

CHARLIE

HUSTON

AUTHOR OF SLEEPLESS

SKINNER

SKINNER

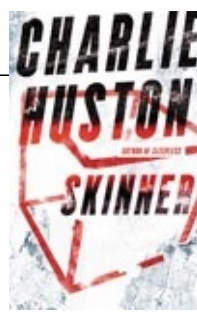
CHARLIE HUSTON



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“Then it may well be that we shall by a process of sublime irony have reached a stage in this story where safety will be the sturdy child of terror, and survival the twin brother of annihilation.”

—*Winston Churchill*

PROLOGUE

gravity of the sun

THE CIMETIÈRE MONTMARTRE.

Skinner is staring at a headstone, puzzling at the name carved there.

Reistroff Guenard Spy.

No one to hear him, he sounds the name to himself. His French spoken with the accent and affect of an advanced language tape.

With a brief pause, he adds a silent comma to the name.

“Reistroff Guenard, spy.”

Changing the last syllable into a profession. Smiling.

One hundred and fifty meters away, down the Avenue de la Croix in the 28th Division, he finds the mausoleum of the Lazarous family. That name, masoned from granite, Gothic script, archaic *Lazarous*. The cuteness of it was too much for someone to resist. The designer of the op. And too easy for someone else to recognize. He hardly needs to open the door to know what he will find. His suspicion further strengthened when he reaches into the stone urn on the step and finds that the key that is meant to be there is missing. Skinner reflects on one of his favorite metaphors, all too applicable in his life, Schroedinger’s cat. Until he, Skinner, opens the mausoleum door, his asset is both alive and dead inside. He is tempted to turn his back and leave, allowing for the possibility that unobserved, the man within will remain in a suspended state of uncertainty forever. But that is not the contract. So, an unlocked gate and behind it an unlocked door, and, behind that, a corpse that will never rise. By any reasonable standard his contract is now complete. Was complete the second his asset was shot and killed. Except that Skinner has special clauses in his contracts. Invisible codicils. But known to everyone.

So he inspects the body.

Someone was direct and professional, anonymously so. First two bullets in the chest, a large target for a shot from a handgun from over twenty meters away, and the final bullet in the head, a small target that offers a level of certainty when shooting from within five meters. Two shots to bring the asset down quickly from a distance; a third shot, after closing that distance, for peace of mind.

So to speak.

Skinner looks at the rectangle of sunlight that leads out of the mausoleum. It invites observation from without, encourages a watcher. In the box himself now, neither alive nor dead. A definitive state will be arrived at on the other side of the rectangle.

A chest shooter. Conservative. Closing for the head shot.

Skinner considers, and steps through the rectangle into the sunlight, pauses on the step that leads

down from the mausoleum, pulling tight the belt of the half-length khaki trench coat he chose to wear today because of the anonymity it offers in a city where the garment is ubiquitous every spring. He pushes his hands into his pockets and the first bullet hits him in the chest, pushing him back into the darkness of the mausoleum, the second bullet hitting within fifteen centimeters of the first before his upper body can quite disappear into the shadows. The shots are muffled but resonant, coughs from the throat of a large jungle cat (a cliché that Skinner knows to be accurate, having had occasion to hear a jungle cat cough). Pigeons fly from nearby horse chestnut trees, then settle again in the branches. Skinner's legs and feet, protruding from the stone mouth of the tomb, are motionless, the scuffed catspaw covering the leather soles of his dark brown oxford boots presented for inspection.

The man who emerges from the doorway of a 112-year-old maintenance hutch 27 meters down de la Croix trots with a directness that matches his methodology. Straight line, weapon held alongside his thigh so it won't be noticed by any tourists as they return from taking a rubbing of Truffaut's gravestone, eyes fixed on Skinner's feet, alert to any sudden movement.

Skinner can discern nothing specific of the man's features. Looking into the bright sun from within the tomb, all he sees is a black silhouette, its edge blurring in pulses as waves of pain continue to radiate from his chest.

Two meters from Skinner's feet, the silhouette raises its gun.

Skinner imagines that the assassin is now close enough that he can make out his own pale oval face in the darkness. Target for one final bullet. Close enough to register also that Skinner's trench coat, while ripped open by the first two rounds, is unstained by blood. Does he, in fact, see the silhouette flinch as this revelation arrives in the assassin's brain? Doubtful. And, in any case, impossible to accurately determine, as the realization, if it exists at all, is reached at virtually the same instant that the silhouette registers the muzzle flash from the Bersa Concealed Carry pistol in Skinner's right hand, followed in an all but immeasurably short flicker of a moment by the sound of the shot as it echos from the mausoleum; any further thoughts cut short by the .380 subsonic bullet that trails the waves of light and sound.

Though tending toward conservatism in these matters himself, a fact attested to by the BA Systems armored vest he wears under his trench coat, Skinner understands the value of taking a high percentage, close-range head shot whenever circumstances present one. Rising to a seated position as the man is falling back, he takes a second bead on the ruined face, waits for the body to hit the ground and squeezes off another round.

Certainty is all.

Stepping into the light, Skinner looks at the dead man. Any ID the man carries will be worse than useless; engineered to mislead. That doesn't matter. His face has been smeared by the impact of Skinner's bullet, but an ID is possible. The man's name was Lentz. Skinner has met him, professional introduction, made by a friend. Recently.

A breeze moves the branches of a chestnut tree, sunlight flickers and tickles his ear, and Skinner knows he is being watched. He knows this, feels it as a kind of pressure, atmospheric. He looks around, sees, several divisions away down de la Croix, a middle-aged man frozen in his track, ranks of gravestones between them. The man flaps his open mouth and runs. Standing near the two corpses, Skinner is painfully aware that he is in danger of playing out a scenario reminiscent of Eric Ambler's Man of mystery, fleeing through the aisles of the dead, pursued by gendarmes, his avenues of escape cut off at every turn by the flash of yet another blue uniform.

He tosses the Bersa away, skimming it over the stone floor into the mausoleum, leaving behind the dead, those entombed and those not, walking northward toward the wall that runs along the Rue Ete

stripping off the ruined trench coat as he goes, peeling the straps of Velcro that hold his armor in place, letting it drop, an audible thud that leaves him nearly two kilos lighter, a man in slacks, shirt collar peeking from the neck of his dark sweater. Against the chill he knots the scarlet scarf he'd worn tucked inside his coat, unharmed but for a burn that might easily have come from the coal of a too casually held cigarette.

As the sirens become audible, the Hôpital Bretonneau comes into view beyond the cemetery wall. A few quick steps and Skinner jumps, grabs fistfuls of green vines, the toes of his boots planted in the notches between blocks of granite. He pulls, swings his legs up, lies flat atop the wall. Quiet street. After midday, high sun, the French are in the cafés, none of which are here. His chest hurts where the bullets embedded in the armor. He thinks about the gamble of having stepped into the light, trusting that the man outside the mausoleum would shoot him where he had shot the asset. Trusting that the man was as good a shot as the evidence suggested.

When did he start trusting such things? When did he start trusting anything?

To have died in the tomb of Lazarous.

That would have been foolish.

He smiles at the thought, rolls from the wall, and walks away.

Later, when detectives from the Brigade Criminelle canvass the area, a patient in the hospital, an elderly man who often spends his day peering out the window at the cemetery, as if casting into the glass of the future, will tell them that he saw a man of uncertain age, average height and weight, black hair color, in trousers that might have been blue or brown or black, and a sweater that was similar. He jumps to the top of the wall and pause there, easing his head into a pillow of ivy, as if to take a nap, and then roll himself over, dropping to the sidewalk with a hesitation that suggested he might be slightly injured, before walking up the street and disappearing once he reached the corner. The only item remembered being the flash of red around his neck, streaming behind him in a sudden wind, like a trail of blood.

An account the detectives find less than helpful, but one that is, as it happens, quite accurate.

A gift of Skinner's, to cause people who view him to see only what he wants them to see. A gift cultivated during a long childhood spent on the object side of a glass pane, scrutinized by eyes that never saw, in all their years of observation, that they had bred a killer. Or caused one to be made.

A short while later, emerging from the Métro at Saint-Paul, topping the stairs next to the newsstand on the island between Rue de Rivoli and Rue Saint-Antoine, staring into the faultless blue of a Parisian afternoon crisscrossed by the vapor trails of jets on approach and departure to and from De Gaulle. Skinner experiences a memory: The infinite wall of sky that he saw for the first time when a child welfare officer, escorted by several sheriff's deputies, took him from his parents' home at the age of twelve. The shock of that vastness having swallowed in an instant more than a decade of containment and solitude. The sky. When all there had been before was Plexiglas, and beyond that the basement ceiling, unfinished, sheets of cotton candy pink insulation stapled between the joists. Skinner's eyes to the heavens. In the arms of the stranger, everyone other than his mother and father a stranger, he had wrenched and squirmed, convinced he was falling upward, where that small, intensely bright ball of light would burn him.

He freezes, staring upward, face to the sun.

He is going to have to kill a great many people soon. Someone has taken his asset, and now he will have to hunt and kill any and all who were involved in that misjudgment. *Skinner's Maxim* demands

it: *The only way to secure an asset is to ensure that the cost of acquiring it is greater than its value.*

Skinner has no formula to determine the value of his lost asset, the man Lentz killed in the mausoleum. He only knows that it must have exceeded any previous price he has exacted. He thinks about some of the things he has done in the past, the exertions that have firmly established his reputation in the community of asset specialists. He thinks about fingers. Scalps. Innocent family members. A thin stainless steel rod heated until it glowed white. He remembers a warehouse near the last standing panels of the Berlin Wall. The headline that ran on the cover of *Bild am Sonntag* the day after the Landespolizei found what he'd left inside. "Schlachthaus."

And he wonders why the people who engineered this bizarrely incompetent attempt on his life couldn't have left his asset alone and spared him the tedium of creating yet another slaughterhouse.

Acquisitions had been easier for him. The measures of success and failure so absolute. Either you acquired the asset or you did not. Protection is uncertainty manifest. Unless an overt acquisition attempted you may never know if your precautions have been sufficient. If no one tries to take what you have, is it because they cannot hope to claim it or because they simply don't care?

But, in the long run, he'd failed at acquisitions. Temperament. Some nuance in his conditioning hard to locate. A node of morality, he suspects. Over time it had come to irritate him, a pebble scraping at an obscure region of his brain. There had been consequences. Emotions. Very strong. Far outside the limits of his conditioning. He'd lacked the tools to feel these things and survive. Quitting acquisitions was the only option. But what then to do with his skills? A very specific set of abilities that fulfilled him as all talented people are fulfilled by what it is they do better than anyone else.

Protection held the answer.

He could resume the application of his trade, do those things that came to him most naturally, and do them without qualm. All that was required to ease the abraded sensitivity that the conditioning had instilled in him was to restrict the use of his talents to killing in the name of protecting others.

There were complications. The hallmarks of his work in acquisitions, corpses that appeared to materialize around bullets hovering in the air waiting for them, parties who evaporated from existence on cloudy days; these ephemeral deaths would not do. He'd had to demonstrate his commitment to the maxim. More than once. But, with time, the conditioning he impressed upon the community required only infrequent reinforcement. Still, the market forces of security guaranteed that there would always be someone willing to test the limits of the maxim. His name commanded a premium that ensured his assets would always be of great enough value that someone might be tempted to risk abomination. Skinner was not perfect; not all of his assets survived. But those who claimed the assets always lost more in the long run.

Over the years Skinner himself lost three toes from his left foot. His back had the texture of wax melted and rehardened, the result of third degree burns and only moderately successful skin grafts. The tip of a Gryphon M30A1 combat stiletto that had snapped off between the eighth and ninth ribs on his left side could not be surgically removed with any convenience. Calcium began to encase it; it grew into his rib cage. And though it caused him discomfort, he decided to leave it there. The blade fused to his bones. Gray appeared in his hair.

And now Montmartre.

Lentz.

Introduced to Lentz just weeks ago. By a friend.

A woman, attractive, as Parisian as the sky, comes up the stairs behind Skinner, sees the bemused look on the face turned up to the sun, and smiles as she sidles around him, hoping, a little, to catch the eye of the intriguing stranger, but failing to do so. Skinner is busy making a mental list of the future.

dead. Those he must kill in order to make safe those he will come to protect. The most discouraging aspect being that the people he'll have to kill are his current employers.

And his friend. Or, rather, *the friend*. Skinner's only friend.

With great suddenness, Skinner wants horribly not to kill his friend.

He loses his footing, feels the upward tug of the sky as a physical thing in his chest. All it manages to tear from him is his breath, but it is no less shocking a sensation than if his heart had been ripped free by the gravity of the sun.

Life, he thinks, *was much easier in the box*.

He blinks the sun from his eyes, mounts the final step, feels that he is unwatched, and fits himself into the flow of the sidewalks, eyes flicking upward, setting forth on a course plotted along the axis of one of the contrails that scar the otherwise perfect sky.

It is only after several days have passed and none of the people who were involved in the Montmartre Incident have died that they realize the truth.

Skinner has disappeared.

A fact that leaves none of them at ease.

PART ONE

bringer of the ball

ALL RAJ WANTS to do is go outside and play soccer with the other boys.

He kicks the ball, toes it, centimeters at a time, closer to the door. As if he is merely following where it leads. The leather shiny, new, white that reflects the brightly colored light filtering through curtains his mother has made from a sari worn too thin for decency. The color shifts as he nudges the ball again. The leather will never be this bright again. Outside it will be coated in dust in the dry months, mud in the rains, dung always. Scuffed, scratched, patched after it is inevitably kicked against an edge of sharp, rusted steel protruding from the roofline of a shanty or booted into a scatter of freshly broken glass shards that no one has yet scavenged.

Only now is it new and clean. Only now can he take it outside, trophy, to show the other boys. Shining in their eyes as bright as the ball.

The ball thumps against the open door, mahogany planks his father has cut from a tabletop salvaged in the city center, rejoined, cloth-hinged, and hung. A door. Such a luxury in Dharavi. Open now, only halfway, stopped by wall-mounted shelves, vertically slotted to hold his mother's plates and pans. In a one-room home, space allowing a door to open flush to its wall is an impossible waste.

The men and women crowded inside the single room of their home, packed around the small table do not look up. Their conversation continues. His father is showing the others something on the screen of his laptop. An Acer Aspire with rubber guards, hand-cut from old car tires, epoxied at the corners to protect it from drops. On the screen, a diagram, electrical. Color-coded lines running in parallel, making abrupt right-angle turns, knotting themselves, unspooling, streaking to another page. His father has played games with him using diagrams like these.

Follow the green line, Rajiv, use your finger, find where it ends. Yes, yes. Oh! But now there are two green lines. Which is the right one? Follow it, follow it.

When he was five, the games became lessons. Positive, negative, erg, watt, voltage, amp. Now, twelve, Raj can look at a diagram without knowing what it is for and determine its purpose on his first try. Or his second try, sometimes his third. And he can also rewire any of the slum's rat's-nest circuit boxes all by himself. Or with only a little help from his father. The diagram on the laptop screen is for something large. A fragment of something massive. The lines draw him almost more than the ball. Almost. But he has seen them before. Watched as his father used the software on his laptop to design that massive maze of circuits. Old hat. The ball is new.

He kicks it against the door again. And again no one looks up.

His mother kneels next to the bright orange Envirofit cookstove. Envy of the neighbors. A bed of wood-chip coals glowing in the base of the small cylinder; on the cooktop, a kettle coming to the boil. Tea soon. She arranges cups on a brass-colored tin tray.

Another kick. Thump of the ball against hardwood.

Only two eyes turn his way. The baby, Tajma, nestled in another of his mother's retired saris, at the foot of the cot that mother, father, and baby all share. Too big now to have a place on the cot, Raj has a mat and blanket. *No problem*, he says. A mat and a blanket, more than so many boys his age.

The baby's eyes are on the ball. Raj kicks it once more, her eyes dart to follow it, her mouth opening in surprise when it bounces sharply off the door.

It goes this way, and then that way!

She waits for more.

Raj kicks again, a little more force, a little backspin, a slightly different angle; the ball skips to stop just against the door frame, half its circumference exposed to the sun.

Taji's eyes widen, her mouth an O.

Outside the door, dirt packed hard against the hump of an enormous water main running half-buried down the middle of the narrow lane between the shanties and their patchwork walls of cinderblock, corrugated steel, scrap wood, waddling, tin, and cardboard. At the far end, a scrum of filthy boys passing in and out of sight where the street opens onto a small square in front of the great shed that serves as shared factory space for the many industries of Dharavi Nagar, in the heart of Dharavi slum.

Raj's gaze travels from the boys to the ball at his feet. With his toe he scuffs the dust just inside the door on his mother's otherwise spotless floor. Fighting the dirt and mud, an endless task, like keeping her family fed. He brings his foot back; a light kick, an accident, will send the ball outside. What choice but to follow? And once outside. Well, he will deal later with the consequences of not returning immediately. When he returns, hero to the boys. Bringer of the ball.

"Rajiv."

He jerks his head around at the sound of his father's voice, his bare toe stubbing against the tile.

"Close the door."

He hops, lifting his throbbing foot from the ground.

His father snaps his fingers.

"Now, now."

On one foot, Raj bends, picks up his ball, the sun falling full on his face as he does so, the screams of the boys in the square coming to his ears clearly.

"Inside, Rajiv."

His mother, hooking the collar of his overwashed *Transformers* t-shirt, pulling him inside as she swings the door closed and seats the latch.

"Sit with your sister."

Raj, looking at the door, ball tight to his stomach.

His mother yanks his collar again.

"Later, later. Sit, sit."

Raj backs away from the door, limping slightly on his bruised toe. Eight steps to cross the room on this tiny journey an epic today because of all the guests he must edge around and squeeze between, his path taking him past the little table and its mismatch of chairs filled with the most senior and honored of their visitors.

His father grabs his arm.

"Come see."

Raj's mother, the rattling tray of tiny cups in her hands.

"Aasif."

His father looks at her.

"I want him to see."

"Let him play with Taj."

His father still with a grip on the boy's arm.

"He should see. Why else if not for him? He should see."

She sets the tray suddenly on the table, one of the men pulling the laptop out of the way.

“Yes, yes. For him.”

Without serving, she takes three steps to the cot and scoops up Taj.

“And also for her.”

Aasif raises a hand.

“For her also, yes, Damini. Bring her here.”

One of the men at the table is staring at Raj. The one who brought him the ball. He also brought stuffed tiger for Taj, almost as big as her. And a bag of aavakaaya for his mother. Pickled mangoes from his home to the east in Gadchiroli district, now heaped in a bowl on the tea tray. Small, dark, hair cropped close; hands calloused thick and smooth, compact muscles suggesting years swinging hammer or an axe, but a potbelly at his middle. A voice, Hindi accented by the forests. They call him Naxalite sometimes, but Raj knows that his real name is Sudhir.

“Like the ball, little Raj, for you.”

He holds up his hands, ready to catch. Raj tosses the ball and it smacks into the easterner’s hands. He spins it between his fingers.

“Someone will tell you that it’s not real. They’ll say, *There’s no hologram, Rajiv. How can it be real if there’s no hologram.* As if the only way we know a real thing is if it has a sticker. A hologram that says FIFA. But don’t believe them. The ball is real. It was made by real hands. Feel.”

He throws the ball, shoving it two-handed so that it sends the boy back a step when he catches it.

“Real?”

Raj nods.

The man reaches for the teapot, using a small square of clean rag to pick it up by its wire handle so as not to be burned by the heat conducted by the cheap tin. He begins to pour, filling the cups one by one, setting the pot aside, adding the milk and sugar he also brought, making thick chai, passing the cups to the others at the table, Raj’s mother first. There are some mutters from the old men of the nagar panchayat, the informal local council and arbiters of disputes: *Should they not be served first and by the hostess rather than this jungle communist?* But Sudhir seems not to notice, pouring tea as if he were a wallah in an office, passing the cups to the women of the Social Ills Assistance Foundation, the representative of the Dharavi Business Is Booming Board, the boss of the electricity goons who Raj’s father has known for many years, a Bombay Municipal Corporation man who has something to do with water treatment, the heads of the potters’ and tanners’ guilds, and also men speaking for the welders and recyclers, a smalltime boss from the gangwar, a woman from a Muslim microbank that loans tiny sums to women of all religions to start small businesses, and a young policeman. These, and several other dignitaries and lowlifes of the slum, are packed into Raj’s home, being served tea by the outsider, Naxalite. Not here are any of the water goons or men from the Shiv Sena or the Congress party. The water goons have threatened the entire proceeding and pledged their noncooperation unless they are paid an ungodly sum. The Sena were approached, but communications broke down. And the local Congress man seems most content to pretend nothing is happening.

Raj has seen all of them here at one time or another, but never all at once. Things are happening, exciting things, but still he only wants to go play with his new ball.

Sudhir passes the last of the cups, many of them borrowed from neighbors to accommodate such a large gathering.

“People will tell you, Raj, your whole life, what is real and what is not. What you can believe in and what you can’t. Don’t let them say, *This is something you don’t think it is. You don’t understand, you couldn’t understand.* It is what you think it is, you do understand it. Believe me.”

He smiles.

“Or don’t believe me. You decide.”

He sips his chai.

“Rajiv.”

A whisper.

“Rajiv, if I tell you that your father is a very rich man, do you believe me?”

Raj looks at his father, the educated outcast of Dharavi. Madman of the wires. His quest to bring the wire to every home of the nagar, safely engineered. His family lacks for nothing that can be had in the slum, but rich?

He shakes his head.

The man puts a hand on Raj’s father’s shoulder.

“But he is. He’s rich. He owns a castle, Rajiv, in this wealthy land.”

He gestures with his other arm, taking in the hut and its contents, drawing some laughter and some discontent from the gathering. This is serious business they are here for, not games.

Aasif touches Sudhir’s hand with his own, brushing it off his shoulder.

“Don’t confuse him.”

The man stares at Raj, brown eyes, jungle green in their depths.

“I’m not teasing him. I’m telling him the future.”

Raj’s father looks into his teacup.

“It is *his* future. If there are riches, they are not mine. Here.”

His fingers dip into the breast pocket of his loose orange short-sleeved collared shirt, coming out holding a Nokia 1100. Indestructible brick phone of the slums. He looks at the screen of his laptop, his thumb working the phone’s rubberized buttons. He studies the tiny LED screen, his lips moving as he reads something, reads it over again, and once more.

“Yes. Correct.”

He weighs the phone on his palm, looks around the room.

“This. And then after. I don’t know.”

Some of them nod, some don’t move.

Raj’s father looks at his wife and his baby girl, then at his son.

“Rajiv.”

He offers the phone.

“Take it.”

Raj tucks his ball under one arm, scooping the Nokia from his father’s hand. He looks at the screen. A string of letters, numbers, and symbols. He tries to let it translate itself into something intelligible. Some lengthy equivalent to *lol* or ;(. Sees only randomness.

He looks from the screen to the others in the room. More than one set of lips is moving in silent prayer to one of many gods. He looks at the one they call Naxalite, sees the forest in his eyes. Trees tall and green, creaking in a breeze, footsteps muffled by layered mulch and deadfall, single-file booted feet. Guns.

He looks at his mother and sister, his father. The family it will be his job to provide for one day when he is older.

His father touches his shoulder, light press, then gone.

“Send it, Rajiv.”

Raj rests his thumb on the large select button marked with a short green horizontal line. On the screen, *SEND*, highlighted. Waiting for the button. He presses down, satisfying firm click of sturdy

technology, slight give of the button's thin rubber cover. The message on the screen blinks; a little bar, empty of color, appears, quickly filling, liquid crystal gray.

MESSAGE SENT

There are many exhalations in the room, more prayers, a few laughs, someone is crying.

His father takes the phone and drops it back in his pocket.

Sudhir rubs his palms together, wood on wood.

"They will say it is not the future, Rajiv. But do not believe them. It is the future. You have touched it with your own hands. You have made it."

Aasif places a hand on his son's head, pushes him gently.

"Go play with your ball."

Raj turns, five steps to the door, snagged by his mother's finger, held as she bends and kisses his cheek.

"Play, Rajiv."

She unlatches the door, sending him sprinting into the light, ball held tight to his chest, bare feet slapping the curve of the water main, hot metal. The boys, seeing him from the square, the ball starting to scream his name. He runs to glory, raising the ball high, as if it is the future the man they call Naxalite has said is his.

patriots

THEY KNOW WHEN they are being lied to.

Terrence reminds himself. *They are very smart. They know when they are being lied to. They've been trained for it.*

And he begins to lie.

"I'm a little lost. You asked me here for what?"

Cross allows a sigh to escape from his nostrils. The spycraft equivalent of a spit take. But he refrains from any further comment regarding Terrence's transparency. He's sitting behind a minimalist black desk comprised of four legs of slightly more than pencil thickness and a slab top with the profile and thinness of an iPad. No drawers, a few papers, a pen set made of the same graphite carbon material as the desk; mouse, monitor, and keyboard, no visible wires, not even a power cord. A desk meant to project the same ideas about its owner that a massive chunk of oak would have communicated in decades past.

Leaning back slightly into the black webbing of an elaborately counterweighted and cantilevered task chair, Cross looks at Haven where he sits on a long, low black leather and chrome couch against the far wall.

"He wants to know why he was *asked* here."

Haven tugs at the armpit of a jacket that Terrence recognizes as having been tailored to conceal a shoulder holster.

"Old times?"

Cross looks from Haven and back at Terrence.

"No, not for old times' sake. Haven is trying to be funny."

Terrence studies the sharp hairline that delineates the southern border of Haven's crewcut. Hair freshly clipped, the back of his neck pale. Where was Haven recently that he was wearing his hair to the collar? Where has his forehead and nose burned so deeply red-brown? Where has the skin around his eyes been raccooned so white by the constant wear of huge sunglasses? His cheeks and chin left pale as his neck by the thick beard he'd been sporting until a recent return. So many deserts he could have been in. Shaggy, bearded, Gargoyles over his eyes. Terrence has been in those deserts himself. Khakis, a blue oxford button-down, Altama desert boots, and a sweat-stained USS *Ronald Reagan* baseball cap, his Ivy League version of the local paramilitary mode. Clearly articulating that he would *not* be marshaling for an extraction in Nuristan. Judging by the deep, horizonless focus in Haven's eyes, his mind is still in the desert, while his body is here, back home, wearing a suit cut for a gun, but not wearing a gun, adapting to management, brigade tattoos hidden by navy blue wool blend.

It is unlikely that he is trying to be funny. In Terrence's experience, Haven's sense of humor is limited.

"So what you want is?"

Cross nods as if in agreement with a concept with which he is somewhat familiar.

"We're interested in exploring an avenue, Terrence."

Haven looks at the ceiling.

“An avenue.”

Terrence touches the plastic sheathed visitor’s pass clipped to the breast pocket of his houndstooth check. He’d been given it in the three-story atrium where all guests are received and cleared for entry on the Kestrel Dynamics campus. That atrium had been designed both to impress and to serve as a killbox for snipers who would ring the third-floor balcony rails should hostiles ever penetrate so far along the Dulles Corridor. Be they terrorists or budget allocators threatening cuts to the dozens of Homeland Security contractors lining the strip that runs from Loudoun to Fairfax counties.

Until seven years ago Terrence hadn’t needed a visitor’s pass. He’d had an office here. This office in fact. But times change. Witness them here, together, now. An unlikely reunion.

“An avenue toward?”

Cross looks at a chronometer display mounted above the door. Analogue, vintage, salvaged from Cheyenne Mountain Directorate during a NORAD renovation. Back when Terrence had the reserved parking spot closest to the front door, he had bought it for Cross from an online auction house specializing in cold war military memorabilia. Current times in the hot spots of the nuclear age. birthday present for his protégé.

Cross’s eyes are on the clock on the far right, a small black plaque: *Moscow*.

“How far is Russia from Ukraine? Time zones, I mean, how many time zones?”

Haven looks at one of the five narrow slits of armored glass along the wall behind Cross; the Kestrel campus outside is warped by their thickness.

“*Time zones.*”

Terrence points at the clock.

“Kiev is an hour behind Moscow. GMT plus two.”

Haven’s lips are compressed, the rest of his face impassive.

“Kiev. Tea. They drink tea in Kiev, right? Glasses of tea. Hacker tea time in Kiev.”

“Probably they drink Starbucks.”

Cross fingers a small cube of clear Lucite that is perched on his desk. Encased within, a coil of wire and a battery, the detonator from an IED that a Kestrel contractor disarmed in Anbar Province.

“If they’re state actors, they get Modafinil. B-12 injections.”

Haven relaxes his lips, amused.

“*State actors.* Ukraine state actors.”

Terrence draws a squiggle in the air with his index finger.

“An incident? Ukraine origin? Is that verifiable?”

Cross stares deep into the cube, as if willing it to blow something up.

“Alarmingly so.”

They will know if you lie.

“And you need an avenue.”

Cross rotates the cube a few degrees, setting off rainbows instead of a bomb.

“Need. Well.”

Terrence nods, touches one of the buttons of his jacket, the garment a remnant of the days when being in the CIA meant affecting the style of an Ivy League dean. Days before his own. Romanticized

Stupid. Foolish. Romantic. Killer. Are you going to do this or not? They will know. Do they already know?

“A cyber attack. Out of Ukraine.”

Cross drops the cube, letting it bounce and tumble across his desk before settling, a gambler’s fix

die coming to rest.

“Bravo. How do you ever put together such apt analysis from unconnected scraps like time zone and Haven talking about hackers?”

Terrence takes a pen from the inside breast pocket of his jacket, a notebook. Terrence the note taker. And the burner. A joke at both the CIA and at Kestrel, Terrence’s incessant note taking and burning of his own notes. He never met a piece of paper he wouldn’t just as soon fill up with Top Secret notions and then burn. For the sake of security.

What have I forgotten? Are you doing this? They will know. They already know. They must know.

“Details?”

Haven is studying his shoes. His feet are no doubt wondering where the hell his boots are.

“It was a SCADA thing. Infrastructure attack. Kinetic. Out of Ukraine. Supposed to start a cascade of the eastern grid. We think. But all they got was blackouts in Ohio and Pennsylvania. Very small in the news cycle. But a two-hundred-megawatt generator blew. SCADA. The Iranian computer worm. The one the Iranians were bitching about. Went after their nuclear plant. Stuxnet worm. Looks like that. But different. Fooled a lube oil pump into shutting down. Took seconds for the turbine to grind itself out of commission. Some attributable deaths. Car accident when the traffic lights went black in Scranton. Guy fell down some stairs, broke his neck. Five dead that we know about.”

Terrence clicks the button at the end of his pen. He likes the weight of it. Heft. He bought it in Stockholm a few weeks ago. Waiting for someone in a stationery store. He clicks it three times.

“Ukraine?”

Cross lifts his hand from his desk and sets it back down.

“That is what it looks like.”

Terrence doodles the number five in the margin of his notebook page.

“Who else is working on it?”

Haven grins, scratches the back of his neck, shakes his head.

“Who.”

Cross presses a fingertip between his eyes.

“Terrence, really. Everyone. Everyone is working on it.”

Of course they are. Cyber attack. Every security contractor and agency, the military, commercial anti-virus software makers, everyone. They’ll all be trying to find out who launched a cyber attack on America’s power grid and caused the deaths of at least five people.

That’s the point, isn’t it?

Terrence scratches out the doodled number five.

“I was just thinking aloud. Yes, everyone. Kestrel. Hann-Aoki, Triple Canopy, XO, Symantec, NSA, CIA, DynCorp, Aegis, air force, army, Homeland.”

He looks at Cross.

“Does anyone have an inside track?”

Cross’s fingers rattle his keyboard.

“That’s what we’re all jostling for.”

A printer across the room wakes, hums, buzzes in short bursts, smoothly spilling paper into a tray.

Cross points at the printer.

“A contract.”

A last sheet of paper shushes into place, the printer goes silent.

“Freelance. Three months guaranteed, with an employer option to extend for another year.”

Terrence walks to the printer, looks down at the top sheet of the stack.

“A temp contract with the company I founded. Shall I comment on the irony?”

Cross plucks a pen from the holder on his desk.

“History, Terrence. Some lingering bile to get off your mind. Is this the time for that? Now, when our country is under attack?”

Terrence pulls the top sheet of paper from the printer, looks at some of the numbers.

“Well, it has been some time since I had your balls in my hand. No telling when I might get a chance to twist them again. If not now, when?”

Cross aims his pen at Terrence, a dart looking for a target.

“You recruited me, if I recall correctly, because you wanted someone with *a robust appetite for the jugular*. Your other misjudgments aside, you got what you wanted.”

Terrence looks around the office, nods.

“And so did you.”

Cross points at the paper in Terrence’s hand.

“Want to come out of pasture? You have the ticket right there.”

Terrence looks at the contract in his hand. The logo at the head of the page. An American kestrel, the slight sparrow hawk of the falcon family, lean and swift, adaptable, stooping to its prey. A logo he’d designed while still working at the CIA. An embodiment of his dream for post-cold war intelligence. And, yes, that had been a lean time at Langley, but never swift or adaptable. He’d been right enough leaving when he did, taking his legendary eye for talent into the private sector. Cut loose from the worst of the bureaucracy, he’d been free to cultivate freelancers who never would have been tolerated inside The Company. Some tremendous successes. And also Cross. A brilliantly conscienceless Beltway climber with a clear-eyed view of national security unclouded by sentiment. The perfect man to mind the details while Terrence theorized, projected, handled esoteric ops, hunted talent, and gradually, willingly, ceded authority to the young man who would sit on the couch in his office honing his mind against the grinding wheel of Terrence’s relentlessly merciless vision of the future.

Until the several follies of the Montmartre Incident made it possible for Cross to get up off the couch and bring in his evil mastermind desk.

They will know if you lie.

He looks up.

“Who do you want?”

Cross tips his head, acknowledging, it seems, Terrence’s submission to the circumstances.

“I want Jae.”

Terrence looks into his notebook’s open pages.

“She won’t work for you.”

“No. But she’ll work for *you*. Why else would you be here, Terrence, if not for that fact?”

Haven stretches his legs, crosses his ankles, folds his arms over his chest.

That fact.”

Terrence looks at Haven, meeting, for the first time since coming into the room, his desert-scarred eyes.

Haven blinks, deliberate closure, open.

“Late in the day, old man, for recrimination.”

Terrence does not blink.

“I didn’t say anything.”

Haven raises a hand from the couch, drops it.

“My mistake. I thought there was a general excavation going on. Dig up the old bones and che

them.”

Terrence looks back at Cross.

“Jae won’t work for you. And she won’t work with him. Pick another name.”

Cross shakes his head.

“There are no other names. Let’s not play, you don’t have anyone else in your armory. They all stayed with Kestrel. You have Jae. Which is the point, don’t you see? Terrence. Don’t you see? Must I spell it out?”

Terrence doesn’t move.

Cross raises and drops his shoulders.

“I must. You have Jae. She is all you have. How long would you have her if she knew you were the one who assigned Haven to Iraq?”

Terrence is remembering the first annual Conference for Securing 21st-Century Security. Year 2000. His first sight of Cross. Front row of a panel titled National Security and Climate Change, which Terrence, overtired from an afternoon spent trolling the hospitality suites for contracts to keep Kestrel alive as it incubated, raised his voice over a modulated debate regarding the virtues of switching to grass as a fossil fuel replacement: *We all know the final solution, and I’m using those words entirely conscious of what they imply—we all know that the final solution to global fucking climate change is going to be a radical reduction in global fucking population.* The hush that followed, the heads turned away, suggested that Terrence had rather embarrassingly just vomited into his own lap but that everyone would be pleased to ignore the fact if he would quietly leave and go clean himself up in the bathroom. He did, in fact, remove himself to the john, where Cross found him splashing cold water on the back of his neck and asked if he could buy him a drink. Three vodka tonics later Terrence had offered him a job, never so lucky before or since to have such a talent fall into his lap.

Haven had been there. One of the believers who had followed Terrence out of government service. His own opinion of Cross characteristically laconic. *That guy. He’s got something on his mind, old man.*

Now they all have something on their mind. The past.

Terrence takes a step sideways.

“What do you have for her?”

Cross pushes his empty hands across the desk, a man all in.

“Money. I have money for her.”

“She doesn’t need money.”

Haven touches the top of his head.

“*Doesn’t need money.*”

Cross flicks his hand westward.

“She’s running around the desert in a forty-year-old Land Rover, living on a diet of amphetamines and psychedelics, playing with robots, and occasionally crawling to the edge of civilization to do whatever piecemeal visual analysis you manage to scrape up for her.”

His face tightens, brows drawing together, lips tensed.

“She is.”

He searches for the words to describe what she is and, finding them, spits them out.

“A wasted resource.”

No worse sin.

He exhales, looks at the ceiling, appears about to smile but does not.

“She’s what you have to offer us, Terrence.”

He looks down from the ceiling.

~~“You got her to leave Disaster City and go to Haiti. Either you can get her to go into the field for me or you cannot.”~~

Terrence thinks about Haiti. The Pelican Case full of cash. How heavy it was.

“There were lives to save in Haiti.”

Cross allows this.

“Are there not lives to be saved now?”

Terrence knows there are. A vast number of lives that may be saved.

Do they know?

Still holding the top page of the contract Cross has offered him, he folds it over once, a letter fold, and uses his thumb to sharpen the crease.

“If I can convince her. Security will be an issue.”

Eyes shooting to Haven and back to the paper.

“As I said. She won’t work with *him*. Obviously.”

Cross shakes his head.

“Haven has an asset already.”

Terrence doesn’t look at Haven.

“You have an asset.”

Haven lifts a finger.

“I have someone else for Jae.”

Terrence folds the paper over again.

“Rosalind?”

Cross shakes his head.

“We don’t like her for this. Too eccentric. Jae should travel with a stabilizing influence.”

Haven lifts three fingers.

“I have a team.”

Terrence sharpens the second crease.

“*Team.*”

“Sloan. The new guy. Everybody wants to work with him. And two others. She’ll be bracketed. Highest-value asset. Sloan and his team, they’re very good.”

Terrence looks at Cross.

“Jae won’t want anyone from Kestrel.”

Cross looks at the clocks over the door.

“You have someone new, Terrence? Looking to package this job? Take a commission on the asset and her protection?”

Terrence looks at the paper in his hands. It betrays no tremor, no sign of what is in his heart. *It’s not too late to stop*, he tells himself. But it is too late. And he wouldn’t stop even if he could.

The abyss is at his feet. He steps into it with a word.

“Skinner.”

The atmosphere in the room changes with the speaking of the name. One’s ears might pop.

The five clocks tick.

Cross touches a button on his keyboard, and Terrence knows that however many devices may have been recording their conversation to this point, they have all gone dead.

Cross looks at the surface of his black desk, magic mirror of an equally dark future.

“*Skinner is gone. You said. Never to return. You said.*”

He looks up from the black desk.

“Was that not the truth?”

“I never said *dead*.”

For the first time since the conference began, Cross rises, fingertips pressing down bone-white on the black desktop.

“If he’d been dead that would have been the ideal outcome, wouldn’t it have been? The list of people unsatisfied with that result would have been brief indeed. Fuck. Terrence. If he were dead, you might still own this company.”

Terrence smiles.

“I doubt that very much.”

Cross appears to notice for the first time that he is standing. He lifts his hands from the desk, blood returning, pinkening the skin.

“It’s an absurd notion. A nonstarter. No.”

Terrence looks at the carpet between his toes, nodding.

“Like I said, I’ll likely never have another chance to twist your balls. So. No Skinner, no Jae.”

Cross looks at the bank of clock faces.

“He’s not viable.”

Terrence looks at the clocks, watches a few seconds of Cross’s time whirl away.

“Jae can give *someone* the inside track on the West-Tebrum attackers. Once word gets out that you have her, she’ll be targeted. I won’t run her out there in the open without the best protection. So she gets Skinner. Or you can’t have her.”

Cross taps his teeth with his thumbnail, realizes what he’s doing, stops.

“So strident, Terrence. So urgent.”

He’s looking at the clocks again.

“I would be concerned about his focus on the present.”

Terrence is still holding the folded page of his contract. He opens it, glances inside, closes it.

“If he’d wanted to do something about Montmartre, he would have done it a long time ago. And you wouldn’t be here now.”

Cross looks at him.

“No. Neither of us would be here.”

He sits, and moves a manila folder to the center of his desk. Anachronistic luxury. He flips it open. A USB drive is taped inside the cover. From his angle, standing on the opposite side of the desk, Terrence can see a heavily redacted document, 70 percent thick black censor lines.

“What will he want?”

“Money.”

“Yes. And?”

Terrence is trying not to feel how carefully Haven is not looking at him. He tucks the contract away inside his jacket.

“An asset. That’s all he ever wanted.”

Cross closes the file.

“Such a *simple* man.”

He looks at the closed file, pushes it across the desk.

“Details. An op for Jae. Now. And yes.”

He looks at the clocks yet again, time the enemy.

“You can have Skinner.”

Haven rises, a single movement that seems to originate somewhere above his head, a force drawing him smoothly to his feet as his ankles and arms uncross.

“Are we talking about this?”

Cross looks at him, places a finger on the keyboard button he pressed minutes before.

“We have talked about it, Haven.”

He presses the button; recording resumed.

“And now we are done talking about it.”

Haven touches his fresh haircut.

“Opposed.”

He raises his voice slightly, speaks to the room.

“For the record.”

Cross types something, rapid fire.

“Events are moving quickly, Terrence. I have to leave for Europe. Constant status reports. American lives are at risk. Let’s do our best to protect them. Patriots.”

Haven is looking at Terrence now, very much so.

“*Patriots*, Terrence. Remember to tell Skinner.”

Exiting through the killbox atrium, Terrence squeezes the USB drive from the file between his thumb and forefinger, secure in the knowledge that Cross and Haven know he lied. But that they only know the lies he wanted them to know. The other lie, *The Lie*, they didn’t catch that one, had no hope of catching it, or of catching him.

They are so smart. Such good liars themselves, they know when they are being lied to.

But I’m the one who taught them how to lie so well.

An hour later, in a Georgetown Internet café, he sends an email, calling Skinner back to the world.

The monster summoned, he starts waiting to die, and is soon on a Lufthansa flight to Cologne speeding toward that end.

agents of taps

JAE HAS BEEN parked across the highway from the motel for nearly an hour. She doesn't want to go in. She's begun to develop sores from sleeping in the Land Rover, not to mention an intimate sweaty reek that reminds her of day-old undergraduate sex, but she does not want to go in.

Still, a bed, a shower.

She should have both before she shows up at Creech.

It's one thing to arrive two days late, another to show up reeking of road sweat, filthy from weeks of living in the desert, more than slightly wild-eyed: the residue of an admittedly ill-advised peyote experiment still wringing itself from her brain. The military expects a certain amount of eccentricity from freelance geniuses, but she suspects that she may have pushed somewhat beyond an acceptable level of quirks. Off in the desert, taking solo shamanistic journeys and playing with homemade robots. Over the border into crazy land. One of the many foreign lands where unsanctioned travel can result in one's security clearances being revoked. A trip that ends with one's file being moved from the *Watchers* drawer to the *Watched*.

Jae does not want to be watched.

A bed. A shower.

She needs the job at Creech. Whatever it is, whatever it is they want her to see and understand from them, she needs the trickle of money it will release into her accounts. Money fuels her on the road. Keeps her off the grid and away from the torrents of media and information that swamp her with compulsions, dragging her into an undertow of data that never resolves into the sense her mind insists is just below the surface. She needs to top off her account, check her PO box in Barstow, pick up some parts she ordered for the robots, speak to her dealer, maybe, and get back into the sand.

She's gonna have to go in that fucking motel and look at its shitting cable TV, for fuck sake whether she wants to or not. She raises the Nikon Prostaff 12x25 binoculars to her eyes and looks out at the motel. Battered by decades of desert sun. Parched wood. A shallow foundation perched on little more than sand and gravel. What would it take from wind or rain to turn this shit box into kindling? That's the peyote talking, backwash of paranoia at the end of any lengthy trip. Fuck it. Take a look.

The Worm will tell her if there's anything to fear.

She returns the binoculars to the case dangling off a strap looped around the glove box handle. Checklist time. She checks the laces of her trail boots, making sure they're tight. She checks the pockets of her safari vest, confirming that they hold her Garmin GPSMAP 62, Motorola Brute cell phone, a Uniden GMRS Two-Way radio with thirty-six-mile desert range, Leatherman Skeletool, three twenty-four-hundred-calorie food bars, a solar blanket, and a 3.1-liter CamelBak hydration pouch clipped to the shoulder rings. Julbo Micropores PT sunglasses on her face and jungle hat on her head. Hair and fingernails clipped to utilitarian lengths. Underwear mostly clean.

She could laugh at herself.

If a sandstorm materializes out of nowhere and blows her over the rainbow or if the Frenchman Mountain Fault becomes active and opens a crevasse beneath her feet that sends her tumbling into

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