many times, and still had a lot of tech when they could get it powered up.

But not Blank. Not only did he have no cell phone, he didn't even have an electric watch, or a portable radio. He had no driver's license, no state I.D., no social services I.D. No identification card at all. He had no wallet, and it was said he had no tattoos—or none that hadn't been burned away. His fingers had been as badly burned as his face...so he had no fingerprints.

Facial recognition wouldn't work on a man without a face. And he never told anyone his real name. People on the street knew him only by the moniker "Blank".

Blank was blank.

“Wolfe...” Blank’s voice was a gurgling growl—his voice, too, was blank, without its original character, because his vocal chords had been burned by hot smoke in the nameless fire that had burned him so badly. Rumor had it that years ago, when he was first homeless, Blank had been sleeping in a crack house, and someone careless with his dope lighter had set the place on fire. Most people in the house had burned; Blank had gotten out...or part of him had.

But that story was just a rumor. Blank’s past was blank, too.

Wolfe could see why the scarred derelict was useful to Aiden Pearce. It was hard to trace Blank—which made him the perfect “bagman” and streetside go-between.

“They’re gone,” Blank said, turning toward the street.

Wolfe saw, then, that Blank’s left ear was missing. There was just a hole in the side of his head.

“Who was that?” Wolfe asked.

“Gangbangers. Viceroy’s.”

“You got a message for me?”

“Maybe. I’m just lookin’ in on you for Pearce.”

“He can look in on me anytime he wants, what I’ve seen.”

“You ain’t using the camera scrambler?”

“I am, yeah.”

“So he needs me to check on you while you’re out, at least in some places. ‘Nother thing, he just decided: you get the tool for sure. I’ll be telling you

where to find it tomorrow. Meet me at noon....”

“Noon tomorrow. Okay. Where?”

“The camp where we first met.”

“That where you stay?”

Blank took off his hat for just a moment to wipe the top of his head with his hand...and Wolfe saw that most of the tramp’s hair had been burned away in that long ago conflagration. Only a few tufts of gray hair stuck out, in random spots.

Blank put his hat back on and said, “I don’t stay *any* place longer’n six or seven hours at most. Mostly not longer’n six or seven *minutes*. Got to keep moving! Not much use to anybody if I don’t keep moving.”

“Okay. The homeless camp under that same overpass, right? At noon. So—you have no cell phone...how does Pearce get in touch with you?”

“He has his ways. Puts messages up for me somewhere. They come and go quick and only I know what they mean. Uses what he calls ‘a drop’ too.”

“I know what that is.”

“Tomorrow at noon, Wolfe. Careful going back to that safehouse he’s got you in. Watch your back on the way there. And before you leave here, press the scrambler again for the cameras. The effect probably done wore off.”

Then he switched on the hat light, and went out of the alley...and Wolfe knew that the hat’s glare blurred his image when he walked under the cameras. His face was “faceless”—but a scarred face is recognizable too. The glare made him just a blur from the neck up, so they couldn’t even see his hat.

Wolfe waited a couple of minutes, then went out onto the sidewalk. There was no sign of Blank out there now. He was gone.

#

Wolfe had almost reached the partly pushed-over fence around the projects building when he realized that someone was following him.

He turned, and saw several black men in hoodies and sagging pants walking stolidly his way, their eyes locked on him.

Wolfe stepped onto the overturned fence, clambered over it, and hurried between the old, thickly tag-marked high rises. He went as fast as he could without running. Running would show fear, instead of respect. Showing fear was dangerous out here.

On the wall to his left was a big crown-shape, a cartoon of a king's crown, stenciled in day-glo orange. *Black Viceroy's*. No one had dared put their tags over that symbol.

He stepped over debris, boots crackling on broken glass, and strode quickly around a corner of the building to the left, and the now-doorless entrance of the high rise. Straight ahead through the door was a rubble-strewn corridor; to the right was the concrete and metal stairs he was going to take up to the seventh floor.

At least, he'd have done that if three more gangbangers hadn't blocked his way.

They stepped out of the stairs, two of them carrying crowbars in their hands. The third one, the tall one in the middle with his hair dyed orange, had a 9 mm pistol in his waistband. Day-glo orange shoelaces were woven into his signature sneakers, and orange trim on his black vinyl windbreaker.

“Where you think *you’re* going?” the Black Viceroy asked. And the Viceroy put his hand on the butt of his 9 mm semi-automatic.

CHAPTER SIX

The tall one in the middle was their leader, Wolfe figured. He was the Black Viceroy here who had had the requisite nimbus of authority. And he had a little more maturity—he looked to be in his mid to late thirties.

Wolfe looked him in the eye and said, “I’ve got a gun, too. We don’t want to use those. Somebody probably get shot. Might be me.”

The tall one almost smiled. “Let me see the gun. Show it real slow.”

Wolfe, real slow, unbuttoned his coat, opened it, to show the .38 stuck in his belt.

“That a lot smaller gun than yours, Shuggie,” said the Viceroy on Shuggie’s left.

Shuggie grinned, showing a gold grill. “Yeah. I got a niner. He got a snub nose.”

“At this range, a .38 will do the job really well,” Wolfe said, keeping his voice calm and even.

“Don’t even think about it, man,” Shuggie said. “You better look behind you.”

Wolfe glanced over his shoulder. The three Black Viceroyes who’d been following him earlier were there, a few steps away. One of them lifted up his sweatshirt to show his own 9 mm pistol.

Wolfe looked back at Shuggie and nodded. “You could rob me, but I got only twenty dollars on me. No credit cards. Boots aren’t worth much. I haven’t been out of prison all that long so...I’m still kinda broke.”

“What you got in that backpack?” Shuggie asked.

“An external hard drive.”

“And where you taking that?”

“Home. Just cutting through the old projects. Heading about ten blocks up. Ducked in here ‘cause I don’t like people following me.”

“You lying,” said Shuggie, his gaze steady and his voice flat. “You were going into this building and you was doing it for a reason. We saw you come out. What’s up in that old building?”

This wasn’t good. They were going to clean out the safehouse if he didn’t stop them.

“Okay,” Wolfe said. He shrugged. “Crappy little room, pirated electricity, old used PC.”

“What kinda PC?”

“Dell.”

“Piece of crap. But we got to look the place over. And we got to kick your ass for good measure. And if you don’t like it, we paint the walls with your brains.”

“Place isn’t worth walking up all those floors to look at,” Wolfe said, meeting Shuggie’s eyes. “Just a squat.”

“We got to look at it,” said the Viceroy on Shuggie’s right. “See what’s there. This is Viceroy’s territory. Everything here belong to us.”

Wolfe shook his head. There were secrets up there. He owed Pearce. He had to cover for him. “Nope. You got to kill me. You can do that. But...be

boring.”

Shuggie looked at him with his eyebrows raised. “Boring?”

“Sure. A fight’s more interesting. Two of your guys. You let me pass if I take them down.”

Shuggie snorted. “*Two?*”

“Three if you want. Unarmed. No guns. No knives. I don’t have any blades on me...”

Shuggie laughed. “Motherfucker’s out of his mind.”

“I take him down my own self,” said the one on Shuggie’s left.

“When I tell you, Renfo,” Shuggie said. He turned to the one on his right. “Lordy?”

“Lord Washington always do it,” the man said. One of those “talk about himself in the third person” guys, Wolfe figured.

“I can do both at once,” Wolfe said, putting his backpack on the ground, out of the way. “But...” He buttoned up his coat. “No guns.”

“Then give your gun here,” Renfo said, sticking out his hand demandingly.

Wolfe shook his head. “Shuggie can cover me with his niner. But I’m not giving up my gun.”

“Never mind that shit,” Shuggie said. “He wants two, give ‘em two. Go on then, Renfo, since you gotta open your yap about it.”

Without wasting another split second, Renfo stepped in a little before Lordy and swung a long looping right at Wolfe's face.

Wolfe ducked his head back, let the blow pass, grabbed Renfo's arm, twisted—and flipped the Viceroy over his hip so that Renfo fell heavily onto his back.

Lordy sunk a fist into Wolfe's gut—Wolfe tightened his abdominal muscles, took the punch grunting, but managed to keep his breath from being knocked out of him. Then he set himself and a split second later straight armed Lordy in the chin with the heel of his hand, using a classic martial arts move. As Lordy went over, Wolfe spun and clipped Renfo on the side of the head just as the Viceroy was trying to get back to his feet. Renfo went down again, Wolfe turned, reset his stance and brought a knee up to catch Lordy in the nose as the man tried to straighten up...

“Okay, enough of those dumbjacks,” Shuggie said, stepping in.

Shuggie set himself into a stance almost identical to Wolfe's, then neatly blocked Wolfe's left jab. Wolfe danced back, but not without getting a ringing crack against the right side of his head from the chopping edge of Shuggie's left hand.

Uh-oh.

Wolfe and Shuggie circled one another, then Shuggie flashed his right hand, Wolfe took the bait and raised an arm to block—but it was a feint, and Shuggie stepped in under Wolfe's block with his other fist, and only a snaking move to the right kept Wolfe from getting knocked off his feet. As it was, he caught a good clip on the edge of his jaw.

Wolfe rocked back from the blow, turned his recoil into a spin, came around in a kick-fighting move. Shuggie seemed ready for that—he grabbed Wolfe's kicking boot and twisted.

Wolfe went down, rolling, pulling his leg free. The sound of the gathered Viceroy's cheering was loud in his ears.

"You're right," Shuggie said. "This isn't as boring as shooting you. But it's not that much fun either. Too ea—"

He didn't finish saying "easy" because Wolfe had scissored his legs around Shuggie's ankles, pulled him off balance.

Wolfe was up in under a second, leaping onto Shuggie.

The two men rolled, struggling for control, each trying to get in a punch.

Shuggie rolled on top, and Wolfe tucked his right knee, managed to flip Shuggie off—but Shuggie, as he went, clutched at Wolfe, got a hold of his shirt at the top of his coat, and Wolfe felt it rip. Buttons went with it, popped off his old Army coat.

Wolfe wrenched free, rolled, got to his feet. He prepared to make a move...

Wolfe's coat was partway open, his shirt ripped...

Shuggie was staring at Wolfe's chest. There was a tattoo there most people didn't see...

Wolfe used Shuggie's hesitation to kick at his adversary's knees. But Shuggie had whip-fast reflexes—and he slipped to one side, twisted his body, grabbed Wolfe's leg, flipped Wolfe onto his back.

Mick Wolfe lay there gasping, the wind knocked out of him.

The Viceroy's were laughing, hooting mockingly.

Shuggie stepped in close, almost standing over Wolfe—then reached down and put his hand out to Wolfe.

The other Viceroys went silent in astonishment.

Wolfe hesitated—then reached up and took Shuggie’s hand.

Shuggie pulled Wolfe to his feet, kept the handclasp for a moment. Then he let go.

Wolfe looked at him, wondering what was up.

Slowly, Shuggie rolled up his right arm. There was a tattoo up there, near the elbow. It was identical to the one on Wolfe’s chest.

The tattoo showed a black bayonet within a red arrowhead shape. It was the symbol of Delta Force: Special Forces Operational Detachment.

“Anybody can have a tattoo,” Shuggie said, rolling his sleeve down. “But you have Delta moves, too. I thought I recognized a couple of those. ‘Course—my moves were better.”

Wolfe nodded, ruefully rubbing his jaw. “Hand to hand wasn’t a specialty of mine.”

“Technical?” Shuggie nodded toward the backpack.

“Yeah. I was in the field for a while.”

“Where?”

“Afghanistan, Mali, Somalia.”

Shuggie looked at him. “What name?”

Wolfe hesitated, then decided he was outnumbered, out fought, and outgunned—so he’d better be honest with this man. “Wolfe. Mick Wolfe.”

Shuggie frowned. "Heard something from a guy just outta North Africa. Something about a Wolfe getting in trouble with General Van Ness."

"That'd be me."

"That's how you ended up in prison?"

"Military prison. Disciplinary barracks."

Shuggie sniffed, looked at the sky as if he were wondering about the weather. "I had my own run in with Van Ness. One of the reasons I left the Army. Guy's a shitbag. Once he's got it in for you..."

"Yeah. I heard he started his command in Iraq. You were under him there?"

"That's where it was. I was working out of Baghdad almost four years. And Van Ness doesn't like blacks being in Special Forces at all."

"I trusted the motherfucker. Tried to report something...he didn't want reported."

Shuggie nodded slowly. "Mick Wolfe. Lot of decorations, I heard? Silver Star?"

Wolfe shrugged. "For what it's worth."

"Not worth a penny to most people. But it's worth something to me anyway."

"Shuggie," Renfo said, "this sombitch lost the fight! We get him to open that door upstairs. I heard there's a place on the seventh floor, hard to get into. Gotta be his."

"We don't go up there, today," Shuggie said.

“Aw, Shuggie, come on! There’s a lot of guys in the Army around, don’t mean—”

Shuggie spun around, his niner suddenly in his hand. He shut Renfo up by shoving the nine millimeter pistol in the Viceroy’s mouth. “Say one more thing like that, I blow your head right up, Renfo. This man ain’t just Army. He’s *Delta Force*.”

He shoved with the gun and Renfo staggered back, choking.

Lordy cleared his throat and, stepping cautiously back, he said, “Is one thing you ought to know, Shuggie. There’s word out about Mick Wolfe. The Club wants him. They got two hundred grand on his head. He’s the one shot up their casino the other night.”

Shuggie looked at Wolfe with renewed appreciation. “No shit! Two hundred thou!”

Wolfe slowly lifted his right hand, preparing to grab his .38. He doubted he could shoot his way out, but he had to try.

Shuggie shook his head at Wolfe. “You don’t need to go for that gun. I wouldn’t take two hundred thou, or a million damn dollars from those pricks in the Club—not for any fucking reason. Not even as a pretty present tied in a bow.”

Lordy groaned. “Two hundred K is a lot of fucking money, bro.”

Shuggie nodded. “Yeah, kind of. But the Club’s our enemy. So now we got another reason to watch this man’s back. Two reasons now. He’s my friend...and he’s our enemy’s enemy.”

He turned to the five other Viceroys there, and swung a pointing finger to encompass them all. “This man is under my protection! You all got that? *My. Fucking. Protection!* He is an honorary Viceroy, far as I’m concerned. I owe my life three times to men like this. Anybody don’t like it better see me in

person. You spread the word! No motherfucker touches this man—and nobody says *shit* to the Club about where he is! Or I'll put your damn stupid heads on spikes!"

#

"Wolfe? Any luck with that imaging?"

It was Pearce's voice, coming from the TV. It almost made Wolfe fall out of his chair.

"Jesus, Pearce, I wish you'd give me some warning."

"I specialize in not giving warnings. What happened to your shirt?"

"Black Viceroy's. Little run in."

"I heard they were tracking you. But—you didn't kill any of 'em, did you?"

"No. Found a friend. Close enough to a friend. Their neighborhood boss, name of Shuggie."

"Shuggie. There's worse than him around. How'd you friend up with him? Military connections?"

"Something like that."

"Better put on a new shirt, clean up that jacket."

"I plan to. You don't need to micromanage, Pearce."

Pearce chuckled. "So how about that image enhancement?"

"Yeah. I got it. Can you pick it up out of this PC?"

“I can.”

The PC wasn't hooked up to anything. But there was something concealed in it, Wolfe figured, some tech that responded to a signal, and when exactly signaled it transmitted on a discrete wifi frequency...to some local hub that sent it to another, and so on, till Pearce got it through the almost legendary black market apps on his smartphone.

“It's up on the desktop,” Wolfe said. “Do you need me to—”

“No, no, I got it. So that's the son of a bitch who tried to splash my brains on the sidewalk...”

“Yeah. I think it is.” The image of the shooter, at the train station Pearce had traced him to, was now fully enhanced. Wolfe knew that enhancement programs could distort too—he'd seen it happen with those “face on Mars” photos—but he knew how to do it without distortion and anyway, he recognized the face that had emerged from the process. It was the guy he'd seen shooting at Pearce. He hadn't seen him with much clarity out there on the street, but he was pretty sure this was the shooter.

“Okay, I'm gonna run this through ctOS facial recognition. They've got access to an international database. Hold tight.”

The wait wasn't more than ten seconds.

“Uh huh,” Pearce said. “Here he is. Stan Grampus is the prick's name. Says he's rumored to be an assassin used by fixers. Works out of Chicago and St. Louis mostly. I hope he's still in Chicago. I don't want to go to St. Louis to find him.”

“What else they got on him?”

“Ambidextrous, it says. Amphetamine habit. Caught with half an ounce of amphetamines about six months ago. Charges dropped because they couldn't find the evidence...Oh and look who arrested him. Detective Tranter, CPD.

He's the dirty gold shield I saw you with in that parking lot. The one who tried to warn you off. I figure this Tranter 'lost' the evidence in exchange for Grampus doing work for him."

"And maybe some cash thrown in?"

"Maybe. Good chance Tranter hired Grampus to hit me. Doesn't seem likely to have been Tranter's personal priority to have me killed. He did it for someone else.."

"So whose priority was it?"

"That's what we gotta find out. From Tranter—or maybe Grampus. Maybe Tranter told him..."

"That system say where to find Grampus?"

"No. It doesn't. Last known address is now a confirmed 'no longer resides'. But if he works for *fixers*...I just might have a lead for you. First thing you need to do, though, is meet Blank tomorrow. He'll wire you in—and then you can be a serious player."

"Pearce—" Wolfe turned in the desk chair just in time...to see Pearce's image vanish from the screen of the TV.

#

Noon, under the Dwight D. Eisenhower Expressway, near West Van Buren.

The homeless encampment beneath the freeway ramp overpass was like a great overcrowded bird's nest to Wolfe's eye. Spilling out from under the concrete and steel overpass were broad, moldy pieces of cardboard, rusty sheet metal, large plastic black bags and old paint stained blue tarps were spread out in a rough circle, like the outline of a nest around the edges of the

camp. Tents, some of them homemade, were propped up here and there; at almost regular intervals were shopping carts, some of them piled high by hoarding. A couple of people had made their own flags on scrappy wooden poles, rags with hand painted symbols snapping in the cold wind: one peace symbol, one obscene gesture. The indigent tried to grab some sleep, fully dressed against the cold as they lay in sleeping bags and under transparent plastic sheets.

There was surprisingly little trash. Most of the encampment tried to keep it clean.

Wolfe got some hostile looks as he walked through the encampment, and some curious looks; most of the squatters, lost in their own inner world, looked at him with dull, indifferent eyes.

Not standing out much from these people, he thought. Really have to get some new clothes.

“Did I see you here before?” asked a red-nosed, bearded man in a floppy hat and shaggy overcoat.

“Maybe,” Wolfe said. “I’ve been here before. I’m...” He remembered what Lulu had called him. “Mickey. You?”

“I’m Mayor Brock. I’m the mayor of this camp.”

“He’s full of shit,” said a toothless woman with lank gray hair, sitting on a sleeping bag, with another one wrapped around her shoulders. “He’s not mayor of nobody or nothing.”

“You see Blank around?” Wolfe asked.

“Blank? Yeah he’s...wait, you got to tell me something funny first. I don’t give nobody nothin’ unless they make me laugh.”

“That sleeping bag—you know what they call those in the Army?”

“What?”

“Fart sacks.”

She cackled at that and pointed. “Up there, underneath the freeway ramp!”

Between the concrete columns holding up this end of the freeway ramp was one of the only burning campfires here now—the fire department had recently made them extinguish the most obvious ones. This campfire, made from broken wooden pallets, was filling up the space under the ramp with gray smoke.

Wolfe wondered how long it would be before the smoke drifted up onto the freeway, attracting the cops. He’d better get his mission done here, and leave.

He worked his way carefully through debris, over a puddle of piss and between sleeping people, till he spotted Blank, who was squatting on the farther side of the fire. Wolfe couldn’t see what passed for Blank’s face, but he could see the familiar dented broad-brimmed hat and that heavy black overcoat.

Wolfe made his way to where Blank was hunkered; a ragged man in shapeless layers of clothes was hunkered beside him wearing a watch cap, his deeply lined face lean as a hatchet.

“I’ll tell you what, Blank,” said the man in the black watch cap, “they’re closin’ this encampment, and soon. Too close to downtown. Too many people, breakin’ too many rules. There’s rules to living in a place like this if you want the fucking cops to leave you alone.”

“I expect you’re right,” said Blank, in his gurgling rumble.

He looked up at Wolfe, as Wolfe coughed from the drifting smoke.

“Who this?” asked the man in the watch cap. He glared at Wolfe, showing eyes gone yellow, around their black irises—yellow as nicotine stains. “Might be the cops, his own self, undercover.”

“Not guilty of being a cop, your honor,” Wolfe told him.

The tramp didn’t think Wolfe’s attempt at humor was funny. “You better back off here, sonny boy.”

“Yeah, better go, Wolfe,” Blank said, standing up. He walked past Wolfe, discreetly sticking a piece of paper in Wolfe’s coat pocket as he went.

Wolfe turned to follow Blank. But Blank turned to him after a few steps, and growled, “Don’t follow me.”

“So that’s it, that’s what I’m here for?” Wolfe patted his pocket.

“Yeah. It’s enough.”

Wolfe nodded, turned, and quickly left the encampment.

#

Wolfe walked along a wet street where cars whooshed by from time to time. As he got to each corner, he put his hand in his pocket and used the ctOS camera scrambler Pearce had given. When he was two and a half blocks from the camp, he stepped into the recessed doorway of a locked emergency-exit, and read the message.

The note Blank had slipped into Wolfe’s pocket was just two handwritten lines in capital letters. One line said,

THIS WILL CHANGE EVERYTHING.

The second line was a nearby street address and the words

UNDER D, BEHIND B. MEMORIZE. DESTROY THIS.

“If you say so,” Wolfe muttered.

He memorized the note and tore it up into tiny pieces and then started along the street. As he walked he scattered little pieces of paper into the chilly wind bit by bit.

He trudged down the street toward the address he’d been given and fifteen minutes later he was there. The address was for a big, rectangular building on the corner, the building fronted by white stone. A fancy restaurant occupied its lowest floor. The restaurant was closed but he could see workers inside prepping it for a 12:30 opening time. *Under D, behind B. . .*

The restaurant was called Fern Gulley. Not a B or a D.

Wolfe walked around to the side of the building where he found a parking lot with only two cars in it. He saw nothing that prompted him to look under it. He walked around the next corner of the building, looked behind it.

An alley. A pretty nasty alley it was, with old filthy gray snow edging its darker parts.

To the left was a large white metal dumpster, still brimming with old garbage from the restaurant.

Under D. Did that mean under the dumpster? He hoped it didn’t mean he was supposed to climb in and look under the garbage inside it.

Then he noticed that the back wall of the building was all brick. Was *behind B*...behind a brick?

He glanced around, saw no one around, and hurried over to the dumpster. Then he flattened, crawled forward. It stank under here. There was a movement, close to his right hand—and saw two beady black eyes staring at him. It was a large, humped over brown rat.

The puzzled rat wriggled its snout toward Wolfe's hand, as if it were wondering if any part of him was good to eat.

“Get outta here!” Wolfe told it, swiping at the rodent.

The rat scurried off, and Wolfe crawled forward to the brick wall. He didn't see any obviously loose bricks. Maybe this was all a trick, a gag, to make a fool out of him...

But he noticed a brick to the right that seemed just faintly lighter than the rest. He reached out to it, tugged—and it came neatly away from the wall. He crawled closer, looked inside. There was a hole back there, behind the brick. And in it was a parcel wrapped in black plastic. He reached in, pulled the parcel out, and slowly wormed his way back out from under the dumpster.

He was glad to be out in the cold, bracing air. He stuck the package in his pocket, looked around, saw a drunk weaving down the alley down on his left.

Wolfe turned right, and headed for the nearest train station.

He decided to wait till he was back at home base to look in the package. Waiting wasn't easily. He badly wanted to look...

This will change everything...

CHAPTER SEVEN

Seline Garnera walked out of O'Hare airport, looking for a taxi to her hotel. She still had her duffel bag for luggage, but she wasn't wearing a uniform. She had a long white Armani coat on over a charcoal-colored suit, things she'd bought on her layover in London.

There was a line for taxis. She got in the line, and waited, trying to get clear in her mind the reason she had come to Chicago at all.

She was relieved to be out of the Marine Corps, in comfortable walking shoes, in civilian clothes, with her long black hair on her shoulders just the way she liked it. Sure, she was proud of serving in the Marines. But the military had some toxic seams deep down in it, like something deadly you'd find in a mine.

Probably she used the mine analogy, thinking about it, because her dad was a retired mining engineer. He'd worked in tin and copper and gold mines all over the world. After she'd gotten that nerve-racking meeting in Chicago over, she planned to fly to Northern Georgia to see her dad. He was going to be relieved she wasn't on that aircraft carrier anymore. He'd always been afraid terrorists would hit it when it was in port.

She hadn't seen much action—except off the coast of Libya during the overthrow of Gaddafi—but she'd done her part. She'd advanced to Chief Computer Security Specialist, and she'd found it interesting. But she had the misfortune, at least a misfortune in the military, of being a pretty good looking woman, and she'd had to fend off a lot of knuckleheads on that flattop. Carriers were mostly crewed by Navy men with some Marines on board, almost all of them men. Rough, lonely men. The worst that had happened was one groping, and some inappropriate talk. But she'd put a stop to it.

Her C.O. had been sympathetic, and he'd put the groper in the brig for a month. The Commander in Chief, the President of the USA himself, had pledged zero tolerance for sexual harassment and it had been working in the last year. The knuckleheads were starting to leave her alone. She'd even dated a naval lieutenant, when she was on leave, a nice guy who'd treated her in a gentlemanly way. Seline had been thinking about "re-upping", signing up for another four years...

But then she'd come across the "Van Ness files". And the military had soured for her. She didn't blame the whole military. She still believed in military service. But she had to get out, if she was to get any justice for Ruth Medina.

General Van Ness was Army, not Marines, but there were Marines involved in this too. And one Central Intelligence Agency attaché who'd disappeared...right after transmitting the Van Ness files to Seline.

Oh yes, Seline had known the CIA attaché—they'd been pretty good friends. She was civilian, a confident, sharp-eyed career CIA agent about forty years old: Ruth Medina, Italian-American like Seline. Ruth had been on the carrier, had transferred from the base on the island of Socotra, assigned to communications with North African classified troop activities. Agent Medina had done her job quietly, and sometimes she and Seline had eaten dinner together in the cafeteria, for mutual support. They'd talked about a lot of things, but since they were both sworn to secrecy about their work, they almost never spoke about it—and when they did they never broke the rules of classification.

One evening, as they ate in the cafeteria, Ruth had been unusually quiet. She kept glancing fretfully at her cell phone.

"Something wrong?" Seline had asked her, at last.

"Um...you have that app on your phone where stuff can be transferred to it just by touching it with another phone, if..."

“I do have that. Almost never get to use it.”

“Kay. Is it alright if I test mine, transfer a jpeg to yours, maybe a couple of them?”

“Sure!”

They set it up and the two women touched their phones together. Then Ruth signaled her to wait—and she sent Seline a text.

The text said, *Pretend to look at a jpeg. Don't look at file. Just keep for me.*

Seline nodded. She clicked on a photo she'd taken herself, off the fantail of the ship, pretended to study it, and smiled. “Nice!”

Soon after, Ruth smiled nervously at her, got up, and took her tray to clean it off...

And that was the last time Seline ever saw her.

Ruth disappeared from the ship the same night, somewhere off the coast of Yemen.

“Taxi, lady?”

Seline was jarred from her thoughts, and looked at the taxi driver, a smiling older black man.

“Sure. Michigan Shore Hotel.”

“I know the place. Let me take that duffel for you...”

“It's okay. I'll take it in back with me...”

She wasn't letting that bag out of her hands. In it, along with her uniform and passport and souvenirs and discharge papers, was a flashdrive.

And on the flashdrive was something that Ruth Medina had died for.

Seline was going to make sure Ruth hadn't died in vain.

#

Mick Wolfe sat down on the sofa in the safehouse, and unwrapped the package.

Inside the package was a black smartphone. One of the slightly larger types. It didn't seem unusual...

He looked for a note in the package, found nothing except a charger and an extra battery extension. No, there was one other thing. It looked like a small hearing aid. He realized it was some kind of Bluetooth device, so he could listen to the phone without seeming to, when he wanted.

He switched the phone on and waited. It booted up quickly, and almost immediately a message appeared, text within a jpeg frame:

W: Touch on the icon in the corner. And learn...

There's a program that will only exist on a temporary basis and that will teach you how to use this device.

I'm probably crazy to create another one with access to the new ctOS, and crazier to give it to you. Maybe this knock on the head has made me even crazier but you may as well take advantage of it. I still have some symptoms of a concussion, so I still have to stay off the streets to avoid getting worse. So here's a way you can bust a move for me. And for you. You and I knew each other back when. Your father helped me, so...I'm helping you, with this. And maybe we'll help each other...

P.

Wolfe's fingers trembled as he tapped the screen icon. The program came up with animated imagery showing the methodology for using what Wolfe thought of as the PearcePhone.

He read the directions excitedly, and then with increasing skepticism. For one thing, Pearce claimed the phone's transmissions were totally untraceable; no one could listen in on it, or trace back its calls. Wolfe doubted that was totally possible.

But this other stuff...taking control of traffic lights? Remotely shorting out power boxes? Controlling trains?

This phone couldn't possibly do all that...

Could it?

There was only one way to find out.

#

Southside Chicago, east 45th. Sleet was slanting through the dusk.

Wolfe had put a heavy dark blue hoodie on; he had the hood up, but his face was exposed. He hoped the improved facial scrambling app actually worked. The black market app transmitted a signal from the PearcePhone to nearby ctOS cameras, blurring his face in the camera itself.

But ordinary people on the street saw him as he really was, a lean white guy in a black neighborhood, an interloper with a two day growth of beard, just trucking along, hands in his pants' pockets, as if he had no particular place to go.

He was walking with the sleety wind to his back. He had the .36 under his hoodie, and the phone in one hand.

He'd already used the PearcePhone before leaving the safehouse—to break into a police computer file on the various gang turfs in Chicago. According to the file, this street was being taken over by The Club, who had lately been trying to muscle in on Black Viceroy territory.

He might be confronted by any of them here—Club thugs or Viceroyes. But he was pretty sure that the Club had taken over this block, through a group of ex-cons it had hired to move weight here.

Wolfe didn't like drug dealers—not if they dealt in major drugs like crack or meth or heroin. He'd seen what they'd done to his own neighborhood.

On the right was a fast food place, Golden Fish and Chicken, with a white and blue awning. Across the street was a shaggy, fenced-in park, with steel piping exposed in muddy trenches. A sign on the fence said *Change for Chicago At Work* but it didn't look like there'd been any work done there for a long time. Across the street three men hunched along in the sleet, one of them talking on a cell phone.

Wolfe thought, *If I want, I can listen into that guy's phone call...if this phone works.*

But someone else had words for him. “Hey, you here for a reason, bub?” came a rough voice behind him.

He turned to see a red-haired man in a long black leather coat looking at him from the parking lot, half-sheltered in the back of the Golden Fish eatery. Probably from the Club.

“Thing is,” the Club thug continued, “you got to be a customer, a resident of this block—or you got to pay a toll. To me.” He patted his coat pocket. “Got a .45 here will back me up.”

“A toll? Sure.” Wolfe reached into his pocket, and walked timidly up to the thug, as if to pay him off. “Here...”

Then he flashed the .38 out instead and used its gun butt to knock the thug on his ass.

Wolfe bent over the stunned man, plucked the .45 from his coat, and stuck it in his own waist band. Straightening up, Wolfe drew out the PearcePhone with his left hand. With his thumb he activated the contiguous phone hack; it penetrated the nearest phone, the thug’s...

The system pulled up the man’s phone bill, first off. The bill provided the name Ken Brown, with an address a few blocks from here. Might be his real name but Wolfe suspected it wasn’t.

Wolfe took a phone picture of the sprawled thug with a quick flick of his fingers. He hacked ctOS recognition, cross referenced the phone photo with the population database. Came up with another name in the CPD case files: *Buford Keeting*. The red-haired Keeting’s face came up, along with his rap sheet. *Buford “Duck” Keeting*.

Keeting groaned as he sat up, holding his head. “Where’s muh gun...want muh gun...”

“Don’t worry about your gun, Keeting,” Wolfe said. “I’ll take good care of it.”

“I know you? My name...How yuh know...?”

“Sure I know you, ‘Duck’,” Wolfe said, glancing around to see there wasn’t anybody else around going to interfere. He saw a group of school kids across the street, walking by a nineteenth-century brick building with a FOR RENT sign in it. The kids were careful not to look over Wolfe’s way. They knew trouble when they saw it and how to avoid it. Wolfe looked back at Duck Keeting—he was trying to get to his feet. Wolfe used a boot to shove

Keeting back on his ass. “I know you’ve got two warrants out for you.”
“So you is a cop, huh? Go ahead, arrest me, the Club’ll have me out again in an hour!”

“I know they would. But I’m not a cop so it doesn’t matter. But hold on—one of those warrants is federal, I see. Yeah. Moving underage girls across a state border...for reasons of human trafficking!”

“I don’t know nothin’ about that.”

“The feds do. They don’t care about the Club. Should I call them? I bet I can get an FBI over here really quick if I tell him who I’ve got right here...”

“Nah, what do you want? You want a pay off? I got maybe eight hundred bucks on me, that’s all.”

“I’ll take that, for starters.”

He pointed the .38 at Keeting’s head.

“Sure, sure, here it is...” Keeting offered a wallet from his pants’ pocket.
“Won’t do you much good for long...”

“Take the money out slow. Hand me that carefully. Don’t get creative. I’ll just start firing. Couldn’t miss at this range.”

Keeting growled to himself, but dug out the cash and handed it over.

“Thanks, ‘Duck’,” Wolfe said, tucking the bills away in his coat. “I’m a little cash poor.” Have to use that ATM trick next, a little later. And why not see what Duck had in his bank account? “I need something else from you Keeting—you know a gunhand, name of *Grampus*? A hire, might do some work for the Club sometimes?”

“Grampus? I heard the name. Somebody pointed him out to me once. I don’t know him ‘cept from that. He might be with that 77th Street bunch. I saw him go in that old lodge hall, over on 77th, I think he was with Gary Klyde...”

“Who’s Klyde?”

“Some kinda fixer. Don’t know him much either.”

“A lodge—on 77th?”

“Used to be an Elks Lodge. You know, for charity shows and all that shit. They sold it to some other outfit. I don’t know what it is. Might be Alcoholics Fucking Anonymous for all I know.”

“Okay. Get up and get out of here. And stay out of this territory. This is Black Viceroy territory.”

“You don’t look like no Black Viceroy to me.”

“They know me, though. And I know them. Better the devil you know than the one you don’t.”

“I get my gun back?”

“Hell no. Go on, fuck off.”

Wolfe stepped back and let Keeting get to his feet. He watched the thug stagger dizzily off. When Keeting was no longer in sight, Wolfe stepped up to the wall, sent a message through Pearce’s trace-proof system to the FBI agent mentioned in the file on Keeting. James Wyst. The Chicago FBI agent who was looking for him for trafficking underage girls.

Agent Wyst: Buford ‘Duck’ Keeting is staying at the Crest Inn on South 47th. He’s using the name Ken Brown. He’s working for the Club while he

hides from the feds. Better send somebody over to get him tonight but make sure it's feds. CPD is paid off to let him go. Your friend, Some Random Anonymous Tipster Who Knows What the Fuck He's Talking About.

Wolfe didn't like human traffickers, either.

It was getting darker out. The streetlights had come on. The sleet had let up but he went into the Golden Fish to get something to eat and wait for the Club to send some more thugs out. He knew they would.

Wolfe was absolutely sure that Keeting was on the phone to the Club right now.

The place was welcomingly warm, emanating a crude perfume of cooked fish and fowl. Wolfe waited in a line for the order window, and tapped the controls to check in on whatever the current phone call from "Ken Brown" might be.

"Hey, O'Mara? It's Duck. Listen I just been jacked up by some guy. He almost cracked my damned head open! He kinda tried to put it on the Viceroy's but that's all hooey, the motherfucker's gotta be some kinda independent operator—maybe a cop went independent, see..."

"What's his name?"

"Dunno, he got the drop on me. Took eight hundred bucks from me and my gun!"

"You pussy!"

"Hey shaddup, he got the jump on me, he snuck up and...never mind! Thing is, he's in our new territory over there on 45th! We was in the parking lot of that Golden Fish place, just about two minutes ago! You can nail the guy, find out who he's working for!"

“Yeah, I guess dat’s worth doing. But you’re still a pussy.”

Keeting gave a brief description of Wolfe, and hung up. Wolfe chuckled. It’d take a few minutes for them to organize some muscle to get over here. Just time for some fried fish and coffee...

It took almost half an hour. Wolfe had misgivings about what he was doing. If Pearce had exaggerated the PearcePhone’s capabilities, he could be cut to pieces here.

Better wait outside so none of the people eating in here get caught in the crossfire...

Wolfe waited out in the cold, listening in on chatter from the Club—none of it seemed relevant till he went to the number Keeting had called. O’Mara’s cell phone. *“Yeah, Percy? You almost there? I’ll be there in a couple shakes...Yeah I see the place up on my left...You in that new metallic green Escalade?”*

“That’s it, man. Brand new. Luxury car. Self-parking...”

“I still got that old Lincoln...”

“That Town Car you restored?”

“Yeah, but it’s lookin’ nice. New black and gold paint job.”

Here came the Lincoln, slowing to turn left so it could go into the parking lot; and here came the green Escalade, fast, with a greater sense of urgency.

Wolfe was ready. Just as the Lincoln was turning the corner, he used the PearcePhone, sent out a signal that took control of the car through the automatic parking’s electronic control units—ECUs are a luxury car’s point of vulnerability to remote hacking. At the same time the phone interfered with the pre-collision system, cutting off the Escalade’s brakes—which shut down

completely. The Lincoln, having slowed for the turn was still partly in the intersection, just as Wolfe had hoped; the Escalade came roaring through, its brakes suddenly out of order.

The Escalade crashed into the Lincoln, not quite t-boning it, but hitting it at the rear so the Lincoln spun around, tires screeching, front end swinging to crack into the Escalade.

Both cars were badly damaged. The Escalade plumed gray smoke from its crumpled front end. There was a guy slumped in the passenger side of the Lincoln. Wolfe couldn't see the driver from here.

His .38 down by his side, Wolfe walked to the corner, stopping just ten paces from the two crumpled cars. The driver of the Lincoln was getting out. He wore a blue suit, and horn rim glasses. He had a gun in his hand and blood on his forehead. He squinted at Wolfe, and raised the gun, a .45 automatic, pointing it toward Wolfe.

Wolfe turned sideways, aimed—the stunned driver fired, and Wolfe heard the bullet sizzle past his right ear. Wolfe returned fire, squeezing off two rounds, and “horn rims” went down.

Wolfe turned to see the driver of the other car was slumped over the steering wheel...Seemed like he hadn't bothered to get an airbag in the car.

The passenger of the Escalade was getting out though; he was a heavy set man with greased-back blond hair and a cardigan sweater. “Blondie” climbed stiffly out of the car, a lit cigarette still dangling from the corner his froggish mouth. He seemed dazed as he spotted Wolfe, fumbling for his gun.

“You better be careful with that cigarette,” Wolfe told him. “Look down at your feet.”

The guy blinked dazedly at Wolfe and then down at his shiny black shoes.

There was a spreading pool of gasoline around his feet. The Escalade's fuel line had broken, was leaking fuel fast from under the car.

"See what I mean?" Wolfe said. "Just toss your gun away. Walk off with that cigarette. I do hate to see a man burn to death. Even a fucking dirt bag like you."

"Who you callin' a dirt bag?" the thug said.

As he said it, the cigarette waggled in his mouth...and fell out.

Wolfe sighed and turned away. He didn't even see the pool of gas catch fire. But he heard the explosion, and felt the heat on the back of his neck.

He put the gun away, and strode off down the street, till he found a car that had a remote opening key. He used the phone to unlock it, and start it. He got in, just as the sirens started screaming toward the burning cars at the street corner, and drove back to the neighborhood of the safehouse.

I guess Pearce's sweet little device does work after all...

CHAPTER EIGHT

“How do I know you’re from DedSec?”

GlowWorm shrugged. “How do I know you’re Seline Garnera?”

“I’ve got military I.D., a passport, a driver’s license.”

He smiled. “I.D. doesn’t mean much. The government prints whatever fake I.D. it needs.” He was a young black in an old, worn out leather motorcycle jacket, skinny jeans and snakeskin boots; he had short dyed-blue hair, a pierced lower lip; he wore one of those circular stretcher earrings, that stretched the hole way out, and within the circular earring was a silver skull and crossbones. He had a considerable paunch but was otherwise remarkably skinny.

They were meeting in a retro-punk bar, near the waterfront in North Chicago. They were standing in a corner of the bar, each of them with a drink in their hands; he was drinking his, she was ignoring hers. They had to talk with their heads fairly close together, because *The Misfits* were booming from the jukebox. The meeting place had been set up via a fairly mysterious text that had come to her from a “GlowWorm”, after she’d asked an old friend from high school to find DedSec—her friend, Sue-Louise Cushman; Seline knew Sue-Louise had married a Chicago hacker, “Grimmy”, who had a lot of internet-underground connections. Grimmy was associated with Anonymous, with Digital Gangsters and, Seline suspected, with the secretive hacker revolutionary group DedSec itself.

GlowWorm was probably a friend of Sue-Louise’s husband.

“I’m takin’ a big chance being here,” Seline said.

“You are, huh? You look like a federal agent to me.”

“A federal agent!”

“You’re a clean-cut lady. You got a slick bearing.”

“That’s a military bearing. I told you I’m just out of the Marines.”

He grinned. “Hard to picture you as a jarhead in boot camp.”

“It was a little different than what men go through, but it was tougher than you could’ve taken.”

“Ha! You’re probably right about that!”

“Okay, you’re Seline, and you’re not a federal agent. I didn’t think you were, because...our mutual friend set this up...But I came here without a mask. I mean, normally, if I met a stranger in anything relating to DedSec, I’d wear a mask to the meeting, someplace else out of the public eye, but out of respect for Grimmy...He bailed me out of jail, he did a lot for me...And since you insisted on no masks...”

“I’m not going to trust somebody who wears a mask to meet me.”

He shrugged. “Those are some of the *only* people I trust.”

“I don’t have the...the *thing* with me,” Seline said.

“I wouldn’t be here if I thought you did. You can put it on a flashdrive and get that to me later, if we decide to move ahead with this. So you told Grimmy’s wife you got this off a CIA agent?”

She glanced nervously around. “I did. She transferred it to my phone. It took me a while to figure out how it was...how it was coded into the jpeg.”

“She used a picture to code it? I’ve heard of that.”

“It’s an extensive file on her investigation into some military guys. She got the story from a soldier named Wolfe. A Delta Force guy. Wolfe ended up in military prison but...she always thought he was telling the truth. She couldn’t prove it well enough to protect herself and to get him out of jail. And then when she was getting close she started worrying that some Marine on board the ship was...stalking her. I mean—to kill her. A Sergeant named Callow.”

“This was on a ship?”

“I was stationed on the *USS Don Roeser*.”

“That’s a big flattop, isn’t it? An aircraft carrier?”

She nodded. The song was changing on the jukebox and they waited till the new song started—a song by *Tool*.

“A carrier,” she said, when the song was wailing and thundering along. She leaned close enough to talk into GlowWorm’s ear. “She disappeared off the ship. Someone spread rumors she was drunk and fell off the fantail. But I think someone hit her, knocked her out...and threw her overboard.”

“They find her body?”

“What was left of it, about five days later.”

GlowWorm grimaced. “I’ll do some fact checking on some of this stuff—I have to warn you about that. But it’ll be done with the utmost secrecy. Won’t be discussed in any chat rooms, nothing like that.”

“You mean—hack into some files?”

“Yeah.”

“A lot of it’s classified. You might not be able to get to it.”

“I can confirm you were on that ship. And probably that this woman who gave you the file was there...but not that she was in CIA. What was her name?”

“Ruth Medina.”

“Okay. You sure you want to leak these files?”

“Yes. It’s what I came here to do. Sue-Louise said I had to come in person and meet with somebody. I thought about sending it to you over the internet...”

He shook his head. “What with the new NSA programs, all that—no. We have our ways around that stuff but it’s safer to use a flashdrive to get it to us.”

“I don’t trust wikileaks anymore. You sure you can get this out on SystemLeaks?”

He nodded. “If we decide we want to do it. We don’t want anybody to make a fool of us...”

“This is for real. Ruth died for it.”

“Yeah. I’d hate to die for it myself.” He smiled crookedly. “But if you can risk your life, Seline...I guess I can risk mine too.”

#

Lou Kiskel was worried. He didn’t like this neighborhood, especially at almost nine-thirty at night. It was close to downtown but looked pretty shabby to him. He was more comfortable in Chicago’s “Gold Coast” neighborhood, on a street like Dearborn.

It was cold out here, too, despite his long two-thousand-dollar camel hair coat. Kiskel was almost sixty, getting fat, and regretted making this overture to Pearce. But he did owe Pearce a few favors and he did want to do the right thing. What would happen to Blume if things continued the way they'd been going?

Still—being out here on a teeth chattering night. Not desirable... And here came a wino, or a homeless person of some kind anyway, going to ask him for spare change.

“Kiskel?” said the deformed man in the floppy hat, in a gurgling growl.

Kiskel gaped at him. He looked around, then said, in a hoarse whisper. “You’re from...Pearce?”

“I am. See that big flowerpot in front of the old hotel across the street? There’s a phone in it. Phone’s not good for anything except this one call. After this call, it’ll melt. So don’t keep it in your hand after he hangs up.”

“Uh—okay. Should I give you some money?”

“He already paid me. What—you think I’m a bum or something?” The man made a low cackling sound that might’ve been laughter as he walked away.

Kiskel looked around, saw no appreciable traffic, and jaywalked, making a beeline for the flowerpot in front of the funky old Wiggins Hotel.

It was one of those big antique hip-high pots, this one cracked and occupied only by a dusty artificial plant, cigarette butts crowding it. He couldn’t see a phone—wait, the cigarette butts were piled up in one place. He dug under them, found the phone, shoved it in his pocket and hurried on.

Kiskel went fast as he could without running, around the corner to his car. Before he got there he used his key control to tell the Jaguar to fire up its

heaters. He got into the warm car, locked it, and, hands shaking from the cold, activated the phone.

A man's face appeared on the screen. The man had a black kerchief bandit's mask pulled up to cover much of his face under his leather billed cap, but Kiskel knew it was Aiden Pearce.

"Kiskel," Pearce said. "I can't stay on this frequency long. Let's get this done. You really got something I should know?"

"It's just...you asked about Verrick. If I had anything interesting on him."

"And you acted like you didn't want to help me."

"Okay, well, I thought it through. He's going to destroy the company if he isn't stopped. And...he's up to something else too. I don't know what it is, but it feels shady. Could be illegal in a big way."

"What makes you think that?"

"Nothing I can prove—it's just the way Verrick's covering things up. Where his investment money came from. I mean—I'm not Blume CFO anymore, I'm mostly just doing consulting for Blume, but Verrick was pretty mysterious about his investors and there were rumors of money laundering."

"Rumors from where?"

"Not at liberty to say. I know he met with a cop named Tranter more than once, and I don't know why, or anything about it, but he's not talking to rest of us about these meetings. His secretary told mine, but..."

"I'm limited on what I can find out right now. Somebody's been trying to shoot me in the head."

"What? Right now?"

“No—they tried recently and they’re likely gonna try again. I’m saying, if you can find out anything more...”

“I do know one thing. He’s connected with a real estate investor from Idaho. Owns land all over the country—made his nut in Florida and Montana. I heard at the club this guy’s got serious connections to white imperialists.”

“And who’d that be?”

“His name’s Marlon Winters. Billionaire. He’s on the Iceberg Investments board of directors along with Verrick. So he knows your pal Verrick.”

“Marlon Winters. I’ve heard the name. Anything else?”

“Ally of mine in Blume has suspicions that Verrick is lining up money—from Winters amongst other people—to buy a whole hell of a lot more of Blume’s shares. And he’s hinting that the price of those shares may ‘suddenly go down’. Verrick might be planning to take over Blume!”

“That’s interesting. Thanks, Kiskel. You’re one of the good ones. They keep trusting people like you at Blume. I may buy some shares myself. But not if Verrick takes over.”

Pearce chuckled—and cut the connection.

Kiskel stared at the blank screen, then remembered what the deformed man in the floppy man had said.

He just managed to get the driver’s side window down before smoke started to hiss from the seams of the cell phone.

He tossed it out the window—and watched it melt into slag on the sidewalk.

Lou Kiskel shuddered, closed the window, and drove hastily away.

#

Mick Wolfe was standing across the street from the old Elks Lodge on 77th. The Elks no longer owned it; they had sold the place, and taken their sign down, but it was a classic big city lodge building. Built in the mid 20th century, it was designed to be an auditorium as well as a meeting place. It was in the general style of an old Greek temple, but with concrete elk heads at the corners as spouts and chipped old columns holding up the big triangular gable.

If this was another lodge of some kind now, as Keeting had hinted, it was sure one that had its meetings late at night. Wolfe glanced at his watch—the time was nearly eleven-thirty.

The Hawk sheered and veered, chasing pieces of newspaper and fast-food wrappers ahead of it, as Wolfe crossed the street.

It had been Pearce, not Keeting, who'd gotten him here tonight.

“Wolfe? Wake up!”

Wolfe had been asleep, stretched out on the closed sofa bed. “What? Pearce? Couldn’t you just call me on the phone?”

“No.” Pearce was up on that television screen again. “Listen, I’ve been doing a search for people associated with Stan Grampus. Only one I could find who might be in Chicago is named Winters. Grampus used to work for Winters—but there’s no clear record of what Grampus did for him. Does seem though that Winters and Grampus have some obscure ideology in common...And tracing Winters, I find he’s in town. And he’s called for a limo to take him to a place on 77th...Here’s a picture of Winters...”

And now Wolfe, crossing the street, was trying to figure out how to get into that old lodge on 77th, which normally would’ve been easy. Only it wasn’t easy now. There were three guys out front in civilian coats, identical

British macs—but Wolfe knew instantly they were military-trained. Chances were, judging from the comm earpieces and the fact that one of them had a G within an eagle tattoo on his neck, they were Graywater Security.

Mercenaries. Some of these Graywaters were fumbling idiots, but some of them were good at their job, and all of them were heavily armed thugs with itchy trigger fingers. Which made all of them dangerous.

Wolfe had the .45 he'd appropriated from Keeting under his coat, and he'd bought extra ammo for it. He had the .38 as a backup pistol. But he had no desire to shoot it out with Graywater Security on the streets of Chicago. If he lived through it he'd end up shooting it out with cops and maybe a S.W.A.T. team.

No, time to use covert entry training...

Wolfe walked up to one of the Graywater Security men, looked at him with a vacant expression, then walked past. He just wanted to get close enough to get a sense of what weapons these guys might have under their coats. Wolfe thought he'd made out just enough of an outline under the guy's left arm— a machine gun pistol, probably a Mack 10.

Wolfe walked away, muttering nonsense to himself so the merc would dismiss him as a homeless crackpot. "I told 'em don't talk to me like my ma, my ma wouldn't say that..." Wolfe said.

He heard the Graywaters laughing at him. And that was good.

Wolfe kept walking past the building, on past the next one, a closed-down Dollar Store, then cut into the narrow walkway between the empty Dollar Store and the SRO flophouse on the corner. He stepped over a shapeless pile of rain-mushed paper trash and went to an old garbage can lying on its side. He turned the can over and set it up, and climbed up on it, jumping from there to the lower rung of the fire escape's hinged ladder. His weight pulled the ladder down on its spring till his boots touched the ground.

Wolfe climbed up the ladder, easing it back into place slowly from the first landing, so it wouldn't clang, then he climbed the rest of the rusty old fire escape to the roof.

It was windy, cold and dark up here, outside the cones of light from the streetlights. He could see a handful of baleful stars through a temporary break in the clouds.

Wolfe worked his way across the roof, circling old brick chimneys and vents, stepping over puddles formed where the black tar roofing sagged.

A cigarette lighter flared on the next roof over—the roof of the former Elks' auditorium. Wolfe ducked down behind an air conditioning duct, then slowly lifted up till he could see the guard's face illuminated by the momentary red glow. The mercenary snapped the Zippo shut and darkness closed down around him except for the orange coal of his cigarette.

The cigarette's coal blotted out as the man turned away. Wolfe smiled and advanced again, hunched down, placing his steps to make as little noise as possible.

He got to the edge of the roof abutted against the next building, stepped over, then ducked behind a chimney as the mercenary turned around and exhaled smoke, the red eye of his cigarette winking.

Wolfe wondered if he should take down the guy the hard way, or the easy way. He didn't know anything about this guy. Some of the Graywater mercenaries had been Special Forces, in their times; at least the mercs who knew what they were doing. This guy could be Special Forces. He could be someone Wolfe had known. He could even have been Delta Force once. Be a shame to kill him unnecessarily. If any of these mercenaries tried to kill Wolfe, then Wolfe would defend himself with lethal force. But until then...

Besides, Wolfe didn't have a sound suppressor on his gun. If he shot the guy he would alert the other Graywaters on the sidewalk below.

Unless he wanted to break the guy's neck, he'd have to take a chance on trying to knock him out.

Wolfe sighed. Would've been so much easier to shoot him.

Watching around the edge of the brick chimney, Wolfe waited till that cigarette glow blotted again, then he crept around the chimney, pulled the .45 out, rushed up and buffaloed the sentry Wyatt Earp-style, cracking him hard behind the right ear with the barrel of the gun.

The sentry's knees buckled, and he went down. He seemed out cold. Wolfe reached down, disarmed the man, and took the small flashlight off the mercenary's belt.

Wolfe regretted not bringing along something to tie and gag the guard with. No time for that. They'd have a check-in on the ear comm. In a few minutes the sentry would be asked to report in, and when he didn't reply...

Better get this scouting trip over pronto.

Wolfe took out the PearcePhone, and set it up to pick up the comm frequency. It took a little less than a minute to locate the channel they were using.

"Five, this is one, how you doing out front?"

"We're cold and bored down here, One, what you think? But I got eyes on Two and Three. Everything quiet."

"Copy that. Four, everything quiet on the roof?"

Wolfe tapped "hack into conversation" and, making his voice hoarse, said, "All clear up here." He coughed. "But cold as a witch's tit. Gettin' laryngitis or some damn thing."

“I can hear that in your voice, Four! We’ll send you relief in an hour..”

An hour. That should be enough time...

Flashlight, phone and .45 tucked away, silenced Mack 10 in his hand, Wolfe moved to the outbuilding on the roof that housed the entrance to the stairs. It was unlocked. He went inside, into a rising column of warm air and the musty smells of an old building.

He came to the door that led onto the top floor, pressed it open—and got lucky. There was a Graywater sentry walking down the hallway to Wolfe’s right, but he had his back turned.

Wolfe eased the door almost shut and peered through the crack, watching—till he saw the sentry turn the corner into an adjoining hall.

Opening the door as quietly as he could, Wolfe slipped through, closed the door, and moved off to the left. He turned the corner, hurried to the end of a short corridor, and opened the only door. It was dark in there.

Wolfe stepped through, closed the door behind him. He took out the flashlight, shone it around the room. Much of it was stacked with old theater seats; a big plaster Elks Lodge seal was leaning against the wall wrapped in cobwebs. To the right, a wooden ladder was built into the wall, rising to a padlocked trapdoor.

Wolfe slung the Mack 10 on its strap over one shoulder, put the small flashlight in his mouth, and climbed the ladder. It took three sharp karate punches, using the heel of his hand—with Wolfe wincing at the noise from each blow—to break the padlock bracket.

He pushed the trapdoor back and, flashlight bobbing in his mouth, climbed up to the attic. It was mostly rafters and dust here, he discovered, as he flashed the light through the low, narrow space. But on the right were pulleys

with ropes looped tautly over them, probably relating to the curtains for the auditorium down below.

Wolfe closed the trapdoor and, hunched over, worked his way down a wooden walkway, two boards wide, laid over the rafters. He could hear an amplified speaker now, from below; points of light from the stage winked in the dust, here and there. Applause came periodically from the unseen audience.

On the right side, about the center of the attic, a shaft of attenuated light rose up. Wolfe made his way to the beam of light and lay on the boards, looking down at the stage to find he was staring directly at the top of the speaker's head. He had a bald spot. The man was speechifying at a podium, reading from notes. No telling who he was, from here. Maybe that Marlon Winters character?

In the attic, the speaker's voice was distorted and muddled by echoes, but Wolfe could hear most of what he said. "...the second and tenth amendments are under attack...There are forces in this country that have worked toward undermining the civilization that the founders of our Western European heritage have worked so hard to build!" *Build, ild, ild...*

"We are threatened from every side!" the speaker boomed. "Socialism pops its ugly head up any time you don't flush its holes out with poison—like the holes of rabid gophers!" *Gophers, ers, ers...*

Western European heritage, Wolfe knew, was speech code for the White Race. But "rabid gophers"? That summoned up some interesting images...

"*Purity* is not just about saving our culture, our right to bear guns, and our right to a free market without regulations. We have created *Purity* to defend *civilization itself* against the forces who would erect a New World Order in its place, an order controlled by a dictatorship that will enslave us to decadent cultures and mud races!" *Races, aces, aces...*

The crowd roared and clapped with approval at that one.

“And now, I’d like to introduce General Van Ness, who will talk about strategy on the ground...and the development of militias that will take control of our streets following the coming chaos...” *Chaos, os, os...*

Applause. *The Elks Club*, Wolfe thought, *would not be happy at all if they found out who it was who’d bought their old theater. Racist insurrectionist scumbags.*

The microphone started feeding back and Van Ness had a mumbling way of expressing himself so Wolfe could only make out occasional phrases. “...while we cannot discuss the means of setting the stage for...” Something, something. “And hence all we’re asking you is to be ready for the call to...” Something something. “...I have stood up for the values of Western European...” Something something. “...but in North Africa we saw again and again that whenever the locals were...And thus....and so you see...but again, we cannot...Yet the time will soon come to...”

Wolfe gave up. He had another agenda to follow up on. He had to see if he could find Stan Grampus here—Grampus, the assassin who’d tried to kill Aiden Pearce.

It was important to find the bastard, fast. Sooner or later, the Graywater bunch was going to realize that one of their own was down...and that something was up.

#

Aiden Pearce was using the encrypted comm system to talk to Pussler on a computer monitor. And Pussler looked worried.

Pussler kept glancing over his shoulder at the door, then looking pensively back at the webcam. “Boss...I’m telling you I don’t feel safe here.”

“That’s one of my own safehouses. The idea is: a *safehouse* is *safe*, Pussler. Right? No one knows about the place but you, me, Blank, and Merwiss. So if anyone’s made out you’re hiding out there, it’s because you stuck your dumb head outside and got noticed. I told you to lay low!”

“I did lay low, boss! Ever since you told me that one of those ambulance guys told Tranter who I was...”

“He wasn’t supposed to know who you were.”

“Well, see, that EMT recognized me! I used to ride those ambulances regular, when I was using that synthetic morph!” Pussler grimaced. “I swear that stuff gave me overdoses about every third time I used it...”

“So why’d you keep using it, Pussler?”

“Well, ‘cause it’s what I could *get*. Keepin’ it real, I’m a drug addict. Or I was...I’m trying to stay clean, boss, and all I got here is....ah, almost nothing.”

“That girlfriend of yours been coming around?”

“No! She don’t know where I am! Boss—you got other safehouses that Merwiss doesn’t know about, right?”

“Merwiss?” Was Pussler really worried about Merwiss? The programmer had seemed harmless enough...although there were recent indications of a gambling problem.

“Merwiss knows about two of the safehouses,” Pearce said. “The one you’re in and the one over on the waterfront.” Pearce was careful to keep some of his safehouses known only to himself. “There’s three more he doesn’t know about. Including the one that Wolfe is in.”

“You gotta let me move into one of those others! I don’t trust Merwiss!”

“Why?”

But Pearce himself had wondered if Merwiss might’ve been the one who’d tipped off Tranter and Grampus to the meeting the day they’d tried to kill him. Merwiss *theoretically* hadn’t known about the meeting. Even Pussler hadn’t known till minutes before attack. But Merwiss had helped set up the cryptography that Pearce had used that day to talk to Pussler. He could have monitored the call and decrypted it, if he was fishing for inside information.

And there was another reason to suspect Merwiss. That gambling addiction. That made him vulnerable to being bought off. Pearce had recently discovered that Merwiss was in debt for hundreds of thousands of dollars.

He hadn’t been in debt when Pearce had hired him. Apparently he’d been “clean” from gambling for years. But he’d had a relapse into throwing away his money in the casinos soon after starting work for Pearce. He claimed to be in therapy for it now. But maybe he’d sold Pearce out to pay off that debt...

“Why do you think someone’s onto you there, Pussler?” Pearce asked.

“I heard a weird noise in the hall outside the door. I looked through the peephole and there was some guy hustlin’ away. It was a fat guy so I thought it might’ve been Merwiss but I wasn’t sure.”

Could Merwiss be monitoring this line? Pearce wondered.

“Pussler,” Pearce said. “The mask is going up, right here and right there.”

“Uh—okay,” Pussler said. He cut the line and his face vanished from the screen.

The mask is going up was code for, “I’m going to deal with this myself”. Meaning that Pearce was coming over there in person.

Pearce wasn't fully recovered from his concussion, but there was no one else he trusted besides Blank and Wolfe. Blank never got involved in anything violent. He was only a go-between. He couldn't handle this. And Wolfe was on an assignment, up to his neck in it at that old lodge auditorium.

Pearce had to handle this himself. It might be that Pussler was just being paranoid...

Still, Pearce had to know for certain.

He strapped on his favorite pistol, put on his leather overcoat and his cap, and hurried out the door.

#

Wolfe decided to take his chances in the crowd.

Probably none of these people knew him. Lots of them were casually dressed; and lots of them were openly armed. Being militia types, some of them wore Army coats from Military Surplus. His own stripped-down Army coat would fit right in.

He'd found a crawl space that took him over the audience, and then over the balcony. From there he climbed down a maintenance ladder into another storeroom and, casually as he could, sauntered out to the balcony. The place was jam-packed, mostly with men, everyone staring raptly at the stage. Nearly every seat was taken. From the look of these chuckleheads, there must be some major militia types in here, including some the feds would like to know about. And who was that? It was the Dousch Brothers, sitting together like Tweedledee and Tweedledum, surrounded by obvious bodyguards. The fat, lumpy-faced brothers were oil industry tycoons notorious for their "astroturfing" anti-environmentalism and anti-liberalism. Rumor had them connected to neo fascist groups based in Switzerland.

There were two more Graywater mercs up in the balcony, weapons on straps over their shoulders. One had an Uzi, the other had a Mack 10. Both sentries were listening to Van Ness speak from the stage.

Van Ness. Wolfe struggled with an urge to take a shot at Van Ness from the shadows of the theater, just blow him away right here and now. The son of a bitch had ruined Mick Wolfe's life. Van Ness had trashed his reputation and got him tossed in the brig for a year. And what a miserable year it had been. Only the exercise room, a couple of friends to play chess with, and the prison library had made the Army's disciplinary barracks bearable.

Maybe just one squeezed-off burst at Van Ness with the suppressed Mack 10. He could go back up to that attic and shoot him from above, and then...

Wait, was that Stan Grampus over there, sitting toward the top of the balcony? The guy who'd tried to kill Pearce?

It was. His face was sharply recognizable to Wolfe after all that image enhancement.

Grampus was sitting in the back row of the balcony, right next to Winters. The hitman was frowning with concentration, trying to make out what Van Ness was saying, despite the mic feedback and echoes, and Winters, a white-haired man with a broad red face, was smiling with satisfaction at the gathering—like the cat that slowly tortured, eviscerated, and finally ate the canary.

Grampus was twitching in his chair, squirming about as he tried to pay attention to the speaker. Wolfe remembered that the police file said Grampus had an amphetamine habit. Looked like he'd popped some pills not long before the show.

Stan Grampus had swept-back black hair, his gaunt face decorated with a goatee. On the side of his neck was a clumsy blue tattoo of an iron cross. He was a small, wiry looking man wearing a brown leather jacket, a black shirt

with a turquoise bolo tie. Somewhere under that coat he was sure to be armed, probably with a nine millimeter pistol.

Wolfe walked up the carpeted stairs along the aisle, trying to get above Grampus, to keep him in view.

The general plan, now that he had a sense of what this joyful little convocation of lunatics was about, was to follow Grampus and hopefully find out who he worked for. But maybe Grampus's real boss was already apparent—sitting right next to him. Maybe it was Marlon Winters, and by extension, Verrick, since they were both on the board of directors of the mysterious Iceberg Investments.

Wolfe reached the top of the stairs where a carpeted walkway stretched horizontally behind the highest row of seats. Grampus and Winters were on the farther side, a few rows down...

But coming up the stairs near them was a Graywater sentry, looking narrowly at Wolfe.

Wolfe turned the other way, as if searching for a place to sit. He still had the Mack 10 on his shoulder. But there were a lot of guys sitting in the audience proudly displaying their firearms...

Might've got myself in a crazy tight place here, Wolfe thought sourly. If this armed audience gets the word and turns against me....

He'd once asked a medic how many times a man could get shot and live. The medic had said, "Depends where they shoot you, dummy. What else? Once in the head will kill you if they get you right between the eyes. But people've been shot three times in the head and lived because the bullets didn't go into the most vital parts of the brain. I'd guess four times would be the max, though, for the skull. But maybe you could take fifty times in the legs and live—if, you know, you don't bleed to death..."

Wolfe wasn't anxious to test out these theories today.

He took the PearcePhone out, adjusted the device so it transmitted to the Bluetooth device he had hidden within his ear. He heard himself being discussed:

“Yeah, Four’s down here with blood all over his head. Somebody sneaked up on him and cracked him a good one. He swears he never gave that response on the phone, One. So that means the bastard is infiltrating, he’s probably right here in the building...”

Uh-oh. The sentry on the roof had woken up.

Wolfe flicked the phone onto, *“Blot out all local phones except this one.”*

That should keep them from communicating. But it was probably too late...

“You!” barked a Graywater merc coming toward him. “What you doing with that Mack 10! We don’t allow any automatic weapons in here! Drop it—now!”

This wasn't good.

Wolfe waved at him and said, “I’ll take it out to my car!” he spun on his heel and saw that the other Graywater guard, alerted by the report from Four, was raising an AK47, not bothering to yell a warning. The AK sputtered and bullets zipped close to Wolfe’s right side. Some of the audience members yelled in alarm; a lot of them ducked down. But it wouldn’t be long before some of the militia audience would be up hunting for a target with their side arms, eager to prove themselves.

Wolfe snapped the Mack 10 up and fired it, all in a split second—and he was a better shot than the guard. The merc caught the auto pistol rounds in the teeth, and got them blown out the back of his head. He staggered back and

fell, and Wolfe ran down toward the dying guard, knowing the one who'd shouted at him to drop his weapon was not far behind.

"Get down!" Wolfe shouted, as the now-alarmed crowd milled and buzzed. "There's some lunatic with a gun who's gotten in here!" He was taking the steps downward three and four at a time, hoping the audience would mistake him for one of the guards. "Get down, folks! We got your backs here! Hold your fire!"

"Stop him!" said the guard behind Wolfe. But Wolfe noticed the merc hadn't opened fire—too much risk of hitting the audience, the people he'd been hired to protect.

Wolfe had reached the bottom row, where most of the audience members were heading for the exits. Others were waving guns around, shouting incoherently, looking for a target. Wolfe pointed at the sentry up on the stairway, the merc pounding down after him.

"There he is!" Wolfe shouted. "He's infiltrated the place!"

That wasn't going to work long—but it kept the crowd confused and occupied long enough that Wolfe could slip past those remaining in the front row of the balcony. A bullet from somewhere on the stage below cracked by close overhead. Then Wolfe ran to the storage room door, yanked it open, slipped inside, and slammed it shut behind him. The metal door immediately dented inwardly, in two places where bullets struck it. Wolfe found a pile of chairs to one side and tipped them over in front of the door to block it. Then he climbed the ladder to the crawl space.

He scrambled along the crawl space, going toward the street, away from the stage this time. A tense three minutes, trying not to cough in all the dust, and then he had gotten to the back wall over the corridor he'd first come to.

Wolfe looked around, found no egress except a dust-caked metal vent that gave onto the outside wall. Wolfe sat, leaned back, and kicked out the vent. It

pivoted out to the right and hung from a rusty hinge. He looked through the opening, found he was at the front of the building over a small marquee. It was not a short drop but doable.

There was just room to squeeze through—he hoped. Be embarrassing to die stuck in this vent hole. He decided he had to abandon the Mack. It would get in the way climbing through and it might go off if he dropped it—which could alert the guards to his position.

He tossed the auto pistol aside in the crawl space, then squirmed through the vent, feet first and face down. He could hear the crowd rushing out the front doors, some of them in a panic, some shouting at the others not to rush, not to go nuts with their weapons. *Hold your fire, damn you!*

Fitting through the vent gap at the shoulders was painful—Wolfe almost put a shoulder out of joint. But then he was through, hanging from his hands in the cold night air. He let go and dropped—almost thirty feet down. The noise from the crowd hid the sound of his drop onto the lower roof. It stung, and his shoulders hurt, but he was intact.

Wolfe drew his .45, crossed the tarpaper base of the marquee support, to the right side.

There—the limo. It was Winters, getting in...and a Crown Victoria was pulling up behind it. Wasn't that the car Tranter had driven that day?

And Grampus was getting into it...

Wolfe couldn't follow both men. He'd have to tail the car transporting Grampus. If he could get down there...but just below him was one of the Graywaters, hurrying past, gun in his hand, looking for Mick Wolfe.

Wolfe pulled out the PearcePhone, tapped for one of its specialized apps, and just as the limo and the unmarked car were pulling away from the curb into the one way street, he used the ctOS hack to turn the traffic lights at the

corner, suddenly turning them from green to red, no yellow in between. The cars just getting to the corner screeched to a halt. A minivan was rear-ended—just a fender-bender. The Crown Victoria and the limo were stuck in honking traffic, for the moment.

But those Graywater thugs were still down there, looking for Wolfe. He could kill them—or plunge them into a different kind of darkness.

Wolfe hacked into the ctOS power grid controls, then hit *Blackout*, *four block radius*.

A second passed. Two, three, four. Maybe it wasn't going to work. And he heard someone shouting from the roof. Had they spotted him from up there?

Then the darkness fell over the street in a series of expanding blackouts zones, light after light going out. In seconds it was pitch dark outside, except for the swiveling headlights of the cars.

The blackout increased the panic on the street. The crowd still streaming from the building milled and shifted, people running chaotically by.

Wolfe put the phone and his gun away, climbed over the edge of the lodge sign, and dropped down into the darkness, narrowly missing a huffing man hurrying past. Wolfe flattened against the building, watching for the Graywater thugs. They were as hard to see out on this dark street as he was.

Wolfe decided he was pretty well hidden, and pushed his way through the crowd, almost getting knocked over in the darkness, to a car illegally parked on the sidewalk, maybe belonging to Graywater. It was a late model SUV. He pulled out his phone, found the app, and used it to trigger the car's electronic locks. The SUV unlocked and the engine started for him before he'd even gotten in. He got behind the wheel, keeping his head down as much as he could. Up ahead he could see the Crown Victoria carrying Grampus had wormed its way through the traffic to the corner, and was just turning right.

Wolfe hacked into ctOS again, switched on the neighborhood power, turned the traffic lights on, and then drove to the corner—and turned right. The Crown Victoria was just a half a block up ahead...

CHAPTER NINE

Aiden Pearce had borrowed a pretty nice looking Porsche off the street to take him to the building where he'd put Pussler in storage.

It was late, and Pearce was wondering what was up with Wolfe. There'd been no report from him yet. But he wasn't going to interrupt Wolfe with texts or phone calls. Probably be too dangerous to distract him right now.

There was the building—an old tenement Pearce had bought for a song, using money swiped from gangsters, on the Southside near the waterfront. He was renting most of the rooms out for about one tenth of the market value, chiefly to elderly people on a fixed income. He kept that upstairs corner room for his own safehouse. Maybe it wasn't so safe now, if Pussler was to be believed.

Pearce parked around the corner, got out into a cold wind, and walked upstream through it to the old brick tenement standing alone on the corner. The buildings on either side of it had been demolished. The bricks of the tenement had gone black with pollution, but he'd had all the windows replaced, the plumbing fixed, and there were new lights around the building.

His head swam as he walked up toward the back door, and his stomach churned with nausea—it was the concussion. He was pushing it. Still needed some recovery time.

He circled the building, putting up his mask, one hand expertly activating the app on his ctOS control phone, blotting out the security cameras before he got into their range.

Pearce picked his way through the rubble left over from the demolition, keeping close to his own building. He hurried to the back door, and tapped the unlock combination on his phone that opened it electronically. The door popped open for him.

He drew his gun and looked around inside. He didn't see anyone, but he could smell detergent from the laundry room, could hear a dryer humming in there. He hurried to the back stairs and started up them—then had to stop at the third landing to keep from throwing up. He waited till the nausea passed, then continued, more slowly this time, till he got to the top floor. He pushed through the door—and down the hall. No one there.

The only sign of life was someone's television yammering behind an apartment door. Canned laughter. Theme music.

He moved on till he came to the corner apartment door. It opened with a conventional lock and key—unless you knew that there was an electronic control over that same lock, and you just happened to have Aiden Pearce's smartphone. In which case you didn't need the physical key.

His fingers found the black market app, and the door clicked.

Pearce flicked his gun's safety off, then put his left hand on the knob, turned and pulled it open.

Immediately he saw Pussler, slumped on the floor, leaning crookedly against the wall of the small living room. Pussler lay in a spreading pool of blood. A large hunting knife was sticking out from under his ribs. But his mouth was moving, his eyes opening.

He was alive. Barely. And probably not for long.

"Jesus, Pussler," Pearce muttered.

He stepped over to Pussler, went down on one knee by him—and Pussler whispered. "He's hidin' in the bathroom, bro. You were...my friend...he's..."

Pearce straightened, spun, pointing the gun at the bathroom door, just as it opened. There stood Clyde Merwiss: a rotund, slack-mouthed man in a stained t-shirt, pointing a pistol at Pearce.

Pearce recognized the gun as the one he'd given to Pussler. Merwiss had somehow decoded the door, gotten in, stabbed Pussler, taken the gun...

But Pearce let Merwiss squeeze the trigger.

Nothing happened.

Pearce had seen that Merwiss had left the safety on.

Merwiss stared down at the gun.

"You left the safety on the gun, Merwiss," Pearce said.

Merwiss fumbled at the gun, Pearce stepped in and tore it from the programmer's grasp.

Merwiss gasped, and took a step back. "Look..."

Pearce kept his pistol on Merwiss and glanced around. "This is the place I was in when I made the appointment with Wolfe. I sent the message to Blank, from the PC in the bedroom. And Blank decoded it from the electronic billboard, and he told Wolfe. And you must've had some transmission bug in that PC. I shouldn't have trusted anyone to set it up for me. You just seemed..." Pearce shook his head sadly. "I have a tendency to try and help out losers."

"I...wasn't going to hurt you, Pearce. I just..."

"You just sold information to my enemies about where I was going to be? So you came here to try and clear that PC, in case I found that bug...and Pussler caught you at it. And you stabbed him..."

"I didn't want to! I...you're Aiden Pearce! I knew they couldn't hurt you! I just needed the money!"

“Because you’re a gambling addict. My own stupid fault for not researching you well enough, maybe. But you know they nearly did kill me, Clyde. Who’d you talk to about where I was?”

“I...there was a cop named Tranter. He was the only one. I heard at the casino he was looking for you and I knew him.”

“How’d you know Tranter?”

“He was collecting gambling vigs for the Club—moonlighting when he was off duty. I swear that’s all I know! He said he could get me off the hook if I could tell him where you might be! So I came over here and...”

Pearce nodded. “I figured.” He tossed the fallen pistol at the programmer’s feet. “Here. Pick it up. . .Go on, pick it up or I’ll shoot you dead right fucking now. Make your move, Merwiss.” Pearce lowered his own gun. “You see? I’ve lowered my gun. Grab your weapon. Maybe you’re faster than you look. I’ll let you straighten up.”

Merwiss licked his slack lips...and then bent over, hastily grabbed up the gun, raised it toward Pearce...

And gasped as Pearce shot him through the heart.

Merwiss tried to aim the gun...but it dropped from his limp fingers. He fell on his heavy belly, bouncing a little on it, twitching in death.

Pearce turned and inspected Pussler. He was gone.

“Sorry...bro.” Pearce said.

He put his pistol away, and quickly left the apartment. His own belly was twisting, his head swimming again, from the concussion. He tried to ignore it.

Have to get those bodies cleaned up. What a pain in the ass. Maybe Blank could find someone to take them out of here.

Before dealing with that, Pearce had something else to look into—it was time to find out exactly what Mick Wolfe was up to. If he was up to anything.

There was a good chance that Mick Wolfe was dead, about now...

#

Wolfe was feeling half-dead with fatigue, but still keeping up with that Crown Victoria without being too obvious about it. He was maintaining the SUV at about half a block behind the unmarked car, hoping that whoever was driving it didn't know he was on their tail.

Sleet was starting to fall again, and that actually helped. It blotted out the back window of the car up ahead, and blurred their sideview mirrors, so they didn't have a good view of anything behind them.

Wolfe had the wipers going, and they labored at shoving the semi-frozen rain off the windshield. Some of it piled up in the corners.

The unmarked car was turning left up ahead, just as the light was turning red.

That could be a problem. If he went through the light they might see his headlights and think about how someone was going through the light just to keep up with them.

Wolfe stopped at the corner and waited impatiently. The light seemed to take forever to change to green, but at last it switched and he turned quickly

left, the SUV fishtailing a little on the slushy street. Where was the Crown Victoria? Gone. He'd lost it. He drove up to the next corner, looked right—and saw the car pulling up at a brownstone about halfway down the block.

Wolfe kept going, then pulled up at the curb just out of the line of site of whoever was getting out of the unmarked car. He got out of the SUV as quietly as possible, then put his hand in his jacket on the butt of the .45.

He stole up to the corner, wormed through shrubs next to a modern apartment building, and peered round the building's corner. Down the street he saw the familiar silhouettes of Tranter and Grampus crossing to the brownstone. Another man followed them, had the look of an off-duty police officer, to Wolfe. Probably another crooked cop, partnered with Tranter.

The phone in his pocket vibrated.

Wolfe drew back so Tranter wouldn't spot him, and checked the PearcePhone. A text was showing on the screen.

Checking in. Ignore this if risky. P.

Wolfe clicked to call the number and in a moment Pearce answered. "Any progress?"

"Got messy. Interesting to see if they can keep it out of the news. I had to smoke a Graywater, for one thing."

"You had to kill him, then you had to," Pearce said, sounding completely unconcerned. "I had to snuff one of my own people today. He killed another one—one you know. Pussler."

"Pussler! I kind of liked that guy."

"Yeah he was all fucked up but not a bad guy. So, Wolfe—I saw an area around that auditorium was blacked out awhile."

“Yeah. This phone is pretty fly, man. I’m gonna sell it to a big corporation , make a billion dollars.”

“If you’re taking time to make jokes I assume you got away okay.”

“Yeah, and I followed Grampus. He went into a building about half a block from here with Tranter and a thuggish kinda guy I took to be a dirty cop out of uniform.”

“Grampus! You found him?”

“He was at the party, man. With Marlon Winters. They separated after the thing got messy. I’m afraid these Purity people are gonna start covering stuff up after this. I got in and got out, and they know it—anyway they know somebody did. They’ll get paranoid.”

“You mean more paranoid. But I see what you mean. Leave it to me, I’ll make them think it was some imaginary socialist with a gripe toward Winters. He’ll be eager to believe it.”

“How you going to do that?”

“Digital evidence can be faked evidence. Never mind. What was going on there?”

“*Purity*, is what. Invitation-only gathering for far-right militia types. They seem to be ramping up for ‘the coming social chaos’. Only Winters and Van Ness made it sound like it was something they were going to arrange for Chicago. Just to start with.”

“They didn’t say how?”

“Not when I was listening—and I doubt they announced what that’s going to be. Bad security. They were just spouting ideological hype and the giving

the ‘get the Minutemen ready for the Redcoats’ kind of talk. You sure this line is secure, by the way?”

“I’m sure it is, as much as you can ever be. Was Verrick there?”

“Not that I saw. He could’ve been but, my guess is, he’d be too smart for that.”

“Good enough for now.”

“I should tell you where I am—”

“Don’t waste your breath, I know where you are. I’m tracking that phone.”

“Oh yeah, of course.”

“So this place they took him to—wait. I’ve got it. ctOS cameras caught them going in. I can see the address. Okay—I want to deal with this myself...I’ll tell you what I find out, later...”

“You’ll tell me *if* you get out alive. I think I should be there, back you up.”

“I told you—I’ll deal with it myself.”

Wolfe hesitated. “Pearce—wait—”

But Pearce hung up.

#

Aiden Pearce was there within half an hour, using a completely different vehicle than the one he'd taken to Pussler's safehouse. He was sorry to have to abandon the Porsche but it was better security to change rides as often as possible.

He found a new, black Ford Explorer with electronic lock and ignition, and drove it to the block containing the brownstone where Stan Grampus was stowed away under the underworld version of police protection.

Pearce parked, switched off the lights and engine, and did a general area check with his phone. Checking the cameras all the way around the block, he didn't see any Club sentries on the street, or any parked cops. There didn't seem to be anybody on the roof of the building either. Yeah, Wolfe was right—these must be dirty cops. Bad cops were always overconfident.

He got out of the Explorer, walked through the thinning precipitation, across the slippery street to the sidewalk in front of the building, then turned left, strolled down the sidewalk a little. He glanced around to see if he was unobserved, then cut into a yard one door down, and circled around back of the building. Dogs barked in the contiguous yard; but the backyard here was clear. He climbed a short fence, his stomach complaining again, his head thumping painfully when he dropped to the ground.

Ouch. He was going to go home and go to bed, finish his convalescence...once he'd taken care of this little matter of Stan Grampus. He walked through a garden shriveled with winter, and climbed another fence, into the backyard of the brownstone. He winced as he dropped to the ground again, and kept going to the backdoor.

Time to do some hacking...

He stepped into a dark place, between the fence and the side of the building, and performed a local wifi hack. It didn't take long to get an image of a face scowling at the screen. A face he knew from the image enhancement software. Stan Grampus.

Grampus wasn't looking at Pearce—it was a one-way view. He was looking at Grampus through a webcam on a PC.

His fingers were a bit clumsy with the cold and it took Pearce a few extra seconds to access what Grampus was doing. The hitman was writing an email. It read,

Kribble frebb snortum bogus ++8 Freeb %# Clodno Neanderthal snout Imperial flagon Squag...

Well, that was unhelpful.

It was heavily encrypted—Grampus was using a program that hid the text in code the moment it was typed. Must be hard to copyedit.

Pearce ran a decryption program on the text...and came up blank. There was always a new encryption system; it always had to be decrypted or hacked. Leading to a new system—and so on.

He told his system to copy the message in its entirety and any reply, then checked for any cell calls from the building.

He heard Tranter's voice, which he knew from his intermittent surveillance of the detective. *"...Yeah I'm heading out, I am gonna find that prick, he's out there somewhere...might still be in that neighborhood...Later."*

Tranter cut the connection; another call came into Pearce's scanning field. *"So I says to her, you get your ass into that bed and flip it up toward me and do your duty, wife, or I'll give you a smack right on the beezer, and she throws a lamp at me, just misses my head. Well that always gets her excited and two minutes later we were..."*

No useful information there.

He shifted to another tactic—another one of the men had left his cell turned on, and it was easy enough for Pearce to hack into it and turn on its speakerphone...

Through the speakerphone he heard a background conversation—three gruff male voices. A little faint but audible enough.

“You going to bet or not, Burfy?”

“I’m lookin’ at my cards, awright? Okay, Witchoo, if I look at my cards?”

The third voice piped up, *“I’ll be glad when this gig is over so I can get back to a regular detail. This kinda shit makes me nervous.”*

“What you nervous about?” came the first voice. *“We don’t know nothin’ about this guy in the next room so we got no complicity, see? It’s all on Tranter. And he’s paying us real cash on the barrelhead...”*

Now that was worth hearing. They were playing cards in another room from Grampus. And Stan Grampus, sending a secret message, was naturally alone.

Pearce opened up ctOS records for the address’s building plans, and superimposed the cell phones and wifi signals.

The signals were clearly marked: Most of them were on the second floor, with Grampus using that PC in a front bedroom, and the other three guys in the adjacent den. The one talking on the phone to somebody about his wife’s sexual predilections was on the first floor. Some downstairs guard in the living room out front.

The front bedroom. Mistake, Grampus.

Pearce froze, hearing a sound from the front of the building. A door opening and closing. He heard footsteps on the front walk, more crossing the

street.

Tranter, heading for his car.

Catch up with you later, Tranter.

#

The wind had let up. The sleet was no longer falling.

Wolfe was sitting in the SUV listening to the news on the radio. He hadn't gone anywhere—he was still thinking that Pearce might need his help in that brownstone.

“The strange events across from Golden Fish and Chicken on the Southside have authorities puzzled,” said the announcer on the radio. *“Several men died in the conflagration—but one of them seems to have died from gunshot wounds. The ctOS cameras show nothing clearly...Police believe they may have been interfered with...”*

Wolfe thought, *Maybe I should ignore Pearce's orders and back him up anyway...*

But that's when he saw Tranter driving by in the Crown Victoria.

Here was another opportunity...

Wolfe watched Tranter drive past, ducking down to keep the detective from spotting him. After a few moments he raised up, used the PearcePhone to start the SUV. He waited till Tranter was a good distance down the street and then started the SUV and drove after him.

A quarter mile on, he realized that Tranter was looking into his rearview. He suspected he was being followed.

And a moment later Wolfe saw Tranter speaking into a hand-mic. Calling it in, on some pretense. They'd use ctOS to check the license on this vehicle—they might well find that it was a stolen vehicle. Probably it had been reported by now. There must be a way to scramble ctOS's view of that license plate. Too late now. There ought to be a way to send a signal to stop those cops from coming...but he was deeply fatigued...he couldn't remember if there was a way to do that or not...

Crap. A shitload of cops were about to descend on him.

Two tight spots in one night, Wolfe. Brilliant job.

Wolfe heard sirens approaching. He sighed and hit the brakes, spun the car around, and cut down the nearest side street.

He was going to have to make a run for it.

#

Pearce went to the backdoor—and found nothing electronic to hack. He'd have to do this the old fashioned way. He took a thin tool from an inner coat pocket, used it to jimmy the lock. He drew his pistol, opened the door, slipped into the back kitchen. It was an old fashioned place, with mid 20th century stove and cabinets, but would be pretty expensive in this part of Chicago. Probably some place Tranter owned.

On the wall was a series of sharp kitchen knives lined up on a magnet. Pearce took a particularly wicked looking butcher knife down, and slipped it into his belt.

He went to the doorway into the front part of the house, looked up the narrow hallway. On his left was a wooden stairs; straight ahead was a hall with hardwood floors. He heard the guard downstairs talking. "...so I said to her, you don't want me to fool around, then you don't be boinkin' that Spinning instructor, yeah I know about that bitch...so she says..."

Pearce was pretty sure the three up in the den would have the door open so they could keep an idea on the upstairs hall. And these old wooden steps would creak. He needed a decoy.

He moved down the hallway, taking three steps in ten seconds, aware of the creaking, and then opened the closet under the stairway, and slipped into it. He closed it, finding himself in musty darkness. He drew out his phone, and checked out the house's electrical system.

There—the fire alarm in the kitchen...

He flicked on the cursor, sent a pulse that would activate the alarm.

Immediately a high pitched warbling shrieked from the kitchen.

“What the hell!” yelled the guard in the front. Pearce heard him thumping past. Then he heard a stampede of footsteps overhead as the upstairs guards rushed along the upper hall, and down the stairs.

Pearce waited a few more moments, then put his phone away and stepped out of the closet, went to the stairs—the men in the kitchen were crowded around the fire alarm, their backs to him.

“What the fuck! There's no damn fire in here!”

“Probably just a crossed wire. These old buildings...”

“Well maybe somebody screwed widdit!”

Pearce was moving up the stairs, his footsteps hidden under the wailing alarm. The alarm soon shut off, but Pearce was already partway down the hall.

He glanced through the open door of the den. He could see the poker cards laid out on the desk. He hurried to the door at the end of the hall, opened it,

slipped through, one hand pointing the gun at Grampus, who was just turning away from the PC. Pearce closed the door behind him.

“What’s all that noise from...” Grampus stared, seeing it was Pearce—and seeing the gun in Pearce’s hand.

Pearce put a finger over his lips. “Remember me, Grampus?” he whispered. You tried to kill me not long ago. Now, stand up, slowly and quietly, Grampus, and I won’t shoot you. Give you my word.”

Grampus licked his lips, then slowly stood up. He glanced at the desk—there was a Mack 10 lying on the desk.

Pearce grinned at him and shook his head. He took a step closer. “Move away from the gun...”

Grampus took a reluctant step, a small one, away from the gun.

The guards were returning up the stairs, arguing. “You don’t know if it was just an accident...”

Grampus opened his mouth to yell—and stopped short when Pearce jerked the knife from his belt and plunged it up, into the soft skin under Grampus’s jawline, up through his lower palate, through his tongue.

Grampus choked, and flailed at Pearce’s arm.

Pearce twisted the knife to make sure Grampus couldn’t say anything. Blood choked the hitman’s throat so he couldn’t even scream.

Pulling the knife free, Pearce winked and whispered. “Promised I wouldn’t shoot you and I didn’t.” Then he stabbed Grampus under the ribs, driving it to the hilt, up into his heart.

Stan Grampus crumpled.

Pearce wiped the blood off the knife onto Grampus, and put the knife in his belt.

“I say we check on Grampus...” someone said from the hall.

Pearce pulled out turned and locked the door. That wouldn’t hold them long. He’d like to have taken the PC or get the hard drive out of it...but there wasn’t time for that. Not even time to hack it with the phone. And in fact someone was already trying the door. “Hey, is this door supposed to be locked, Burfy?”

Pearce got out his phone, quickly went into the ctOS power interface—and turned off the power for the whole block.

The room went dark—the whole house did too, Pearce assumed. The men in the hall shouted.

Pearce went to the tall front windows, opened them, kicked out a screen, slid through, and dropped onto the front porch. He glanced around, saw no one on the street. It was pitch dark except for a little light from the next street down. There was shouting from upstairs.

“Who’s gotta flashlight? One of you assholes find a flashlight!”

Pearce chuckled to himself and tossed the butcher knife into a drainage grate. *Better get out of here fast.*

He crossed to the Ford Explorer, got in, and drove off, not turning on his lights till he was around the corner.

He hoped Wolfe had taken his advice and gone home.

CHAPTER TEN

Should've taken Pearce's advice...

Wolfe pulled into a random driveway of this suburban neighborhood off the main drag. He killed the engine and got out into the cold night, hearing the sirens keening nearer.

He glanced up at the lamp posts. There were the ctOS cameras. Chances are his phone had scrambled his appearance—but it hadn't disguised the car they were looking for.

Wolfe hurried down the street, looking for a hackable car. There, a Lexus. That'd work.

He used the proximity sensor when he got near the car, told its doors to unlock. It beeped softly at him and he got in, started it with the phone, backed out, and drove down the street.

But looking in the rearview he saw gumball lights spinning, a few blocks down. Looked like at least three patrol cars. He heard the sirens, then. For sure they'd gotten a report the SUV was stolen. And the ctOS had probably seen him change cars.

He could try and outrun them, but that usually didn't work out, and then trying to operate the PearcePhone while driving—notoriously, a disastrous thing to do in itself.

He could just pull over, on the theory that they were looking for another vehicle. But they'd have his description and no way they wouldn't check him out on their way. Especially now that the Chicago cops were hip to guys like Pearce and Wolfe “borrowing” cars, and changing them up.

He turned at the corner, hoping they'd drive by...but two of them screeched to a halt at the intersection...

Wolfe pulled over, hoping to bluff this out somehow.

Then his phone vibrated.

He pulled it out, as the cops turned in the intersection...

Steam started rising from a manhole cover—and suddenly it erupted upward, a water main geyser gushing up out it, knocking the steel cover into the front of the oncoming patrol car. The car ground to a halt, its engine totaled. Another manhole blew...and another water main shot its geyser into the sky, deflecting the second cop car. The street was almost submerged in spurting water, churning with steam and flooding.

Wolfe could just see the outlines of the cops getting out of their cars, baffled, backing away...

Wolfe answered the phone. "That you, Pearce? You blow up those watermains somehow?"

"Yep. Got my system monitoring CPD—and Tranter. He called in your car. Said it was probably stolen...And it is stolen. So...I came out to see what I could do. Watched through the cameras, hacked into the hydraulic public works control."

"What do I do now?"

"Get out of that car. Your phone'll blur the cameras—I've reset it to do that at the moment. Head into that alley behind the houses. I'm coming to get you..."

Wolfe got out of the SUV, ran to the right, into the broad alley between the houses. Dogs barked at him. The lights suddenly dimmed around him—

Pearce had blacked the area out.

A car was turning into the alley up ahead.

Wolfe stepped out of the way and a black Ford Explorer pulled up. The driver's side window hummed down.

"Get in, ya dumbjack, *fast!*" Pearce shouted.

Wolfe ran around the Explorer, the door opened and he climbed in.

Pearce started backing down the alley. He knocked over a couple of garbage cans in the dimness, then they were on the cross street, turning, and racing off toward the Southside of town.

"Grampus is dead," Pearce said, the way another guy would say, "*It's raining again.*"

"You killed him?"

"Yeah. I got in and stabbed him. Quieter."

"Pearce," Wolfe said, looking out the back window, "I thought Somalia was stressful. But you know what? Getting into your scene, in Chicago—that might be worse."

"You get used to it," Pearce said, yawning. "Man I need to go home and lay down."

#

Wolfe was sleeping in on the sofa bed when Pearce called—the PC switched on and he heard Pearce's voice. "Hey, hotshot. Get your ass up." Pearce's face was on the PC monitor.

Wolfe swung his feet onto the floor. “You bring coffee?”

“Are you joking?”

“Naturally. What’s up?” Wolfe got up, and boiled some water in the microwave.

“I finally got that encrypted message Grampus sent out *decrypted*...He says—well here, read it...”

Wolfe hastily dumped some instant coffee in his hot water, swirled it, tasted it, grimaced, drank some more as he went to the PC. He read the decryption Pearce provided in a note window:

I did my part. I killed Pearce. Tranter might not be convinced of it but I am. No one has proved the vigilante isn’t dead. And what I am saying, boss, is that when the project kills hundreds of thousands, maybe millions, of people, it’s going to bring the New World Order right down on our asses, the US gov will come for us and they’re not gonna neglect me. They got me on their list. That guy at the Purity talk today was probably some federal agent. Hiding me here from him is only good for so long. I’m gonna need a way out of the country and plenty of money...

“Holy shit,” Wolfe said.

“That’s what I said too, coincidentally,” Pearce told him dryly.

“Maybe millions of people...”

“Give or take a few hundred thousand. These assholes are either completely delusional—or they’re a serious threat.”

“We have to tell Homeland Security about this, man. Connect it up with this ‘Purity’ thing for them...”

“I would. Anonymously. Except that General Van Ness is involved in this and he has deep connections to Homeland Security. And the Dousch Brothers are involved—judging by what you told me when I was driving you back to the safehouse. And the Dousch Brothers have huge influence over media. We need more evidence, not just your word on it. This decryption could be faked up, for all they know. It’s not like the feds are going to listen to you, the guy with a year in the military penitentiary...or me. We also need to know what they’re up to. He doesn’t say how it’s going to happen. And there was no reply to the email. But I have got something else that might bring the whole thing down. If we can get hold of it. My source in DedSec says there’s a big file that could soon be leaked by DedSec, implicating Verrick and Van Ness in the murder of a CIA agent...”

“A woman named Medina?”

“I don’t have the agent’s name yet. But that’s probably it. Because you’re in these files too. Only this isn’t happening right this minute—DedSec is going to lengths to try and confirm that the file’s the real deal.”

“At least they think you’re dead.”

“Seems like they’re conflicted about that. I know the feeling.”

“Who did Grampus send that message to?”

“Haven’t got a name. It’s an email that’s listed as one of about fifty screen names used by Iceberg Investments. But there’s no name associated with it, no matter how I dig—which is freaky in itself. I do know where it was picked up though. A place out in the country...A place belonging to the Blume Corporation. They used it to demonstrate a Blume SmartHouse design.”

“Who’s staying out there?”

“To find out, one of us has to go out there. And the guy who pretends to be my doctor...he did used to be a doctor...he says I’ve gotta to take it easy for a few days. So let’s see. Who does that leave?”

#

The text startled Seline. Not the chime that announced it—what startled her was the message.

She was sitting in a coffee shop, just finishing breakfast, when the text came in. It made her feel glad she was facing the door.

Hey. We're feeling very positive about document but someone else feeling negative. Seems like they're trying to find you. They got worried she gave you something. Am hiding out. Grimmy too. You better. Use special key I gave you. Send inquiries from internet cafés. Never same one twice. Destroy this phone. Watch back. Trying to arrange definitive DS action on this.

GlowWorm

Seline felt the hair rising on the back of her neck.

She glanced up at the windows of the busy café. They were steamed from coffee pots and a bit grimy. She could see only blurry outlines of people passing on the sidewalk—which looked pretty sinister.

If she read this text right, GlowWorm was saying that whoever had killed her friend Ruth Medina was now looking for Seline Garnera. And they probably weren't looking for Seline so they could make friends.

There were more delays on DedSec uploading the material. Maybe because they'd gotten word that Seline was being hunted, and GlowWorm too. So they were being extra careful to cover their asses before uploading.

Roger Verrick and General Van Ness would be behind this. They probably wondered if Ruth Medina had shared anything from her files on the rip off of all that money in Somalia. And the set-up of a certain Mick Wolfe.

So they asked themselves, who would it have been?

“Oh, Ruth Medina? She had only one real friend on the ship...”

They were looking to clean house, it seemed, by sweeping away Seline Garnera.

Better get rid of this phone, fast. Apparently she could be traced through it...traced in person.

Seline got up, put on her coat, grabbed her purse, put some money on the table and hurried to the lady's room. There she smashed her cell phone between the seat and rim of a toilet, as if the hinged seat were a nutcracker. She took the circuit board out, tossed the rest in the trash. She took the circuit board with her, and left the coffee shop, hurrying out into the sunny but cold November morning. She bought a cigarette lighter in a tobacco shop, and went behind the building. She put the phone's circuit board on the edge of a trash can, and used the lighter to burn it, holding the flame on it till it melted. Then she tossed it in the trashcan.

She still had a way to get in touch with GlowWorm. He'd given her a flashdrive to use for contacting him, in exchange for the one she'd made of the Medina files.

Later. She had to get her luggage and...

No. She had everything she really needed with her. Three hundred dollars in cash, passport, a small pistol—all in her purse. She'd have to abandon that bag, at least for now. She'd buy new clothes. And maybe a wig. Change her appearance as much as she could.

Seline walked quickly out of the alley, and onto the street. Now where?

She just started walking. Random movement seemed best, for now.

Was the organization hinted at in the file really planning to hunt her down, and kill her?

She didn't have any doubt they were capable of it. The file had made it clear they were murderers, completely ruthless, and highly secretive.

The more she thought about it, the more her stomach tightened.

They might be watching her right now—through ctOS.

She saw a store with wigs in the display window. That'd be a start. She'd need new clothes, after that, and dark glasses...

And then what? She could leave town. But GlowWorm hadn't recommended that. Maybe for a reason.

And how would she rent a car, or take a plane or train, without the organization being able to trace her?

For now, she would stay put in "the city of big shoulders". Chicago was a big town. And she just might find some more allies here...

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Wolfe could see his own breath shining in the sunlight.

The sky was blue—ice blue. The sun was in its winter declination, pale and low in the sky, though its light glinted on patches of snow in the meadow.

He had his hoodie on under his coat, the hood up, but it didn't do much for the cold stinging his ears.

Mostly, Wolfe was concentrating on staying alert, watching the sky, and looking for cameras. While they were too far from town for ctOS cameras, the property could well have its own...

His boots crunched frozen stalks of grass as he skirted the meadow, staying under cover of the trees as much as he could. There wasn't much foliage in those barren branches to hide him—and when he saw the UAV he had to duck into a denser stand where several trees overlapped.

The Unmanned Aerial Vehicle—a model similar to those Wolfe had controlled in Somalia—hummed by overhead, a few yards above the treetops, like some runaway from an extraterrestrial mothership. But he knew exactly what model of drone it was—a new, delta-shaped prototype he'd seen being tested on a secret base in Pakistan—and what it was capable of doing. It was smaller than most attack drones, and didn't have the elongated, missile-like shape of the Predator. This one was for specialized surveillance and targeting. It was only about twelve feet from snout to tail.

Were those gun muzzles, projecting at a thirty degree angle from the bottom of the drone? Could be. Wolfe wasn't certain at this distance.

Wolfe pressed against the bole of a tree, and waited. Soon enough the drone moved on. That would seem to indicate it hadn't spotted him...

But it would see him, when it returned this way, if he weren't careful.

Keep moving. Keep watchful.

Wolfe emerged from the woods into the clearing, but keeping close to the trees—and then he saw the dead deer. It was sprawled awkwardly, with only a few gnaw-marks on it where something had tried to feed in the night and a couple of bullet wounds on its flank and upper spine. Judging from the placement of the wounds, Wolfe figured the thing had been shot from above. From directly overhead.

He shuddered, imagining himself sighted by the UAV. Followed. Hunted. Shot down that way.

He hurried to the treeline, and on toward Blume's prototype smart house. Wolfe hoped he was going the right direction. The presence of the drone suggested that he wasn't far away...

He emerged from a stand of sugar maples, and saw he was just about fifty yards from the edge of a house; it was a spread-out, glassy, angular place, modern architectural-style, one-story. It was exactly where it should be—the smart house—it used a distributed control system, an intelligent network to govern all the devices in the house, right down to door locks, window shutters, lighting, voice activation systems. There were satellite dishes on the roof, and another control antenna, which rotated as Wolfe watched. It was probably there to control the drone.

A brawny, heavy bellied man in a blue parka walked around the corner of the building, a Mack 10 over one shoulder. He was looking at his cell phone as he walked along. Probably reading a text from someone. The text might be business but more likely he was just doing a shitty job of being a sentry. A Graywater.

Wolfe waited. The sentry wandered to a corner of the yard and sat down on a wooden bench, still looking into the screen of his phone. Still Wolfe

waited.

Minutes passed. No other sentry showed up.

Just one sentry outside? Good. Overconfidence, maybe because of the drone. And those security cameras on the corners of the building.

The presence of a Graywater made Wolfe suspect that Pearce's info was right—that Verrick or Van Ness or both might well be in that building, right now.

Tempting to go in there, gun blazing, and kill the sons of bitches, right now. Kill that sentry first, take his Mack 10...

No. There was a threat to Chicago itself. Maybe to millions of people. If he killed Verrick and Van Ness right now it might precipitate the attack—or send the other perpetrators into deeper cover, where it'd be harder to find out what they were up to. It couldn't be just Van Ness and Verrick. There had been an auditorium full of "Purity" enthusiasts on 77th Street. And there was Winters to consider...

Wolfe shook his head. He needed to gather all the information he could get about Purity's plans...So he had to put some pressure on these guys without killing them.

Might not be able to get by without killing that Graywater guard, though. He'd been reluctant to kill the Graywater mercs at the auditorium. Then he'd had to kill one. Now, he was a little less reluctant. Funny how that works, he thought.

He was, by his own estimate, just out of range of the cameras on the house. Getting closer he was going to have to use the background scrambler. The PearcePhone would transmit digital imagery to the cameras that blurred him with the surroundings—but anyone looking closely at the security

monitors would see the outline of a man. They wouldn't know what man, though. And soon they'd know someone was around anyway...

Wolfe set the scrambler, then moved off along the treeline, till he was behind the sentry. He drew his .45, sprinted across the grass and up to the wrought iron fence; he was just clambering over, when the sentry, alerted by the sound, turned around and gaped at Wolfe.

“What the f—”

The sentry was fumbling at his Mack 10 when Wolfe jumped down inside the fence, bringing the barrel of his gun down on the man's head as he came.

The gun connected solidly and the Graywater merc went down like a dropped feed sack.

Wolfe was gratified to see that the man had handcuffs clipped to his belt. He pulled the Mack 10 free, put it over his own shoulder, then retrieved the cuffs. He cuffed one of the big man's hands behind his back, the other to a post of the fence. Then he rushed to the house, pressing himself to a wall underneath a camera.

He readied the PearcePhone, and scanned for the home automation server. Pearce had already run a password cracking program. Pearce entered the password, hacked the smart house, and then got a floor plan of the building from the server, indicating people in the rooms. The smart house was doing all his surveillance for him. Each room had a system to pick up voice prompts for the house computer. It could also be used to listen to people talking. Wolfe heard them on the small wireless earpod.

“Sir, there's something here, sir.”

“Something where, Starling?”

“On the monitor. Does it look like the sentry is down, sir?”

“Well zoom in on him you fool!”
“Sir, yes sir.”

Who is coming out with this *sir yes sir* stuff? Wolfe wondered. He’d recognized the voice talking to the guy. Verrick.

“Yes, sir, he’s definitely down—and cuffed to that fence.”

“Holy fuck! Okay, check all the exterior cameras, if you don’t see anything then rewind the digital feed! And recall the drone! Get it back here! And where’s the other Graywater?”

“Here, sir!”

“Get out there—no, wait till drone gets back, should be less than a minute, we’ll cover you with that...”

“Should I call the police, sir?” Starling asked.

“No! Are you nuts?”

“Sir...” Starling hesitated before saying, *“...no sir.”*

Wolfe chuckled—and, through the house’s automation server, directed the doors to lock. He found an option for emergency lock override...and unchecked it. Warning: House will stay locked for thirty minutes, said the message. Continue?

He clicked on yes.

“Sir! The door is locked!”

“Well unlock it!”

“It’s not responding, sir!”

“Sir—”

“What is it, Starling?”

“Sir, I rewound the security footage, sir! Someone’s hacked the system! You can see the man some of the time, but not clearly, sir, he’s used image blending on the—”

“Who the hell is he?” That was the Graywater’s voice. He sounded scared.

“Could be Quinn—he got word Pearce is still alive. He blames me because it was part of the deal for me to...it doesn’t matter.”

“I doubt anyone in the Club would have this much hacker sophistication. They could have hired a fixer, sir, but this is very...very Aiden Pearce.”

“Get that admiration out of your voice, Starling! Pearce is scum!”

“Sir, yes sir, but when you asked me to study him I did admire the way he...”

“Shut up! Get the drone back and find this guy!”

“Maybe we oughta get out through the windows!” the Graywater whined.

Wolfe smiled, and hit the controls that brought down metal shutters, blocking off the windows. Those were an anti-hurricane device. But they effectively sealed the residents of the house in.

The doors were high-security. They wouldn’t be easy to break. Shooting the lock wouldn’t work. They’d have to get a sledgehammer and work on it.

He could hear shouting, faintly, from inside the house.

Wolfe switched to the house heating system—and turned it up full. He then gave the house a series of other commands...

He heard a humming, then, and looked up in time to see the delta shaped drone appearing over the treetops, coming toward the house.

Delta Force, delta-shaped drone. Did Verrick intend that irony?

He didn't have time to ponder—he was running, cutting right at the corner of the house. He heard a hissing, and bullets thwacked into the ground behind him. The drone was shooting at him. Verrick was probably controlling it, enjoying this little remote controlled hunting trip.

More bullets zinged past, one of them ricocheting from a metal shutter over a window. Next time that thing wouldn't miss. Wolfe could almost feel the crosshairs on his back. And he pictured that dead deer in the meadow...

There—a driveway, in which sat a big white four-door Chevy Silverado truck; the driveway led to a carport.

Wolfe ducked into the car port. The concrete and steel roof would protect him for now. But how low could the drone fly and still fire with effect? If it came down low enough and got him in its sights, he'd have to try the Mack 10 on it, see if he could shoot it down. But it was probably armored against light weapon firepower.

He could hear it whirring overhead as they looked for him...

Wolfe shoved the .45 in his belt, and concentrated on the PearcePhone.

He knew how to hack into a drone—he'd worked up methods of blocking hacker transmissions from the Iranians. Could this drone be protected—by technology Wolfe himself had helped create? If so, that was another cold-blooded irony.

But as far as he knew, the methodology hadn't yet been adopted. The Army took its time with testing.

"I guess I'll find out," he muttered, as he directed the phone to scan for the drone's GPS receivers.

Pearce had a program for hacking a GPS receiver. And GPS is what drones used to orient themselves. The remote controls relied on GPS—you could tell the drone to go straight, but it used GPS to work out to do it relative to the controller.

"Spoofing" was the key—in this case, generating counterfeit GPS signals... He needed to get his phone's signals aligned with the original signals used by the drone; then he had to increase signal strength, to override the GPS tracking loops. That would give him control of the receiver's sense of location and time.

The drone was humming closer, as Wolfe pecked at the phone with his cold, half-numb fingers.

He glanced up—and saw its shadow on the driveway. The shadow was getting larger. Meaning the drone was getting lower. The controller had figured out where he was and was sending the drone lower to try for a kill shot. He could hear its rotors whirring, saw dust rising, swirling under their pressure...

"There he is sir!" came Starling's voice through the phone's hack into the house's voice activation system. *"All you have to do is get him in your sights!"*

The phone chimed—and Wolfe saw the words *GPS receiver located. Lock in?*

He clicked on yes.

The drone was still lowering...and there it was, vibrating in the rotor wash, its camera swiveling to take Wolfe in; its gun muzzles training on him.

He looked at the GPS control grid—found, *Veer Left*. He tapped it—and the drone suddenly veered left. Firing a moment after it turned.

“Ha!” Wolfe said. His heart was pounding—he’d come within a split second of being shot down.

The drone fired a few more bullets but now its rounds were aimed to its left, away from Wolfe, and they spanged off the building’s shutters.

Wolfe found another directive: *Circle area. Choose area diameter.*

He chose fifty yards.

The drone suddenly headed out, circling the building...

“*What the hell!*” said the voice. “*Starling, what’s going on?*”

“*Sir, I think he’s spoofed the drone, sir! He’s gotten control of its GPS—that’s the vulnerable point...We really should have used those GPS input protocols recommended by—*”

“*Starling, don’t say it!*”

“*Sir, yes sir!*”

“*It’s sure getting hot in here,*” said the Graywater.

“*Oh, hell and damn, he’s got control of the heat!*”

“*Who is this guy?*” the Graywater muttered.

Wolfe put on the speakerphone and said, “”Verrick—I really should just cook you alive. It’d take a long time. Maybe hours. I guess you’d probably

get through the door. Or call someone to get you out. But maybe not. I've shut down the house's wifi and cell output! The house doesn't have landlines—so how are you going to call out?"

"Who are you?" Verrick demanded.

"I'm the guy who can turn the lights out on you..." Wolfe tapped the superimposed interface on the PearcePhone.

"Hey! The lights went out!" the Graywater yelled.

"I can see that, you moron!" Verrick snapped. *"Go get some lanterns—there, in that storage room. And stop panicking! He's just messing with your head!"*

"But you can have the lights back on, if you want..." Wolfe said, as if it had just occurred to him.

He switched them back on.

"Hey now they're on—!"

"I can see that too, you idiot!"

"But on second thought," Wolfe said, "why not give you a dark room to chill out and think things over in..."

He switched the lights out again—just as Verrick growled, *"That voice! I know that voice!"*

"Do you know my voice, Verrick?" Wolfe asked. "You should! Before I'm done you'll hear my voice plenty—loud and proud! It'll be the last thing you ever hear!"

“Wolfe!”

“Bingo, Verrick! The guy you framed and left in federal prison for a year! Big mistake!”

“My mistake was not killing you!”

“It’s a mistake you can’t undo, Verrick! You’ll never get another chance!”

“Sir—he’s hearing you! But the cell phones aren’t on! He’s got to be listening in through speech recognition!”

“That means he’s been hearing us all along!”

“That’s right, Verrick. Now how about telling me about the Iceberg Project? And about Purity?”

“Wolfe—I’ll tell decadent socialist scum like you nothing! You go to hell!”

“Hell is all about heat, Verrick! How’s the temperature in there?”

“You, get that door open! There are tools in the maintenance room! Make it quick!”

“Yes sir!” the Graywater replied.

“You come outside,” Wolfe said, heading out from under the carport, “I’ll shoot you dead!”

He glanced up, saw the drone circling the house.

“Sir—I might be able to free up the GPS, sir!”

“Starling—shut up! He’s listening! How can anyone be so smart at some things and so stupid at others?”

“Sir, I don’t know, sir!”

“It was a rhetorical...never mind! Just...”

“Yes sir! I’m sorry! It’s this heat...this heat!”

“Stop whining!”

Wolfe had reached the front door, heard a hammering on the other side. But he had something else to deal with first...

He brought up the phone’s hack of the UAV, and made the drone change course, so it was heading for the front of the house...

The hammering became a strident clanging. The door beside the lock was starting to bulge outward...

“You ready to talk, Verrick?” Wolfe demanded. “Cooking alive’s going to be very unpleasant! I really think I’m going to have to shut the phone off pretty soon. The screaming of men baking to death is just something I don’t care to listen to. I’m too sensitive a guy...”

“You’re going to die slowly when I get my hands on you, Wolfe!”

“Come on, Verrick! You may as well tell me the facts! I know that you’re planning a—”

Suddenly the doorlock snapped and the door flew open.

Wolfe backpedaled quickly, keeping to the wall to the side of the door. “Stay back, Graywater!”

Bullets sprayed through the open door, more or less at random. None of them hit Wolfe.

“Get out there and kill him!” came Verrick’s command from inside.

The merc was sure to rush out at any moment. Wolfe could waylay him and shoot him down—but why not kill two birds with one stone? If he did this right he could block the door?

His fingers flicked over the phone. He sent the drone down fast and hard, screaming with speed into the front door, the last of its bullets firing as it dived down.

Wolfe ducked back around the corner—there was a yelp of fear from the front door—then the drone crashed.

The house shook. Smoke billowed up at its front.

Suddenly the steel shutters over the windows flickered up. Starling may have gotten control back.

Wolfe turned—and found himself looking straight at Verrick.

And Verrick was aiming an assault rifle at Wolfe.

Wolfe threw himself aside, a moment before Verrick fired. Shattered glass flew, bullets hissed, and then Wolfe was up, running around the corner of the house. He sprinted past the front door—another burst of bullets rattled after him, cutting through the flames and smoke.

Then Wolfe angled out, dodged behind the Chevy Silverado, and used his phone to unlock its doors. This was a late model, luxurious, plenty of electronics to hack into—he started the engine remotely, then ran to the driver's side, opened it.

Bullets strafed up the driveway and clanged off the door. But he was already in the truck, putting it in reverse, stamping the accelerator. The truck roared backwards, and Wolfe spun it around. The back window exploded from gunfire.

Would be nice to go back and shoot it out with Verrick...

But he had information to get to Aiden Pearce. Vital information.

He drove the Silverado to the highway, got on the freeway fast as he could, and headed for Chicago.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Quinn!” Pearce exclaimed, when Wolfe told him what he’d heard over the smart house’s speech recognition system. “But I *killed* Quinn...”

“Is there only one Quinn? Not likely...”

Wolfe was back in the safehouse, sipping Scotch at the desk. Pearce’s face was gigantic on the monitor—Wolfe clicked the mouse to put his face in a smaller window. Pearce was intimidating enough as it was.

“There’s a Niall Quinn,” Pearce said. “One of the old mob boss’s sons. I did hear a rumor he was taking over the Club. But doing it quietly. Trying to keep his name out of it as long as possible. I couldn’t find any confirmation and I discounted it...”

“Could be you shouldn’t have discounted it. Son probably wanted to get revenge for his old man.”

“Yeah—but why didn’t he just send a Club hitman out?”

“Don’t know unless it’s in case the guy screwed up. Which he did. Quinn didn’t want the thing to lead back to him.”

Pearce grunted. “Could be. So Niall Quinn reached out to Verrick. Who got Tranter to set it up. And Tranter sent Grampus. Be my guess, anyway.”

“So this Quinn’s got close connections with Verrick—and Purity? Might be they’re doing something for Purity without knowing what it’s all about...some kind of dirty work...”

“Sounds about right to me...”

“And you heard something about a guy named Starling?”

“He was there. Thinking about it, I realized I’d heard of him. Might’ve even met him—back in North Africa. He was with Air Force special technical division, a drone specialist...There was a guy notorious for verbal OCD behavior...Yeah, that’d be him. Starling.”

“Where’d you dump that Silverado?”

“I know, I should’ve kept Verrick’s truck for, maybe, planting a tracer in it or something but...it was Verrick’s. I scuttled it. Ran it down a boat ramp into Lake Michigan.”

Pearce laughed. “Don’t blame you! You search the truck before you scuttled it?”

“Yeah, he didn’t leave any laptops in it or anything. So—what about that SystemsLeak file supposed to go up?”

“They’re reshuffling their people. But let me check on that...”

And suddenly Pearce vanished from the screen.

Wolfe lifted his glass to toast the screen. “Here’s to you, Pearce.”

He sipped his whiskey, thinking, *The more I hang out around Pearce, in any sense, the better my chances are of getting killed...*

Wolfe turned that thought over in his mind, and then realized he didn’t really mind, that much.

Did he, Mick Wolfe...have a deathwish?

He had a revenge wish. But under that, maybe...

He’d been Delta Force; he’d risked his life for his country many times. And when they’d kicked him out with a dishonorable discharge, he’d put on a

stone face about it. He hadn't shed one tear. But inside he'd been deeply wounded, and it was a wound that might never heal. You don't get through training for special forces, and combat with Delta Force, without having a deep sense of commitment and belonging. And then suddenly, the belonging had been taken away from him.

They'd taken it all away from him. They'd smeared him. They'd shamed him.

And he'd been so willing to die for Delta Force, so identified with it, somehow he didn't feel like living, now, with his identity shattered...

"Fuck 'em," he said, to the empty glass.

And he poured himself another.

#

GlowWorm seemed quietly scared; his gaze kept darting around the park. "I shouldn't be here in person..."

"You told me to get rid of my phone. You didn't seem to want to talk via Instant Message through internet cafe so..."

"I just felt like it was too insecure. This park doesn't have any working ctOS cameras. We should be okay here...."

They were standing together on a small footbridge over a branch of a park lake on the southeast side of Chicago. It was a cold but windless midmorning, with broken clouds letting intermittent shafts of winter sunlight through.

To the north was more tree lined park, and then the great expanse of Washington Park's many youth baseball fields. There were maples, elms and other trees Seline couldn't identify lining the small, curved lake. "Looks peaceful here," she said. "Not the way people think of this part of Chicago."

“Can be,” GlowWorm said. “There are all kinds of people in the Chicago ‘hoods. There are strong families, and neighborhoods where people take care of one another; where they tell the parents if they see a child snuck out late in bad company. There are street parties with great music and food, and everyone getting along. There are a lot of good people. But there are gangs, too. And they’re some of the toughest and best-armed in the USA. This bridge looks peaceful—but I know for a fact two Black Viceroyes were killed here, a couple months ago, thugs hired by The Club. Turf fight.”

“On this bridge?”

“Yeah.”

“You know how to make a girl feel safe.”

“You don’t come across like a woman that scares easily.”

“I’m not,” Seline said. “But I’m worried about being tracked by ctOS—if it’s true that the company maintaining it’s got some bad guys mixed in...”

“Blume’s a mixed bag. Most of them are okay for a corporation. But lately...” He looked her over, shook his head. “I don’t know about that disguise...”

She had on a big blowsy blond wig and enormous rhinestone sunglasses, and she’d exaggerated her makeup. She now wore a cheap, heavy bright-green overcoat with really large buttons on it.

Seline shrugged. “I’m just trying to confuse whoever’s using their cameras.”

“Don’t worry about the cameras in this spot. That’s why I picked it. This area, ctOS is behind on their maintenance—the cameras around here have been spray painted by kids working for the Black Viceroyes. They’re all blanked out.”

“Comforting, I guess. If the gangs don’t come after us.”

“Not in broad daylight. And mostly the gangs go after one another.”

“So what’s the word on the upload of the file?”

“Positive. I’ve been pushing them to approve it and just do it because there’s word of some upload blackout coming down. Maybe because rumors of this file have gotten out. Here’s another flashdrive, with another contact, in case anything goes south between you and me. DedSec’s being even more careful than usual...”

She took the flashdrive. “They’re being pretty paranoid, aren’t they?”

“Maybe they are, maybe we’re completely safe. But there is something that I—”

Something he never got to tell her.

The top of GlowWorm’s head exploded with the impact of a sniper’s bullet. He crumpled, as if someone had cut through the tendons in the back of his knees.

Seline threw herself flat on the bridge. Another bullet slapped the air where she’d been a moment before. She found herself almost staring into GlowWorm’s dead, staring eyes.

She looked away. A bullet ricocheted from the metal rail of the footbridge.

She had no intention of being pinned down here. She pulled off the wig, tossed it in the air to distract the shooter, and jumped up, ran with her head below the railing level, to the bushes nearby. She dodged to the right, ran along the bank of the lake, putting tree trunks between her and the place she thought the shot had come from.

Her heart hammered in her chest; she could scarcely breathe as she ran, though she was in good shape.

Calm down, girl. They're not going to chase you down. That was a sniper. They're on their back way out of that position by now, heading out.

Her stomach lurched when she remembered GlowWorm's head flying apart.

She stopped behind a thick maple bole, retching, not quite throwing up.

Maybe it really is time to leave town...

No. She'd liked GlowWorm. She'd liked Ruth Medina. That was two people she'd liked, murdered—and the “tracks” all led back to Chicago.

No. She was going to find the alternate contact, on this flashdrive. And she was going to convince them to upload the file—despite what had happened to GlowWorm.

#

SNIPER IN WASHINGTON PARK?

Unidentified Man Shot Down on Park Footbridge

This morning, police said that the victim at yesterday's shooting in one of the most serene settings of south Washington Park was killed with a 7.62 mm rifle bullet associated with sniper rifles. The man has not yet been publicly identified. Bullet casings were found on the roof of a parking garage across from the park.

A press release from the CPD indicated...

Wolfe felt a chill reading the article in the online Chicago Tribune. He had no clear reason to assume this killing was related to him, or Verrick. Or Purity. But something about the use of that particular ammo, and the military-style placement of the shooter, suggested Purity.

“Hey Wolfe...”

Wolfe almost jumped out of his chair again. “Dammit, Pearce, do you have to boom your voice like that out of the PC? That’s the second time you made me jump.”

Pearce’s face suddenly filled the PC screen. “And how come you’re so jumpy?”

“That’d make anyone jump.” After a moment he admitted, “But this sniper killing in Washington Park...”

“Yeah. I’m following that too. I suspect Purity. Police haven’t released the info but they think the guy was a hacker who went by the name GlowWorm. Might be associated with DedSec. But that’s always hard to confirm. DedSec specializes in making it hard to confirm. ”

“You made any progress on confirming Niall Quinn in sending Grampus after you?”

“Not definitely. But I’ve confirmed he’s taking over the Club. He’s not quite there yet—he’s got rivals. But he’s got control of some sex slavery ring they’ve got going.”

“Nice guy.”

“Yeah. I’m ninety per cent sure he’s the one who called for a hit on me. I’ll get closer to a hundred per cent...and I’ll take him out. In my own time, in my own way.”

“DedSec...T-Bone’s got some connection with them.”

“Some. He’s not one of them though. How’d you get to know T-Bone anyway?”

“We used a white-hat hacking consultant, to try to work up protections against drone spoofing. The guy told me about T-Bone. Said he had ‘the dirt under his fingernails’. Whatever that means. I guess it means he’s not particularly ‘White Hat’.”

“Definitely not. But he’s an idealist, in his own way.”

“When I got out of prison I thought he might be the guy to find you for me. I called my friend, he sent a text to T-Bone. Who called me. Told me about Blank...”

“Okay. You...” Pearce’s face and voice fuzzed out for a few seconds, then came back. “...and if he’s willing to talk to you...”

“Wait, I lost you there. That indicate we’re being tracked?”

“Nah, it’s my system for keeping them from tracking us. I switch from server to server, frequency to frequency. It’s set up to be smooth but sometimes there’s delays. I was saying, you should get in touch with DedSec. See if you can find out what the story is on that file. Maybe they’ll give it to us if they don’t want to leak it themselves. I’ll give you another contact. This guy’s kinda mercenary—he’s in and out of DedSec. But he’s the right contact for what you’ve gotta do. He’ll need ”a fee though. Fancies himself a fixer. Guy’s name is Garnet. Just...*Garnet*.’ You need cash?”

“I’ll be okay. I’ve been using the PearcePhone to listen in to street dealers. Then I do the ATM thing. Most pushers have at least some money in the bank. I’ve accumulated a pretty good pile. I can pay with that.”

“Wait—the ‘PearcePhone’?”

“What I call it. The special phone you got to me.”

Pearce winced. “It’s not the *phone*, it’s the software that’s special. The custom apps. Just keep that ‘PearcePhone’ stuff to yourself. Don’t refer to it that way anyplace. In fact, don’t refer to it at all. One of these days, you’re gonna give that phone back to me.”

“And if I don’t?”

“If you don’t, I send it a signal to make it meltdown, Wolfe. If you happen to have it in your trouser pocket, you might need a testicle transplant.”

“Do they do those now? Because Verrick could use one. He hasn’t got the balls to face me.”

“Thinks like a military man. A Special Forces guy. How often did you Delta Force types take the enemy on face to face like Redcoats running toward the Minutemen so they could get mowed down?”
Wolfe smiled. “Point taken.”

“You need more supplies there?”
“There’s a guy with the Black Viceroys who buys stuff for me, meets me about a block away. I pay him good—but he’d probably do it anyway. Wants to keep Shuggie happy. Got to get some aspirin in but that’s about it. That Scotch of yours is a little too tempting when I’m having a rough day.”

“Keep your head clear, Wolfe. Things are about to get intense.”

“About to? What’s this been up to now?”

“Just mildly tense. Look for intense now. I’ll send you that new contact info for Garnet. Handle him carefully.”

“Wait—you say he’s on the fence...like you don’t always trust him.”

“I don’t.”

“Then why do you think I can trust him?”

“You can’t. But he’s your best shot right now to get in touch with DedSec. They’re kind of annoyed with me. Seems they think I brought too much spotlight down on them, and I refused to give them some accesses. Bunch of pussies.”

And Pearce ended the call.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Garnet was a man with his face and head so covered with tattoos it was difficult to identify his ethnicity. He was a blue-and-red man now. He had a ring through his nose and a small shark's tooth through each earlobe. Garnet had defiant dark brown-black eyes, a sweatshirt with an obscure cryptogram on the front, almost like a superhero's chest symbol; there were copper clasps on his Maori tattooed forearms.

Actually, Garnet was laughing at the whole world', because Wolfe, who was on the roof of the old tenement, was seeing Garnet on the PearcePhone's screen...and he was seeing a frozen digital image Garnet used for trusted contacts. That is, relatively trusted contacts.

Suddenly the animated image moved. "What do you want?" came 'Garnet's voice. The image looked at Wolfe with Max Headroom cynical inquisitiveness.

"I don't know if you remember me, last time it was just texts, my name is ____"

"I know who you are, Wolfe," the animation interrupted. "I can see you. "And I used my own system to I.D. you. You're ex-military. Army special forces. With your technical training, I figure you're one of those scumbags who blow up kids with drones."

Wolfe controlled his temper. "I only hit targets that we knew were...never mind. You want to talk to me or not?"

"Why should I?"

"I need a connection."

"This won't be free, if I decide to do it. Far from free." Garnet told him.

“You’re kidding me.”

“No, Wolfe, I’m not fucking kidding you. You got it or not?”

“Why am I looking at an animation of you?”

“Because it’s better security for reasons I don’t care to explain. Especially to an ex-military geek like you.”

“From what I’ve heard, your hands aren’t so clean either.”

“Wolfe—fuck off.”

“Wait a minute. I’ll meet your price.”

“Okay. I’m transmitting an account you can wire the money to. One of many. So don’t get cute with it.”

“What am I going to get cute for?”

“Just make the transfer. Then check back with me in the morning. I’ll see if I can set you up.”

“This sounds like an act of faith to me. How do I know you’ll come through after I transfer the money?”

“You don’t. You want the deal or not?”

Wolfe growled to himself. “Yeah, yeah. Send the info.”
“I already did.”

The screen went black.

Wolfe sighed.

Time to go raid some more drug dealers—and their ATM accounts.

#

There was someone following her.

Seline had changed wigs and coats, gotten a different style of shades, changed her makeup again. She now wore a red wig, with a white plastic scarf over it. But she wasn't confident of her disguise.

If someone was following her, it must be that someone had seen through it.

She was walking along the Loop, under the elevated train tracks. The sky had clouded up, that evening, and snow came down in fits and starts, slipping between the train tracks. The air vibrated, and then she heard the thrumming of an approaching L Train. The train rumbled over. A truck rumbled past, underneath it, like one great beast calling to another.

She thought, *If that guy who's walking up behind me for three blocks isn't following me, he probably won't turn when I do. If I turn and he does, I should confront him. Better that than being shot in the back.*

Seline turned at the corner, walking away from the Loop. Here the snow was falling a little more heavily. She got to the next corner, glanced back—and saw the guy turn the corner. He was a white guy with a hoodie. Hard to see much else about him from here.

One more chance, pal, she thought.

On the corner was a flashy-looking restaurant. She entered its noise, went to the 'bar, and sat down. "Menu?" asked the bartender, trying not to stare at her. She saw in the bar mirror her wig was crooked.

"Yeah, sure, menu," she said. "And a glass of Chardonnay."

When he turned away, she straightened out her wig. “That wig’s too cheap to make a good disguise,” said the man sitting down beside her. “It’s conspicuous. Crooked or not.”

It was the guy who’d been following her.

Seline put her hand on her purse, where her gun was.

“Garnet sent me,” he said, accepting a menu from the bartender. “I’m buying, by the way. I’m gonna get a steak. I’m hungry. Haven’t had a decent meal in a while. Just canned crap mostly.” He glanced at the menu. “I’ll have the T-Bone steak medium rare, and a whiskey and soda. And a glass of water.”

“Yes sir.” The bartender looked at Seline.

She shrugged. “Uh...the...Caesar salad.”

“You got it, ma’am.”

Wolfe looked at Seline. “ So—about our mutual friend, Garnet.”

“Oh—I forgot. Um... ‘I’ll take my pain...’”

She stared now. Finally she said, “‘...in the shade.’”

I’ll take my pain in the shade was a lyric from the Screaming Geezers—and it was the code that DedSec had given them so they’d know one another.

“Sorry,” he said. “On your end it’s just DedSec. I had to go through some other people to talk to them.”

She stared at him. Lean, good looking guy. There was a certain iciness in his eyes, despite his warm smile, that made her sure he was capable of killing

people. He could be with the wrong side. He could be with the bunch who'd killed GlowWorm.

The waiter brought their drinks. When he reached for his, the movement exposed his forearm. US Army.

"You going to tell me your name?" she asked.

He hesitated. Then he said, "Mick Wolfe."

She blinked. "Push that hoodie back."

He did. She got a better look at him. "I guess you are."

"You've seen me before."

"In her file."

"Medina's file?"

"Yeah. Ruth Medina."

He nodded slowly. "That would be me."

She swallowed. "Sorry to suspect you—but I was told I was going to meet the person another block from here in about half an hour."

"That's where I was going. But..." She had the impression he had started to say someone's name, and decided not to. "...a friend of mine was watching. Through the cameras. He's not with ctOS. He just...uses them. He worked out who you were. So I just went for it. I've gotten kind of leery about pre-arranged meetings."

"Me too," she said, thinking about GlowWorm. Which brought up a memory of the footbridge. His getting shot down in mid-sentence. Falling at her feet...

Seline closed her eyes. She didn't want to think about it...

"This actually is a pretty good place to meet," Wolfe said. "Seeing as it's not where we'd planned. And it's noisy in here."

She looked at him. "You think they might be listening to us, even here?"

"I've lost all confidence in privacy anywhere in this town," Wolfe said.

"I know what you mean." She glanced in the mirror, feeling an adrenalized surge from sheer paranoia. Everyone passing who looked toward her seemed to be watching her.

But maybe it was this wig...

"I gotta get a new wig."

He smiled and said, "DedSec going to come through for us?"

"They say they are. But...they don't want to upload it themselves. They've got it on some laptop. They're going to give that to us—and we're supposed to take it somewhere secure. Then it goes up on SystemsLeak."

"They're almost as paranoid as I am."

"They've got reason. One of their people was just shot down. Sniper."

"That's bad. I hate snipers. Unless they're on my side." He looked her over. "Way you were walking, something about you...You ex-military too?"

She nodded. "Marines. Mostly working on a flattop. Just got out not long ago."

"And that's how you knew Medina?"

She nodded.

After a moment he added, “I never thought of her as Ruth. She was base CIA Liaison Medina to me. I figured that was just another way of saying field agent.”

“You know she’s dead?”

“I heard. My friend did some research on my case. Her name came up. He checked her out. They claimed it was accidental drowning.”

“You believe that?”

“No. Where do we get this laptop?”

“Not here. DedSec set up a drop at the train station...”

“Here’s your steak, sir,” said the bartender. “And the lady’s Caesar salad.”

They ate in silence. She mostly picked at hers. The blood oozing when Wolfe cut into his steak made her queasy. She was still trying too hard not to think about the blood on the footbridge...

#

Verrick stood by the concrete wall above the boat ramp, with his fists balled into his heavy overcoat, a powder-blue felt hat pulled down over his head against the night-time wind-sheer off Lake Michigan. The rattling of the chains pulling the Silverado up the boat ramp was getting on his nerves. He dug in an inside coat pocket, and found a pill. He was trying not to take the Oxycodone but...

Mick Wolfe was getting on his last nerve.

The big crane creaked on the industrial-sized tow truck—designed to pull overturned semi-trucks upright on the freeway—and it froze. The men in blue

coveralls went down to look at it. The big four-door pickup that Wolfe had rolled into the lake was halfway out of the water, oozing water and muck. Verrick could see that the leather interior he'd had custom made was immersed in murky water.

"That son of a bitch," he muttered.

The cops arrived, a patrol car and an unmarked Crown Victoria. The patrolmen got out, and went down to talk to the workmen. Verrick looked over at Tranter who was coming over to stand at his side.

"That yours?" Tranter asked.

"That's what the police report says, Tranter. Stolen truck. And that's my truck. Perp, Mick Wolfe. So why hasn't anyone arrested him?"

"You said before you didn't want an all points bulletin on him. We could put his name up on television news, call him a mad dog, the whole shebang."

"It's tempting. But can you count on Wolfe not talking to the wrong people when he's arrested? Can you count on every cop who picks him up to deal with him our way?"

"Hell no. Who knows what Wolfe'll do if they pick him up. And you haven't got the whole department on your payroll. We can't count on any of that."

"Then...I'll just push harder to locate him through ctOS. We find him, we'll get the right people out there."

Verrick watched moodily as water started streaming out of the Silverado as they got up on the back of the towtruck.

He sighed. "Not the top best truck out there but I loved that thing. I'm going to put him in what's left of it and set him on fire."

“Smarter to just shoot him first chance.”

“Don’t tell me what’s smarter, dammit!”

Tranter’s face went grim. “You don’t own me, Verrick. I am not your little abused dog, like that Starling character. Don’t push it.”

Verrick returned the look. “What have you done for me lately, Tranter? Nothing much. What am I paying for?”

“Tell you something. Things are getting hot around you. You want me to work on this—you double my paycheck.”

“What!”
“You heard me.”

Verrick privately vowed to put Tranter in that burning truck with Wolfe when he got a chance. But he said, “Fine. Just get it done. Get Mick Wolfe.”

#

The Hawk was ripping down South Canal Street as Wolfe and Seline walked hunched over, against it.

The Union Station with its dignified Beaux Arts face, was just up ahead. “You sure the station’s still open at this hour?” Seline asked. Her voice was somewhat muffled under the wool scarf she had bought. It covered half her face. She now had a blue scarf in place of a wig, and no sunglasses.

“Of course it is.” He glanced at her. “That’s a better disguise. Just cover the whole damn face up.”

“It wouldn’t work inside. It’d call attention to me. Maybe I should get a burka.”

“Maybe you should. But not in a train station.”

“You don’t disguise yourself. You’re not worried about ctOS?”

“Not too much. I’ve got some hardware on me that transmits to their camera. Disguises me.”

“You’re not serious.”

“I am.”

“Where’d you get that? At Radio Shack?”

“Got it from a friend. Tell you about him some other time. If it turns out I can trust you.”

“Wolfe, I’m the one who should be worried about trust around here...”

“Are you? You could be some kind of federal agent looking for my friend. Van Ness could’ve pulled some strings...”

They had gotten to the Union Station entrance, and Wolfe was glad to go in. His face was going numb in the cold wind.

Inside, faces tingling in the renewed warmth, they found their way to the Great Hall. A lot of the ticket booths were closed, but that’s not what they were here for.

A discontented-looking black-clad hipster with a soul patch was slumped on a wooden bench by the door, clutching his luggage to him. On other benches were a number of homeless—one of them, hunched under a broad brimmed hat, looked familiar to Wolfe...

They clopped across the Great Hall, the big room echoing their footsteps in a way that made Wolfe edgy. They were right out in the open here. He

remembered that sniper that Seline had mentioned.

“He said someone would recognize us,” Seline whispered.

“I know who it is...I think. Seems like he works for more people than I knew.”

He led the way over to Blank but was careful not to look at Blank directly. He cleared his throat as he walked past, and in his peripheral vision was aware that Blank looked up. He led Seline about thirty steps past Blank they sat down on the facing bench.

“Gotta rest my legs,” he said.

He looked up at the cameras on the columns of the ornate room, then looked at his feet. After a few moments he took the device out of his coat pocket that Pearce had given him—the one that looked like a remote control. “Here,” he said, handing it to her. “I found this. If you ever get a TV you can control it.”

She pulled the woolen scarf down, glanced at him in brief puzzlement, then took the device and put it in a pocket.

He caught a motion in the corner of his eye, saw Blank getting up, walking out. Under the bench, where Blank had been sitting, was a plastic bag. Wolfe kept an indirect watch on the bag, making himself sit there for a couple minutes.

Maybe too long, he thought. Seline has her face exposed.

Wolfe got up, and Seline followed him over to the plastic bag. He acted like he’d just seen it. “Hey, that old guy left this bag...maybe it’s worth something...” He picked it up, looked in it. A laptop taped up in bubble wrap. He shrugged and carried the bag to a side exit from the building.

When they were in a secure hallway just before the exit door, Seline whispered, “It’s in the bag?”

“It’s there.”

“What’s with the TV remote?”

“Not what it looks like. It’ll blot out your face, on a block by block basis, when you go into the range of the ctOS camera.”

“It’ll work for you too?”

“I’ve got a different device. Just remember to press the button on yours every time you cross a street.”

“I won’t need this scarf on my face?”

“Couldn’t hurt to have it.”

She put the scarf back up and they went out into the cold. “Now where?” she asked.

“Should be some kind of instructions when we boot it up. Find a safe place to do that. I’ve got a safehouse. You may as well use it too.”

He could feel her looking at him in a “what are you up to, male?” sort of way.

“I won’t manhandle you there,” he said.

“You mean you won’t handle me at all. No touching.”

“You’ve got a high opinion of yourself.” He flinched inwardly, wishing as soon as he said it that he hadn’t put it that way. She was an attractive woman. He didn’t want to make her feel sneered at.

“I was on a Navy ship for a long time,” she said, unruffled. “I learned to set boundaries.”

He nodded. “Fair enough.” Wolfe was walking briskly south, Seline taking two steps for each of his long strides. He was trying to decide what the best way to get to the safehouse was. Steal another car? He had been doing too much of that. Every time was a risk. Maybe if he got one from a storage lot, where it wouldn’t be reported for a while.

Something made him turn and glance back. A gray van was driving along the street, back there, a little too slowly. “Turn right here,” he told her, as they approached the corner. “Then we cut across the traffic—fast.”

“What’s going down?”

“Not sure. You see action when you were in the corps?”

“You mean, did I ever kill anybody?”

“I mean—anybody ever shoot at you, when you were enlisted?”

“Not to speak of. I was rated a Data Network Specialist. Computer stuff. But somebody shot at me the other day. I handled it.”

“You might have to handle it again,” he said as they turned the corner. “Come on!”

They dodged through the light traffic, making a Safeway truck blare its horn at them, a cab driver cuss at them. Then they were across, stepping into a doorway.

An automatic light came on when they went into the darkened doorway. Wolfe instinctively pushed her behind him.

“I thought I told you, Wolfe, not to—”

“Quiet. Here they come. They turned when we did. Doesn’t prove anything but...”

The van was still toddling slowly along the street. It hadn’t quite drawn abreast of them yet. The van was driving about five miles per hour, clearly taking its time as the driver searched for something—he was the one getting honked at now, the driver, who looked vaguely familiar... from the old lodge.

“See if that door behind us will open,” Wolfe said. He hadn’t even noticed what kind of building it was before he’d ducked into the doorway.

“Yeah. But there’s a security guy at the desk staring at us...”

“Be ready to go through the door anyway...if we have to.”

The van’s driver wasn’t looking his way. But as it drew abreast, that profile...

Then it hit Wolfe. The driver was the Graywater who’d fired the AK47 at him.

And now the driver of the van turned his head—and looked straight at Wolfe.

“Go!” Wolfe said sharply.

She turned, and opened the door, and they rushed through.

“Can I help you folks?” the black security guard asked them, standing. He wore a uniform but didn’t seem to have a gun on him. The lobby was faced in marble and brass. This must be some kind of upscale high rise apartment.

Wolfe turned, glanced through the door. Saw the van pulling up, the driver getting out—with a Mack 10 auto-pistol in his hand.

“Visiting friends upstairs,” Wolfe said. “Party.”

“Sir...”

But then the elevator opened, and a lady with an ermine coat stepped out, with her two small white fluffy dogs on a leash. “Come on lovie loves,” she said. “Walkie walkie!”

Before the elevator doors had closed Wolfe and Seline were through them, and Wolfe was punching the Close Doors button. He saw the security guard push the woman with the dogs out of the way—she dragged the dogs with her—as the Graywater merc burst into the lobby, raising the Mack 10.

The doors closed, catching a short burst on them, then the elevator was headed up.

“I hope those people in the lobby are okay, Wolfe,” Seline said.

“So do I. The Graywaters won’t waste time with them. They’ll be coming right after us. Anyway—there are a lot of lives at stake. More than you know. Thousands.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Something called the Iceberg Project. Tell you later.”

“Just tell me one thing—how’d these guys in the van find us?”

“Security cameras in Union Station. I guess they were monitoring the place through their pal at Blume pretty closely to keep us from leaving town. And they had your face in their system. And ctOS recognized you and sent those lunkheads over to take us out. Must’ve been close by—the Blume Building’s not far off...”

“Oh. I shouldn’t have taken off the scarf.”

He was thinking that there had been an emergency stop elevator button in the lobby—and just as that thought crossed his mind, the elevator jarred to a stop.

“Oh shit,” she said.

They were about seven floors up. They seemed to be almost up to the eighth floor.

“Let’s not stay here and *wait* for the sons of bitches,” Seline said. She found the emergency open door button, slapped it, and the doors opened—showing they were halfway up the doorway of the eighth floor.

Wolfe slid the plastic bag through the doorway, onto the carpeted floor, then did a pull up, and scrambled out onto the hallway. He turned reached down, clasped Seline, and helped her up.

Then he picked up the bag—and drew his gun. “This way.”

They ran to the door to the stairs, through it—and then they heard urgent footsteps coming up the stairs, not far below them.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“I want to know what this whole upload runaround is all about, Garnet!” Aiden Pearce snarled.

Pearce had just changed his own headquarters to a new safehouse, activated its surveillance gear and watch devices, when he’d gotten the redirected-call chime on his phone.

Now Pearce was sitting on the edge of the bunk, close beside a shuttered window, glaring at Garnet—the fixer was on the smartphone screen. This image wasn’t animated—Garnet wouldn’t dare pull that crap on Pearce. Garnet took a spliff from his mouth, exhaled smoke, and said, “DedSec’s started running scared after GlowWorm got offed. They’re all worried they might have someone inside—some kinda mole. And it looks like any major download coming from the underground is gonna be blacked out.”

“How’s that possible?”

“I don’t know. There’s somebody at Blume who’s pulling a lot of shit with ctOS without the rest of Blume knowing it. That’s what I’m hearing.”

Pearce thought, *That’s probably Verrick*. But Pearce wasn’t going to mention that—he instinctively told Garnet only what he had to. Information was money, as far as Garnet was concerned. Sometimes Pearce thought Garnet had a rudimentary conscience. But most times the hacker seemed totally self-interested. He wasn’t sure Garnet would try to sell him out to Verrick—but there was no way to know.

So Pearce only said, “I can upload the damned file myself. I’ve got systems that can do it without Blume being able to do a damn thing about it.”

“DedSec’s not trusting just anybody with it right now. Last I heard, that was especially ‘Don’t trust Aiden Pearce’. They’re not gonna let you have it.

It has to be done this way.”

“So how’s ‘this way’ work?”

“They go to some place where the file can be uploaded safely through a short term wifi terminal. Without Blume knowing about it till it’s all over the internet.”

“*What* place?”

“I don’t know, man. I already told you way too much for free anyway—so if I did know I’d have to charge you. In fact I’m gonna send you a bill for this call.”

“And I’ll use it to line a bird cage.”

“You got a bird in a cage now? What kind? I used to have a cockatoo.”

“No, you stoned-ass fool, it’s an expression. Never mind. Just tell me you didn’t give my man bad information. If you fucked him over, Garnet, I’ll come after you. He’s a good man and he’s valuable to me.”

“See, that’s your problem, Pearce. You think that exists.”

“*What* exists?”

“Good men.”

With that, Garnet hung up.

Worried, Pearce sent Wolfe a text:

Everything rolling okay?

He waited. In fact he waited quite a while.

There was no answer from Mick Wolfe.

#

Wolfe was busy. He was trying not to get shot in the back.

He was pounding up the steps, carrying the laptop in its plastic sack; two steps behind Seline, he turned now and then to fire a single bullet down the steel stairs, mostly just trying to slow down the pursuers. There were four of the Graywaters in all. The other three had been waiting in back of the van.

A quick burst of bullets came up the airspace and struck the railings, the shots ricocheting. Sparks flashed. Wolfe smelled friction-heated metal.

Then they passed the top-floor landing, went up the last flight, and ran up to a doorway to the roof. Seline opened it, stepped through, and held it for him. He ran through onto a flat roof, and she slammed it closed. There didn't seem to be a way to lock it without a key.

He put his arm through the loop in the plastic sack, pulled it up onto a shoulder, and looked around—seeing it the same moment Seline did.

“Look!” Seline said. “A helicopter!”

On the other side of the roof was a green concrete helicopter landing pad—and there was a chopper on it, its rotors slowly starting to turn. It was someone's posh private helicopter, neither large nor small. Wolfe could see the pilot in the cockpit looking down at his instruments.

Wolfe tugged his PearcePhone from a pocket, and handed Seline the .45.

“Walk slowly backwards toward that helicopter,” he said. “Keep the gun pointed at that door. See if you can keep them from coming through. There's seven rounds in that clip at the moment.”

“But I’ll back into the chopper blades!”

“They’re over your head. Go!”

“What are you going to...?”

“Just do it and let me concentrate.”

“Whatever. This is crazy shit.” She backed toward the chopper, keeping the pistol, gripped in both her hands, trained on the door of the building; Wolfe walked backwards himself as he told the phone to search for *Aviation mode: Vehicle Door locks*.

The phone scanned the area—and it found the locked doors of the chopper.

The chopper doors popped open. And at that moment Seline fired the pistol at the men bursting out of the stairway outbuilding. One of them yelled in pain, stumbled. The next one jumped over him...

Wolfe was only peripherally aware of this. He was focusing on the phone’s scanner. It found: *Aviation mode: Automatic pilot control*. He clicked on that...as a bullet shot past his head. And he clicked on, *Suspend Take Off*.

He looked up at the doorway. The merc thugs were backed into the doorway, trying to get a clear shot. But every time they raised their guns Seline fired at them. The bullets didn’t seem to be hitting any meat—except the first one had wounded the man groaning face down on the roof.

Wolfe drew his .38 back up pistol and said, “Now—turn and run, get in that chopper, then keep your head down!”

She ran—Wolfe fired at the door. Wounded a Graywater in the shoulder. A burst from a Mack 10 cut its way up the rooftop close beside him.

Almost lost a kneecap there, Wolfe.

He turn and sprinted to the chopper, the blades slowly churning overhead.

The doors were open—because he'd set them that way with the phone hack.

A bullet slammed into the chopper fuselage just beside the door. Then he pulled himself in, and saw the pilot had already split. He looked out the window, saw the pilot frantically climbing down a metal fire escape ladder off the rooftop.

“Can you fly this thing?” Seline said, from the back, as she fired out the open side door to suppress the Graywaters.

“Yes I can,” he said. He tapped the phone to close the doors and take the chopper off autopilot. Bullets cracked the windshield. He put the phone away and accelerated the blades, grabbing the joystick, and angled the helicopter up. “Heli’s about the only aircraft I can fly.” It wobbled in the air under his inexperienced control. “Been a while though.”

Bullets clanged into the fuselage of the helicopter and shattered a side window. “You keeping your head down back there?”

“Yeah—just get us out of here!”

“Trying!”

Bullets ricocheted from the rotor blades. Another burst clattered into the underside of the helicopter.

He veered the helicopter off to portside, heading south as fast as he could accelerate, not sure where he was going to take the thing. That pilot would report a stolen helicopter and police choppers would be up looking for him. It'd take them a while to get scrambled though...

His mouth was dry as a burnt out match; he tasted metal. Only then did he realize that his pulse was going like a drum roll.

The wind struck the chopper, then, and it bucketed in the air. Wolfe struggled for control. Another thud from a bullet.

South...so where? The Indiana line was nearby. Chicago almost straddled it. Would it be better to set down over there?

The bullets stopped hitting the helicopter. Out of range. Probably the Graywaters were taking their wounded off the roof and trying to get out of there before the cops came...

The wind struck the aircraft again, and once more Wolfe had to work hard with the pedals and joystick to keep it steady.

He was out of practice coordinating the pedals and joystick. The helicopter yawed sickeningly...

“You smell smoke?” Seline asked, coming to sit in the seat beside him.

“No...” He sniffed. But he did smell it. And more. “Yeah I do. We got to set this thing down fast. They hit the engine, maybe the fuel tank...this rich guy’s toy isn’t armored...”

She buckled herself in, then reached across him and buckled him into his seat. There was a certain intimacy in that—which he pretended not to notice.

What the hell are you thinking about that for? This thing’s losing elevation!

He looked at the altimeter again to be sure. Yeah. Losing elevation pretty fast. “Engine’s stalling...”

He looked out the window, and through the distortion from bullet cracks made out one possibility for survival.

The chopper began to dip down. It still had a little power. He forced a little more lift out of it...

“Hold on!” he yelled.

“I’m *already* holding on!”

Down...lift almost gone. The engine whining, sputtering.

Down...

Then the gray green surface of the water rushed up at them.

They slammed into the water, hard, jarringly, so that Wolfe’s teeth clacked painfully together and his whole body was whiplashed in the seat. They struck at an angle, so that the helicopter skidded a little ways toward the shore of the lake—and then it stopped moving. He heard no engine sound—just a gurgling as the helicopter began to sink...

Wolfe checked on Seline...she seemed dazed as she fumbled at her seat belts, but not much injured. He got his own seatbelt unlocked; she got herself free, and pressed the red emergency handle. The door popped out of the way and started gushing in at their feet.

Seline jumped out, splashed out of the way; Wolfe put his phone in the plastic sack with the laptop, got out on the other side, and found they were in water only up to their chests. They rushed to get away from the helicopter blades, and sloshed toward shore.

“Cops’ll be here pretty soon!” she said.

“You okay?” he asked.

“I think so. Maybe a little whiplash in the neck.”

“Me too. Feel like I was worked over by a drunk chiropractor.”

They climbed up on the shore, where they shivered, wet and cold—and she pointed at a sign. “Look at the name of this lake!”

He looked. It was Wolf Lake. “If I had time, I’d add an *e* to the end. I know where Wolf Lake is...out below Calumet. I think we’re in Indiana...Come on, we gotta get some transportation...Need to get back to Chicago.”

By the time they found a car that responded to his PearcePhone, a Mercedes parked about two blocks away from the lake, police helicopters were starting to arrive over Wolf Lake.

But Wolfe and Seline were far enough away they weren’t spotted as, teeth chattering with cold, they drove away in the Mercedes...

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Her wet hair wrapped in a towel, Seline walked over to him from the kitchenette. She had a cup of tea in her hand. “”You want some tea?”

“Tea’s not my cup of tea.”

“Funny guy. It didn’t even occur to me to ask if the laptop got wet when we had to slog through that lake...”

Wolfe shook his head. “It was in plastic. Double wrapped. It should be okay...” He was sitting at the desk, with the PC shoved aside for the laptop.

They’d both showered—her first. He’d given her plenty of privacy. He was wearing his only other outfit, jeans and an old Army t-shirt, and a pair of sneakers. She’d put on some extra men’s clothing Pearce had left here, trousers and a button up Arrow shirt. It didn’t fit very well—the trousers were rolled up over her bare feet. Wolfe glanced at Seline.

She actually looks kind of cute dressed that way...

Don’t start thinking about that. Focus.

“What’d you find on the laptop?” she asked.

“It’s just now booted up...oh, here’s the password form. What’s the password?”

She knew the password. *Remember GlowWorm.*

The laptop accepted the password, and the screen showed a block of text:

Problem: Someone at Blume is using ctOS related wifi to block uploading of files from wifi. If anything relating to Roger Verrick is

attempted to be uploaded, the upload is blocked both at 2.4GHz and 5GHz. The blockage is accomplished with wifi signals that immediately overload the band. Other bands are also being searched and blocked.

Cable blocking of any upload relating to Verrick is accomplished via a NSA-quality ctOS search spider constantly checking all uploads in the area.

Solution: Leave town.

Drawback: They're looking for you to leave town and watching airports, stations, freeways, boats. And if you leave town you will not have the advantage of using the transmitter being prepared for you.

Preferred solution: We have located an area where the wifi blockage is not effective. It is southeast of your location, in the Washington Park area. by tomorrow morning, a powerful transmission device will be installed at that location, by sympathetic local hackers working with SystemsLeak. The device will transmit directly to a satellite. The file upload will go out worldwide. Blockage will then be impractical. The address of the transmitter, available at 8:30 a.m. tomorrow, is—

Wolfe memorized the address. “That’s one of the toughest neighborhoods in Chicago...”

“Let’s make sure the file’s there...”

He opened the text and graphics file on the desktop—the only file on the laptop. He had to use the second password for that: *Remember Ruth.*

Ruth Medina Case File 237.

In summary: 1. There are strong indications that Major Roger Verrick, U.S. Army, was planner and key in executing the cash theft from the Road 23B Incident, Somalia Case File 2289...

2. There are further indications that the testimony given by Master Sergeant Mick Jeremiah Wolfe, was in fact substantially accurate.

Verrick appears to have laundered money through a casino in Chicago know as the Four Clubs...

It went on for page after page. “She knew...” Wolfe said, after he’d scanned the extensive file. “Medina knew I was right. She knew what Verrick did...”

“She knew,” Seline agreed. “But she didn’t have enough evidence to convince her superiors. She needed more to have Verrick and Van Ness arrested. The money vanished, sure. They know millions of dollars were laundered through the casino—and that a payment was made to Roger Verrick from ‘Iceberg Investments’. He later ‘reinvested’ a lot of it in Iceberg. But the connection is mostly circumstantial. And the footage you put on disk just isn’t there anymore. So, she was gathering evidence...she spent more than a year doing it.”

“The year I was in prison! Christ. She could have told me.”

“She wasn’t free to do that, Wolfe. She was allowed to investigate but she wasn’t allowed to tell anyone what she knew...except whoever this file was to go to. When she was about to make a move with this data...they killed her.” Seline shrugged, sighing. “She got it to me because she suspected they were moving in on her.”

Wolfe opened a desk drawer, took out the Scotch and two glasses. “Why didn’t she just email the damned thing to her superiors?”

“It could be she didn’t trust them enough. Maybe she was planning to go over their heads. Right to the Pentagon. Defense Intelligence Agency. She was gathering information and she had some pretty damning stuff...Don’t pour any whiskey for me, thanks...And then...”

Wolfe sipped Scotch from the small tumbler. “And then someone killed her.” He looked at Seline. “You’re lucky to be alive.”

“Yeah. They didn’t know I had the file—not until after I got here. I had a friend in the area with some connections with the local chapter of DedSec and I knew they have been working with SystemLeaks so...”

“You sure you don’t want a drink? You don’t really have to worry that I’m trying to get you drunk. I’ll keep an eye on you to make sure you don’t put roofies in my drink.”

“Okay, wise guy. Just one.” She put her tea cup on the desk.

He poured her a drink. “Looks like when we go to that address in the morning, there’ll be someone there ready to help up us do the satellite upload...”

“Uh huh.” She looked around.

“The sofabed,” he said, guessing at her thoughts. “You take that. I’ll be on the cot in the bedroom. Sofabed’s more comfortable.”

Wolfe sipped some Scotch, then got out the PearcePhone and sent a text.

Don’t be throwing your face up on the system here unless you want it to be seen by my guest. . .We’re doing the upload tomorrow. Crashed a chopper in a lake. Yes that was us. . .Hope this is secure. Yeah I know: always secure.

He sent the text.

“Who’re you texting?” she asked, going to sit on the sofa.

He drank off his Scotch, and stood up. “I’ll have to get his permission before I tell you. A friend.” Wolfe looked at her. “Nice new look. Have to get you some loafers to go with it.”

She smiled and sipped her drink.

He said, evenly, “You were pretty cool headed today. Glad I had you on my side.”

She looked at him with narrowed eyes. “Are you patronizing me?”

“No. I meant it.”

Seline raised her eyebrows in mild surprise. “Okay. Thanks.” She grimaced. “But...tell you the truth, I felt kind of weird on the roof when I...”

“When you shot that guy? I don’t think it was a killing wound.”

“I never shot anyone before.”

“I wouldn’t feel bad about it where those shit-dicks are concerned. They were ready to shoot us dead.”

“I don’t feel bad about it exactly. Just...a weird feeling. I could have gone my whole life without shooting anybody and been fine with that.”

“I hear you. Only two ways to feel about it. Feel nothing—or the way you do. Me—I think it’s better to give a damn if you have to do it.”

She nodded, just slightly.

Wolfe kept looking at her. No special way. Just looking.

She glanced up at him—then quickly away. She opened her mouth as if to say something...

Then she gave her head a small shake and raised her glass to him. “See you in the morning.”

He nodded, and went into the bedroom, closing the door behind him.

#

A dull thumping sound woke Wolfe up the next morning. He grabbed his .45 from under the pillow and jumped out of the bed...

And then realized it was only the sound of something thumping in the clothes dryer.

He put on his pants, stuck the gun in his waist band, and opened the door into the other room a little, peering through. He didn’t want to rush out and startle Seline.

Especially now that he knew she had a .44 in her purse. He knocked on the door.

“It’s your place, come on out,” she said.

“It’s not really my place,” Wolfe said, coming out into the living room.

Seline was hunkered down next to the small dryer, taking her clothes from it. She was still wearing the oversized pants and shirt.

“Get all the pond scum off your clothing?” he asked.

“Most of the pond scum’s out there in Chicago,” she said.

She straightened up and looked at him. He thought her eyes lingered on him—and he realized he was bare-chested.

She looked away. “If this is not your place, whose place is it?”

“You go on and change your clothes, and I’ll see if I’m allowed to say whose place it is.”

She shrugged and carried her clothes into the bathroom to change.

He sat down at the desk, and looked up the file he’d organized on Tranter. He copied and pasted select parts of it, making a summary, that he uploaded to the PearcePhone. He had a feeling it could be useful in the search for allies.

Then he picked up the phone and called Pearce. It took a while for the system to bounce the call around securely enough. The heard Pearce’s voice crackling gruffly through. “Wolfe?”

“Yeah. So—you know about Seline Garnera.”

“Yeah. Got your message. So—you crashed a chopper together? Good first date. She’s there with you now?”

“Yeah. She’s taking a shower. Doesn’t know you could be watching her get undressed and stuff.”

“I could even watch her in the shower if I wanted to. But I don’t have those cameras turned on. Never have been.”

“That’s reassuring.”

“You never had to worry I was going to check out *your* naked ass, Wolfe. You know what to do about the uploading?”

“Yeah. I got the address. Doesn’t look easy.”

“Best way to do it right now.”

“Uh—look. You want to meet Seline? I mean—onscreen? We’re already tangled up with her. And she’s already here. And it’s not like you haven’t been all over the news about three hundred times in your life.”

“Yeah, yeah, okay.” Pearce hung up.

Seline came out of the bathroom, dressed in the clothes she’d worn yesterday. “Only problem is my shoes. They’re still kinda stiff. Wasn’t easy getting the mud and stuff off ‘em.”

Aiden Pearce suddenly appeared on the television screen. “Hello, Ms. Garnera.”

Seline gasped, spinning toward the television. “What the fuck.”

Pearce smiled crookedly at her from the TV screen. “Wolfe said you might want to meet me. Here I am. Aiden Pearce! You’re staying in one of my safehouses. Which means I saved your ass. And so did the software I gave Wolfe there. Just keep it in mind—and in return keep your mouth shut about anything you find out about me.”

“Uh...sure.”

“I’ll let Wolfe explain the rest. There’s some instant coffee in the cabinet to your right.”

Pearce’s image flicked off the TV screen.

#

The windshield wipers chugged with metronomic regularity, wiping off sleety rain, as a man’s deep voice said,

“Wild action in downtown Chicago last night where a helicopter was stolen from the helipad atop the Armstrong Arms, a high-priced apartment building just a block south of Union Station. The helicopter pilot, David Hendle, had been waiting to take a client to Las Vegas when apparent gunfire broke out on the roof. Escaping the gunfire, Hendle climbed down from the rooftop using an emergency ladder. Unidentified persons, reportedly a man and woman, hijacked the helicopter and flew it a few miles south only to crash it into Wolf Lake, possibly as a result of bullet damage to the helicopter’s fuel line. ctOS security camera footage is inconclusive...The thieves were not found at the scene of the crash. The lake is being dragged for their bodies.

“Blood was found on the rooftop along with shell casings but none of the wounded or the other gunmen. This is CKNW, Chicago’s News Radio...Now let me tell you something I bet you didn’t know about car insurance. For a fantastic deal...”

Wolfe switched off the radio of the stolen Ford Explorer. “I’ve gotta stop stealing cars and helicopters and things. One of these days I’m going to be arrested.”

Seline, who was driving, just smiled. “At least you don’t keep them or sell them for parts.” She glanced at him. “Do you?”

“Nope. They get back to their owners eventually. I’m not sure the police would accept the ‘I just borrowed it from a complete stranger’ concept though. And the truck I took from Verrick got special treatment—I let it roll into Lake Michigan.”

“Ha. Good.”

He glanced down at the small backpack on the floor of the Explorer. In it was the laptop with the file for SystemLeaks.

“Wolfe—’look!”

Up ahead the road was blocked by orange cones and blinking temporary traffic barricades—stolen from some roadwork, somewhere, probably. Standing behind the barricade were half a dozen African Americans in hoodies with day-glow orange trim. Two of them carried AR15 semi-auto rifles. The tall one in the middle had a Desert Eagle pistol stuck in his waist band, the grip showing over the bottom of his sweatshirt. He grinned at Wolfe, and wagged his fingers in a joking wave.

Wolfe snorted. “It’s okay—those are friends of mine. Black Viceroy. The one in the middle’s the boss of his own little chapter of the Viceroy—Shuggie’s his name. Just pull up and let me talk to them.”

“I’m getting out too. If you’re their ally I want them to be clear that I’m here with you.”

“Okay but keep the car running in case we gotta get out of here quick.” She stopped the car and put it in park. “I thought you said they were friends of yours?”

“They’re not the reason we might have to get out of here. Come on.”

They got out of the Explorer into the cold sleety morning, Wolfe putting up his own hood against it.

“Hey Shuggie,” he said. “What’s up?”

Shuggie nodded as they walked over to the barrier. All the Viceroy but Shuggie were having a good long look at Seline.

She looked at Shuggie.

Shuggie hooked a thumb at her. “We saw you takin’ your woman to that crib you got all up in that crap hole of a building.”

“I’m not anybody’s woman” Seline said, in flat, informational tone.

The Viceroyes laughed.

“Bitch, shut up while Shuggie’s talkin,” Renfo said.

Hearing that, Wolfe felt a tautness come into his shoulders and jaw. He put his hand on the butt of the .45 at his waistband. “Renfo. Don’t talk to the lady like that.”

“Never mind, Wolfe,” Seline said calmly.

Without looking at his lieutenant, Shuggie said, “Shut up, Renfo.”

Wolfe saw Renfo give Shuggie a cold look. Could be Renfo was starting to resent Shuggie.

Wolfe relaxed a little and dropped his hand from the gun.

“Wolfe,” Shuggie said, “this is the end of my turf, right here.” He tapped the barrier. “I been having some trouble with a, what you call it, a splinter faction. All Viceroyes having trouble with ‘em. And past here, there’s the *other* Viceroyes. Different chapter.” Shuggie shook his head sadly. “Man I cannot guarantee, if you go on from here, you get through where you goin’. It’s looking pretty sketchy down that way. There’s a motherfucker in CPD got some friends in the Chunkies.”

Wolfe glanced past Shuggie at the street beyond. It looked lifeless from here. “‘Chunkies’ are the splinter faction?”

“Yeah, *Chunky Crunkies*, is what they call themselves. Splintered off from the Viceroyes. I think they’re working for the Club, is what’s up. They say they got their own thing. I don’t like either one—not Club, not Chunkies.”

“When you say the ‘other Viceroyes’, Shuggie, what’s that about?”

“You think I tell all Viceroys what to do? No, just my ‘hood, man. Motherfuckers past here are...harsh. I cannot guarantee my protection there. Not from every Viceroy on the Southside, dude. You stay around that crib of yours, it’s okay. But past this point...”

Wolfe shrugged apologetically. “I got to go down there.”

Shuggie seemed to think it over. Then he nodded. “I’m committed to staying here—I’m watching this corner, man. But...you got my cell number. And who knows?”

Wolfe nodded. “Sure. Who knows? How do I identify a Chunkie?”

“Bull’s eye tattoos—each man got one around his right eye. Center of the bull’s eye is the eye socket.”

Shuggie moved the barrier out of the way of the Explorer. “Hey Wolfe—that girl there as tough as she acts?”

Wolfe said, “She just got out of the Marine Corps.”

“Straight up?”

“Straight up.”

Shuggie walked over to Seline. He stared at her. She stared back.

Then he stuck out his hand.

They shook hands. She nodded at Shuggie, then turned and went back to the car with Wolfe.

“So those are definitely *friends* of yours?” she said, when they’d gotten back into their seats.

“Shuggie is, I guess. I’d back him up in a fight. I know, maybe we should have a picnic on the roof of that building the safehouse is in. Have all the Viceroys over.”

She drove the car between the Viceroys and the barrier. “And they bring their AR15s?”

“So okay, maybe a picnic’s not the best idea.”

They drove through an area of low rent high rises; then passed onto another block of mostly houses, with fences around the yards. Winter-bare trees stood in margins between the sidewalk and street. The houses seemed clean, and well kept. A small black child looked out the front picture window of a two story house. The child waved to Wolfe. Wolfe waved back.

Another block down, on the left, was an elementary school. But the windows were boarded over. “I heard Chicago closed a lot of inner city schools,” Seline said. “Seems a shame.”

“It is. Makes things worse for people around here.” He was looking at the GPS. “Address we want is to the right and then about nine blocks up...”

They turned, drove past a Golden Chicken and a tavern, and then crossed a street into a more ragged neighborhood. Trash clogged the sidewalks, and old tenements rose gauntly on either side, fenced off and boarded over.

“You sure this is the neighborhood?”

“Oh yeah. This is the...”

That’s when a Molotov cocktail hit the hood of the Ford Explorer, the bomb shattering in flame and broken glass.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“I hope the guy you stole this car from has good insurance on his car,” Seline said, as Wolfe gunned the motor. He wanted to get past whoever had thrown the firebomb before dealing with the fire.

The Ford Explorer surged ahead, trailing flame, black smoke blotting the windshield, and then it skidded out of control.

The Explorer spun around three times, and slammed a rear door against a steel post. The engine died.

Flames continued to flicker across the front of the car.

“Yeah,” Wolfe said, drawing his pistol. “I sure as hell hope the guy has insurance, too. Come on, put on that backpack and let’s get out before the damn car blows up.”

But when he stepped onto the road his boots skidded and he almost fell—there was oil spread all over the street. And it wasn’t there accidentally.

“Hold it, Seline! Stay in the car, put that backpack on, and flatten down!”

He held onto the side of the car and looked around. He saw hooded faces watching him from across the street, about where the Molotov cocktail had come from. The Chunkies were half-sheltered behind a tumble of masonry below a half-fallen building.

He saw the glint of light on a gun barrel and he fired twice to keep them back. The faces vanished, ducked down. For the moment.

He reached a hand into the car. “Come on, get out this side!”

She took his hand and helped her slide across the front seats, and out of the car. She was wearing the backpack. “Hold onto the side...they’ve dumped oil on the street!”

“What? Oil?”

She steadied herself. Fire still crackled from the hood of the car.

“I’ve heard about people doing this...they scare you into hitting the gas, you hit their oil spill and the car goes out of control...”

She took her gun from her purse. “And then what?”

“They loot you and...it’s not good. Wait...”

He turned, catching a movement from the corner of his eye. Someone was raising up behind a dumpster on this side of the street—and pointing a gun at him.

He fired, and Seline fired too, their guns barking like two dogs side by side. Jets of orange licked out from the two guns and someone shouted in pain.

“Come on,” Wolfe said firing another shot across the street. “Time to go skiing. Take my arm and we’ll steady each other—into that doorway across the sidewalk.”

She didn’t argue. She clutched his arm and they half-skidded, half-ran, across the oil slick to the sidewalk, stumbling up it. Two bullets cracked into the wall to their right, spitting chips of brickwork.

Then they were in the doorway, descending. It went down to a basement apartment, under the main stairway. The door was padlocked—Wolfe kicked it, hard, three times, and broke the hasp of the lock.

He turned—and saw a dark figure running at him, raising an AK47. The guy had a bull’s eye tattoo around his right eye.

“Go on, Seline!”

“But—”

He was taking careful aim. “Go!”

She went through the door and he aimed. He had a flickering impulse to fire at the center of the bull’s eye but instead he aimed at a clearer target.

Wolfe fired. The thug with the AK47 went down, a bullet in the forehead.

The AK skidded over to the edge of the sidewalk. Wolfe ran up the steps, scooped up the weapon and ran back, bullets humming by him.

Then he was through the door and into the dim room. She took a small flashlight from her pocket—the flashlight was on a keychain.

“First chance I ever had to use this...”

The beam illuminated a dusty, cobwebbed sofa, a few chairs. A hole had been knocked into the farthest wall.

Voices came from the street. “Just shoot through the door and kill the motherfucker!”

“He shot Kewpie right in the head, man, I’m not getting close to that fucking door.”

“Just give me the damn gun...”

“Motherfucker that’s my gun! You got a niner!”
“I need more heat than that, now gimme the fucking Ar-five!”

“I think we oughta wait for Tranter, man. He said we wait here, he come and clean it up.”

“Sounds like we go this way,” Seline said.

She led the way through the hole in the wall. On the other side they found a concrete floor with a hole broken in it, and a web-laced aluminum ladder stretching down into the darkness.

“Great,” Seline muttered. But she put her gun in her pocket and started down the ladder. Wolfe put away the pistol, put the strap of the AR15 over one shoulder and followed her down.

Wolfe had just gotten halfway down the ladder when a burst from an AR15 came spitting through the hole in the wall from the next room, the rounds zipping over his head.

He hurried down the ladder and found they were in a sub-basement—in one wall another gap had been smashed through. The rusty sledgehammer that had done it was leaning up against the wall by the hole.

“They going to follow us down here?” Seline asked.

“I think they’ll wait for orders on that. May as well go through that hole too. Wouldn’t want to miss out on another scenic Chicago hole in the wall.”

They followed the thin flashlight beam through the hole and found they were in an old rain runoff tunnel, dripping but not coursing with water.

“It’s going the way we were driving,” Seline pointed out. “Should we follow it?”

“No better options. You hear what that guy said about Tranter?”

“Who?”

“Detective Tranter. A sleazebag with Chicago PD. Only he works for Verrick too. And the Club. I think he’s kinda the intermediary between Verrick and the Club. And these Chunkies who just chucked a bottle of burning gas at us have started working for the Club. So that means they’re working with Tranter, when he needs ‘em...And he’s apparently coming here to ‘clean this up’.”

“Meaning he’s gonna bring a lot of cops down here?”

“I doubt it. That’d cause too much talk around the ol’ department. No, the prick is probably calling Verrick right now asking what to do.”

“You think they know where we’re going?”

“Hope not. With any luck—no. They’d have waited for us there if they did. I figure the Chunkies know about me...and you. And they saw us coming.”

“We should get the hell on, then.”

“A sound strategy. You’re like a female Napoleon.”

“Oh shut up.” But she laughed softly and led the way with the light.

He unstrapped the AK and kept it ready.

The floor was wet and slippery but they went as quickly as they could. The tunnel stretched on endlessly, occasionally streaked with light from manhole covers and drainage grates. They’d gone what must’ve been several blocks when Wolfe said, “Hold on.”

They were just entering the vertical shaft of a manhole. A steel ladder went up the side. A little light came down...

“You thinking of going up there, Wolfe? Might get your head shot off like a gopher if you stick it up there.”

“No, I’m gonna try something else.” He handed her the AK57. “Keep an eye on the tunnel for me. And better turn off that light—save the battery.”

“Yeah okay.”

Wolfe climbed the ladder, almost to the top. He listened. He heard no traffic going by. He reached up, and pushed on the manhole. It moved, just a little. He pushed harder—it came unstuck from the asphalt, and he moved it a few inches aside. He listened again. Nothing.

He took out the PearcePhone, put it on speaker, and lifted it up so it would have a chance of getting a decent signal. Then he shifted it through its scanning modes with his thumb. It took him a while to locate Tranter’s phone number...

Tranter hadn’t changed it. Arrogant or sloppy. “...They tell me he’s there with that woman, Verrick. *Our guys in the Chunkies spotted him.*”

“*You gave them his description?*”

“*Hell I gave them that photo of him...He’s somewhere in that four-block area. I can get it blocked off so we can operate kinda quiet. You know, I got some guys in the department who’ll block off the street for me, no questions, if they get a little Paypal bump for it...*”

“*Can’t they go in there and do the job?*”

“*You don’t own the whole department. Neither does the Club and neither do I, Verrick. Told you that before.*”

“*Okay, fine, then have ‘em block off the area and I’ll send in...well, tell ‘em to ignore anything they see flying over the area.*”

“Flying? You mean like choppers?”

“No, it’ll come out of a helicopter. So that too.”

“Out of a...you mean some kinda drone?”

“Yeah, and so what?”

There was silence on the line for a moment. *“Whatever. If any of them go down they’re your responsibility.”*

“Yeah, they’re not marked in anyway that’ll...just don’t worry about it. I’m sending them in—it’ll give us a chance to test them in Chicago airspace, make sure the control signals work okay. Just get your men on the street to point the way. Let ‘em know they’re going to see drones.”

“Next the gangs’ll want their own goddamn drones.”

“Might sell them some, too.”

“You’re not serious.”

“Just do what I said, Tranter.”

A click, and Verrick hung up.

“That’s just what we need,” Wolfe muttered.

“What?” Seline asked. “I couldn’t hear much from here.”

“Tell you in a minute.”

Wolfe went through his speed dial, found the one he wanted, dialed it and put the phone to his ear.

“Wolfe? Where you at?” Pearce’s voice.

“You can’t see my position?”

“Yeah. I see it. Kind of a weak signal. Wait—you underground?”

“Yeah. Drainage tunnel. About five blocks from where I need to be. Tranter’s called Verrick—he’s sending in drones.”

“The clowns?”

“The *drones*, Pearce.”

“They can’t get to you down there.”

“These could—and the Chunkies know I’m underground.”

“Chunkies? As in Chunky Crunkies?”

“Yeah. Shuggie thinks they’re working for The Club. Anything you can do to help us out here?”

“There? Underground? I don’t know. You’ve got the phone—you could probably do most of what I could do. If I burst any water pipes, it’ll make it as bad for you as them.”

“Okay, fine. Just so you know where we are. I’m gonna try something else.”

“Wait—”

But Wolfe was dialing another number. Shuggie answered. “Who that?”

“It’s me, Shuggie. Wolfe. Um...I’m down in the drainage tunnels...” He gave the address. “And I got Chunkies all around me, up above anyway. And

uh...I think we're gonna get some drones here."

"Drones. Like back in North Africa-type drones?"

"Yeah."

"They going to be shooting Sidewinders at me and my boys?"

"I doubt it. I don't think these use those kind of weapons and I don't think they're looking for you." His arm was aching from holding onto the metal rungs and he pulled closer to it, to distribute his weight better. "I was just wondering if you could pull some of this heat off of us."

"I thought I told you, you were on your own if you went down there?"

"Yeah but uh...I just wanted to say, bro: *De Oppresso Liber*." The Delta Force motto.

Shuggie laughed bitterly. "You know what that motto even means? It means 'To Liberate the Oppressed.' Anybody here oppressed, it's me, man. You should be liberating me, motherfucker."

"Next time I liberate you. We take turns."

Shuggie snorted. "Yeah right. *De Oppresso Liber*, fuck! Let me think on it. But I doubt I'm gonna be able to help. Doubt it a lot. Fucking drones..."

Shuggie hung up.

Wolfe growled to himself and put the phone in his pocket.

He descended the ladder. "So much for the cavalry, I guess."

"What were you saying to him about drones?"

“Yeah. Going to be looking for us. This is Verrick’s way to test them in Chicago too. So we’re part of testing the Iceberg Project. Always good to feel useful to Major Roger Verrick. You see anybody coming? Hear anything?”

“Not so far.”

“Let’s keep going.”

They went on down the tunnel. Water dripped down their necks. It began to rush along in a gutter beside the slimy concrete walls.

Seline said, “That phone of yours...The one you use for hacking...”

“Yeah. You’re thinking I can use it to control the drones? If it’s the same kind as last time—maybe. But not more than one at a time. And there’s more than one.”

“How do you know?”

“Because...” He pointed down the tunnel. “Two of ‘em are coming at us right now...”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The UAVs were faintly outlined, small red lights tracing their edges. The drones were both delta shaped, like the one Wolfe had seen at the country SmartHouse, but these were each about a third the size of that one.

The drones were armed, though. A gun muzzle protruded from the snout of each drone.

“Retreat, Wolfe?” Seline asked.

“Hell yes retreat! Go, Seline!”

They’d passed a manhole access space about five strides back. Seline ran back and he ran behind her. Bullets cracked on the floor just behind them.

Then they were in the cylindrical chamber. They flattened to either side of the tunnel entrance. Wolfe could hear the drones moving their way, their engine noise more high pitched than the larger one that had patrolled the SmartHouse grounds.

“Can you fire an assault weapon?” he asked.

She gave him a look of irritation. “I’m a Marine.”

He tossed her the AK47. She caught it neatly. “Try to shoot down those drones. Or at least slow ‘em down...”

He was already working on the PearcePhone, trying to break into the drone’s GPS.

Seline fired a short burst from the AK47 down the tunnel. “I think I disabled one of them,” she said. “The other’s pulling back a little...”

No luck with the GPS hack. Then he heard a voice, coming from his phone...

“You’re trying to break into the drone’s GPS control, right, Wolfe?”

He knew that voice, from the SmartHouse. It was Starling. He was talking in a snotty tech smugness way that had always irritated Wolfe. Starling was so proud of himself he said more than he should’ve:

“Yeah, I’ve pulled back for a little minute but the GPS hack won’t work down here anyway. Most GPS doesn’t work underground. There are systems that try but they’re too spotty.” A moment’s pause and then Starling added boastfully, *“We use a combination of geomagnetics, downloaded information about infrastructure, and, of course, the camera on the drone. You see what does work down here is the transmitter we’ve dropped into one of the tunnels. And that transmitter is completely insulated from any possible hack. It’s bouncing signals from me to the drones, and back. So I can see what it sees. And tell it what to do.”*

“That’s nice,” Wolfe said. “You’re a very impressive little boy. You’re not going to ‘sir yes sir’ me?”

There was a moment’s crackling hesitation. Then, *“No. You don’t deserve it. You’re not in authority over me.”*

“We’ll see about that. If I can kill you, that’s authority enough for me. And that’s what I plan to do, Starling. You’re a traitor to this country.”

“I’m not a traitor! I’m going to help liberate this country. From people like you, Wolfe. You’re going down first...”

Seline was looking down the tunnel. “The drone’s coming back...the other one’s bumbling around like a bee in a jar.”

“Wait till it’s close and open up on the aggressive one,” Wolfe said. He was trying to find some way to hack into the camera on the drones...screw with what Starling was seeing.

But it turned out there wasn’t time for that.

Seline fired a long burst down the tunnel. Then the AK47 gave out an empty clicking sound. “You got another clip for this?”

“Nope,” Wolfe said.

“It’s still coming.” She threw the AK47 itself down the tunnel, to try to confuse the drone.

The drone fired at her, and she sucked air between her teeth. “Ouch.”

He looked at her. “You hit?”

“Just a small chunk of my shoulder. Flesh wound stuff. Didn’t think I was that exposed. Stupid.”

“There’re bandages in that backpack that...” He broke off, listening. A humming had drawn his attention to the other tunnel, running the opposite way.

“Seline—that tunnel...” He saw them then. “Two drones from that direction now.”

“We’re getting boxed in.”

Wolfe pulled out his .45, emptied the clip at a drone—it drew back a little but he could still see its small red running lights in the tunnel.

He ejected the clip from the .45, pulled another from his pocket, quickly slapped it in the gun and handed the weapon to her. “Use this one. We’re

going to have to head in another direction.”

He swarmed up the manhole’s rungs as she opened fire at the drones.

“They’re slowing,” she called. “Doing some kind of evasive maneuver...”

The UAV’s returned fire.

“You hit?” Wolfe asked as he got to the manhole cover.

“No! But they’re moving in! We’re caught between them, Wolfe!”

Wolfe pushed up, hard, on the steel disk. The manhole cover just didn’t want to open. Probably it was rusted into place. He pressed harder yet, using his back and shoulders. He grunted with effort. The cover creaked.

“Oh *Wolfe!*” she yelled. “You got any ideas? They’re *coming!*”

He pressed with all his strength—and suddenly the manhole popped upward.

No time to see if the coast was clear. He shoved the steel cover out of the way, climbed up, clambered onto the street, immediately reaching down to Seline. “Come on, Seline! Up!”

She jumped to the rungs and climbed them--fast. Wolfe braced himself and caught her coat collar, lifting her up almost by the scruff of her neck.

The drones were coming into the manhole space below, tilting up to aim...

She scuttled clear of the manhole, just as the bullets cracked upward. Another split second and they’d have nailed her.

Wolfe and Seline got to their feet, Wolfe taking the .45 from her and reloading it. “Weather’s cleared up,” Wolfe remarked, as he reloaded the gun.

Seline busied herself putting a bandage from the backpack over her shoulder wound. The wound was fairly bloody but not serious. She took the .44 out and put the pack back on, wincing.

Wolfe looked around. They were on a block of moderately small houses, some of them boarded over; some of the street's houses were like insistent survivors, refusing to give up. There'd be a house that was badly deteriorated, even boarded over; then a house that was in good shape, with a neat lawn enclosed by a fence. He saw no Chunkies—not yet. In places along the gutter, thin deposits of snow gleamed...

Just across the street, an elderly black lady in a shapeless black coat stumped by on her walker. She looked suspiciously at Wolfe and Seline. Possibly it was the gun Seline had in her hand...

Wolfe smiled and waved to the elderly lady. She didn't wave back.

More bullets, fired by a UAV, sang up out of the manhole. The elderly lady said, "Oh!" and tossed the walker aside, hurried off down the avenue, almost running. Wolfe used the tip of his boot to shove the cover back over the manhole. It clanged with another bullet, and spun like a coin about to fall flat—and then fell neatly back in place.

"They going to fly up out of there?" Seline asked.

"No. They can't fit through. By now Starling is figuring that out and looking for another egress for the damn things. They'll come after us again from some other direction. Come on!"

Wolfe took the gun back and reloaded it; she took out her own.

"I don't suppose there's any point in our calling the police?" she asked, as they hurried down the road.

“Somebody’s probably calling the police right now. That old lady, I bet. But I heard on the phone hack—Tranter’s got some of his dirty cop pals posted around the area. They’re blocking it off. So they’ll probably tell dispatch that something’s going on here that isn’t going on here...and we wouldn’t get any help, anyway.”

“Okay but...you said yourself that not all Chicago PD is corrupt. Maybe we should try working with some of the stand-up cops.”

“Most of them are probably stand-up guys. But how do we decide which is which, Seline? Police records don’t prove anything. And if I try to call the cops here, Tranter’ll set me up to be arrested for some bullshit or other. They’ll take the phone Pearce gave me.” He shook his head. “When we get this file uploaded, NSA, Homeland Security, people like that will see it. We’ll look into getting in touch with them—when the moment is right. Maybe give them a clue about Purity. But even with that...I don’t know how far Purity’s tentacles extend. Or how many friends Van Ness has in homeland security...Who to trust there--that’s a hard call to make anywhere.”

He was studying the addresses as he spoke. One more block...

And then a low, dark blue sedan came cruising slowly by, heading the opposite way. The men in the car were probably Chunkies: they each had the gang’s bull’s eye tattoo. Wolfe muttered, “Get ready to vault that fence on the right, Seline, if we need to...”

The sedan got about ten yards past and then did a sudden screeching U-turn. The windows rolled down on the two nearest side windows and the muzzles of guns emerged.

“Vault it, Seline!” Wolfe shouted as he drew the .45 from his waist band and fired at the car, letting his instincts guide his aim. He squeezed off two rounds, and the bullets smashed through the windshield. He saw the driver rock back in his seat, hit, the car swerving. The bullets fired from the side

windows went wild with the car's swerving, and then Wolfe turned, vaulted the fence. Seline was crouched down, waiting for him by the front porch.

A piebald pit bull came snarling from the front door—someone had let it out to attack the intruders into their yard. Wolfe raised his gun to shoot it but Seline shouted, “No!”

She snatched up a coiled garden hose and she threw the coil of hose over the pit bull's head so the dog was tangled, confused. It struggled to free itself and she led the way to the back of the house.

“Come on!” she yelled.

Wolfe and Seline ran into the back yard. Bullets cracked over their heads from somewhere in the street. They climbed another fence, tumbled over, landed on their feet side by side.

“I can't shoot a *pit bull* that's coming at me?” Wolfe asked, as they crossed through the neatly kept-up yard.

“No! I love dogs! Don't you shoot any dogs, Mick! He's been trained to attack people!”

“And I'm trained to shoot at something trained to attack me! That was a pit bull!” Wolfe laughed breathlessly at carrying on an argument while they ran.

“Tough! I dealt with it!” she puffed.

“You did, I got to admit! Glad I didn't have to kill the poor brute.”

They came to a boarded-over house, fenceless, and beyond it was the cross street.

Wolfe ran ahead, looking for the Chunkies, didn't see them. Maybe they were thinking better of just rushing in on him. Gangs have some pecking order, some hierarchy, but they aren't as structured as military units and that led to confusing and dissent in "the ranks"--which was a damned good thing, right now, for him and Seline, Wolfe reflected, as he led the way across the street.

"There...I think that's it two houses down!" Wolfe said, pointing. "That's the address!"

"That house with the huge white satellite antenna out front? Really? That *obvious*?"

"That's one of those old satellite antennas, from back in the day, for television," Wolfe said, as they strode quickly along the sidewalk. "No one knows it's been retrofitted for this...They think it's just old junk..."

They hurried to the rear of the house, and up the back porch steps. A piece of paper was taped to the screen door. On the paper someone had penciled a simple outline of a wolf. The drawing of the wolf meaning *Wolfe*, probably. Under the wolf outline was an arrow pointing downward.

Near the arrow was scribbled one word, a kind of signature: *Blank*.

"Looks like a message from Blank," Wolfe said. He tore it off, turned it over. Nothing on the other side.

They went through the unlocked back doors, and looked around the kitchen. The house was empty; there were no appliances, no furnishings. The floors were neatly swept. There was a door standing open on the left. It led to a wooden stairway to a basement. The arrow had been pointing downward. *Wolfe, go downward.*

Wolfe drew the gun—for all he knew the Chunkies were waiting to jump him down there. He switched on the basement light and led Seline down the

steps. There was an ordinary concrete basement, smelling of dust and mold, and a single naked overhead bulb. The basement contained a desk in a farther corner, and on the desk was a computer, turned on.

On the monitor screen was one word: *Upload*.

Wires ran from the back of the computer to its power source and to the front of the house—to the old, retrofitted satellite dish.

“What a relief to see that computer waiting for us,” Seline said.

She crossed to the desk, taking off the backpack. She drew the laptop out, set it up on the desk beside the computer, and powered it up. When it had booted, she found the jacks and plugged them in. She used the passwords and clicked to begin the upload...

The upload was going pretty quickly. Should take ninety seconds.

But as it was happening a car was pulling up outside. And another. Another after that, too, all three of them stopping with an urgent squeal of tires...

“They must’ve seen us going into the back yard,” Wolfe said, as he went to look through a screened air vent in the concrete wall.

He could see a Chunkie standing on the sidewalk, a Mack 10 in hand.

Men were walking past the vent, toward the back of the house. The computer was still uploading...

Voices. Whispers from outside. Footsteps. The click of a cocking gun.

The computer was still uploading...

“We’ve been getting boxed in a lot today,” Wolfe whispered calmly. “It’s a popular trend, boxing us in.”

“They got to be in there!” someone said, outside. “We got to rush ‘em and shoot any motherfuckers we find!”

The computer was...

Done.

“It’s uploaded,” she said breathlessly.

“That’s good.” Privately he was thinking, *But it’ll be a shame to die here anyway...*

“It looks like it’s completely up and going out onto SystemLeaks,” Seline said, bending over the desk. “And from there—everyplace else.”

“Cool. I hope Verrick chokes on it.”

Wolfe walked over to the stairs, and prepared to defend Seline as best he could. He drew the .45...

“You got that .44?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“Better get it ready...”

Gunfire sounded—but from the front of the house.

Seline went to the vent and looked through. “They’re...in a fight. With one another! No...I think that’s a different bunch of gangsters! I saw your friend, Shuggie!”

Wolfe ran to the vent, and looked—he could make out Shuggie crouching behind a car, firing across the hood with the Desert Eagle. The huge handgun lifted a Chunkie off his feet and spun him around before he fell, stone cold dead, on the sidewalk.

“Yeah man,” Wolfe chuckled. “*De Oppresso Liber!*”

#

It didn’t take long. No more than three minutes of firefight, the Chunkies taking all the casualties. The surviving Chunkies took off, some of them driving away, the others, unable to get to their cars without being shot, running off between houses.

Wolfe and Seline walked upstairs and out front, hands in the air, just to defuse anyone trigger happy. “Shuggie!”

The Black Viceroy’s captain was standing by a rebuilt Army-green Plymouth Duster, reloading his Desert Eagle. He glanced up at Wolfe and Seline.

“Let ‘em through, they’re okay!” Shuggie called, as other Viceroy’s—some Wolfe didn’t know—turned to stare.

“Put your hands down,” Shuggie said, tossing the massive handgun on the front seat of his Duster.

“Nice ride,” Wolfe said. “You cherry it up yourself?”

“Fuck no, man, who’s got time for that. I paid to have it done by the best.”

Seline was looking at the dead men on the street. “The cops are gonna see all this...”

“Nah,” Wolfe said. He was feeling pretty good. A Delta Force brother had come to his rescue and he and Seline had successfully uploaded the files. Verrick must have smoke coming out of his ears about now. “Remember, the cops got the area blocked off.”

“Yeah, just two blocks outside that perimeter I was at,” Shuggie said. “Don’t get my ‘hood back till you’re dead—or until I deal with this.”

“Thanks for getting my back, brother,” Wolfe said, putting out his fist.

Shuggie gave him a fist bump, the kind Special Forces do. “Hey you know, I had to deal with those Chunkies sometime. Funny thing, the cops kinda making that possible, keeping the area locked up. But you know—it’s not the Chunky Crunkies I’m worried about...”

He pointed at the sky past Wolfe.

Seline and Wolfe turned—and saw two drones skimming their way over the rooftops.

Shuggie drew his Desert Eagle and took careful aim, both hands wrapped around the big hand gun—while the drone was taking careful aim at him.

Wolfe drew Seline back behind the car, assuming the drones would soon open fire. But he already had his PearcePhone out.

Shuggie fired; the gun boomed loudly, three times. The big gun, firing .50 Action Express rounds, easily penetrated the snout of the UAV on the right—and the unmanned vehicle exploded.

The other drone was rocked by the shockwave from the explosion. Shuggie fired at it, missed, and lined up his aim again

“Don’t shoot that other one, Shuggie,” Wolfe said. “I’ve got this.”

Shuggie looked at him. “You gonna deal with that thing with a *phone*?”

Wolfe was already flashing his fingertips over the interface. “No ordinary phone...and above-ground these things are vulnerable to a GPS hack...”

The drone, hovering just above the phone lines, angled downward to aim its gun at the group by the car—and then it froze. It seemed to jerk about in the air for a moment like a fishing float, then angled upward, and flew overhead. “I’ve got to deal with that police barricade,” Wolfe said. “With some luck this thing’ll do it.”

“You got *control* of that thing with a phone?” Shuggie said, amazed. “You show me how to do that?”

“We’ll talk about that sometime, brother,” Wolfe said. “Can you drive us back to my hidey-hole...if I can get rid of the cops?”

“You’re not planning on shooting any cops around here, are you?” Shuggie asked. “I don’t need that kind of heat coming down on me.”

“No worries, dude. Come on.”

Shuggie waved the other Viceroy's away, sending them back in their own vehicles to the perimeter, as he got into the Duster beside Renfo. Wolfe and Seline got in the back.

They turned left at the corner, following the drone, as Wolfe continued to direct it on ahead. A few blocks down was a police barricade, with two CPD patrol cars parked radiator-to-radiator across the street at the corner. A barricade was up—and several cops were arrayed around the barricade with shotguns.

“They got nicer barricades than you do, Shuggie,” Wolfe said.

“I sure hope you know what you’re doing, Wolfe,” Shuggie said, slowing the car to a stop a block from the police barricade.

Seline looked at Wolfe. “I hope so too, Wolfe. Christ. Those cops aren’t going to like whatever it is you’ve got planned...”

Wolfe looked up at Shuggie. “You willing to drive up on a sidewalk, Shuggie? And over a lawn? Can you do it without wrecking this Duster?”

“Man I got the best shocks there is on this beauty. My baby can slam over a speedbump at sixty miles an hour, no problem.”

“Okay. Just try to do it without running anybody over...”

Wolfe tapped the PearcePhone, thumbs working the app. He could see the street, in the phone’s screen, from the point of view of the drone’s high def digital camera. The image showed the cops and their barricade, ahead and below. The cops had just spotted the drone, pointing upward at it, open mouthed. Some of them probably thought they were seeing a UFO. All the better.

He had to aim the drone carefully...

Peering into the phone’s screen, Wolfe moved the crosshairs with careful flicks of his thumbs, got the drone’s gun sighted in on the cops...then he moved the crosshairs so that it was aimed just a few steps short of them.

He licked his lips—and tapped the *fire* button. Twice.

The drone fired, smacking two bullets into the street in front of the police at the barricades.

One of them fired up at the drone, the others scrambled back behind the cars. He tilted the drone toward the cop firing at it—and the guy turned and ran, joining his police pals.

Wolfe fired twice more into the hoods of the patrol cars to get the cops to back away from them. It worked...

And he sent the drone down in a crash dive.

The UAV whined down like a bomb and smashed into the hoods of the two unoccupied cars, coming down right in between them.

The cops flattened—and the drone exploded.
“Now, Shuggie!” Wolfe yelled.

Shuggie accelerated, roared down the street, then cut to the left, driving up on the sidewalk. The car bounced and bumped and then he was screeching it across the lawn of the corner house. He turned left, down off the sidewalk, and burned away down the street.

Wolfe looked back. The cops were still flattened in the street. He doubted any of them had gotten the license number—they were too shaken up by the drone attack. Anyway there was no reason they could assume that the car was connected to the drone.

Shuggie cut right at the next corner, veered around several pot-holes, then cut left again. He got on his car’s Bluetooth, and called the address in to his lieutenants so they could keep an eye on the area.

That made Wolfe a little nervous. He never knew for sure what the other Black Viceroy might do.

“Well I got to say, that was interesting,” Shuggie said. “I wouldn’t have wanted to miss that one. Going to be a story to tell. I’m sorry I didn’t get it up on youtube.”

“I’m glad you didn’t,” Wolfe said. “But—you ever check out SystemLeaks?”

“Sure, a few times.”

“Check it out today. See some interesting files just uploaded there. So—you want to come up to my place, have a glass of Scotch?”

“Sounds good, Wolfe.”

They drove to the crumbling old tenement that housed the Pearce safehouse Wolfe was using. It was starting to snow, a little, as they drove up.

“Doesn’t it ever get serious about snowing around here?” Seline asked when they got out of the car. “I mean, I’m from Georgia, but I thought we were far enough north here...”

“Oh, later in the year,” Shuggie said. “One time we had a blizzard...what the fuck?”

He nodded toward the broken down fence of the tenement...where Detective Tranter was just stepping into view, pointing a gun at Wolfe.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“The drones saw you, Wolfe,” Tranter said. He was about fifty strides away, slowly walking toward them. “Whatever scrambling system you’re using didn’t help you with their cameras. Starling called me. He got your man Shuggie’s car there on ctOS...and we came to meet you. What’s up with this shitty old building you’re headed for? You got a hideout in there?”

“You talk pretty confident, detective, for a man outnumbered and alone,” Shuggie said.

“Oh I’m not either one, gangbanger,” Tranter said. He made a gesture, and four Graywater mercs stepped out from the behind the building, walking up to join him. They were all armed with Mack 10s.

“We didn’t know where you were going after you crashed that drone,” Tranter said, drawing a gun. “But since the street’s blocked off up past this spot and you parked right back over there...Well, we worked it out and here we all are! Now--here’s the deal. You three surrender to me—and we’ll give Shuggie a good deal on a prison term for all that shooting back there. The lady—I can’t say for sure what’ll happen to her. Wolfe, well, maybe he’ll live through it, if he surrenders. Better than dying right here.”

“I’ll think on that,” Shuggie said.

Wolfe had his hand in his coat pocket, was activating the PearcePhone.

He muttered, “Seline, distract them. Non violently.”

He said it just loud enough for Shuggie to hear, too.

She stepped forward, “Stop there, detective, and let’s work out a deal. Otherwise we’re gonna have to open up on you. That bullet proof vest you’re wearing under your coat isn’t going to protect your head.”

Tranter paused, stood his ground. “What the hell are you up to, lady?”

“Just give me one minute. Let’s make a deal, as the man says...”

As she spoke, Tranter was looking toward her, frowning, and Wolfe had the phone out. He transmitted the file he’d set up earlier on Tranter—to everyone within a ten-block distance. Then he sent a text informing everyone who’d received it of Tranter’s whereabouts right now...

“Maybe if you let me and Shuggie go, we could avoid blowing your brains out,” Seline was saying.

“Sound pretty good to me,” Shuggie said.

Wolfe, sending the text, was pretty sure...*pretty* sure...they were just playing Tranter.

“Hey boss—” It was one of the Graywater Mercs, whom Wolfe recognized from the rooftop gunfight just before he’d swiped the helicopter. “That guy’s screwing around on his phone!”

Tranter turned to Wolfe—and pointed his gun at him. “Drop that phone!. Or you can go down right now. Up to you.”

Wolfe clicked the phone’s sensitive speaker-mic on, so it’d pick up his voice, and dropped it, hoping the case he’d put on it would keep it from breaking. “So I guess if I’m not yet dead, there’s someone who wants to interrogate me...”

He glanced around at the neighborhood. He hoped the Black Viceroy in the area were as close as he’d figured.

“...but the thing is, Tranter,” Wolfe went on, raising his voice so the phone’s speaker device would pick up on it, “...you’re well known for racial profiling. I’ve been looking up your history. And you’ve backed it in the

department. And you're famous for targeting not only blacks...but Black Viceroy. I sent all that data, summarized, out just now. I've been saving it...so I think you're the one who oughta surrender."

Tranter snorted. "If I hassled Black Viceroy it's cause they're gangbanger scum—they specialize in stealing cars, they take protection money from businesses in their turf."

"Ten percent, that ain't much," Shuggie said, sounding reasonable. "How much you take from the Club, Tranter?"

"That's right," Wolfe said--loudly. "Tranter's in with the Club. And the Club's been moving in on Black Viceroy turf...and now Tranter's threatening to kill Shuggie!"

"You not aware, Tranter," Shuggie said, "That I had some of my people move in on this area before we came. And there's more coming, I'm guessing..."

He looked at Wolfe. Who nodded.

Whistles came, from behind the building. Voices. The sounds of a crowd converging on the area.

Tranter's eyes widened.

"Down, Seline!" Wolfe shouted, pulling his .45.

"Take 'em out!" Tranter commanded. The Graywater Mercs raised their weapons.

Wolfe threw himself flat beside Seline. Shuggie jumped behind a parked car.

Mack 10s rattled and bullets sucked through the air where Wolfe had been a moment before. Wolfe extended his arm, aimed, fired, all in a second—and one of the Graywater Mercs, shot through the head, fell backward, dead before he hit the ground.

The others quickly fell—shot to pieces, despite their vests, by heavy AR15 fire coming from the left, that tore into their legs and blew off their heads.

Tranter looked desperately around—then ran. But a phalanx of Black Viceroy's were coming at him from that direction, walking quickly, in ragged but closed ranks.

Tranter stopped and backed up...then turned and started between the two half-ruined tenement buildings...but from that direction, striding up past the big Black Viceroy's tags, came five more Viceroy's, pointing their weapons at Tranter.

Tranter dropped his gun, put his hands up, waving his badge. "I'm a police officer! If you harm me, they'll never stop looking for you!"

Shuggie was up now and walking toward Tranter. "The department gonna do all that for *your* sorry ass, Tranter?" He laughed.

The encircling Black Viceroy's closed in on Tranter...

Wolfe got to his feet, helping Seline up. "Wolfe—they're beating him! All of them! They'll kill him!"

"Yeah," Wolfe said. "It's a sad thing. Even though Tranter's a corrupt, murdering dirt bag. Come on, let's go upstairs and have that drink..."

#

Starling's face appeared on Verrick's desktop, in a webcam video. Verrick knew what the report would be just from the look on Starling's face. "Sir, Mr

Verrick, sir, we lost track of him...We think he's somewhere in Black Viceroy territory. There is one possibility..."

Verrick was at his desk, looking at the first reports of the SystemsLeak upload. He closed the news window, and looked at Starling.

"Starling..." Verrick had to pause a moment, to get control of himself. He was in his Blume office—he didn't want to start shouting about this, in here. He found a roll of antacids on his desk, and flicked a tablet into his mouth, began to chew. His stomach felt like bubbling cauldron of hydrochloric acid. His back was aching; his head was throbbing. He was thinking seriously about having an Oxycontin.

"Sir yes sir?" Starling prompted.

"Starling—have you seen the SystemsLeak uploads? They're already hitting the net."

"Sir, yes sir. I have been monitoring the situation. I would like to point out that they went mostly to *alternative news* sites. The story hasn't been picked up yet by the New York Times and CNN. We could unleash the Purity cyberhack team and take down the mainstream news sites. The way the Syrians did to the New York Times--"

"Starling, I told you never to mention Purity in any transmitted communication!"

"Sir, sorry sir. But we could bring down those news sites..."

"No, no, that'd just make it look like someone was hiding the truth—if it came out that we...no. Instead...I have another plan. Most of this stuff in this file is just people connecting the dots. There's no real proof against me or Van Ness in it. What I need is...I've got to talk to you in person, Starling. How far away are you?"

“Sir, not far, sir, I was directing the...”

“Never mind. Meet me on the roof of the Blume Building. You’ve got the all-access card.”

Verrick cut the connection and decided on half an Oxycontin. He had to stay functional.

He took the half pill, lay down on his office sofa for a while, and tried not to think...

Twenty-five minutes later, he was up, and heading to the roof.

It was damned cold up there. But he was a little numb from half a synthetic morphine pill, and bundled in his overcoat and hat and leather gloves.

Starling arrived a couple minutes later, not as warmly dressed, and cringing into his old Army cold weather coat against the Hawk wailing across the rooftop.

There were two miserable looking Graywater mercs up there, standing sentry, rifles over shoulders, tramping back and forth to keep warm. Verrick made a mental note to get them relieved. He didn’t need these guys starting to think disloyally out of resentment.

Verrick and Starling took shelter in the lee of the elevator housing, out of the wind, the two of them pressed close to the housing’s wall. “Well, Starling, what else have you got to tell me?”

“Sir, the bodies of Four Graywaters were found dumped in the Club’s turf, about ten minutes ago. And there was another body with them. It was barely recognizable, but—they think it’s Detective Tranter.”

“Tortured?”

“Sir, beaten to death. Black Viceroys, judging from the chatter I picked up. .
.Sir.”

Four Mercs down. And Tranter. An important ally.

Would he even be able to keep the Graywaters working for him, with this kind of attrition rate? He’d have to double, maybe triple their pay...

“Sir, you had a plan about blocking that upload, s-s-sir?” Starling’s teeth were starting to chatter in the rooftop cold.

“No, that horse is out of the barn. My plan is to see that anyone who could *substantiate* those accusations has...an accident. Maybe in some cases—the same accident.”

“S-s-sir?”

“Blume is planning a demonstration of some new tech. Prototype self-driving cars. There’re four people in this town who can connect me with that missing money. And maybe with Purity. And we don’t want anyone talking about Purity. Some of these people might start panicking about now, what with this SystemsLeak stuff. Going to the Justice Department, maybe. Try to cut a deal.”

“S-s-sir, th-that w-would—”

“Will you stop that stuttering, Starling? Just shut up and listen. This is what I want you to do...”

#

“Ow!”

“You’re the one said you didn’t need a regular doctor,” Wolfe said, stitching the wound closed. “Best I can do. I got pretty good at it in the field, up country...There.”

Wolfe was sitting close beside her on the sofa of the folded-up sofa bed. He leaned back to look critically at the minor wound on her shoulder. “You’re gonna have a scar. But that’s okay, you’ll be more badass that way.”

“Stop being a smart aleck, Wolfe, and cut the thread.”

He cut the thread from the needle. “How about some more local anesthetic on that?”

“You call that stuff from the corner store a local anesthetic? Forget it.”

“Hey don’t get mad at me, I didn’t shoot you. You jumped into this thing with both feet, Seline.”

“Yes I did. I was thinking about jumping out again. But not because somebody shot at me.” She took a pull on the Scotch. “Because I was involved in something that got bullets flying around a neighborhood in Chicago where there were ordinary, unarmed people—people who could’ve caught those bullets. We don’t know for sure someone didn’t get hit by a stray bullet.”

“Haven’t seen it on the local news yet.”

“I hope we don’t see it, Wolfe. We *did* see something on the news about five bodies being dumped.”

“Those mercs had to know they were working for the bad guys. They didn’t care. You makes your choice and you takes your chances.”

“They beat Tranter to death.”

“After years of abuse from him.”

“So that makes it cool?”

“No. It doesn’t. But you know, if we hadn’t had help from the Viceroy, we’d be dead by now. And there’s something big coming down, Seline. Something that could involve thousands of deaths—maybe millions. And a plot to take over Chicago. Use it as a base against the rest of the country.”
“You told me. You really believe that’s what they’re planning?”

“It fits like a jigsaw piece. Fits right in with everything I know about these creeps.”

She seemed to brood over that. “If I was sure...”

He stood up. What he had to do now, for Seline, was going to take an act of will...

“You know what, Seline--you don’t have to be sure. You can walk away from this. And you should. You’ve been in firefighting at my side. You kept your head. You stuck by me. You did the job. You were a stand-up soldier. And you did what you came here to do. You uploaded your friend’s file. It’s making its way across the internet. You don’t need to be here anymore. You can leave Chicago.” He kept his voice gentle, as he said it. He knew he was angry—because he simply wanted her with him. Close to him. And that was selfish. He had to suck it up, and let her go. “I think you’re right--you should walk away from this, and leave it to me and Pearce. When I get more evidence, you can testify to the Justice Department with us. I’ll call you.”

Seline blinked up at him. She seemed disappointed. There was no figuring women.

“You *want* me to go?” she asked.

He didn't. But he kept his face deadpan. "I think you should go. Tomorrow morning."

He made himself walk to the bedroom, close the door, and lie down on the cot.

Wolfe, he told himself, you got to let her go.

You've got to face it. You're on your own in this thing. Can't get Shuggie in this anymore. Can't expect Pearce to be out here on the firing line, ducking bullets.

And as for what you were hoping for, with Seline...

No. Forget it. Can't put her at risk. You're on your own, in life. All over again.

Better get used to it, pal. Better get used to it.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Wolfe didn't sleep much that night. About eight in the morning, as he was just pulling on his boots, a pounding came at the front door of the flat. He grabbed his pistol, rushed out of the bedroom to the front door, and looked through the peephole.

Shuggie.

"Wolfe! It's Shuggie! You gotta get out of there!"

Wolfe unlocked the door and opened it. "What's up?"

"A fucking wrecking ball, that's what's up!"

"*What?* When the hell did they move that in?"

"About an hour ago! I just found out! This place has been slated for demolition for awhile but—never mind, man! Get *out* of there, motherfucker, it's moving into position! There's no time to argue with 'em!"

Wolfe turned—saw that Seline was dressed, putting her coat on, her face pale. He checked in his pocket, found he had his PearcePhone. He grabbed his coat, she grabbed the small backpack, and they followed Shuggie down the hall, having to run to keep up.

They pounded down the stairway, taking the turns like slapstick comedians trying not to fall over, and they were just reaching the second to the last flight when the building shuddered and—seemed to scream.

The scream was the sound of a 7,000 pound wrecking ball squealing as it crashed into bricks and metal girders.

The stairwell quaked and the floor rocked under them; Wolfe had to catch Seline's arm to keep her from falling. Another squealing blow struck the building. As they stumbled down the stairs, Wolfe was thinking that this kind

of demolition couldn't be procedure. Had someone really searched the building to make sure there were no homeless, no squatters? Probably Verrick's people suspected that Wolfe was here—and had moved up the timetable and bent the rules.

The building shuddered and squealed again, and continued to shake, dust powdering down from above--then pieces of plaster fell and finally bricks, debris raining around them as they stumbled onto the bottom floor.

Cracks appeared in the walls as they rushed through the door into the hall. Ceiling tiles fell, flipping end over end; insulation filled the air, rising in a choking cloud.

Then they burst out through the doors and into the open air—but they were far from safe.

The outer walls were coming down around them; the building they'd been staying in was leaning, threatening to fall into the one beside it. Rats ran from the buildings, screeching, and pigeons circled in confusion, disturbed from roosts. The air filled with dust, a fog of fine debris...

A cornice fell, narrowly missing Shuggie.

Then they were clear, running out of the cloud of dust, coughing, across the street.

They flattened behind the wreck of an old burned out car, trying to make no noise--a patrol car was coming around the corner. And chances were, the cops in the patrol car had been given Wolfe's description. Verrick had to have more than one way into the police force.

The patrol car passed, the cops missing them—and the three fugitives stood up, letting the coughs come as the demolition ball continued to swing pendulously back and pound the building they'd just been in. After a full

minute of coughing out the dust, and a good deal of spitting, Shuggie said, “Man, you are one high maintenance motherfucker!”

Coughing, Wolfe had to laugh. “Yeah. I guess I am. I’m gonna get out of your hair now, brother.”

“Well, stay in touch, bro. I got to get about my business. Got to cover my ass in all this.”

That’s when, pounded with unusual persistence, the building they’d been in simply imploded, crumbled in on itself, in a mighty cloud of rising dust...

Wolfe looked at it. “Holy shit.”

“Yeah,” Shuggie said. “Those motherfuckers ain’t playin’.” He said it almost admiringly.

A car was pulling up, Renfo at the wheel.

Seline looked at Shuggie. “Thanks, Shuggie. Coming in there, when that wrecking ball was about to hit...you got some pretty big balls yourself.”

“Hey so do you, lady.”

Seline laughed, and Shuggie got in the car and drove off.

Wolfe said, “Come on, let’s get out of sight. Then we got to get you out of town.”

She looked at him, like she was considering saying something...

Then she shrugged and followed him across the street, through a debris choked alley.

#

“Pearce, you got any more spare safehouses?”

“Wolfe! You’re alive! I heard about what happened...I thought you were bleeding all over the rubble about now.”

“Almost was. Wasn’t for Shuggie, I’d be mush. And Seline too.”

In another safehouse, Aiden Pearce was letting “Doc” Morrsky take his blood pressure as Pearce spoke to Wolfe on the phone.

“Your blood pressure’s okay,” Morrsky said. He was a middle aged man with a red nose, receding hair, and the profile of a weasel. “But we need to get you a CAT scan. I can set it up somewhere, we’ll fake up your identity, they’ll never know who you are.”

“Forget that, Doc.”

“Come on, Pearce, help me out here. Any dizziness?”

“Occasionally,” Pearce admitted.

“Then you’re not going to risk falling over dead by going on any of your goddamn missions till I tell you different.”

“Pearce, you still there?” asked Wolfe, in his ear.

“Yeah, hold on. Doc—I hear and obey. Now get the fuck out of here.”

“You owe me some money.”

“You know it’ll be in your account when you get home. Go. And keep your goddamn mouth shut.”

“Sure, Pearce. You know me.”

Yeah, Pearce thought. I thought I knew Merwiss too.

When Morrsky had gone, Pearce said, “Wolfe...go to the corner of 47th and South Archer. You’ll find Blank there. He’ll give you the address. And when you’re there, call me—I’ve got something new for you.”

“Hope so. The upload cast suspicion on Verrick but I just heard on the radio he’s calling it all a lie spread by an ex-con--that would be me. He’s trying to discredit the whole thing. Casting suspicion on him isn’t enough. Maybe I should’ve talked about the info you got on that attack—made a special doc to go out with the Medina file. And then we could go to the DoJ.”

“No. We’ve got no specifics and we don’t want to drive Purity further underground...”

“We’ve got to do something. I’m starting to get worried we’re not going to find out what this thing is...until it’s too late to stop it. Maybe you can live with that, Pearce. I can’t.”

“Just wait till I verify some stuff...Not get over to that corner.”

Pearce ended the call and sent a text, under an arranged name, to Kiskel. He was going to need some inside dirt--from his inside man at the Blume Corporation.

We need to talk. Life and death for a lot of people.

Sending a phone to you...by special messenger. The Blank kind.

#

The new safehouse was in the basement of a Southside pool hall near the lake. Wolfe and Seline could hear footsteps overhead, as the players walked around the pool tables, along with outbursts of laughter or hooting derision.

An outside stairway went up to a cracked, weedy old parking lot behind the building. The upper floors of the old brick structure housed an SRO hotel, complete with “bathroom down the hall”.

The basement safehouse was dank and damp, its peeling wallpaper spotted with mold, but it had all the simple necessities of the previous one and more or less the same layout.

Seline was using the shower, now, washing off the dust from the collapsed building, as Wolfe sat on the sofa, drinking beer. He’d bought a six-pack from a liquor store next door to the thrift store where they’d bought fresh clothes.

With the edge of his thumb he wiped a bit of plaster dust from an eye and waited for the PearcePhone on the coffee table to ring.

He wanted to be out doing. Not thinking about Seline--about how she was getting set to leave town. In half an hour, she’d be gone. And that’d be that.

He wouldn’t find a woman like her again, not easily. Not only pretty but brave; not only brave but cool headed; not only cool headed but caring; not only caring but smart...

There was something else between them too. The raw attraction; the visceral tugging he felt when he looked at her. As if she was some missing part of him he’d been searching for, and his body wanted to unite with it, restore its wholeness.

Don’t be a sap, Wolfe. Let her go.

She came out of the bathroom, her hair wrapped in a towel. Her cheeks seemed blush-red; her eyes bright. She sat beside him, and opened a beer. “I’ll get out of here pretty soon...”

“No hurry,” he said.

“Wolfe...listen, I...”

The phone rang. Wolfe automatically picked it up. “Yeah?”

“Wolfe?” It was Pearce. “Listen...There’s a guy who works for Blume, knows a little too much about Verrick. Guy’s name is Lawrence Bullock.”

“Um...” He realized he shouldn’t have answered the phone in that moment. Someone a glance of Seline’s eyes conveyed that fact.

She got up, using the towel to dry her hair, and went to the bathroom, probably to brush it and comb it back...

Already used to living with her.

Give it up, Wolfe. Let her go.

“...this Bullock.” Pearce was saying, “apparently helped Verrick buy his way into Blume. Verrick had some shares but--Bullock pushed for him to be Security Chief, for one thing. And Bullock’s tied into this Purity thing somehow. He talked to Kiskel about Purity, trying to recruit him. Kiskel said no way. Bullock swore him to silence and backed off. So now Bullock’s been acting weird and scared at work--and then the upload on Verrick came out. Apparently this really spooked Bullock.”

“Pearce...”

“Listen, man! Bullock has gotten an invitation to test out one of Blume’s new prototype self driving cars, along with another guy. The other guy is an exec with a shell company used by The Club. Jakey Morrison. So I did some digging--indications are, Morrison may have been the guy who helped Verrick launder that stolen money through the Four Clubs casino. He’s invited as a shareholder in something called Morrison Incorporated which does some automotive investing. Kind of a coincidence these two are in the same autonomous, self-driving car, same time...”

Suddenly Pearce had Wolfe's full attention. "Yeah. It is."

"I found a phone record of a call from Verrick to the engineer, arranging the self-driving car 'experience' for key people. Got the name of the engineer from Kiskel..Don't know what Verrick said. But soon after that two guys connected to Verrick were put in the same car."

"Those cars can be hacked?"

"Theoretically...yeah. Or tampered with in advance."

"So...they could be used to kill somebody. Make it look like an accident."

"Right. There are two of these prototypes. And two other people, local bigshots in business, are scheduled to be in the other car. I haven't located any definite connection with Verrick. But those two could be a couple more he wants to get rid of...to cover his ass after this upload made him look so shady. Only, it's got to look like an accident. And these people don't appear in your file. Most people aren't going to see any connection with Verrick..."

"Maybe he thinks they're going to testify against him, if things get ugly, and investigators start snooping around."

"I figure that's exactly it. Now suppose you were to save these people--or at least some of them. Suppose you were to hack the hack? Suppose you got in there...and get them out? They're going to be scared, after their close shave. And they just might give us the inside track we need."

"Even if they're not willing to talk...we can convince 'em to do it."

"You mean--the hard way?"

"If we have to. A lot of lives are at stake."

"You're a cold son of a bitch, Wolfe. I like that. Okay--here's the down side of this whole plan..."

“What?”

“It’s tomorrow morning. Early. You’re going to have to go to the address I give you and see what you can do. I can’t get out of here for another twenty-four hours or so. I’m counting on you. And you seem pretty good with that tech.”

“That was my specialty, when I was on base...”

“Yeah. You probably know more about it than I do,” Pearce admitted.

“Imagine that.”

Pearce laughed. “I’ll text you the address and all the background data I can get on Blume’s autonomous car. And the schedule. Then it’s up to you, Wolfe.”

“You know, chances are, the son of a bitch is going to have some of those Graywaters watching over this thing. Just waiting to bust a cap in my ass.”

“Chances are, yeah. You don’t want to be bored, do you Wolfe?”

“Look, Pearce...”

But Pearce had already ended the call.

Wolfe sighed, and looked up to see Seline making some dinner on the camp stove that sat atop the disconnected appliance.

“Canned food?” he asked.

“Canned stew. Oh, yum.”

“I can’t cook for crap, anyway,” she said.

“Not important.”

She looked at him.

Wolfe cleared his throat. “I mean, if anyone was...Uh...you want another beer?”

“What time you want me out of here in the morning?” she asked, her voice cold as she turned back to the little stove.

“You? I...I’ll be out early, so...it’s up to you. Where, uh...where you want to sleep? Sofa or bedroom?”

“Bedroom. Your slop is almost ready, Wolfe. Get a plate. There’s some in that cabinet, over there.”

He sighed--and he got his plate.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Wolfe was across the street from the address Pearce had given him. He was, standing on a sidewalk that ran along a street that turned beneath an overpass. From here, he was in shadow, looking out at the pearly morning light shining off the two, silvery autonomous-car prototypes parked in front of the hotel. They were smallish cars, each with less bulk than a Prius...Cameramen were set up, a small crowd of people in fine clothing were gathered near the autonomous cars...

Wolfe wondered who, in that crowd, were the ones marked for death.

It was an overcast morning. The clouds threatened rain--maybe even snow. Or both. The wind was changing directions, jamming clouds up against one another as if piling them up.

They were starting to load people into the prototype cars. He'd need a car himself...and he'd need to borrow it without anyone knowing. A luxury car he could hack easily...

Wolfe put up his collar, pulled his knit cap lower, and got out the PearcePhone.

#

Bullock was a spindly, nervous man, with a high pale forehead, lank brown-blond hair, and a long, pinched nose; he was aware that his appearance belied his name. Bullock buckled the backseat belt and smoothed out his Italian blazer.

Morrison, a heavy set man with a red face, jowly cheeks, small eyes, was just heaving himself into the seat beside Bullock. Morrison grunted as he struggled to connect his seat belt. Then he slammed the door of the self-driving prototype. The smell of Morrison's cologne filled the car.

Bullock discreetly lowered his window a crack for a little fresh air.

Morrison adjusted his tie and his suit jacket, glancing out the window at the row of reporters. He seemed pleased at the attention. He waved. Someone snapped a picture.

“Well, Bullock,” Morrison said, glancing up at the empty front seat. “I’m not sure if I feel like a pioneer or a damned fool. There’s a steering wheel up there, but no driver, and it’s going to stay that way even after we get going.”

“The cars were thoroughly tested, with dummies and then with volunteers,” Bullock said. “The steering wheel’s just there in case anyone wants the car on manual. It does have a driver...”

“I prefer my drivers visible,” Morrison chuckled. “But yes, I’m confident we’ll be fine.”

“I’ve probably been in more dangerous amusement park rides,” Bullock said. He liked Disneyland and Universal Studios. They seemed like safe artificial worlds, to him. If you had enough money, everything there was fine.

“Oh, I don’t like those rides,” Morrison said, shuddering visibly. “My grandson made me take him on one...Oh, gosh, what’s happening?”

The car had started moving. The hybrid was so quiet, its motions so smooth, that the passengers hadn’t noticed till it was underway.

“Very smooth ride,” Bullock said. But he was staring at the steering wheel. It was turning, by itself. It was like something from an old ghost movie. The directivity of the car was carried out from inside it, via computer and cameras, but the wheel was there for emergencies, and it turned as the car did, because passengers found it disorienting otherwise.

“Pretty weird,” Morrison said, looking at the steering wheel move.

“Tell you what else is weird--you and me being assigned to this car together--long with Monteleone and O’Mara in the other car. I mean, only you and O’Mara work for Blume. Monteleone is a lawyer of some kind. Near as I can figure out, the only connection between us four is Purity. And Verrick, of course...”

Morrison stared at him. “That is kinda odd...I mean, I know how you and I are connected to Verrick. Well, there’s Purity. And there’s the other thing. But Monteleone? And O’Mara?”

“Monteleone did some legal work for Verrick--setting up Iceberg Investments. He transferred some money, hid some of the trail for it. After it was, uh, washed by you guys at the Four Clubs. And O’Mara--he owns some freight planes. He helped him transport a big package from the Middle East. Knows what was in that package...”

“Really.”

The self driving car was accelerating. Up ahead was the other car--with O’Mara and Monteleone in it. They were on the freeway alongside Lake Michigan, and picking up speed. Going surprisingly fast. You’d have thought the demo program would keep these self-driving cars right at the speed limit.

“I didn’t think about it till I got here, and saw who was assigned to be the riders in the cars,” Bullock said. “You know--we weren’t the original people chosen for this. Nope. One was Bill Gates. Another was the Secretary of Transportation. Couple of other guys. Right before the invitation went out to those people--it was changed. Making it us and O’Mara and Monteleone.”

“How do you know this?”

“I noticed Verrick treating me differently. Kind of subtle but it was there. He’s gotten all that bad PR from the leaked file, having to deny all that stuff...Maybe it just put him in a paranoid, defensive mood...Then I heard that he’d put me on this exclusive list--I thought it was his way of showing things

were all right with me. But when I saw you and the other three, and remembered that none of us were on the original list...”

Morrison swallowed. “You think...something’s up?”

“I think we’re going too damned fast.”

The ghost that was driving the car was apparently a lunatic--the car was now shrieking along, passing the other cars on the freeway. There was a news helicopter overhead. Bullock could hear its blades chopping away. Maybe the reporters up there would tell the cops these cars were malfunctioning. But what could the cops do about it?

Bullock got out his cell phone and dialed 911. And...nothing. It just made a buzzing sound in his ear.

The car went faster--Bullock looked up at the speedometer. It was on 90 miles an hour. The car up ahead was going even faster--then suddenly it seemed to pull away. He looked at the speedometer. The car they were in was slowing..

“There’s one car keeping up with us,” Morrison said, pointing. “Who the hell is that guy?”

Bullock looked to their left--a copper-colored Acura MDX was just managing to keep up with them. The driver was waving a phone at them.

Lean, scruffy looking guy in an old Army coat. But maybe he was on the testing team somehow. Some badly dressed engineer...

The car continued to slow. Bullock’s phone chimed and he answered. “Hello?”

“Listen, it’s me, in the car next to you...” He waved, glanced at the road to keep himself in his lane, then looked back at Bullock. “I’ve hacked into their

control signal and that's given me access to your phone too, but not for long. I can't seem to keep the signal up consistently. They've got theirs coming from a stronger transmitter maybe."

"They?"

"Verrick and Van Ness! They're trying to kill the two of you. Maybe the guys in the other car too...I'm not sure exactly how they're going to do it..."

Bullock felt a deep, shimmering chill go through him. "Who are you?"

"My name's Wolfe."

"You're the one who slowed us down?"

"Me, no, I just noticed that..."

The buzzing sound came back and the man's voice went away.

"Bullock," Morrison said, a catch in his voice, "look--the other car's taking an exit..."

The other self-driving car was driving off at the exit ramp, far ahead. Very rapidly. While their own self driving car had slowed down to well under the speed limit. Cars with human drivers were honking behind them.

"Well, maybe we'll take that exit, maybe this is over. God, I hope so..."

Maybe Wolfe was a lunatic. He looked a little crazed. Maybe Verrick wasn't...

Then they saw the other car, up ahead, doing a wild, rapid three point turn on the overpass, turning around, driving back along the ramp it'd just existed...going the wrong way on the ramp.

And now the other self-driving car was once more driving on the freeway, in the opposite direction--against the flow of traffic.

The other self-driving car was coming right toward them. It was less than an eighth-mile off. Cars screeched and honked around it.

Bullock could see O'Mara sticking his head out the window calling for help.

Lot of good that'd do....

Their own car was going faster, once more. The speedometer read 50, 60, 70...80...

"Bullock!" Morrison was almost sobbing. He was grabbing the back of the seat in front of him, knuckles white. "It's coming right at us! It's going to hit us! It's going to hit us *head on!*"

Bullock unbuckled his seat belt, and half climbed over the seat in front of him, so he could reach the steering wheel. He tried to turn it, not too sharply, so it'd go onto the shoulder.

It resisted his grip. It turned the other way, staying in the lane, the "ghost" far too strong for him. And it was still accelerating.

"The brake, Bullock!" Morrison shrieked. "Climb over and hit the break!"

Bullock saw the emergency brake, pulled it--and the car squealed, and spun around, out of control. Car screeched around them, horns honked. He heard a siren somewhere.

Bullock felt himself catapulted up front. The side of his head cracked into the steering wheel. He got up, sitting up in the front seat--just in time to see the car straighten itself out. The emergency brake popped out of activation

position and the self driving car headed right for the other suicidally robotic vehicle.

The two self-driving cars were a few seconds from collision. Bullock could see the terrified faces of O'Mara and Monteleone.

"Bullock!" Morrison shrieked. "Do something!"

Then a beeping sounded from the blinking self-steering indicator on the dashboard. The words *Automatic Driving Signal Interrupted* flowed digitally by on the small billboard screen...

Their self-driving car veered, suddenly, to the right, bumping onto the road shoulder. It bounced, swerved, fishtailed...and slowed. Then it came to a sudden stop.

Heart pounding, Bullock turned to look out the back window--just in time to see the other self-driving car driving headfirst into the very large flat silver grill of an enormous semi truck.

The self-driving car crumpled, flew to bits, flame spouting up around the semi-truck which went swerving into the left hand shoulder...it piled into the freeway divider, ripping up great swaths of white metal and then stopping about seventy feet from Bullock. But other cars were swerving, losing control, spinning...

"Oh God," Bullock said.

Morrison was jumping out of the car, running wildly, shouting, stumbling....

"Morrison, no!" Bullock shouted.

But that's when a 1990s era station wagon, screaming out of control, slammed into Morrison, and dragged him under it, past the remaining self

driving car.

The other cars were moving on, past the wreckage, or pulling over. The prototype car seemed to stall, then.

Bullock decided it was safe to get out. He felt dizzy as he clambered across the front seat, opened the door, got out of the car, and stumbled toward the ditch on the other side of the shoulder. The wind off the lake stung his nose. He liked the feel of it. It seemed to calm him a little...

Morrison was dead. O'Mara was dead. Monteleone was dead...

Bullock heard a whirring sound, turned, and saw the self-driving car's lights coming on. That ghostly steering wheel was turning once more. It was turning toward him.

The car was going to come after him, now. It was going to finish what it had started.

Then another vehicle was coming--backing up along the road shoulder. It was the coppery Acura. It kept going, honking...and he realized the driver wanted him to get out of the way.

Bullock turned and jumped into the ditch. The Acura was a blur in his peripheral vision. He heard a loud metallic crack, looked up to see the Acura, more than double the size of Blume's prototype, smashing its rear end into it, crushing the self-driving car's front end and forcing it into the freeway.

The Acura then drove forward, pulling up close to Bullock...and its engine died. The driver of the Acura tried to restart it. But it only whined. Crashing into the now-defunct self-driving car had damaged the Acura too.

The driver got out, ran around the front of the car to Bullock. It was the man who'd called himself Wolfe. He was looking around, with an air of urgency that was just short of desperation.

“Did...did you stop the car I was in, somehow?” Bullock asked.

“Yes. Couldn’t keep control of it though. And now the car I was in is stopped too. And that’s not part of my plan.” Police cars were arriving, beyond the crashed semitruck. The truck driver was getting out, unhurt, shouting to the police. “They’ll be here in a second. Do you think you can make it over that fence, Bullock?”

Bullock turned--and saw a hurricane fence about twenty five feet high.

“I...don’t know. Doubt it. I don’t want to go over it. Want the police. They’ll be here in a minute...”

“Look, you can’t trust the cops, Purity has friends in the department. Verrick wants you dead! You’ve got to...”

Then another car weaved past the ones pulled up behind the wreckage, and drove up to them. It pulled up sharply. It was a Toyota Camry. A young woman was behind the wheel.

“Wolfe! Get in!”

“Seline! What are you doing here?”

“I came to get your ass out of this mess! Get the hell in the car, Wolfe! Him too if you want!”

Wolfe opened the back door of the Camry, and Bullock felt himself shoved headfirst partway into the vehicle. “Get in, Bullock!” Wolfe said. “Or I’ll kick your head in! Get in the car!”

Bullock climbed the rest of the way in, Wolfe got in with him, and hadn’t quite closed the door before the Camry raced off down the road.

More sirens were warbling up from behind.

“With any luck, they’ll be too busy with this mess to follow us,” the woman said.

Wolfe looked at her. “What the Hell? Where’d you get this car? You hot wire it?”

“No! I’m not like you, Wolfe! I rented it! Hello, it’s called a credit card!”

“Oh. But...Seline...How’d you find me?”

“Never mind.”

“You followed me!”

She was silent for a moment. Then she shrugged. “So what? How’d we first meet? You were following *me!*”

“Yeah but...this is more like stalking.”

“You better be kidding or you can get out right here.”

Wolfe laughed. “I was. Sort of.”

The woman took the exit, and drove off, fast as she could, taking turns frequently...

“The cameras,” Seline said. “They going to track us...?”

“Got my phone set to blur them as we get close. Where we going?”

“The safehouse.”

“Can I get out here?” Bullock asked.

“No,” Seline said.

“Could you turn me over to the police?”

“No,” she said.

“I’m going with you two?”

“Yes,” she said.

Bullock leaned back on the seat. He felt like he was going to faint.

He buckled his seat belt, and closed his eyes.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“Sir?”

“Yes, Starling, just report.”

“Is this line secure, sir?”

“Yes, yes,” Verrick said impatiently. He was in his penthouse apartment, now, in his bathrobe, smoking a cigar and looking out at the lights coming on as dusk sank into night. He was trying to focus on the cigar and not think about Oxycontin. Needed to keep his head clear. “Wait--why are you asking me that? This is your goddamn system! You tell me if it’s secure!”

“Sir yes sir, I just meant--”

“Never mind what you meant! Did the cars get them or not?”

“We’re sure of three of them, sir. The cars are wrecked, and O’Mara, Monteleone, and Morrison are dead.”

“And Bullock?”

“Sir, we haven’t got a definite report on him, sir. His body has not turned up, sir. But there’s a lot of chaos out there, sir.”

Starling’s *sir* tic was getting on his nerves but he let it go. “Don’t make excuses about chaos, Starling--find Bullock!”

“Sir, yes sir. I have discovered that there was a car stolen in the area. I suspect its remote ignition was hacked...”

“Wolfe?”

“I think so. It was found wrecked on the same highway. No sign of the driver...”

“Dammit! He could have Bullock! Wait--what about ctOS surveillance in the area where Bullock disappeared?”

“Checked it sir. Cameras were blotted out in the area, remotely. Sir I believe that could be the work of Aiden Pearce.”

“Pearce! Another man who has to go down! Starling...find Bullock! Pull out the stops! Do whatever’s necessary! We’re close to go time for Iceberg!” Verrick turned from the window, walked to his desk, stubbed out the cigar in a glass ashtray. “And about go-time--how many drones do we have operational? They destroyed four at the last encounter...”

“We have six drones, sir. More than enough. If anything--you might, sir, consider moving the timetable ahead...”

That was a possibility Verrick had been considering. “I might. Especially if we don’t locate Bullock...”

“Sir, we’ll find him, sir!”

“We’d better--before they find the Iceberg Project.”

“There *is* something we can do, sir, if we can even get close to Bullock. I’ve been researching him, since he went missing. Sir, did you know he has diabetes?”

“Yeah, he developed it in the last year. Adult onset, some kind of genetic deal, what about it?”

“You know he has an implant device for delivering insulin, sir? That presents possibilities...”

“Fine, but we’ve got to find him first.”

“Sir--is there anyone else in Blume who knows what’s planned? Anyone else we need to...”

“No. No, the Board of Directors at Blume is made up of a bunch of moderates or the wrong kind of conservative--the old school kind that doesn’t have the balls to face the real enemy. Low-down compromisers! And Blume developed ctOS! Think of the power in ctOS--and they’ve barely scratched the surface of it. There are plans to get ctOS going in a lot of cities around the globe, Starling. If the right people controlled that system they could shape the world if they wanted to! Well, they won’t go in that direction. I’ve tested the water with them. They can’t deal with that hot water, Starling. But if they won’t use it to change the world, I will!”

“Sir yes sir! We’ll do it together, sir!”

“Just take care of--” He broke off, listening. The doorman was ringing from downstairs. “I’ve got to go.”

Verrick went to the door and touched the intercom button. “Yeah?”

A nasal voice on the intercom said, “*Mr. Verrick, I have a Mr. Quinn here to see you? A Mr. Niall Quinn?*”

Quinn? The son of Lucky Quinn. The guy hadn’t made an appointment. He might be the new head of the Club, replacing his old man, but he wasn’t some kind of boss over Verrick and he couldn’t just bust in here anytime he wanted. Still, Verrick was curious about the visit--and he doubted Quinn was here to do him harm. He would never come in person to do that. “Okay, send him up.”

“*There is actually another man with him, Mr. Verrick...*”

That’d be his bodyguard. “Sure, fine, whatever.”

He opened his door and stuck his head out. His Graywater bodyguards were gawping at some video on a cell phone. “You two!” Verrick called, making them jump. “Stop pulling your puds and get in here! I’ve got a couple of plug uglies from the Irish mob coming up here! Call Three in here--he can watch the door.”

“Sure, boss, we were just--”

Verrick left the door and went to make himself a drink at the little glass bar across from his desk. The Graywaters came in, a young, blond, tanned mercenary and an Arab who used to work for a Saudi prince. They had their Mack 10s on straps over their shoulders.

“You two, leave the door ajar, get over here, stand on either side of the bar. Keep your weapons in your hands, safeties off, but keep them pointed at the floor. Unless you see someone jerk a gun on us.”

The mercs exchanged glances then went into position.

Verrick mixed a brandy Alexander and when he’d just tasted it, someone knocked on frame of the door.

“Yeah it’s open, come in!” Verrick called.

Niall Quinn came in, followed by a beefy red faced man with red hair. Quinn had long wavy black hair, neatly clipped formed by some high priced barber, clipped just over his shoulders. He had thick black eyebrows, and freckles against pale skin. His lips were red, smirking; his eyes bright blue. He wore a long black double breasted coat, open now, to show a fine dove colored vest--and a gun in a holster, gun butt across his belly. He wore thin, gray leather gloves. His bodyguard closed the door behind them.

“So there he is, Roger Verrick,” said Niall Quinn. “Big shot at Blume, huh? I’m guessing anyhow you’re the one in the monogrammed bathrobe.”

There was something mocking in the way Quinn said virtually everything. A barely disguised contempt.

“Good to meet you at last, Quinn,” Verrick said smoothly. “How about a drink? What’ll you take?”

“I look like I’m going to drink anything but Irish whiskey? I’m old school, Verrick.”

“Bushmills?”

“Sure, onna rocks.”

Verrick made the drink. His bodyguard, keeping a close eye on Verrick’s men, came over to get the drink. Verrick handed it to the bodyguard, and he took it to Quinn.

“Thanks, Colin,” Quinn said. He looked around. “You know, Verrick, been a while now since we had a deal. Your man Tranter came to me. Said you wanted some kind of help here and there around town. He’d pay. I said I wanted something else. Needed someone not connected with me to take out that son of a bitch Pearce. I just make it a policy--anytime I can get some asshole clocked out without my name attached, I do it. Degrees of separation and all that, you know?”

“Sure,” Verrick said. He noticed that Quinn hadn’t taken off his gloves or coat. That meant he wasn’t planning to stay long. Which could mean a couple of different things. One of them had to do with overseeing a hit.

Verrick glanced at the Arab, the brighter of his two guards, and raised his eyebrows. The man caught the look and nodded slightly. Understanding that Verrick wanted him to stay alert.

Quinn sipped his drink, made one of those grunting *ah* sounds that people made over liquor sometimes, and went on, “So Tranter says he can take care

of it. With your approval. You'll pay the guy. Bing bang boom. But there's no *boom*. I mean--you know--there's a bang. But no boom. The dumb son of a bitch missed his target."

"Stan Grampus was the son of a bitch in question. Yes. Close but no cigar."

"And word is, Grampus is dead. Probable killer? Aiden Pearce! The same cocksucker Grampus was supposed to off! And who's Aiden Pearce--he's the guy who killed my father. I repeat--*my father*, Verrick!"

"Right. Understood."

"Way I see it, Verrick, you either owe me some money--and some vig on top of that--or you owe me a clean-up. I want Pearce killed. Soon. Because we laundered a big fat pile of money for you--two piles, really, brought in two lots, piping hot from Somalia--and we gave you a lot of accommodation. We sent some of our Chunkies over there to help you out, on the South Side. What happened? Dead Chunkies, wasted personnel I can no longer use."

"Not our fault if your men were not efficient."

Quinn stared at him--then a red light seemed to shine in his blue eyes. He threw his glass at the wall to his left, where it shattered.

The two Graywaters stepped up, raising their guns.

"Hold your fire," Verrick said.

"So my men were inefficient? You man was inefficient. Aiden Pearce is still alive!" He pointed a finger at Verrick. "And I haven't heard a fucking word about you making this right!"

Verrick glanced at the brown splash on his wall. "You know, that was pretty rude."

“You want to see rude?”

“One step forward, men,” Verrick said.

His mercenaries both took a step toward Quinn.

Quinn looked at the men, first one and then the other. “Look at that, Colin! See that military style these guys got? That’s Verrick’s military background! He was a major! And now he’s an important man at Blume! And he thinks he can threaten me!”

Verrick shook his head. “Just keeping my guard up. But don’t worry, Quinn. Everything’s going to get turned upside down in this town--and soon. I’ll be on top. And so will you--if you work with me. And Aiden Pearce? I’m looking for him right now. I’ll shoot him myself, if necessary. He’s going down. No extra charge.”

“What’s this turning upside down you’re talking about here?” Quinn demanded.

Verrick shrugged. He hadn’t told Quinn about Purity’s plans. Wouldn’t be prudent, as the elder George Bush used to say. “I’m just making some moves, is all. Business stuff. But believe me--Pearce is going down. Aiden Pearce will be smoked, dusted, snuffed. And soon. And as for Grampus screwing up--and the tone of this conversation...” He made a very slight bow. “I apologize. You’re the boss in this town now, Quinn. I haven’t forgotten it...”

Niall Quinn stared at him. “Then he sniffed and said. “I never forget it. And I don’t forget a debt. You see you take care of this--and soon.”

He turned and walked out the door. His bodyguard followed him, but backing toward the door.

When they were gone, Verrick fixed himself another drink, and washed down half an Oxy with it.

He smiled to himself.

You're the boss in this town now, Quinn...

For now. Just for now.

#

Blindfolded, Bullock was sitting on the sofa. They'd blindfolded him about a quarter-mile away, and made him lay on the floor so no one would call in a police report about it.

Now Wolfe sat turned toward Bullock, letting him wait in uncertainty for a minute. Seline, a gun in her hand, was standing nearby.

Finally, Wolfe removed the blindfold.

Their captive blinked at the safehouse room. He looked at the curtained and shuttered window. Licked his lips. Glanced at the door.

"There's no way out of here except past me, Bullock," Wolfe said. "And even if you could do that--then you'd have to get past *her*. And she's actually scarier than I am."

Seline nodded gravely, playing the part. "I am, really. I have some surgical saws in those drawers over there. I think, Wolfe, we should skip the bullshit and just gag him and get the saws out. There's some plastic tarp we can put down on the floor."

Bullock's eyes widened. "Now wait a minute--"

"Bullock--the more I look at you," Wolfe said musingly, "the more I feel I've seen you before. In person. Somewhere."

Wolfe meant it. He couldn't quite place the guy.

Bullock cleared his throat. "I was the General's secretary. When you came in for your hearing. I was in uniform then."

"Ah yes. You worked for Van Ness. And you still do. With Purity."

Bullock's face went blank. It was a careful, studied blankness. "Purity?"

"It's okay, Bullock," Seline said. "We know all about it."

"I was there," Wolfe said. "At the lodge on 77th Street. I heard Van Ness. I didn't see you there. Chances were you were backstage. But I got a lot of information. And we got more through hacking. Now we can either dig the rest of the information out of you now, the way Seline suggested...I think I'd have to tie you up and leave, it makes me sick to watch that stuff...or we can turn you over to the Justice Department. Now, I know--that sounds better to you. But you'd still be facing years in prison. Because I am pretty sure I can convince them to hold you until after the attack...we know the attack is coming...and no way they're going to let you go. They learned their lesson from the Boston Bombing, Bullock. They'll hold you and they'll tie you in with it and then it'll be all about them trying to keep Van Ness and Verrick from trying to kill you in prison. But there's a third option--I can call up Verrick and sell you to him. He was just trying to kill you--remember? How long do you think you'd last, without protection? So..."

"Wait, Wolfe!" Seline said, snapping her fingers. "We could do a combination of option one and three! We could slice him up, get the info, then sell whatever we have left of him to Verrick!"

Bullock groaned.

"Let's call that option four, Seline," Wolfe said. "There you have it, Bullock--those are the cards you've been dealt. How you going to play them?"

"You were there that night..." Bullock looked at him doubtfully.

“Yeah. I was there. *Socialism pops its ugly head up any time you don’t flush its holes out with poison.* Remember when Van Ness said that, Bullock?”

Bullock swallowed, blanching.

“And you remember there was a guy on the roof. And someone knocked him out and got in. One of the Graywaters went down...but the guy escaped.”

Bullock stared. “That was you!”

“Yes it was. I know about Purity. Your only hope is to tell me how the attack is going to happen. And then I won’t call up Verrick, and sell him to you. And I won’t give you to the Justice Department. Or...her.”

“And if I tell you, you’ll let me go?”

“I’ll get you to O’Hare. You can leave town. But if you talk to Verrick...I’ll talk to the Justice Department. If you don’t...you’ll go free. If I can confirm what you tell us.”

“I don’t know...”

“Would a drink help?” Seline asked.

“A drink? You mean liquor? No. I’m diabetic.”

“Crap. We’ll have to get insulin for him, Wolfe. I mean--if we keep him alive.”

“No, no,” Bullock muttered. “You won’t have to get insulin. I have an implanted insulin injector. There’s enough concentrate in its storage unit to keep me going for months.”

“Okay then,” Wolfe said. “Coffee?”

“Yes. Yes please...”

They reheated a cup of coffee--sick of instant, Seline had gotten a coffee maker and some good roast.

She brought Bullock the cup, and he stared at it. “You didn’t poison it, did you? Or put some kind of drug in it?”

“No, no, I didn’t. Here.” She took a sip and handed it back to him.

He sipped the coffee and then said, “Purity is...pretty big. It’s supported by a small group of billionaires--and people like Verrick. He invested most of the money he stole in Somalia in Purity, after he laundered it, he socked most of it into Iceberg.”

“What is Iceberg, just a shell company?” Wolfe asked.

Bullock hesitated. Then apparently decided to go whole-hog with the facts. “No. Iceberg...it’s called that because, you know, the tip of iceberg.” He put his coffee cup down on the small table in front of the sofa. “Iceberg is more than a shell company. It’s the organizing group for Purity, the financial group, the board of directors. Purity’s been around for decades, very hush-hush and all. A group of very rich families set it up. They’ve been stashing money for Purity for a long time. Billions! Some of them were invested in top oil and tech companies--and they did make a killing. That gave them funds to divert to Purity. You know--through Iceberg.”

“What’s their long-term plan?” Wolfe asked.

“It’s in several stages but essentially it’s a ‘from the inside out’ takeover. They’ve started it by ‘astroturfing’ media. Van Ness says controlling media is controlling mind; controlling access is controlling hope. ctOS can do that, once they take control of it completely. Hell, controlling ctOS can even be controlling money flow.”

“So they start with media--and set the stage with that?” Seline asked.

“Sure. But they got impatient. They’re working up another plan. See, they feel that North America should be a bastion of purity related to western European culture--and American culture. And that means resisting this so-called ‘cultural diversity’ thing. They want to resist the liberal agenda, the gay agenda, the immigrant agenda, and above all the socialist agenda. You know, the whole ‘tax the rich’ paradigm, all the regulations and pollution controls...”

“They?” Seline broke in. “Shouldn’t you say *we*, Bullock? I mean--as in you?”

Bullock cleared his throat. “Ah--it was *we*. I’m still pretty much against a lot of that stuff but...it’s where they’re taking it. I was taking notes for Verrick at the last meeting of the Iceberg board of directors and...I guess it scared me. Could be that Verrick saw my reaction. And then when the SystemsLeak file about him and Van Ness came out he started thinking maybe I’d testify against him. Being as I knew about the...expropriation.”

“The expropriation?” Wolfe snorted. “You mean killing those soldiers in Somalia and stealing millions and millions of dollars from the US government?”

“Ah. Yes. That.” He nodded stiffly. “I knew about it. And I know about *Project Iceberg*. So I guess he figures I’m a liability to that as well as to him.”

Wolfe and Seline stared at him, waiting.

Bullock looked back and forth between them. “Project Iceberg...involves sending up UAVs--special drones, developed by Verrick and Starling. The drones will be transmission stations, intermediary tech that will hack into the automatic pilot systems of passenger jets. Jumbo jets preferably--the bigger the better. They’ve gotten more and more auto-pilot oriented, in the last few years. Makes them vulnerable to hacking, y’know.” He picked up his coffee

cup, and put it down again. “Ultimately PURIFY plans to hack into planes coming into O’Hare airport to crash them all over the city. It will rain jet planes...including some military jets.”

Seline’s mouth dropped open. “How will that help *anyone*?”

Bullock sighed. “I had the same thought. But Verrick thinks it’ll provide cover for something he wants to do. He plans to take over Blume Corporation. There’s a special meeting of Blume Corporation’s top people...They’ll be meeting over several days. Most of them aren’t the kind who’ll sign on with Purity. They have some kind of qualms about the whole concept, I guess. Fairness, that kind of thing. So they’ll stand in the way of the Purity agenda. They’ll be roadblocks to Verrick and Van Ness. This way--they’ll die. Verrick figures when they’re killed, Blume’s stock value will plunge. Then --Roger Verrick himself--can buy up enough of it to put himself in control of the company. And then when he controls Blume, he’ll be able to get full control over ctOS. Right now he only has intermittent access to it. He’s worried the...the reds, the socialists, the unions, the liberals--that they’ll get control of ctOS themselves. He want to get there first. Chicago will be heavily damaged by the crashes all over town. That’ll weaken every part of the city. He can insert his own people, in the chaos. That’ll give him control of Chicago. Then he’ll push for ctOS to be established across the country--and he’ll have a special access to the system so he can control it. He’ll be able to take over the whole country...through ctOS.”

“But...” Seline shook her head in amazement. “Countless people will die in Chicago!”

“Sure. But one thing he plans to is to crash a lot of the planes into areas of Chicago heavily populated by liberals--or minorities. If they’re dead...they can’t vote. Plus--he can get rid of Pearce’s network. It’s more concentrated on the poorer sides of town. And he wants to eliminate Aiden Pearce. He’ll use the Club as his enforcers, when he’s rebuilding...”

“Wait,” Wolfe said. “The Club. Tranter. Aiden Pearce...so Verrick is definitely the guy who sent Grampus to kill Pearce?”

“Through Tranter. But...of course it was Niall Quinn who paid for it. And who demanded it get done. In exchange for services.”

“Niall Quinn. Son of Lucky Quinn?”

“Right. Niall Quinn wanted revenge on Aiden Pearce for killing his dad...”

Wolfe grunted. “Big mistake on Verrick’s fault, to get involved with that bunch. Because going after Pearce, for Quinn--got Pearce to fight back. And Pearce’s been using me like a chess piece against Verrick...only I don’t think he knows why Verrick sent Grampus...”

Seline glared at Bullock. “Just tell me--when was this attack...involving drones and planes...going to happen?”

“A few days. End of that meeting the Blume outfit was here for. But--I’ve heard...that Verrick is moving it up. It’s going ahead...tomorrow!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“So it was Niall Quinn?” Pearce’s voice on the phone was hard, brittle. “I wondered if it might be. He pulled the trigger on Verrick, who pulled the trigger on Tranter, who pulled the trigger on Grampus--who pulled it on me.”

“Yeah. But Pearce...” Wolfe was in the bedroom of the safehouse. She could hear the murmur of voices, Seline talking to Bullock in the next room. “...the attack. If Bullock’s right about that...”

“It fits in with what we know. It’s the last piece of the puzzle, Wolfe. We have to assume it’s true. You’re going to have to go to a guy I know at the Justice Department. Or--I have a friend who’s a friend of his. Kiskel knows him. He’ll see you. There’s an office right here in Chicago. You warn them--Homeland Security will ground those planes and put out an alert for drones.”

“You believe that?”

“Sure, they go on high alert every time a Muslim baby burps. They’re almost as worried about militia nut jobs. And this is pretty much what these Purity guys are.”

“But--Van Ness is a connected son of a bitch. And Purity has a lot of money. You know as well as I do that money talks in this country. Did the Department of Justice go after all those Wall Street lowlives? I don’t know if they’re going to raid Verrick and Iceberg on my say-so.”

“Look, I’m not a law and order guy. I’m a wanted man. But --we’ve got an obligation to tell people about this. I think Department of Justice is more reliable than Homeland Security. Those dopes at HS will probably arrest you before they’ll detain Van Ness...they’ll figure it’s all a veiled threat from you. But Doolin at DoJ--Kiskel says he’s all right. Go to him, Pearce. Fast. I’ll try to set it up.”

#

It was dusk by the time Seline drove Bullock to the train station.

They were just approaching the curb near the station, when Bullock said, suddenly, “Young lady--you wouldn’t really have carved me up, would you?”

She hesitated. But she couldn’t keep up the pretense anymore. “No. And we wouldn’t have given you to Verrick. But we’d have turned you over to Pearce, probably. And who knows what he’d have done with you....”

He looked up at the station. “I don’t know if this is safe...”

“You want to try to drive out?”

“No. Verrick’ll be watching my house. I don’t want to use a credit card--I’d need that for a rental.”

“You could try O’Hare...”

“No, couldn’t go out through O’Hare. Not with a lot of crashing planes a possibility. But...I don’t feel good about this either. They could be looking for me here. Would you at least come in with me?”

“Okay, Bullock.” She took a left, and lucked into a parking place almost immediately. They parked, got out and walked through the cold gray evening to Union Station. She had the remote camera scrambler Wolfe had given her, in her pocket, and she pressed it several times as they approached. She didn’t know if they were looking for her but she didn’t want to take a chance.

They went through the glass doors, down the hallway, into the big ticketing room. Seline looked around. It was mostly just a room full of busy people, or waiting people. They were bustling off to a train, waiting in lines, or waiting in wooden benches. There were a couple of cops across the room, chatting, paying them no harm. An announcer’s voice boomed out, warning that a train to Kansas City was about to depart.

“You sure you want to go to Los Angeles, Bullock?” she asked. He was planning to pay for the ticket cash, at the ticket windows.

“Yes. I didn’t know if you were going to really bring me here...” He looked around nervously. “I don’t see anyone watching me.”

“There wasn’t any doubt, once Wolfe made you a promise, that he was going to let you go. He’s a pretty square guy. Tough but...honest.”

“You like him, don’t you? I mean...in a big way.”
“None of your business.”

The ticket cashier, a gray haired man in thick glasses, was staring at them, as they got closer in the line. He excused himself for a moment, as the fat lady up ahead fumbled in her purse for cash, and then stepped away from the window, talking quickly into a cell phone.

I shouldn’t be paranoid about that, Seline told herself. The man could’ve just realized he had to call his wife. Could be anything.

The cashier quickly returned to the window and took the fat lady’s money.

Seline tried to relax. It took a couple more minutes, but at last Bullock stepped up to the window, and asked for a ticket to Los Angeles.

Then Seline realized the cashier was staring past Bullock--past her. At someone...

She turned, saw a flabby pot bellied man in coveralls rushing up toward Bullock. In his hand was something like a walkie-talkie. It seemed modified, with extra wiring on the outside--and he was pointing it at Bullock.

“Bullock!” Seline called.

He turned--saw the man...stared at the device in his hand...

Then Bullock began to sway. He looked dizzy. White foam showed at the corners of his lips. “Insulin...shock. He...”

Bullock collapsed.

Seline automatically knelt by him--tried to hold Bullock still as he convulsed, his eyes rolling back in his head...

She shouted, “Someone! We need an ambulance!”

The cops ran over to her, looking genuinely concerned. Seline looked around for the man with the device in his hand...

But he was gone. Vanished into the crowd.

She backed away. The cops were kneeling by Bullock, one of them taking his pulse. “This man’s dying...”

Seline slipped into the crowd herself.

#

“Wolfe?”

“Yeah, you get him on a train?”

“No. They were watching for him. He’s dead. He said something about his insulin...There was a man there who was pointing a...a machine of some kind at him...”

Wolfe was driving a “borrowed” car to the justice department, listening to Seline on his bluetooth.

She described the man with the “device”.

“That’s Starling,” Wolfe said. “He must’ve been nearby. But then Blume’s headquarters is about half a block away. Must’ve hacked into Bullock’s insulin injector. Made it dump three months worth at once. Too much insulin-you die.”

“Oh, God.”

“You get away without being followed?”

“I think so.”

“Okay. Go back to the safehouse. I’ll call you. I’ve got to go in and see Doolin. Kiskel got me an appointment. I want to get this over with fast before they start looking at me for...other stuff.”

Wolfe ended the call, pulled the car up to the nearest curb. It was a red curb but he didn’t care--he didn’t plan to drive it again.

He hurried through the increasing wind across the street to the Federal Building, sizing it up as he went.

It was old granite building, about eight stories high, with a U.S. flag out front and curving stone eaves. The Department of Justice’s offices in Chicago were housed in two buildings and this was the older one.

Wolfe went in, half expecting to be arrested on sight. He wasn’t sure to what extent law enforcement might be looking for him now.

In the old, echoing marble faced lobby was a scanning machine and a metal detection framework. He’d been expecting this and he’d left his gun in the car.

He went through it, removing off his shoes and belt as at the airport, aware of the curious stares of the Federal Marshals as he put them back on. He didn’t look like the usual visitor.

Wolfe went to the downstairs admissions desk where a brisk black woman in a suit looked him over. "My name's Wolfe. Agent Doolin's waiting for me." She looked at her appointment book.

"Yes sir."

Doolin was expecting him. His identification was checked, then he was sent upstairs to room 325.

The door had the old fashioned white glazed glass in it; painted in black on the glass was *Edward Doolin, Special Agent* .

Wolfe reached for the doorknob--then he heard a man whispering inside. Another door opening. The hair went up on the back of his neck. Something was wrong here. He could feel it.

And then he saw it...he looked down and saw blood spreading slowly out from under the door.

Wolfe thought, *If you were smart, you'd beat it out of here, now.*

He opened the door. *Never said I was terribly smart.*

Inside two men were duct taped to chairs; one, a hefty middle aged man in a suit, was behind a desk; the other was facing the desk. That one, Wolfe figured, was Kiskel, who was supposed to meet him here. The other one was Edward Doolin.

They were both dead--their throats cut. Their eyes were open and unblinkingly staring. Their clothes were soaked in blood.

Wolfe theorized that a couple guys had come in with guns, one had taped them down, the other had slashed their throats. Quieter that way. Silencers weren't really very silent.

There was another door with glazed glass in it, to the left--and Wolfe could see the shadow of a man there.

Wolfe thought about going downstairs, calling a general alarm. But these guys would have a way out of this. And he didn't. The feds would hold him for questioning, to see what he might know about these deaths. And he'd probably end up with his throat cut too. Somebody on the inside would find him alone in an interrogation room...

He crossed the room, stepping carefully around the blood, and quietly opened two of Doolin's desk drawers. It was in the second one--a .44 semiauto police special. He took it out, checked it--it was loaded.

Voices from the next room. Maybe they were expecting him but they didn't seem to know he was here.

"...that chopper has to be on the roof, Van Ness. That was the deal..."

Wolfe walked over to the door, readied the gun--and opened it.

Two men stared at him in shock. One was probably a Graywater--he just had that look about him. He wore a long coat, had his hair cut short like the others. There was a time-blurred tattoo on his neck. In his hands was a plastic sack, sealed with duct tape. Probably had the knife in it they'd used for cutting throats.

The other man was General Van Ness, now in civilian clothes. He was a stocky man, mid sixties, in a charcoal suit, with iron-gray hair, a square jaw and hooded blue eyes.

"Wolfe," Van Ness muttered.

"I'm guessing you guys have been wiretapping Kiskel. Pearce told him what was going down; he told Doolin. Came over to talk about it with me. So

you guys took those two out...Kind of a desperate way to deal with it, Van Ness."

"Timetable's been moved up, thanks to you, Wolfe." He was looking at Wolfe's gun. "When it all goes down--you can take credit. In fact we plan to give you credit."

Van Ness smiled, showing a lot of large yellow teeth.

"You got your pal here in the building, Van Ness? You have another contact in here? Who is it?"

"Why should I tell you? You going to shoot me? Then they come up here and find you shot a Brigadier General. And they find those bodies..."

"How about if I just shoot you in the--don't go for that!"

But the Graywater already had the Mack 10 out, was spraying metal toward Wolfe--who fired the .44 as he threw himself back. Machine pistol rounds tore up the doorframe and thudded into the dead men behind Wolfe. Then Van Ness gasped, fell back, spitting blood.

Wolfe wasn't sure who'd hit Van Ness, him or the Graywater.

The mercenary was running across the other office, and out into the hallway. He was heading toward the roof. And even from here Wolfe could just hear the sound of chuffing rotors.

Wolfe got up, and saw that the mercenary had dropped the plastic sack. Maybe hoping to implicate Wolfe in the execution of the two men in the office. And it might work.

There wasn't time to chase the Merc down--the shots would've been heard. The marshals would be up here in a minute.

Wolfe stuck the gun in his waistband, turned to the window behind Doolin's body, and unlocked it. The old style office window opened fairly easily. He could hear shouting from the hallway. Pretty soon, the sirens would start.

He looked out the window--he was three stories up. Cold wind cut at his face; the air smelled of snow, and car exhaust.

Below him was a parking lot, mostly full. To his right, about six feet away, was a drainage pipe. To his left were rows of windows. No easy way down.

He probably should surrender. But...

It wasn't going to look good. And they weren't going to be in the mood to listen to crazy stories about drones and planes.

Then, in his mind's eye, he saw himself taking off his belt earlier, when he went through the metal detector.

He removed his belt, and slung it over his neck, and then climbed through the window. Placing his feet carefully on the ledge, and holding to the inside of the window frame with his left hand, he closed the window with his right. Then he edged toward along the slippery ledge, balancing carefully, holding on with the tips of his fingers along the tops of the granite blocks...

One slip, he'd go over backwards, probably shatter his spine on one of those cars down there.

He heard voices from the window to his right. They were looking at the bodies, in there. No one seemed to have checked the window yet. The door would be open from the adjoining room to the hall. With luck that'd draw them that way.

The chopper on the roof was about to take off. He could hear its engine roaring...Distant sirens approached...

He kept moving, crabwise, step by excruciatingly careful step...and then he wasn't careful enough. He slipped. He swayed, near falling back...

But the drainage pipe was in reach. He grabbed the pipe with his left hand, and steadied himself. With his right he slipped the belt off his neck, threaded it behind the pipe. He took hold of the pipe with his right hand, then grabbed the belt on both sides--and slid down, rappelling down the side of the building with his own belt.

It was a fast trip down--Wolfe was able to slow it some by braking on the wall with his boots, and his hands burned as he struggled to keep a grip on the belt.

Then he struck the asphalt with both feet. He sucked air through his teeth at the pain, but it didn't feel as if anything was broken.

He pulled the belt free, and hurried away, weaving past cars to get quickly out of the parking lot.

The sirens were loud, now. And overhead, the helicopter was taking off.

#

"General Van Ness is dead?" Pearce asked, surprise in his voice.

"Looked pretty dead to me. I didn't stick around to take his pulse."

Wolfe was in the corner booth of a crowded bar, talking to Pearce on his phone. He had an untouched beer in front of him.

"You kill Van Ness?"

"Not sure. Hope so."

“You think you’re going to get blamed for that--and the other two dead men? I mean--you signed in, you went up there. And then there were gunshots...”

“I think they’ll piece together that Van Ness and the guy with him went in at the right time. There are cameras in the lobby. They had to have signed in...Eventually the feds will figure it out.”

“You better hope so. Wait...hold on...holy shit...Verrick is....”

“Pearce--Verrick is what?”

Someone put some loud music on the jukebox. Hip hop of some kind. Wolfe stuck a finger in his other ear to block the noise.

“Wolfe--Verrick’s gone out to the airport...”

“How do you know this?”

“I’ve been monitoring his movements on ctOS. What do you think? He’s heading for the cargo jet area. And--Seline uploaded everything on Bullock’s phone to me.”

“She did?”

“What do you think, she sits around and waits for you to do everything because you’re a macho badass?”

“I kind of was hoping for something like that, yeah. What about Bullock’s phone?”

“I’ve been monitoring his contacts. One of them is this Winters you were talking to. Apparently Verrick didn’t tell him what the plans were for Bullock. He tried to leave a message on Bullock’s phone.”

“To what effect, for crying out loud, Pearce?”

“To this effect, and I quote: *Iceberg Project has been moved up. Head to safety zones. It’s happening tonight. In two hours.*”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“There are only certain frequencies these drones are likely to be using, Pearce,” Wolfe said, as he strode into Pearce’s safehouse.

An odd, grubby little man named Morrsky had picked Wolfe up at the bar. He’d driven him in a fading 2000 Toyota Echo to pick up Seline. She’d been waiting outside the safehouse under the billiard parlor. Morrsky had taken them to the safehouse Pearce was in--an apartment in a high rise overlooking Lake Michigan.

Pearce was at a desk overlooking the lake, staring into a computer screen.

“Man,” Wolfe remarked, glancing around. “This place is way better than the safehouses I’ve been in. You’re styling in here.”

“Really,” Seline said. “I want an upgrade.”

Pearce glanced up in mild annoyance. “This is my main domicile. But it’s also a safehouse. What were you saying about the drones, Wolfe?”

“These are based on the Navy’s X-47B drones. Smaller but the same idea. Mostly they use GPS for navigation.” As he talked, Wolfe gazed out the window. He could see passenger planes out there. They could all start raining down on Chicago soon if something wasn’t done. “They can switch to a kind of manual with guidance from the operator, via camera, but it’s not as reliable. They use a set of frequencies they can get away with here, without FAA approval. And I know what those would have to be. I’m going to have to go out there. I need you and Seline here to work on the drones from this end. If they’re launched, you might be able to override the GPS and control them manually...Starling might have blocked direct GPS control from outside, by now. Probably has. Pearce--do you have any hand grenades?”

“Nope. Nothing like that. Take me an hour or two to get any decent explosives. We don’t have time. You thinking of just finding this plane and chucking a grenade into it?”

“Thought about it. But sounds like we’re going to have to do this the hard way.”

“Wolfe,” Seline said, sinking onto the posh sofa--she was sitting now but there was no relaxation in her posture. She was tense with worry. “We need to call Homeland Security...I can go out and call them...but they need to ground every aircraft in Chicago. And detour the planes that are coming in!”

“You can try, Seline. But grounding all those aircraft...they’ll ground one if you tell them there’s a bomb on it. But they’re not going to believe they all have bombs on them. And they’re not going to believe this drone story. And we don’t have time to convince them.”

“They’re probably infiltrated by Purity,” Pearce said. “Look what happened to that DoJ guy, Doolin--and Kiskel.” He shook his head sadly. “Kiskel wasn’t some kind of heroic guy but he put his life on the line and...”

“We have to try,” Seline insisted.

Wolfe nodded. “I don’t have time to wait on them though. I’m going to check out that cargo plane that Verrick’s taken such an interest in. Let me give you the specs and basic methods for the drones, Pearce...”

#

It wasn’t far to O’Hare airport. Pearce had printed him out a counterfeit access to the cargo field, and Wolfe had swiped a Jaguar to get him there as fast as he dared to go--if he went too fast he’d be delayed, maybe arrested, by Chicago PD.

Now Wolfe was walking up behind the hangar--cargo hangar three, which his PearcePhone designated as the last known location of Roger Verrick.

The orange sun, blurred by the striations of clouds at the horizon, looked like it was spreading out like the broken yolk of an egg. He figured the light was still good for another half hour or so. And Wolfe had to take action within minutes if he was going to stop this thing...

There was a rear corner door, for maintenance workers, at the back of the hangar. Wolfe stalked across the tarmac to the door, opened it, looked out at the interior of the hangar. There was the cargo plane, taking up the hangar floor. The hangar was open to the runway at the front. Lights gleamed from the main airport. Wolfe could see planes taking off--planes full of unsuspecting people who might soon be screaming as the plane crashed into Chicago.

If only he could spot something here--something he could warn the airport authorities about. Something he could phone into Homeland Security-- maybe upload a picture to them.

But there was nothing visibly illegal going on in the hangar--nothing that would bring the authorities stampeding here in time. The freight loading ramp at the rear of the cargo jet was down. The aircraft was a 747-400M Combi, a twelve-year-old cargo jet with room for some passengers. Men were loading large oblate canvas covered objects, on wheels, into the back of the fuselage with a roller-conveyer system. The objects just fit. Most of them must already be loaded. One was disappearing into the plane, the other was just going up the ramp. The general shape told Wolfe these were probably the drones--but UAVs could be legitimately shipped--and they were under canvas so they weren't obvious anyway.

He saw two Graywater mercs standing near the jet, watching the loading, with Mack 10s over their shoulders. No sight of Verrick yet.

Nearer were a number of fueling pumps, washing hoses, and an unloaded freight truck. Wolfe slipped through the door and went stealthily to the left, quickly getting under cover of the fueling pumps. The smell of jet fuel was strong. He waited, looked cautiously around the pump. No one was looking his way. He moved on, and got to the freight truck. It was angled toward the front so he was able to use it for cover to get closer to the cargo plane.

The big spaces of the hangar echoed with voices, the clank of machinery, the whirl of the loading machine. Someone laughed.

He had no hope of pretending he belonged here. They had to be on the lookout for him.

But he was close enough, now, to hack the plane's controls. If he could do it--he could put the kibosh this whole project of Verrick's, quick and easy.

Squatting in the cover of the truck, Wolfe took out the PearcePhone, and tapped it to aircraft automatic pilot hack...

And got an app error message. It read:

No Can Do. Vehicle/Aircraft is shielded. Cannot be hacked with present techno-interface. Sorry, dude.

AP

He wanted to shout, "Fuck!" but he crouched silently near the grill of the truck, trying to think of a plan. He had to stop this plane from leaving. If it meant he had to pull out the .45 and shoot every son of a bitch here, he had to do it. Countless lives were at stake.

Could he get the truck started--maybe smash it into the plane? Should he try to call Homeland Security? Seline had probably gotten some sort of message to them but it might be too late...

Then he heard, “All clear! Shut the hatch!”

“Shit,” Wolfe muttered, peering over the top of the truck’s hood. The ramp was clear, and beginning to go up on hydraulic lifts.

The two Graywater mercs were walking toward the front of the plane--which was warming up, its engines beginning to whine. The cargo jet was getting ready to taxi for takeoff.

There was no time to do anything...

Except what he did.

He ran for the back of the fuselage, jumped, caught the edge of the rising ramp, did a pull up, and scrambled up onto the metal lip. As he went he imagined it closing--and cutting him in half. Verrick would be pleased, and amused, standing there and looking at him dangling, dying, spitting blood....

But then he was over the steel lip, sliding down into the cargo hold of the aircraft just as the hatch finished closing. The plane jolted forward, and started out of the hangar and Wolfe was thrown forward, fell on his belly with a grunt.

The noise of the engines covered for him. The three men at the other end of the hold, buckling themselves into a short row of seats forward of the six chained-down drones, were facing away from Wolfe and they didn’t turn around. None of them looked like Verrick from here. He was probably in the cockpit with the pilot and maybe Starling.

Wolfe thought about sabotaging the drones. But that would take time, it would make noise, and there might be a short cut to get them neutralized...probably in the cockpit.

The plane was taxiing onto the runway...

Wolfe thought he was probably going to have to sneak up behind these guys and shoot two of them, one after another, rapidly, in the backs of their heads. He'd need the other one alive--he'd have to put the gun to the guy's head, force him to talk that cockpit door open. Like any large jet, post 9/11, the cockpit would be locked from the inside to prevent hijacking.

He wasn't looking forward to shooting two strangers in the back of their heads. He couldn't be sure these guys knew what was going down, here. But he had to do whatever he needed to.

Including, maybe, crashing this plane with himself aboard it, if that was the only way to stop it...

The first thing that came into his mind when he thought of crashing the plane, and going down with it...was a picture of Seline.

She was just sitting on the sofa with her hair up in a towel, her feet bare, looking up at him. Very grave look in her eyes...

He'd probably never see her again.

Just get this done, Wolfe.

Wolfe drew his gun, went into a crouch, and moved alongside the drones toward the men up front. Then the plane took off, steeply and rapidly. Wolfe was thrown off balance, and slid backwards. He grabbed a frame on the bulkhead and held on--then saw that one of the men up front was unbuckling his seat belt, and getting up.

Wolfe flattened, and crawled under one of the drones.

If he tried to take this guy down right here and now, the others would become aware of it--he'd be outgunned and he'd lose the element of surprise. He needed to wait his moment.

He looked at the deck, saw that the drones were locked into some kind of railing. The plane had been retrofitted to facilitate their launching.

Wolfe watched the shoes of the man walking up toward him. The man paused by a drone, and unfastened something with a clicking sound. Then he threw the canvas off the drone. He was getting them ready for launch...

Another fine mess you've got yourself in, Wolfe.

The Purity mechanic uncovered the last of the drones, then turned--

“What the fuck,” the mechanic said. “Who--”

Wolfe rolled, jumped to his feet, came up face to face with the man, and cold cocked him hard on the forehead with the butt of his gun. The mechanic went down.

Wolfe turned--saw that the engine noise had once more saved him from notice. The other two weren't looking over.

Wolfe dragged the mechanic to one of the canvas tarps, and rolled him up in it, locking him in place with its clips.

The he turned and started toward the other two...

He got within a few feet and one of the men turned to see how the mechanic was getting on. The Graywater's eyes widened. He unhooked his seat belt and jumped up, pulling his Mack into play. Wolfe just had time to recognize the merc as the one who'd killed Doolin and Kiskel, before he shot him in the face, twice.

The other merc, a chunky man with round cheeks, was struggling to unbuckle his seat belt. In his panic he couldn't quite get it done.

Wolfe stepped up to him and pointed the gun at his face. “You want what the other one got?”

The merc shook his head.

“What’s your name?”

“Prebo.” The name came out like a squeak.

“Okay, Prebo. Very slowly unbuckle yourself, and stand up, and drop that gun. If it looks like you’re gonna do anything else with it I’ll blow your face off your skull.”

Prebo swallowed, and nodded his head several times, fast. “Sure. Sure. You got it.” He looked at his seatbelt as if it were a complicated puzzle. He licked his lips, then he reached down and slowly unbuckled it.

Wolfe stepped back, a little unsteady in the plane’s turbulence. “Put the gun on the deck carefully and shove it toward me with your foot.”

Prebo obeyed. Wolfe picked up the gun, keeping his eyes and the .45 on Prebo.

“Now,” Wolfe said. “Look at your friend there, the one I shot.”

Prebo stared at the dead man.

“You see his face?” Wolfe asked. “See how I put one through his right eyes and the other right in his teeth? I bet if anyone does an autopsy they’ll find teeth in his brain. You see all that, Prebo?”

“Mm-hm, yes,” Prebo said, his voice still squeaky. “You don’t do what I tell you, you’re gonna look at least as bad as that when I’m done with you. Only it’s your nuts I plan to blow up into your skull. I’ll start with that. Sound good?”

Prebo blinked. “Good?”

“Not so good, right? Let’s avoid that ugliness. Just go over to the cockpit door there, and pound on it. Stand right in front of that peephole. Tell them that something’s stuck out here. Problem with the drones. You hear me?”

Prebo nodded. “You won’t shoot me?”

“Not if you obey me to the letter. Be convincing! Go on--the door!”

Prebo went to the cockpit door. Wolfe followed closely, and flatted to one side of it, and whispered, “Stand close to that peephole so they can’t see anything but you. And do what I told you!”

Prebo cleared his throat, and then banged on the door. “Uh--boss! Mr. Verrick! Um...Mr...Mr Starling? We got a problem out here with the drones! We can’t get ‘em flight ready!”

Wolfe nodded and mouthed, *Good*.

A few seconds passed. Then the door opened--quicker than Wolfe had expected.

Wolfe grabbed Prebo by the collar and shoved him through the door, to make sure it couldn’t be shut quickly.

Then he stepped up behind Prebo and pointed the gun--right at Verrick.

Roger Verrick was just pulling a .44.

“Hold it, Verrick!” Wolfe shouted. “Don’t touch that--”

He didn’t get the word gun out because Verrick was firing his. Unfortunately for Prebo, he’d straightened up, trying to get out of the line of fire, and stepped right into it. He caught two rounds from Verrick.

One of them went through Prebo, and into Wolfe. He felt it tear open his right side. The other one caught Prebo in the throat. Prebo was going to his knees, clutching at his throat, spitting blood.

“Out of the way you fat slob!” Verrick snarled, shoving Prebo back at Wolfe.

Wolfe was trying to figure out where to place his shot without risking the pilot, or Starling--two guys he needed. He decided to shoot Verrick in the heart and hope it didn't go through him into the instruments.

Verrick snapped off another shot, catching Wolfe in the outside of his left shoulder, just missing the bone.

Wolfe grunted with the impact, staggering back--the plane shivered in turbulence and he fell onto his back.

“Starling--star the launch now!” Verrick shouted.

Wolfe sat up, grimacing with pain. Spots swam in front of his eyes. He knew the drill--he was experiencing some shock from the bullet wounds. Symptoms of blood loss would start soon. He raised his gun and aimed at Verrick

Verrick stepped awkwardly over the dying Prebo. Whose body was still blocking the door. “Wolfe...”

Verrick's mouth contorted into a stressed grin and he pointed his gun at Wolfe's chest.

Wolfe fired first, but the plane was shaking as the rear cargo hatch opened and the shot didn't go where he wanted it to--it caught Verrick in the trapezius muscle, between his neck and shoulder. Verrick shouted wordlessly. Blood spurted, but it wasn't a killing wound. Verrick tried to steady himself to fire again.

Wolfe got to his feet, Wind roared through the cabin. They were at a fairly low altitude still. He stepped to the side, close to the bulkhead in front of the seats. A bullet zipped by. Wolfe was conscious of losing blood. It was trickling down his sides, thick and hot and sticky. He could smell the iron scent of his own blood.

A clacking sound drew his attention to the left. He could see the drones were already offloading.

They were rattling out through the back of the plane, on their railings--and dropping.

Maybe it was too late. Maybe he'd failed. He needed to call Pearce, tell him to--

Then Verrick was there, stepping into view, swinging his gun up toward Wolfe's head.

Wolfe knocked Verrick's gun hand to the left, brought his own weapon up to fire. Verrick grabbed the wrist of Wolfe's gun hand and they scuffled for dominance--then Verrick went over backwards, falling onto the deck with a pained grunt, Wolfe on top of him, Wolfe catching the wrist of Verrick's gun hand in his own left hand.

Wolfe brought his right knee up hard as he could into Verrick's crotch.

Verrick groaned as Wolfe connected with his testicles. "Fuck! Goddamn you! You're too fucking late!"

Wolfe felt his strength ebbing. He was losing too much blood.

He put his all into ripping his gun-hand free of Verrick's grip.

He fired--but Verrick had blocked the shot with his arm. The bullet shattered the bone of Verrick's left forearm.

Verrick shrieked in pain, arched his back, and pitched Wolfe off him.

Weakened, Wolfe fell back, but managed to struggle to his feet--and he fired again, hitting Verrick in the left shoulder. Verrick spun around, staggered back, floundered blindly toward the rear of the plane, looking for cover.

Wolfe raised the gun and aimed. But the plane jolted and Verrick fell onto the last of the drones. He clutched at it, just as it went down the rail and launched.

It took Verrick with it.

Wolfe turned toward the cockpit, saw Starling struggling to move Prebo's dead weight out of the doorway.

Wolfe pointed his gun at Starling and shouted, "Starling! Back up! Get in the cockpit and siddown!"

Starling looked up, paling, and raised his hands. He backed up.

Wolfe got the phone out with his left hand, hitting the speed dial. The signal was good.

"Wolfe?"

"Pearce--they're launched! Use the codes..."

"We've tracked them already--they're heading for an airliner! Seline's got Homeland Security to ground flights on the runways but the ones in the air are vulnerable. Starling's blocked the GPS hack--only thing I can do is take over manual, one drone at a time!"

"Pearce--try to block them, dammit! Try to control one, use it to block the others!"

Wolfe went to the cockpit. He could see two drones through the windshield, the Unmanned Aerial Vehicles flying off below the plane. They were over Lake Michigan at the moment. Up ahead was a passenger jet.

The pilot on the left was a tall, Nordic looking man wearing a headset. He was muttering to himself. "I didn't sign up for shooting on the plane..."

Starling was half turned in his seat beside the pilot; he stared at Wolfe, mouth hanging open, as if seeing an apparition.

Wolfe had the .45 in his right hand; in his left the PearcePhone, pressed to his ear. He was leaning in the doorframe to keep from falling over. He'd lost a lot of blood. His knees were weak. The cockpit seemed to slowly sway back and forth in front of him...the black specks were swarming more thickly over his vision...

Then Pearce's voice in the phone jolted him alert. "Wolfe--I've got control of one of the drones...holy shit, that one ahead...there's a man clinging to it!"

Verrick was alive out there.

"Shoot it down!" Wolfe said.

"No weapons on this thing. It's all about hacking into passenger jets...which it's gonna do in about one minute, Wolfe! It's getting in range of that airliner up there!"

The drone, once in range, would take over the passenger jet's automatic pilot, and crash it into a pre-picked target in Chicago. Probably the Blume building. The other electronically-hijacked jets would be hitting power plants, City Hall, hospitals, anyplace they could create maximal damage and panic. The special ctOS power backups would come on, and restore ctOS control to most of the time...A state of emergency would be declared, and Verrick would use it to take over the area...

Wolfe could almost taste what was about to happen, if Verrick succeeded--taste it like a poison pill melting bitterly on his tongue.

He saw an explosion, out the windshield, about two hundred feet below and well in front of the cargo jet. A drone had struck another.

And he thought he saw the flaming shape of a human body spinning away...

There goes Verrick, burning his way down into Lake Michigan and Hell.

"I've got another drone, Wolfe," Pearce said. "But I don't think I can get the others...they're locking on their targets..."

"Pearce--the one you've got control of. Can you head it toward my position? Straight on, right at the cockpit. Fast."

"What?"

"Just go. Make it happen."

The black swarm was back, swirling like a cartoon tornado between Wolfe and Starling.

And Starling was staring at the gun. Maybe seeing Wolfe was dazed; maybe thinking about making a grab for it...

"Starling, you go for that gun, I'll pull the trigger. Now I see that monitor, you've got set up there, between you and the pilot. Says Drone Command on the screen there. You just go to that interface, Starling, and you deactivate those drones. All of them. All four of the drones remaining. Now. Or you're going to die and you won't live to see Purity's glorious triumph."

"You won't kill us," Starling said. "If you do, the drones do their job anyway. And you'd crash the plane. And it might hurt a lot of other people..."

“Starling--look out the windshield...”

“What is that up there?” The pilot said. “Starling! That drone! Turn it away from us!”

“Steer away from it!” Starling said.

Wolfe pointed a gun at the pilot’s head. “You change course I’ll blow your brains out. I can pilot this piece of junk.”

The pilot froze in his seat. “But--it’s going to hit us!”

“Yeah. Unless Starling does the right thing it’ll hit us in a little more than than,, forty-five seconds. Look at it, Starling! It’s coming!”

Starling stared out the windshield at the oncoming drone. It was getting bigger. Heading for them as if in a vengeful mechanistic fury. “You won’t let it hit us, Wolfe! You’d die too! The plane will crash and...”

“Yes. I will. We’re still over the Lake. Screw it, let’s all go down together right now. Tell you the truth I think I’m bleeding to death, anyway. Let’s go out with a bang, Starling. We’ve got control of one drone. No time to deal with the others so we’ll just crash that one into this...”

“It’s gonna hit us!” the pilot yelled. “It’s getting *close!*”

“Verrick is dead,” Wolfe said. Everything was spinning. He was afraid he was going to lose consciousness at any moment. “Who’s your boss now, Starling? It’s me, now! You deactivate those drones right now. And then you land this thing, and I won’t tell them about the thing with Bullock--he was a dirt bag anyway. I’ll tell ‘em you’re a valuable man. You won’t do much time...I’m your new commander. And I’m giving you three seconds to make up your mind...”

The drone was headed for the windshield...

“Sir yes sir,” Starling said.

And he turned to the drone command interface, hit the *deactivate* button.

The oncoming drone wavered, then lost power, and went diving downward, spiraling into Lake Michigan.

“Wolfe!” Pearce said. “The drones--they’re going down!”

The pilot said. “We’ve got two fighter jets on us...”

“*Cargo jet 322,*” said a voice over the radio. “*This is Air Force Interceptor 2441, you are now required to head for runway 3, immediately. That is immediately, proceed on a heading to land at runway 3, or we will open fire...*”

The pilot banked toward the runway. Wolfe shoved the Pearcephone deep in his pants. They’d have to really dig for it...

“What now,” Starling said. “What happens now?”

“Now, Starling,” Wolfe said, struggling to remain on his feet. “We’re going down and you’re going to surrender and tell the people what Verrick was up. That’s an order. From me. So...” The black tornado was sucking at him. Drawing him in. His own voice sounded so distant in his ears. “So...just you...turn around in your seat, Starling, and you let the pilot land this thing, and you surrender to the nice people, or I’ll knock you...I’ll knock you...”

He didn’t manage to say that last word out loud.

Unconscious.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

He heard voices, just penetrating the thick pearly gray fog that enveloped the world.

“He came close...” Some strange male voice. Maybe a touch of Asian accent to it. “...but he is a strong, resilient man, and the wounds themselves weren’t so bad. It was all that blood...”

“He still need transfusions?” It was Seline’s voice.

“No. We were basically out of his blood type but a rather odd man came in. He, ah, was, strikingly deformed. Said he’d just had his first bath in a year and could he give blood for Mr. Wolfe and...”

“That would be Blank.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Never mind. Go on.”

“Well, we tested the man’s blood, it was safe to use, it was the right type, and...he didn’t have any identification but...it was an emergency and we took a chance...I really think he saved Mr. Wolfe’s life...”

“Who says I’m not dead,” Wolfe said. His voice came out a rasp. He was looking around but not seeing much. Just blurry silhouettes. One of the silhouettes was definitely shaped like Seline.

“I say so, Mick,” Seline said, sitting down beside Wolfe. He felt her hand on one of his. Her touch was cool, but there was a sweet warmth in it too. “You’re alive. I’m taking your pulse right now. Yep, there it is. Pretty strong.”

“Am I...” He swallowed. His throat seemed gummed up.

“Here--you want some water?”

He felt her left his head a little; felt a paper cup of water at his lips. He drank. It was a beautiful taste. Just cool water.

“Thanks.” He lay back and asked. “Am I under arrest? I mean--is there...did they...”

“It’s complicated, Wolfe. There were bodies on the plane. But...seeing as you saved a city...of course that’s still under discussion. There are people wondering if you might be the guy who...” She bent near his ear and whispered, so closely, he could feel her breath tickle. “...who stole a helicopter and crashed it. I told them no way was that you.”

“Thanks. You’re a great...character witness.”

She chuckled, and sat up. “They aren’t sure. Then there was that Federal Building mess...But Starling is talking. He says you gave him orders to talk--so he’s talking. You really psyched him out, Wolfe. And our mutual friend, Aiden, is using all his contacts on your behalf. And so is DedSec. And the SystemsLeak thing has really gone viral. That vindicates you and makes Verrick look like the creep he was. So with a little luck...”

“I...” He looked around. His eyes almost cleared, for a moment. Then the darkness closed in again. “...gave up on luck...Till I...”

He squeezed her hand. Then he lost consciousness again.

#

“The testimony of Mr. Starling, and the information from the drone recovered from the lake seems to confirm the story provided by Mr. Wolfe’s lawyers regarding the planned attack on Chicago. The District Attorney declines to prosecute Mick Wolfe, citing...”

Wolfe turned off the radio. “Hey nurse!” he shouted.

He found the button to call her. A minute later a fairly large cocoa-colored nurse with dyed-blond cornrows came into the room. “Who’s hollering in here? That you again, Mick? Did I not tell you to get some rest?”

“Done resting, Martha. I need you to take this IV out of my arm. I’m free to go, no more cops watching my room. I feel better. I can leave.”

“And you got a medical degree when?”

“It’s just common sense, Martha. I know why you’re keeping me here, really. And I don’t blame you. Women cannot resist me. But you have a wedding ring. It wasn’t meant to be.”

She laughed. “Oh listen to him! Now you *got* to go! I’ll ask the doctor...”

But it was almost two hours before he was out of the hospital, standing on the corner, on a sunny but cold winter afternoon, wondering what had become of his PearcePhone. He could get a standard phone. He knew Seline’s number. He wondered if it was the right thing to call her. Purity, in some form, was still out there. It was being investigated. Iceberg Investments had been shut down. Starling’s testimony had led to Marlon Winters being arrested. But there were still a lot of Purity members out there, most of them under cover. They had reason to hate Mick Wolfe. If they were after him--Seline would be in the crossfire. If, that is, she even wanted to be around him.

He’d thought she’d whispered something to him, while he was semi comatose...something about wanting--

“Mick! I’ve been looking for you, you idiot!”

Seline was walking up to him. She wore a long blue coat, something retro, like you’d expect to see Barbara Stanwyck wear in a 1940s movie, and a matching hat.

“Seline. Hi. I was just wondering if I should call you.”

“Wondering if! What a...”

“I just thought...I’m going to have a lot of enemies now.”

“That’s why you need me to watch your back, dummy.”

“You really want to do that?”

“Did I or did I not pick you up on the freeway when you were trying to get away with Bullock?”

“Yeah. But...”

“Never mind, yeah but. Let’s get some lunch. I’m starved. Come on, I’ve got the rental. We won’t have to steal one.”

They started off down the street together. Wolfe felt something strange, as he walked along. After a moment he realized it was something close to happiness. He’d forgotten what that felt like.

After a couple minutes, though, the worries came back. The first one had to do with Pearce. “Where’s the PearcePhone, Seline? I was wondering if someone could use it to trace Pearce.”

“Pearce made sure one of his EMT contacts was there when you were loaded into the ambulance. He had to pull it out of your pants. I guess it was kind of a little too intimate for the guy. But he did it. Pearce has it now.”

“I don’t want the damned thing anymore. It’s a magnet for trouble.”

“It saved your life more than once. But I know what you mean.”

They got to the car, she unlocked it, and they climbed in. She started the car, then turned to him. “Wolfe...I want you to know, you were a perfect

gentleman when we were sharing quarters together. I appreciated that.”

“Okay.”

“But Wolfe...that was then. This is now.”

He blinked at her. What was he supposed to do now?

She made a sound of exasperation, and reached out, pulled him to her, and kissed him hard on the mouth.

After a moment he relaxed, and put his arms around her. And kissed her back.

There was that strange feeling again...

#

“Mr Quinn?”

Niall Quinn put out his hand. “Mr Winters?”

“Call me Marlon.” They shook hands.

“Okay. Call me Niall. Glad to see you made bail. A man like you shouldn’t have to sit in stir.”

“The bastards will never convict me.”

“Sit down, take a load off, Marlon. Have a drink.”

Winters looked around at the interior of the train car. “This is something. Old fashioned. Like something one of the old time tycoons would have--like Vanderbilt.”

“Sure, that’s what I had in mind,” Quinn said. “My dad always wanted one. It’s in his honor. It’s armored. It’s got every kinda electronic contraption you can imagine. I own the train it’s hooked up to. The whole thing is the latest--even though this here looks so old fashioned. Doors are electronic, so they can’t be jimmed or lock picked. It’s a fortress...one that moves!”

“I do admire that.”

They sat in two plush red velvet chairs; between them a little round mahogany table held a brass cigar humidor, a cut-crystal brandy decanter and two small snifters. The table and chairs were bolted to the floor, against sudden motions of the train car. The luxurious private car was done in reds and golds, with carpeting, a bar, a breakfast table, a fold-away double bed, fine fringed curtains over the bullet proof windows. Quinn’s old man had indeed admired the private rail cars he’d seen in movies, and Niall Quinn had copied one from an old film about a railroad magnate.

“How about we go the whole hog and have brandy and cigars?” Quinn suggested.

“Fine, fine...”

They drank brandy, smoked cigars. Quinn switched on the fan overhead that drew the smoke from the car.

“I’ve never been a train car guy,” Winters said. “Private jets, that’s me. Mine’s sweet.”

“I’ll bet it is. But see, I don’t trust jets right now. Too vulnerable to hacking.” He winked. “So I heard.”

Winters grunted. “We’re both still vulnerable, Niall.” He blew a cloud of blue smoke toward the ceiling. “Pearce. Wolfe. DedSec. Long as all that’s in place...”

“I’ve heard of that DedSec. Hard to kill what you can’t find.”

“We can find Pearce. You almost got him yourself.”

Quinn looked at Winters narrowly. “There a chance you made a plea deal? You’re not wearing a wire are you?”

“Your man checked me outside. Besides--you asked me here. Wasn’t the other way around.”

“True. Okay.” He put his cigar out in the ashtray. Cigars looked good but he’d never learned to like the taste much. “I asked you here because I had a deal with your friend Verrick. He was supposed to get rid of Pearce. Well, he got close but he failed. Now, Pearce and Wolfe--those guys are common enemies to both of us, Winters. Right?”

Winters nodded. “No doubt about it.”

“I figure we throw in together, we can take them out. Share resources. You guys at Purity got more technical knowhow. I got firepower on the street. You find ‘em--I kill ‘em. And maybe when that works out--we can find some other deals to work on together. You know?”

Winters nodded thoughtfully. “Wolfe’s laying low but...we can probably find him eventually. Pearce seems to be constantly moving around, constantly monitoring everyone. Difficult man to find...”

“I’m not hard to find,” came Aiden Pearce’s voice, over the train car’s intercom system.

Quinn started up out of his seat. “What the fuck.”

Winters was staring around the room, scowling. “Where did that voice come from?”

“I’m talking to you over the intercom system,” Pearce answered. *“I’ve hacked into your little choo-choo train here, Quinn. You made it a little too*

high tech. You should have stuck with the steam train model. Or maybe buy a Lionel set and just sit next to that in your basement, run it in circles.”

As if to confirm this, the car jolted, and he could feel it moving. It only went about fifty feet, as the train backed up...and then rolled to a stop. Quinn heard a *chunk-clunk* sound from his left.

He hurried over to the door leading to the next car, swept back the curtain, and looked open mouthed at the receding train cars. The train had moved backward, unlocked from his private car--and now it was moving away.

“Yeah, they think you ordered them to back up a little, uncouple and roll off,” Pearce said. *“I bet the order sorta puzzled them.”*

Quinn tried the door. It was locked. He remembered his remote keys, got them out, pressed the button. Nothing happened. The door stayed locked.

“Colin!” Quinn shouted. “Where the Hell are you!”

“Oh, I had to shoot your man Colin,” Pearce said. *“Not a really nice guy. You know he was a partner in a child prostitute ring? I’m gonna take that down next, after I finish with you.”*

Quinn spun around--saw that Winters was already trying the door at the other end of the train car. “Quinn! This damn door is locked!” Winters hammered on it. “Someone open this door!”

Quinn got out his cell phone, tried to call the train’s engineers.

But the cell wasn’t operating. *No Signal.*

He threw it aside, and got out his gun, fired it at the window over the door.

But he’d made the glass bullet proof again. And so was the lock.

“Quinn!” Came Pearce’s mocking voice. *“Oh, Niall Quinn! Come to the side window, facing onto the street!”*

Quinn went to the window facing the street, and pushed back the curtains.

He couldn’t see Pearce out there. There was nothing but an enormous semi truck, with a big full load of scrap metal on its trailer. The hulking semi truck was just sitting there, about sixty feet away, engine idling. There was no driver at the wheel.

“Pearce--I don’t know what you’re up to, but it’s pointless. You got the upper hand here. Let’s me and you make a deal! I’ll turn this guy Winters over to you...”

“What!” Winters yelled. “Why you treacherous Irish son of a bitch!”

“But I’ve got you and Winters both, right there, Quinn! Your old man gave me no choice! He had to go. You could have left it alone, Niall. But what did you do? You tried to have me killed! I do not approve. I officially object to it, when people try to have me killed. I have to make sure you don’t try it again.”

The truck was now backing up--though it had no driver.

Quinn’s mouth was very, very dry. “That truck! Pearce...You got some control over that truck?”

“I do,” Pearce said cheerfully. *“Nothing as fancy as a self driving car. I simply planted a remote control unit steering and acceleration unit in it...and I’m operating it from here...I’m just backing it up to get a good run!”*

“Jesus!” Quinn said, as he realized what Pearce had in mind. “Okay, fine! How much money do you want?”

“I don’t want money. I want to get rid of people who try to have me killed, Quinn. And that is priceless.”

The truck stopped backing up, a little more than two blocks away. Quinn could see smoke gushing from its steel exhaust chimney as it revved its motor.

“Pearce! I’ll...I’ll tell you what I’ll do! I’ll turn everything I own over to you! I’ll...Pearce, don’t do this!”

But the truck began moving forward. Faster. And faster. Picking up speed and momentum. Coming full bore at the train car.

Niall Quinn turned, looked around desperately, then ran and got behind the chairs bolted to the floor. He found Winters already there, crouching down. They looked into each other’s frightened eyes...

And then the semitruck impacted the train car.

Quinn’s special train car was armored against grenade blasts, and high caliber bullets. But not against a semitruck pulling a load of scrap metal at full speed.

#

Aiden Pearce sat in his borrowed Porsche and watched, as the semitruck smashed into Quinn’s car, crushing its way into it, shattering everything inside the train car...

And then the semitruck’s gas tank exploded. He sat there, watching it all burn.

He twitched and reached for his gun as someone rapped on the glass of his driver’s side window.

But then he relaxed. It was Blank.

Pearce rolled down the window. “How’d you find me?”

“I was staying with some hobos in the train yards, back there,” Blank said. “Saw you drive up. Didn’t seem to be a driver in that semi. Big nasty crash. Must’ve been your work.”

Pearce shrugged. He had few secrets from Blank. “Niall Quinn was in that train car. Along with Marlon Winters.”

Blank nodded. His burned, disfigured mouth twisted into its rude semblance of a smile. “Very thorough job. No one’s coming out of that alive.”

“No. That’d be my guess. Cops will be here soon. I’m outta here. You want a ride somewhere?”

“Don’t get a chance to ride in a Porsche much. Sure. I’m going over to the foodbank.”

He walked around the Porsche, climbed in beside Pearce.

They drove back toward downtown. Police cars raced past them, on the way to the scene of the wreck. None of the cops glanced at the Porsche.

“You know, Blank, you don’t have to go to the foodbank. I give you money. I’ll give you some more.”

“I don’t go there to eat. I go there to volunteer. I carry boxes.”

Pearce nodded, impressed. “I’ve been thinking about something, Blank. You realize I know who you are, don’t you?”

Blank didn’t answer.

Pearce said. “Well, I do. I had to know. Safer to know. But Blank--don’t you think it’d be good if Wolfe knew?”

Blank shook his head. “No. Not...yet.”

“Blank--the guy thinks his father’s dead. You got out of that fire, you survived, you should have your son take care of you. He’d like to know you were alive, at least.”

“I...don’t want him to know I’m his father. I’d rather he thought of me the way I was...”

Aiden Pearce shook his head. “I think he should know. And I think you’ll change your mind.”

“Maybe. I’m not ready yet.”

“You know he’s getting married?”

“No. That’s good. God bless her. Fine girl.”

“Okay. Here’s the food bank.” Pearce pulled up at the curb. “You need some cash?”

“Not just now. You promise--you won’t tell him?”

“I won’t tell him, till you’re ready.”

“Thanks, Pearce. Keep your head down.”

“Always do.”

Blank got out. Pearce watched him walk up to the food bank’s alley door.

Then Pearce’s phone rang. He answered it.

“Pearce?”

“Yeah.”

“T-Bone.”

“I recognize your voice, filtered through all that beard. What’s up?”

“Trouble. Stuff we might have to deal with together...”

“Okay,” Pearce said. “I’m gonna ditch this car. I’ll call you from my safehouse.”

He ended the call, and drove off.

As he went, a ctOS camera tracked the car.

Stolen car, the system reported.

But by the time the police found it, ditched in the South Side--Aiden Pearce was no longer there. He was nowhere to be found.

The End