

THE SIGMA PROTOCOL

**ROBERT
LUDLUM**



THE SIGMA PROTOCOL

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Chapter One

Zurich

“May I get you something to drink while you wait?”

The *Hotelpage* was a compact man who spoke English with only a trace of an accent. His braided name-plate gleamed against his loden-green uniform.

“No, thank you,” Ben Hartman said, smiling wanly.

“Are you sure? Perhaps some tea? Coffee? Mineral water?” The bellhop peered up at him with the bright-eyed eagerness of someone who has only a few minutes left to enhance his parting tip. “I’m terribly sorry your car is delayed.”

“I’m fine, really.”

Ben stood in the lobby of the Hotel St. Gotthard, an elegant nineteenth-century establishment that specialized in catering to the well-heeled international businessman—and, *face it, that’s me*, Ben thought sardonically. Now that he had checked out, he wondered idly whether he could tip the bellhop *not* to carry his bags, *not* to follow his every move a few feet behind, like a Bengali bride, *not* to offer unceasing apologies for the fact that the car that was to take Ben to the airport had not yet arrived. Luxury hotels the world over prided themselves on such coddling, but Ben, who traveled quite a bit, inevitably found it intrusive, deeply irritating. He’d spent so much time trying to break out of the cocoon, hadn’t he? But the cocoon—the stale rituals of privilege—had won out in the end. The *Hotelpage* had his number, all right: just another rich, spoiled American.

Ben Hartman was thirty-six, but today he felt much older. It wasn’t just the jet lag, though he had just arrived from New York yesterday and still felt that sense of dislocation. It was something about being in Switzerland again: in happier days, he’d spent a lot of time here, skiing too fast, driving too fast, feeling like a wild spirit among its stone-faced, rule-bound burghers. He wished he could regain that spirit, but he couldn’t. He hadn’t been to Switzerland since his brother, Peter—his identical twin, his closest friend in all the world—had been killed here four years ago. Ben had expected the trip to stir up memories, but nothing like this. Now he realized what a mistake he’d made coming back here. From the moment he’d arrived at Kloten Airport, he’d been distracted, swollen with emotion—anger, grief, loneliness.

But he knew better than to let it show. He’d done a little business yesterday afternoon, and this morning had a cordial meeting with Dr. Rolf Grendelmeier of the Union Bank of Switzerland. Pointless, of course, but you had to keep the clients happy; glad-handing was part of the job. If he was honest with himself, it *was* the job, and Ben sometimes felt a pang at how easily he slipped into that role, that of the legendary Max Hartman’s only surviving son, the heir presumptive to the family fortune, and to the CEO’s office at Hartman Capital Management, the multibillion-dollar firm founded by his father.

Now Ben possessed the whole trick bag of international finance—the closet full of Brioni and Kiton suits, the easy smile, the firm handshake, and, most of all, the gaze: steady, level, concerned. It was a gaze that conveyed responsibility, dependability, and sagacity, and that, often as not, concealed a desperate boredom.

Still, he hadn’t really come to Switzerland to do business. At Kloten, a small plane would take him to St. Moritz for a ski vacation with an extremely wealthy, elderly client, the old man’s wife, and his

allegedly beautiful granddaughter. The client's arm-twisting was jovial but persistent. Ben was being fixed up, and he knew it. This was one of the hazards of being a presentable, well-off, "eligible" single man in Manhattan: his clients were forever trying to set him up with their daughters, their nieces, the cousins. It was hard to say no politely. And once in a while he actually met a woman whose company he enjoyed. You never knew. Anyway, Max wanted grandchildren.

Max Hartman, the philanthropist and holy terror, the founder of Hartman Capital Management. The self-made immigrant who'd arrived in America, a refugee from Nazi Germany, with the proverbial ten bucks in his pocket, had founded an investment company right after the war, and relentlessly built it up into the multibillion-dollar firm it was now. Old Max, in his eighties and living in solitary splendor in Bedford, New York, still ran the company and made sure no one ever forgot it.

It wasn't easy working for your father, but it was even harder when you had precious little interest in investment banking, in "asset allocation" and "risk management," and in all the other mind-numbing buzzwords.

Or when you had just about zero interest in money. Which was, he realized, a luxury enjoyed mainly by those who had too much of it. Like the Hartmans, with their trust funds and private schools and the immense Westchester County estate. Not to mention the twenty-thousand-acre spread near the Greenbrier, and all the rest of it.

Until Peter's plane fell out of the sky, Ben had been able to do what he really loved: teaching, especially teaching kids whom most people had given up on. He'd taught fifth grade in a tough school in an area of Brooklyn known as East New York. A lot of the kids were trouble, and yes, there were gangs and sullen ten-year-olds as well armed as Colombian drug lords. But they needed a teacher who actually gave a damn about them. Ben did give a damn, and every once in a while he actually made a difference to somebody's life.

When Peter died, however, Ben had been all but forced to join the family business. He'd told his friends it was a deathbed promise exacted by his mother, and he supposed it was. But cancer or no cancer, he could never refuse her anyway. He remembered her drawn face, the skin ashen from another bout of chemotherapy, the reddish smudges beneath her eyes like bruises. She'd been almost twenty years younger than Dad, and he had never imagined that she might be the first to go. *Work, for the night cometh*, she'd said, smiling bravely. Most of the rest she left unspoken. Max had survived Dachau only to lose a son, and now he was about to lose his wife. How much could any man, however powerful, stand?

"Has he lost you, too?" she had whispered. At the time, Ben was living a few blocks from the school, in a sixth-floor walk-up in a decrepit tenement building where the corridors stank of cat urine and the linoleum curled up from the floors. As a matter of principle, he refused to accept any money from his parents.

"Do you hear what I'm asking you, Ben?"

"My kids," Ben had said, though there was already defeat in his voice. "They need me."

"*He* needs you," she'd replied, very quietly, and that was the end of the discussion.

So now he took the big private clients out to lunch, made them feel important and well cared for, and flattered to be cosseted by the founder's son. A little furtive volunteer work at a center for "troubled kids" who made his fifth-graders look like altar boys. And as much time as he could grab traveling, skiing, parasailing, snowboarding, or rock-climbing, and going out with a series of women while fastidiously avoiding settling down with any of them.

Old Max would have to wait.

Suddenly the St. Gotthard lobby, all rose damask and heavy dark Viennese furniture, felt

oppressive. “You know, I think I’d prefer to wait outside,” Ben told the *Hotelpage*. The man in the loden-green uniform simpered, “Of course, sir, whatever you prefer.”

Ben stepped blinking into the bright noontime sun, and took in the pedestrian traffic on the Bahnhofstrasse, the stately avenue lined with linden trees, expensive shops, and cafés, and a procession of financial institutions housed in small limestone mansions. The bellhop scurried behind him with his baggage, hovering until Ben disbursed a fifty-franc note and gestured for him to leave.

“Ah, thank you so *much*, sir,” the *Hotelpage* exclaimed with feigned surprise.

The doormen would let him know when his car appeared in the cobbled drive to the left of the hotel, but Ben was in no hurry. The breeze from Lake Zurich was refreshing, after time spent in stuffy, overheated rooms where the air was always suffused with the smell of coffee and, fainter but unmistakable, cigar smoke.

Ben propped his brand-new skis, Volant Ti Supers, against one of the hotel’s Corinthian pillars near his other bags, and watched the busy street scene, the spectacle of anonymous passersby. A obnoxious young businessman braying into a cell phone. An obese woman in a red parka pushing a baby carriage. A crowd of Japanese tourists chattering excitedly. A tall middle-aged man in a business suit with his graying hair pulled back in a ponytail. A deliveryman with a box of lilies, attired in the distinctive orange and black uniform of Blümchengallerie, the upscale flower chain. And a striking, expensively dressed young blonde, clutching a Festiner’s shopping bag, who glanced generally in Ben’s direction, and then glanced at him again—quickly, but with a flicker of interest before averting her eyes. *Had we but world enough and time*, thought Ben. His gaze wandered again. The sounds of traffic were continuous but muted, drifting in from the Löwenstrasse, a few hundred feet away. Somewhere nearby a high-strung dog was yip-ping. A middle-aged man wearing a blazer with an ochre-purple hue, a tad too stylish for Zurich. And then he saw a man about his age, walking with a purposeful stride past the Koss Konditorei. He looked vaguely familiar—

Very familiar.

Ben did a double-take, peered more closely. Was that—could that really be—his old college buddy Jimmy Cavanaugh? A quizzical smile spread over Ben’s face.

Jimmy Cavanaugh, whom he’d known since his sophomore year at Princeton. Jimmy, who had glamorously lived off-campus, smoked unfiltered cigarettes that would have choked an ordinary mortal, and could drink *anybody* under the table, even Ben, who had something of a reputation in that regard. Jimmy had come from a small town in western upstate New York called Homer, which had supplied him with a storehouse of tales. One night, after he taught Ben the finer points of downing Tequila shots with beer chasers, Jimmy had him gasping for breath with his stories about the town sport of “cow tipping.” Jimmy was rangy, sly, and worldly, had an immense repertory of pranks, a quick wit, and the gift of gab. Most of all, he just seemed more *alive* than most of the kids Ben knew: the clammy-palmed preprofessionals trading tips about the entrance exams for law school or medical school, the pretentious French majors with their clove cigarettes and black scarves, the sullen burn-out cases for whom rebellion was found in a bottle of green hair dye. Jimmy seemed to stand apart from all that, and Ben, envying him his simple ease with himself, was pleased, even flattered by the friendship. As so often happens, they’d lost touch after college; Jimmy had gone off to do something at the Georgetown School of Foreign Service, and Ben had stayed in New York. Neither of them was big on college nostalgia, and then distance and time had done their usual job. Still, Ben reflected, Jimmy Cavanaugh was probably one of the few people he actually felt like talking to just now.

Jimmy Cavanaugh—it was *definitely* Jimmy—was now near enough that Ben could see that he was wearing an expensive-looking suit, under a tan trench coat, and smoking a cigarette. His build had

changed: he was broader-shouldered now. But it was Cavanaugh for sure.

“Jesus,” Ben said aloud. He started down the Bahnhofstrasse toward Jimmy, then remembered his Volants, which he didn’t want to leave unattended, doormen or no doormen. He picked the skis up, hefted them over one shoulder, and walked toward Cavanaugh. The red hair had faded and receded a bit, the once-freckled face was a little lined, he was wearing a two-thousand-dollar Armani suit, and what the hell was he doing in Zurich of all places? Suddenly they made eye contact.

Jimmy broke out in a wide grin, and he strode toward Ben, an arm outstretched, the other in the pocket of his trench coat.

“Hartman, you old dog,” Jimmy crowed from a few yards away. “Hey, pal, great to see you!”

“My God, it really *is* you!” Ben exclaimed. At the same time, Ben was puzzled to see a metal tube protruding from his old friend’s trench coat, a *silencer*, he now realized, the muzzle pointing directly up at him from waist level.

It had to be some bizarre prank, good old Jimmy was always doing that kind of thing. Yet just as Ben jokingly threw his hands up in the air and dodged an imaginary bullet, he saw Jimmy Cavanaugh shift his right hand ever so slightly, the unmistakable motions of someone squeezing a trigger.

What happened next took a fraction of a second, yet time seemed to telescope, slowing almost to a halt. Reflexively, abruptly, Ben swung his skis down from his right shoulder in a sharp arc, trying to scuttle the weapon but in the process slamming his old friend hard in the neck.

An instant later—or was it the same instant?—he heard the explosion, felt a sharp spray on the back of his neck as a very real bullet shattered a glass store-front just a few feet away.

This couldn’t be happening!

Caught by surprise, Jimmy lost his balance and bellowed in pain. As he stumbled to the ground, he flung out a hand to grab the skis. *One hand.* The left. Ben felt as if he’d swallowed ice. The instinct to brace yourself when you stumble is strong: you reach out with both hands, and you drop your suitcase, your pen, your newspaper. There were few things you wouldn’t drop—few things you’d still clutch if you fell.

The gun was real.

Ben heard the skis clatter to the sidewalk, saw a thin streak of blood on the side of Jimmy’s face, saw Jimmy scrambling to regain his orientation. Then Ben lurched forward and, in a great burst of speed, took off down the street.

The gun was real. And Jimmy had fired it at him.

Ben’s path was obstructed by crowds of shoppers and businessmen hurrying to lunch appointments, and as he wove through the crowd he collided with several people, who shouted protests. Still he vaulted ahead, running as he’d never run before, zigzagging, hoping that the irregular pattern would make him an elusive target.

What the hell was going on? This was madness, absolute madness!

He made the mistake of glancing behind him as he ran, inadvertently slowing his pace, his face now a flashing beacon to a once-friend who for some unfathomable reason seemed bent on killing him. Suddenly, barely two feet away, a young woman’s forehead exploded in a mist of red.

Ben gasped in terror.

Jesus Christ!

No, it couldn’t be happening, this wasn’t reality, this was some bizarre nightmare—

He saw a small scattering of stone fragments, as a bullet pitted the marble facade of the narrow office building he was racing past. ~~Cavanaugh was on his feet and running, now just fifty feet or so away from Ben, and though he had to fire in mid-stride, Cavanaugh's aim was still unnervingly good.~~

He's trying to kill me, no, he's going to kill me—

Ben fainted suddenly to the right, then jerked to the left, leaping forward as he did. Now he ran full out. On the Princeton track team, he was an eight-hundred-meter man, and, fifteen years later, he knew his only chance for survival was to find a surge of speed inside him. His sneakers weren't made for running, but they'd have to do. He needed a destination, a clear goal, an endpoint: that was always the key. *Think, dammit!* Something clicked in his head: he was a block away from the largest underground shopping arcade in Europe, a garish, subterranean temple of consumption known as Shopville, beneath and adjacent to the main train station, the Hauptbahnhof. In his mind's eye, he saw the entrance, the bank of escalators at the Bahnhofplatz; it was always quicker to enter there and walk underneath the square than to fight through the crowds that typically thronged the streets above. He could seek refuge underground in the arcade. Only a madman would dare chase him down there. Ben sprinted now, keeping his knees high, his feet ghosting along with great soft strides, falling back into the discipline of the speed laps he used to devour, conscious only of the breeze at his face. Had he lost Cavanaugh? He didn't hear his footsteps anymore, but he couldn't afford to make any assumptions. Single-mindedly, desperately, he *ran*.

The blond woman with the Festiner's bag folded up her tiny cellular phone and placed it in a pocket of her azure Chanel suit, her pale glossy lips compressed in a small moue of annoyance. At first everything had gone like—well, like clockwork. It had taken her a few seconds to decide that the man standing in front of St. Gotthard was a probable match. He was clearly in his mid-thirties, with a square-jawed face and strong jaw, curly brown hair flecked with gray, and hazel-green eyes. A pleasant-looking fellow, she supposed, handsome, even; but not so distinctive that she had been able to ensure definite identification from this distance. That was of no consequence. The shooter they'd chosen could make the identification; they'd made sure of that.

Now, however, matters seemed less than perfectly controlled. The target was an amateur; there was little chance he would survive an encounter with a professional. Still, amateurs made her uneasy. They made mistakes, but erratic, unpredictable ones, their very naïveté defying rational prediction, as the subject's evasive actions had demonstrated. His wild, protracted escape attempt would merely postpone the inevitable. And yet it was all going to take time—the one thing that was in short supply. Sigma One would not be pleased. She glanced at her small, bejeweled wristwatch, retrieved the phone, and made one more call.

Winded, his starved muscles screaming for oxygen, Ben Hartman paused at the escalators to the underground arcade, knowing he had to make a split-second decision. 1. UNTERGESCHOSS SHOPVILLE read the blue overhead sign. The down escalator was crowded with shoppers laden with bags and strollers; he would have to use the up escalator, which had relatively few riders. Ben charged down it, elbowing aside a young couple who were holding hands and blocking his path. He saw the startled looks his actions had provoked, looks that mingled dismay and derision.

Now he raced through the underground arcade's central atrium, his feet scudding along the black rubberized floor, and he allowed himself a glimmer of hope before he realized the error he'd made. From all around him arose screams, frenzied shouting. Cavanaugh had followed him here, into this enclosed, contained space. In the mirrored facade of a jewelry store, he caught a glimpse of muzzled

fire, a burst of yellow-white. Instantly, a bullet tore through the burnished mahogany panels of a travel bookstore, exposing the cheap fiberboard beneath. Everywhere was pandemonium. An old man in a baggy suit a few feet away clutched his throat and toppled like a bowling pin, blood drenching his shirtfront.

Ben dove behind the information station, an oblong concrete-and-glass structure perhaps five feet wide, on which was mounted a list of stores, elegant white lettering on black, a shoppers' guide in three languages. A hollow explosion of glass told him that the information box had been hit. Half a second later, there was a sharp crack, and a piece of concrete fell heavily from the structure, landing near his feet.

Inches away!

Another man, tall and stout in a camel-hair topcoat and a jaunty gray cap, staggered a few feet past him before collapsing to the floor, dead. He'd been shot in the chest.

Amid the chaos, Ben found it impossible to distinguish Cavanaugh's footsteps, but, gauging his position from the reflected muzzle flash, he knew no more than a minute remained before he would be overtaken. Remaining in position behind the concrete island, he stood, to his full six feet, and peered around wildly, looking for new refuge.

Meanwhile, the screams crescendoed. Ahead, the arcade was crowded with people, shrieking and crying out hysterically, crouching and cowering, many of them trying to hide their heads beneath their folded arms.

Twenty feet away there were escalators marked 2. UNTERGESCHOSS. If he could close the distance without being shot, he could get to the level below. His luck might change there. It couldn't get any worse, he thought—then he changed his mind as he saw a widening pool of blood flowing from the man in the camel-hair coat a few feet away. Dammit, he had to *think!* There was no way he could close the distance in time. Unless...

He reached for the dead man's arm and dragged him over. Seconds remained. He yanked off the dead man's tawny coat and grabbed the gray cap, conscious of baleful eyes upon him from shoppers cowering near the Western Union. This was no time for delicacy. Now he shrugged into the roomer's overcoat, pulled the cap down hard on his head. If he was to remain alive, he would have to resist the urge to dart toward the second-level escalators like a jackrabbit: he had gone hunting enough to know that anything that moved too abruptly was likely to be shot by an itchy-fingered gunman. Instead, he clambered slowly to his feet, hunched, staggering, weaving like an old man who had lost blood. He was now visible and supremely vulnerable: the ruse had to last just long enough to get him to the escalator. Maybe ten seconds. So long as Cavanaugh thought he was a wounded bystander, he wouldn't waste another bullet on him.

Ben's heart was hammering in his chest, his every instinct screaming at him to break into a sprint. *Not yet.* Hunched over, shoulders rounded, he staggered on with an unsteady gait, his strides as long as he could make them without exciting suspicion. Five seconds. Four seconds. Three seconds.

At the escalator, which had emptied out, abandoned by the terrified pedestrians, the man in the bloodied camel-hair overcoat seemed to crumple face forward, before the movement of the stairs took him out of view.

Now!

Inaction had been as strenuous as exertion, and, every nerve in his body twitching, Ben had broken his fall with his hands. As quietly as he could, he raced down the remaining stairs.

He heard a bellow of frustration from upstairs: Cavanaugh would now be after him. Every second he had to count.

Ben put on another burst of speed, but the second below-ground level of the arcade was a virtu maze. There was no straight route of egress to the other side of the Bahnhofplatz, just a succession byways, the wider walkways punctuated with kiosks of wood and glass that sold cellular phones, cigars, watches, posters. To a dilatory shopper, they were islands of interest—to him, an obstacle course.

Still, they reduced the number of sight lines. They lessened the chance of the long-distance kill. And so they bought him time. Perhaps enough time for Ben to secure the one thing he had on his mind: a shield.

He ran past a blur of boutiques: Foto Video Ganz, Restseller Buchhandlung, Presensende Stickle Microspot. Kinderboutique, with its window crammed with furry stuffed animals, the display framed by green-and-gold-painted wood with an incised ivy pattern. There was the chrome and plastic of a Swisscom outlet... All of them festively plying their goods and services, all utterly worthless to him. Then, straight ahead, to his right, next to a Credit Suisse/Volksbank branch office, he spotted a luggage store. He looked through the window, heaped high with soft-sided leather suitcases—no good. The item he was after was inside: a large, brushed-steel briefcase. No doubt the gleaming steel cladding was as much cosmetic as functional, but it would serve. It would have to. As Ben darted into the store, grabbed the article, and ran out, he noticed that the proprietor, pale and sweating, was jabbering hysterically in *Schweizerdeutsch* on the telephone. No one bothered to run after Ben; word of the insanity had already spread.

Ben had gained a shield; he had also lost precious time. Even as he sprang out of the luggage store, he saw its display window transformed into an oddly beautiful spiderweb in the instant before it disintegrated into shards. Cavanaugh was close, so close Ben didn't dare look around to try to locate his position. Instead, Ben charged forward into a crowd of shoppers emerging from Franscati, a large department store at one end of the cruciform plaza. Holding up the briefcase, Ben lunged forward, tripping on someone's leg, regaining his footing with difficulty, losing a few precious moments.

An explosion inches from his head: the sound of a lead bullet slamming into the steel briefcase. The briefcase jolted in his hands, partly from the impact of the bullet, partly from his own muscular reflex, and Ben noticed a bulge on the steel casing facing him, as if it had been struck by a small hammer. The bullet had penetrated the first layer, had almost penetrated the second. His shield had saved his life, but only just.

Everything around him had gone blurry, but he knew he was entering the teeming Hall of Mirrors at the Landesmuseum. He also knew that carnage was still trailing him.

Throngs of people were screaming—huddled, cringing, running—as the horror, the gunfire, the bloodshed came closer.

Ben plunged into the frenzied crowd, was swallowed up by it. For a moment the gunfire seemed to have stopped. He tossed the briefcase to the floor: it had served its purpose, and its gleaming metal would now make him too easy to pick out of the crowd.

Was it over? Was Cavanaugh out of ammunition? Reloading?

Jostled one way, then another, Ben scanned the labyrinthine arcade for an exit, an *Ausgang* through which he could disappear unseen. *Maybe I've lost him*, Ben thought. Yet he didn't dare look back again. No going back. Only forward.

Along the walkway that led to the Franscati department store, he spotted a fake-rustic sign of dark wood and gilt lettering in script: KATZKELLER-BIERHALLE. It hung above an alcove, an entrance to a desert restaurant. GESCHLOSSEN, a smaller sign read. Closed.

He raced toward it, his movement camouflaged by a frenzied rush of people in that general

direction. Through a faux-medieval archway beneath the sign, he ran into a spacious, empty dining room. Cast-iron chains from the ceiling supported enormous wooden chandeliers; medieval halberds and engravings of medieval nobility adorned the walls. The motif continued with the heavy round tables, which were crudely carved in keeping with someone's fantasy of a fifteenth-century arsenal.

On the right side of the room was a long bar, and Ben ducked behind it, gasping loudly for breath as desperately as he tried to remain silent. His clothes were soaked with sweat. He couldn't believe how fast his heart was thudding, and he actually winced from the chest pain.

He tapped the cabinetry in front of him; it made a hollow sound. Obviously fashioned from veneer and plaster, it was nothing that could be relied upon to stop a bullet. Crouching, he made his way around a corner and to a protected stone alcove, where he could stand and catch his breath. As he leaned back to rest against the pillar, his head cracked into a wrought-iron lantern mounted on the stone. He groaned involuntarily. Then he examined the light fixture that had just lacerated the back of his head, and he saw that the whole thing, the heavy black iron arm attached to the ornamental housing that held the bulb, could be lifted right out of the mounting bracket.

It came out with a rusty screech. He managed to get a firm grip and held it against his chest.

And he waited, trying to slow the beating of his heart. He knew something about waiting. He remembered all those Thanksgivings spent at the Greenbrier; Max Hartman was insistent that his sons learn how to hunt, and Hank McGee, a grizzled local from White Sulphur Springs, was given the job of teaching them. *How hard could it be?* he remembered thinking: he was an ace at skeet shooting, had no reason to be proud of his hand-eye coordination. He let this slip to McGee, whose eyes darkened: *You think the hunt's really about shootin'? It's about waitin'*. And he fixed him with a glare. McGee was right, of course: the waiting was the hardest part of all, and the part he was temperamentally least suited for.

Hunting with Hank McGee, he had lain in wait for his quarry.

Now he was the quarry.

Unless... somehow... he could change that.

In a few moments, Ben heard approaching footsteps. Jimmy Cavanaugh entered stealthily and tentatively, glancing from side to side. His shirt collar was grimy and torn and bloodied from a gasp on the right side of his neck. His trench coat was soiled. His flushed face was set in a determined grimace, his eyes wild.

Could this really be his friend? What had Cavanaugh become in the decade and a half since Ben had last seen him? What had turned him into a killer?

Why was this happening?

In his right hand Cavanaugh gripped his blue-black pistol, the ten-inch-long tube of a sound suppressor threaded to its barrel. Ben, flashing back on target-practice memories from twenty years ago, saw that it was a Walther PPK, a.32.

Ben held his breath, terrified that his gasping would give him away. He drew back into the alcove, clutching the iron light fixture he had just torn from the wall, flattening himself out of sight. Cavanaugh made a sweep of the restaurant. With a sudden but sure movement of his arm Ben flung the iron lantern fixture, smashing it into Cavanaugh's skull with an audible thud.

Jimmy Cavanaugh screamed in pain, his cry high-pitched like an animal's. His knees buckled, and he squeezed the trigger.

Ben could feel a flare of heat, a fraction of an inch away from his ear. But now, instead of drawing back farther, or attempting to run, Ben lunged forward, slamming himself into his enemy's body.

pummeling him to the ground, Cavanaugh's skull cracking against the stone floor.

Even badly wounded, the man was a powerhouse. A rancid miasma of sweat arose from him as he reared up and vised a massive arm around Ben's neck, compressing his carotid artery. Desperately, Ben reached for the gun, trying to grab it but succeeding only in wrenching the long silencer up and back toward Cavanaugh. With a sudden ear-shattering explosion the gun went off. Ben's ears rang with a sustained squeal; his face stung from the blowback.

The grip on Ben's throat loosened. He twisted his body around, free of the chokehold. Cavanaugh was slumped on the ground. With a jolt Ben saw the dark red hole just above his old friend's eyebrows, a horrific third eye. He was suffused with a mixture of relief and revulsion, and the sense that nothing would ever be the same.

Chapter Two

Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada

It was still early in the evening, but already it was dark, and an icy wind roared along the narrow street, down the steep hill toward the roiling waters of the Atlantic. Fog had settled over the gray streets of this port town, blanketing it, closing it in. A miserable drizzling rain had begun to fall. The air had a salty tang.

A sulfurous yellow light illuminated the ramshackle porch, the worn front steps of a large, gray clapboard house. A dark figure in a yellow hooded oilcloth slicker stood under the yellow light, jamming his finger against the front door buzzer insistently, over and over and over. Finally there came the clicks of the safety bolts, and the weathered front door came slowly open.

The face of a very old man appeared, peering out angrily. He was wearing a stained pale blue dressing gown over rumpled white pajamas. His mouth was caved in, the baggy skin of the face pallid, the eyes gray and watery.

“Yes?” the elderly man demanded in a high, raspy voice. “What do you want?” He spoke with a Breton accent, a legacy of his French Acadian forebears who fished the seas beyond Nova Scotia.

“You’ve got to *help* me!” cried the person in the yellow slicker. He shifted his weight anxiously from one foot to the other. “Please! Oh, God, please, you’ve got to *help!*”

The old man’s expression became clouded with confusion. The visitor, though tall, looked to be in his late teens. “What are you talking about?” he said. “Who are you?”

“There’s been a horrible accident. Oh, *God!* Oh, Jesus! My dad! My dad! I think he’s *dead!*”

The old man pressed his narrow lips together. “What do you want from me?”

The stranger flung a gloved hand toward the handle of the storm door, then dropped it. “Please just let me make a call. Let me call an ambulance. We had an accident, a terrible accident. The car totaled. My sister—badly hurt. My dad was driving. God, my *parents!*” The boy’s voice broke. Now he seemed more a child than a teenager. “Oh, Lord, I think he’s dead.”

Now the old man’s glare seemed to soften, and he slowly pushed open the storm door to let the stranger in. “All right,” he said. “Come in.”

“Thank you,” the boy exclaimed as he entered. “Just for a moment. Thank you so much.”

The old man turned around and led the way into a dingy front room, flicking on a wall switch as the boy entered. He turned to say something just as the boy in the hooded rain slicker came closer and with both hands, clasped the man’s own hand, seemingly a gesture of awkward gratitude. Water ran down from the sleeve of his yellow slicker onto the old man’s dressing gown. The boy made a sudden jerking movement. “Hey,” the old man protested, confused. He pulled away, then slumped to the floor.

The boy stared down at the crumpled body for a moment. He slipped off his wrist the small device that held a tiny retractable hypodermic needle and put it in an inside pocket of his slicker.

Quickly he surveyed the room, spotted the ancient television, and turned it on. An old black-and-white movie was playing. Now he set about his task with the confidence of someone much older.

He went back to the body, set it carefully on a shabby orange lounge chair, arranging the arms and head so that it looked as if the old man had fallen asleep in front of the TV.

Pulling a roll of paper towels from inside his slicker, he swiftly mopped up the water that had

pooled on the wide pine boards of the entrance hall. Then he returned to the front door, which was still open, glanced around outside, and when he was satisfied, stepped out onto the porch and closed the door behind him.

The Austrian Alps

The silver Mercedes S430 wound up the steep mountain road until it arrived at the clinic gates. A security guard in the booth by the gate came out, saw who the passenger was, and said with great deference, "Welcome, sir." He did not bother to ask for identification. The chief of the clinic was to be admitted with dispatch. The car turned onto the ring drive through a sloping campus where the vibrant green of well-tended grass and sculpted pines contrasted with drifting patches of powdery snow. Towering in the distance overhead were the magnificent white crags and planes of the Schneeberg peak. The car drove around a dense stand of tall yews, and over to a second, hidden security booth. The guard, who had already been alerted to the director's arrival, pressed the button that raised the steel bar and, at the same time, touched the switch that lowered the steel spikes set into the pavement which would ruin the tires of any vehicle that entered without being cleared through.

The Mercedes drove up a long narrow road that led only to one place: an old clock factory formerly a *Schloss* that had been built two centuries ago. A coded remote signal was sent, and an electronic door opened, and the car pulled into the reserved parking space. The driver got out and opened the door for his passenger, who strode quickly into the entrance. There another security guard, this one behind bulletproof glass, nodded and smiled a welcome.

The director entered the elevator, an anachronism in this ancient Alpine structure, inserted his digitally encoded identification card to unlock it, and made his way to the third, and top, floor. There he passed through three sets of doors, each unlocked by means of an electronic card reader, until he came to the conference room, where the others were already seated around the long burnished mahogany table. He took his place at the head of the table and looked around at the others.

"Gentlemen," he began, "only days remain before the fulfillment of our dream so long deferred. The long gestation period is nearly over. Which is to say, your patience is about to be rewarded, and beyond the wildest dreams of our founders."

The sounds of approval around the table were gratifying, and he waited for them to subside before continuing. "As for security, I have been assured that very few of the *angeli rebeli* remain. Soon they will be none. There is, however, one small problem."

Zurich

Ben tried to stand, but his legs would not support him. He sank to the ground, on the verge of becoming violently ill, feeling at once cold and prickly-hot. Blood roared in his ears. An icicle of fear was lodged in his stomach.

What had just happened? he asked himself. Why in the hell was Jimmy Cavanaugh trying to kill him? What kind of madness was this? Had the man's mind snapped? Had Ben's sudden reappearance after a decade and a half triggered something in a disturbed brain, a rush of twisted memory that for some reason had propelled him to murder?

He could taste liquid, brackish and metallic, and he touched his lips. Blood was seeping from his

nose. It must have happened in the struggle. He'd gotten a bloody nose, Jimmy Cavanaugh a bullet to the brain.

The noise from the shopping arcade outside was subsiding. There were still shouts, the occasional anguished cry, but the chaos was diminishing. Steadying himself with his hands on the floor, he pushed himself up, managed to get to his feet. He felt dizzy, vertiginous, and knew it was not from a loss of blood; he was in shock.

He forced himself to look at Cavanaugh's body. By now he'd calmed down enough to think.

Somebody I haven't seen since the age of twenty-one turns up in Zurich, goes insane, and tries to kill me. And now he lies here dead, in a tacky medieval-themed restaurant. No explanation to offer. Maybe there'd never be an explanation.

Carefully avoiding the pool of blood around the head, he went through Cavanaugh's pockets, first the suit jacket, then the pants, then the pockets of the trench coat. There was absolutely nothing there. No ID cards, no credit cards. Bizarre. Cavanaugh seemed to have emptied his pockets, as if in preparation for what happened.

It had been premeditated. *Planned.*

He noticed the blue-black Walther PPK still clutched in Cavanaugh's hand and considered checking the magazine to see how many rounds were left. He pondered taking it, just slipping the slide pistol into his pocket. What if Cavanaugh wasn't alone?

What if there were others?

He hesitated. This was a crime scene of sorts. Best not to alter it in any way, in case there would be legal trouble down the line.

Slowly, he got up and made his way, dazed, into the main hall. Now it was mostly deserted, apart from a few clusters of emergency medical technicians tending to the wounded. Someone was being carried on a stretcher.

Ben had to find a policeman.

The two cops, one clearly a rookie and one middle-aged, looked at him dubiously. He'd found them standing by the Bijoux Suisse kiosk, near the Marktplatz food court. They wore navy-blue sweaters with red shoulder patches that read *Zürichpolizei*; each had a walkie-talkie and a pistol holstered to their belt.

"May I see your passport, please?" the young one asked after Ben had spoken for a few minutes. Evidently the older one either didn't speak English or preferred not to.

"For God's sake," Ben snapped in frustration, "people have been killed. A guy's lying dead in a restaurant down there, a man who tried—"

"*Ihren Pass, bitte,*" the rookie persisted sternly. "Do you have identification?"

"Of course I do," Ben said, reaching for his billfold. He pulled it out and handed it over.

The rookie examined it suspiciously, then gave it to the senior man, who glanced at it without interest and thrust it back at Ben.

"Where were you when this happened?" the rookie asked.

"Waiting in front of the Hotel St. Gotthard. A car was supposed to take me to the airport."

The rookie took a step forward, uncomfortably close to him, and his neutral gaze became frank and mistrustful: "You are going to the airport?"

"I was on my way to St. Moritz."

“And suddenly this man fired a gun at you?”

“He’s an old friend. *Was* an old friend.”

The rookie lifted an eyebrow.

“I hadn’t seen him in fifteen years,” Ben continued. “He recognized me, sort of came toward me if he was happy to see me, then suddenly he pulls out a gun.”

“You had a quarrel?”

“We didn’t exchange two words!”

The younger cop’s eyes narrowed. “You had arranged to meet?”

“No. It was pure coincidence.”

“Yet he had a gun, a loaded gun.” The rookie looked at the older cop, then turned back to Ben. “And it was outfitted with a silencer, you say. He must have known you would be there.”

Ben shook his head, exasperated. “I hadn’t talked to him in years! He couldn’t possibly have known I’d be here.”

“Surely you must agree that people do not just carry around guns with silencers unless they mean to use them.”

Ben hesitated. “I suppose that’s right.”

The older policeman cleared his throat. “And what kind of gun did you have?” he asked surprisingly fluent English.

“What are you talking about?” Ben asked, his voice rising in indignation. “I didn’t have a gun.”

“Then forgive me, I must be confused. You say your friend had a gun, and that you did not. In which case, why is he dead, and not you?”

It was a good question. Ben just shook his head as he thought back to the moment when Jimmy Cavanaugh leveled the steel tube at him. Part of him—the rational part—had assumed it was a prank. But obviously part of him had not: he’d been primed to react swiftly. Why? He replayed in his mind Jimmy’s easy lope, his wide welcoming grin...and his cold eyes. Watchful eyes that didn’t quite match the grin. A small discordant element that his subconscious mind must have registered.

“Come, let us go to see the body of this assassin,” the older policeman said, and he placed a hand on Ben’s shoulder in a way that was not at all affectionate but instead conveyed that Ben was no longer a free man.

Ben led the way across the arcade, which now swarmed with policemen, reporters snapping pictures, and made his way down to the second level. The two *Polizei* followed close behind. At the KATZKELLER sign Ben entered the dining room, went to the alcove, and pointed.

“Well?” demanded the rookie angrily.

Astonished, Ben stared, wide-eyed, at the spot where Cavanaugh’s body had been. He felt light-headed, his mind frozen in shock. There was nothing there.

No pool of blood. No body, no gun. The lantern arm had been replaced in its fixture as if it had never been removed. The floor was clean and bare.

It was as if nothing had ever happened there.

“My God,” Ben breathed. Had he snapped, lost touch with reality? But he could feel the solidity of the floor, the bar, the tables. *If this was some elaborate stunt...* but it wasn’t. He had somehow stumbled into something intricate and terrifying.

The policemen stared at him with rekindled suspicion.

“Listen,” Ben said, his voice reduced to a hoarse whisper, “I can’t explain this. I was here. *He was*”

here.”

The older policeman spoke rapidly on the walkie-talkie, and soon they were joined by another officer, stolid and barrel-chested. “Perhaps I am easily confused, so let me try to understand. You race through a busy street, and then through the underground shopping arcade. All around you, people are shot. You claim that you are being chased by a maniac. You promise to show us this man, this American. And yet there is no maniac. There is only you. A strange American spinning fairy tales.”

“*Goddammit, I’ve told you the truth!*”

“You say a madman from your past was responsible for the bloodshed,” the rookie said in a quiet, steely voice. “I see only one madman here.”

The older policeman conferred in *Schweitzerdeutsch* with his barrel-chested colleague. “You were staying at the Hotel St. Gotthard, yes?” he finally asked Ben. “Why don’t you take us there?”

Accompanied by three policemen—the barrel-chested one walking behind him, the rookie ahead of him, and the older policeman close by his side—Ben made his way through the underground arcade up the escalator, and down the Bahnhofstrasse toward his hotel. Though he was not yet cuffed, Ben knew that this was merely a formality.

In front of the hotel, a policewoman, whom the others had clearly sent ahead, was keeping a custodial watch over his luggage. Her brown hair was short, almost mannish, and her expression was stony.

Through the lobby windows, Ben caught a glimpse of the unctuous *Hotelpage* who’d attended him earlier. Their eyes met, and the man turned away with a stricken look, as if he’d just learned he’d toted bags for Lee Harvey Oswald.

“Your luggage, yes?” the rookie asked Ben.

“Yes, yes,” Ben said. “What of it?” Now what? What more could there be?

The policewoman opened the tan leather hand luggage. The others looked inside, then turned to face Ben. “This is yours?” the rookie asked.

“I already said it was,” Ben replied.

The middle-aged cop took a handkerchief from his pants pocket and used it to lift an object out of the satchel. It was Cavanaugh’s Walther PPK pistol.

Chapter Three

Washington, D.C.

A serious-looking young woman strode briskly down the long central corridor of the fifth floor of the United States Department of Justice Building, the mammoth Classical Revival structure that occupied the entire block between Ninth and Tenth Streets. She had glossy dark brown hair, caramel-brown eyes, a sharp nose. At first glance she looked part-Asian, or perhaps Hispanic. She wore a tan trench coat, carried a leather briefcase, and might have been taken for a lawyer, a lobbyist, maybe a government official on the fast track.

Her name was Anna Navarro. She was thirty-three and worked in the Office of Special Investigations, a little-known unit of the Justice Department.

When she arrived at the stuffy conference room, she realized that the weekly unit meeting was already well under way. Arliss Dupree, standing by a whiteboard on an easel, turned as she entered and stopped in mid-sentence. She felt the stares, couldn't help blushing a little, which was no doubt what Dupree wanted. She took the first empty seat. A shaft of sunlight blinded her.

"There she is. Nice of you to join us," Dupree said. Even his insults were predictable. She merely nodded, determined not to let him provoke her. He'd told her the meeting would be at eight-fifteen. Obviously it had been scheduled to start at eight, and he would deny ever having told her otherwise. It was a petty, bureaucratic way of giving her a hard time. They both knew why she was late, even if nobody else here did.

Before Dupree was brought in to head the Office of Special Investigations, meetings were a rarity. Now he held them weekly, as a chance to parade his authority. Dupree was short and wide, middle forties, the body of a weight lifter in a too-tight light gray suit, one of three shopping-mall suits he rotated. Even across the room she could smell his drugstore aftershave. He had a ruddy moon face the texture of lumpy porridge.

There was a time when she actually cared what men like Arliss Dupree thought about her and tried to win them over. Now she didn't give a damn. She had her friends, and Dupree was simply not among them. Across the table, David Denneen, a square-jawed, sandy-haired man, gave her a sympathetic glance.

"As some of you may have heard, Internal Compliance has asked for our colleague here to be temporarily assigned to them." Dupree turned to her, his eyes hard. "Given the amount of unfinished work you've got here, I'd consider it less than responsible, Agent Navarro, if you accepted an assignment from another division. Is this something you've been angling for? You can tell us, you know."

"This is the first I've heard of it," she told him truthfully.

"That right? Well, maybe I've been leaping to conclusions here," he said, his tone softening a bit.

"Quite possibly," she replied, dryly.

"I was making the assumption that you were wanted for an assignment. Maybe you *are* the assignment."

"Come again?"

"Maybe you're the one under investigation," Dupree said in a mellower tone, evidently pleased by the idea.

“It wouldn’t surprise me. You’re a deep one, Agent Navarro.” There were laughs from some of her drinking buddies.

She shifted her chair to get the light out of her eyes.

Ever since Detroit, when the two of them were staying on the same floor of the Westin and she’d turned down (politely, she thought) Dupree’s drunken, highly explicit proposal, he’d been leaving condescending little remarks, like rat droppings, in her performance evaluation folder:... *as best she can given her obviously limited interest...errors a result of inattention, not incompetence...*

He described her to a male colleague, she’d heard, as “a sexual harassment suit waiting to happen.” He tarred her with the most vicious insult you can give someone in the Bureau: *not a team player*. Not a team player meant she didn’t go out drinking with the boys, including Dupree, kept her social life separate. He also made a point of papering her files with mentions of mistakes she’d made—a few minor procedural omissions, nothing at all serious. Once, on the trail of a rogue DEA agent who’d been turned by a drug lord and was implicated in several homicides, she’d neglected to submit an FD-460 within the required seven days.

The best agents make mistakes. She was convinced that the best ones in fact made more minor gaffes than average, because they were focused more on following the trail than on following every single procedure in the manual of rules and regs. You could slavishly observe every last ridiculous procedural requirement and never crack a case.

She felt his stare on her. She looked up, and their eyes locked.

“We’ve got an unusually heavy caseload to deal with,” Dupree went on. “When somebody doesn’t do their share, it means more work for everyone else. We’ve got a midlevel IRS manager suspected of organizing some pretty complicated tax scams. We’ve got a rogue FBI guy who seems to be using his badge as a shield to pursue a personal vendetta. We’ve got some ATF shit-heel selling munitions from the evidence vaults.” That was a typical array of cases for the OSI: investigating (“auditing” was the term of art) misconduct involving members of other government agencies—in essence, the federal version of internal affairs.

“Maybe the workload here is a little much for you,” Dupree said, pressing. “Is that it?”

She pretended to jot down a note and didn’t reply. Her face was prickly warm. She inhaled slowly, struggling to tamp down her anger. She refused to give in to his baiting. Finally she spoke. “Look, it’s inconvenient, why don’t you refuse the request for interdepartmental transfer?” Anna asked it in a reasonable tone of voice, but it wasn’t an innocent question: Dupree lacked the authority to challenge the highly secretive, all-powerful Internal Compliance Unit, and any reference to the limits of his authority was bound to infuriate him.

Dupree’s little ears reddened. “I’m expecting a brief consult. If the spook hunters at ICU knew as much as they pretend, they might realize that you aren’t exactly cut out for that line of work.”

His eyes shone with what she imagined was contempt.

Anna loved her work, knew she was good at it. She didn’t require praise. All she wanted was not to have to spend her time and energy trying to hang on to her job, clinging by her fingernails. Again she kept her face a mask of neutrality. She felt the tension localize itself in her stomach. “I’m sure you do your best to make them understand.”

A beat of silence. Anna could see he was debating how to reply. Dupree glanced at his beloved whiteboard, at the next item on his agenda. “We’ll miss you,” he said.

Shortly after the meeting broke up, David Denneen sought her out in her tiny cubbyhole of an office.

“The ICU wants you because you’re the best,” he said. “You know that, don’t you?”

Anna shook her head wearily. “I was surprised to see you at the meeting. You’re in operation oversight now. Doing great, by all accounts.” Word was he was on the fast track for a position in the AG’s office.

“Thanks to you,” Denneen said. “I was there today as divisional representative. We take turns. G to keep an eye on the budget numbers. And on you.” Gently, he placed a hand on hers. Anna noticed that the warmth in his eyes was mixed with concern.

“It was good to see you there,” Anna said. “And send my best to Ramon.”

“I’ll do that,” he said. “We’ll have to have you over for paella again.”

“But there’s something else on your mind, isn’t there?”

Denneen’s eyes didn’t leave hers. “Listen, Anna, your new assignment, whatever it is, isn’t going to be like getting a new call sheet. What people say around here is true—the ways of the Ghost are mysterious to man.” He repeated the old jest with little humor. The Ghost was an in-house nickname for the longtime director of the Internal Compliance Unit, Alan Bartlett. During closed hearings before the Senate subcommittee on intelligence, back in the seventies, a deputy attorney general had referred to him, archly, as “the ghost in the machine,” and the honorific had stuck. If Bartlett wasn’t ghostly, he was a legendarily elusive figure. Seldom seen, reputedly brilliant, he ruled over a rarefied dominion of highly classified audits, and his own reclusive habits made him emblematic of clandestine ways.

Anna shrugged. “I wouldn’t know. I’ve never met him, and I don’t think I know anyone who has. Rumors thrive on ignorance, Dave. You of all people know that.”

“Then take a word of advice from an ignoramus who cares about you,” he said. “I don’t know what this ICU thing is about. But be careful, O.K.?”

“Careful how?”

Denneen just shook his head, uneasily. “It’s a different world over there,” he said.

Later that morning, Anna found herself in the immense marble lobby of an office building on L Street, on her way to her appointment at the Internal Compliance Unit. The unit’s workings were obscure even within the department, and its operational purview was—or so certain senators had occasionally charged—dangerously undefined. *It’s a different world over there*, Denneen had said, and so it seemed.

The ICU was located on the tenth floor of this modern office complex in Washington, isolated from a bureaucracy it was sometimes obliged to scrutinize, and she tried not to gawk at the splashing indoor fountain, the green marble floors and walls. She thought: *What kind of government agency gets fitted out like this?* She got on the elevator. Even that was trimmed with marble.

The only other passenger on the elevator was a too-handsome guy around her age in a too expensive suit. A lawyer, she decided. Like just about everyone else in this city.

In the mirrored elevator walls she saw him giving her The Look. If she caught his eye, she knew he’d smile and say good morning and strike up a banal Elevator Conversation. Even though he was no doubt well intentioned and probably just wanted to flirt politely, Anna found it mildly annoying. No did she respond well when men asked her why a woman as beautiful as she was had become a government investigator. As if what she did for a living were the special province of the homely.

Normally, she pretended not to notice. Now, however, she threw him a scowl. He looked away hastily.

Whatever it was that the ICU wanted from her, it had come at a damn inconvenient time; Dupree was right about that. ~~Maybe you are the assignment, he'd said, and though Anna had shrugged off the suggestion, it nagged at her, absurdly. What the hell was that supposed to mean? No doubt Arlis Dupree was in his office right now, gleefully sharing his speculation with some of his drinking buddies on the staff.~~

The elevator opened onto a lavishly appointed, marble-lined hall that could have been the executive floor of a high-priced law firm. Off to the right she spotted the seal of the Department of Justice mounted on one wall. Visitors were instructed to buzz for admittance. She did so. It was 11:20 A.M., five minutes before her scheduled appointment. Anna prided herself on her punctuality.

A female voice demanded her name, and then she was buzzed in by a handsome dark-skinned woman with a squared-off haircut—almost too chic for government work, Anna thought to herself.

The receptionist assessed her coolly and directed her to take a seat. Anna detected a very faint Jamaican accent.

Within the office suite, the trappings of the swanky building gave way to a setting of utter sterility. The pearl-gray carpet was immaculate, like no government carpet she'd ever seen. The waiting area was brightly lighted with an array of halogen bulbs that left virtually no shadows. Photos of the President and the Attorney General were framed in lacquered steel. The chairs and the coffee table were of hard blond wood. Everything looked brand new, as if it had been freshly uncrated, unsoiled by human habitation.

She noticed the foil hologram stickers on both the fax machine and the telephone on the receptionist's desk, government labels indicating that these were secure lines, employing official certified telephony encryption.

At frequent intervals, the phone purred quietly, and the woman spoke in a low voice using a headset. The first two calls were in English; the third must have been in French, because the receptionist responded in that language. Two more in English, gently eliciting contact information. And then another in which she spoke in a language, sibilant and clicky, that Anna had a hard time identifying. Anna glanced at her watch again, fidgeted in the hard-backed chair, and then looked at the receptionist. "That was Basque, wasn't it?" she said. It was something more than a guess, but less than a certainty.

The woman responded with a fractional nod and a demure smile. "It won't be much longer, Mr. Navarro," she said.

Now Anna's eye was drawn to the tall wooden island behind the receptionist's station, which extended all the way to the wall; from the legally required exit sign, she realized that the wooden structure concealed the entrance to a staircase. It was artfully done, and it allowed ICU agents or the guests to arrive and depart unnoticed by anyone in the official waiting room. What kind of outfit was this?

Another five minutes went by.

"Does Mr. Bartlett know I'm here?" Anna asked.

The receptionist returned her gaze levelly. "He's just finishing up with someone."

Anna returned to her chair, wishing she'd brought something to read. She didn't even have the *Post*, and clearly no reading material would be allowed to soil the pristine waiting area. She took out an automatic-teller-machine slip and a pen and started making a list of things to do.

The receptionist placed a finger on her ear and nodded. "Mr. Bartlett says he'll see you now." She emerged from her station and guided Anna down a series of doors. No names were posted; only numbers. Finally, at the end of a hallway, she opened a door marked director and took her into the

tidest office she had ever seen. On a far table, stacks of paper were perfectly arrayed in equidistant piles.

A small, white-haired man in a crisp navy suit came out from behind a vast walnut desk and extended a small, delicate hand. Anna noticed the pale pink moons of his perfectly manicured nails and was surprised by the strength of his grip. She noticed that the desk was barren, save for a handful of green file folders, and a sleek, black telephone; mounted on the wall just behind it was a velvet-lined glass display case containing two antique-looking pocket watches. It was the one eccentric touch in the room.

“I’m so terribly sorry to keep you waiting,” he said. His age was indeterminate, but he was probably in his early sixties, Anna decided. His eyes were owl-like through his glasses, large round lenses in flesh-colored frames. “I know how busy you are, and you were so very kind to have come by.” He spoke softly, so softly that Anna found herself straining to hear him over the white noise of the ventilation system. “We’re very grateful for your making the time.”

“If I may speak candidly, I didn’t know we had a choice when ICU called,” she said tartly.

He smiled as if she had said something amusing. “Please do sit down.”

Anna settled into the high-backed chair opposite his desk. “To tell you the truth, Mr. Bartlett, I’m curious about why I’m here.”

“You weren’t inconvenienced, I hope,” Bartlett said, interlacing his small fingers in a prayerful gesture.

“It’s not a matter of inconvenience,” Anna replied. In a strong voice, she added, “I’m happy to answer whatever questions you may have.”

Bartlett nodded encouragingly. “That’s rather what I’m hoping. But I’m afraid these answers won’t be easy to come by. In fact, if we could even frame the questions, we’d be halfway home. Am I making any sense to you?”

“I return to my own question,” Anna said with banked impatience. “What am I doing here?”

“Forgive me. You’re thinking that I’m being maddeningly elliptical. Of course you’re right, and I apologize for it. Occupational hazard. Too much time shut away with paper and more paper. Deprived of the bracing air of experience. But that must be your contribution. Now let me ask you a question, Ms. Navarro. Do you know what it is that we do here?”

“The ICU? Vaguely. Intragovernmental inquiries—only, the classified kind.” Anna decided that the query called for reticence; she knew a little more than what she volunteered. She was aware that behind its bland title was an extremely secretive, powerful, and far-reaching investigative agency charged with highly classified audits and examinations of other U.S. government agencies that couldn’t be done in-house, and which involved highly sensitive matters. ICU officials were deeply involved, it was said, in scrutinizing the CIA’s Aldrich Ames fiasco; in investigating the Reagan White House’s Iran-Contra affair; in examining numerous Defense Department acquisitions scandals. It was the ICU, people whispered, that had first uncovered the suspicious activities of the FBI counterintelligence agent Robert Philip Hanssen. There were even rumors that the ICU was behind the “Deep Throat” leaks that led to Richard Nixon’s downfall.

Bartlett looked off into the middle distance. “The techniques of investigation are, in the essentials, everywhere the same,” he said, finally. “What changes is the bailiwick, the ambit of operations. Ours has to do with matters touching on national security.”

“I don’t have that kind of clearance,” Anna put in quickly.

“Actually”—Bartlett allowed himself a small smile—“you do now.”

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