

{!TSR}{BM}{!DATELINE}

Camp Putnam, New York: April 12, T+0:00

{/!DATELINE}

The forest was on fire, and the sky was full of orange smoke. Land mines kept cooking off and exploding in the distance, making Sergeant Lourdes jump every single time—and regret it every single time, since it made the barbed wire imbedded in his leg snag and tear some more.

Sweat poured down his face, chilling instantly in the cool night air. There was blood—blood everywhere but he couldn't think about that, couldn't think about what had happened to him, about his injuries, about what was going to happen to his family without him. He couldn't think about how he probably wouldn't make it to see morning.

All he could think about was the sentry post, twenty-five yards away. The cramped little box he'd been stationed in for three years now, the box he'd come to loathe, then tolerate, then start to think of as his home away from home. There was a picture of his baby girl taped to one window. There was a flask of coffee in there and right now he was so thirsty, his mouth felt dry as a bone and—

—and he couldn't think about that. Because his uniform jacket was in there, too, hanging on the back of his wooden chair. And in the pocket of that jacket was his cell phone, his direct link to his superiors. To the people who had to know what had happened. To the people who could fix this, who could make everything okay, if he could just tell them.

Just tell them the fence was down, the perimeter defenses compromised, and the detainees were *free*.

Sergeant Brian Lourdes had a pretty good security clearance. Not enough to know why those seven men had been locked away so tight. Not enough to know why they were so dangerous they could never be set free. But enough to know what would happen if they ever did get out. Enough to know it could mean the end of America.

Of course that was never supposed to happen. When Lourdes first came to the facility in upstate New York, he'd been amazed at the level of security on Camp Putnam. The razor-wire fences stood twenty feet high, two layers with a fifty-yard stretch of minefield in between. Twenty men monitored that fence rain or shine, every day of the year. There were more than seven hundred cameras mounted on the fence posts, trained in every direction, watching every corner of that fence that surrounded over a hundred acres of forests and fields.

There was no gate in that fence, no way in or out at all. The detainees never left, and nobody ever went in to check up on them. That was how it stood when Sergeant Lourdes was assigned to this job. That was how it was supposed to be forever.

As of tonight all bets were off.

Lourdes grabbed at a tree root and hauled himself across the rocky ground. The wire in his leg felt like it was on fire, but he gritted his teeth and ignored it. He was trained for this. Trained to keep going, no matter what. Trained to know his duty. He dug his fingers down into the dirt and pulled himself another yard. The sentry box—and his phone—was getting closer.

Three years in that stupid box. Three years working the easiest and most boring job Lourdes had ever had. Every morning he had shown up at oh six hundred and logged himself in, then logged himself back out at eighteen hundred sharp. Twice a day he walked his mile-long section of the fence, checking the chain link, making sure animals hadn't burrowed underneath it, looking for signs of rust or damage. The rest of the time he just sat watching the trees beyond the inner fence, looking for any sign of movement. If he saw a bird in there, or a fox hunting for eggs, he checked a little box on a form on his computer screen and clicked the trackpad to file it. And that was it. There had never been any sign of the detainees. Wherever they were in there they kept to themselves. He'd never gotten so much as a glimpse of any of them.

Three years when nothing—*nothing* happened.

And then tonight, not an hour after his day started, before the sun even came up, everything changed. A Predator drone had come in just over the tree line, a sleek little machine that flew so low he didn't even hear its engine until it was almost on top of him. The laptop computer in the sentry box had lit up with warnings and alarms, but by then Lourdes was already jumping out of his box, running to see what was going on.

The drone was only overhead for a second. He just had time to identify it as an unmanned aircraft. *But it's one of ours*, he'd thought. *It's the good guys, just checking up on the camp*. He lifted one hand to wave at it, thinking that he would get a call on his radio at any second explaining what the drone was doing there. Instead, the Predator had attacked without warning. Rockets had streaked from pods slung under its fuselage—Hellfire missiles that slammed into the ground like giant hammers beating on the earth.

After that things got very loud and very painful. The fence exploded outward, barbed-wire shrapnel scything through the air, tearing branches off trees, making the dirt boil and jump. The drone was gone before Sergeant Lourdes even knew he'd been hit. Just before the pain started, just before he collapsed to the ground in a blubbering heap, he saw what the chopper had wrought.

A section of both fences maybe a hundred yards wide was just ... gone. The minefield was a series of craters, entirely neutralized. On the far side of the fence a stand of trees had been knocked down, and Lourdes could see all the way in to a clearing lit only by starlight.

Lourdes had been told what to do if something like this happened, given instructions by the same LT who had promised him it never *could* happen. The satellites watching Camp Putnam, the cameras on the fence, would take care of almost everything. Automatic alarms would switch on and soldiers would be summoned; backup defenses would activate without anyone needing to push a button. But there was one thing he had to do. He had to pick up the phone and call a man in Virginia, a man who would need to know the fence was down. A man who could make everything okay, fix everything, but who needed to hear from an actual human being, needed an eyewitness account of what had happened, before he could get to work. Sergeant Lourdes just had to make that call—he just had to pick up the phone.

The phone—the satellite cell phone he was supposed to keep on him at all times—was back in the sentry box, only a few dozen yards away. Lourdes pulled himself another couple of feet. The pain didn't matter. The blood he'd lost didn't matter.

He was so close now. He felt like he could almost reach out and touch the wall of the box. Just a few more yards and—

“There,” someone said, from behind him. “Another one.”

“This one’s mine,” a second voice said.

Sergeant Lourdes closed his eyes and said a quick prayer. Then he rolled over on his back and pushed himself up on his elbows. He had to see. Three years of his life making sure these bastards didn’t get out. Three years making sure they didn’t end the world. He had to know what they looked like.

There were six of them, standing in a rough line near where the fence had been just a few minutes before. Big guys, young looking. Muscular, but not exactly Schwarzenegger types. Their hair was long and unkempt, and they had scraggly beards and their eyes—

Something was wrong with their eyes.

Lourdes couldn’t quite make out their faces. They were silhouetted against the burning trees and the orange smoke that masked the stars. But their eyes should be glittering, reflecting some of that light. Shouldn’t they?

“Freeze right where you are!” Lourdes shouted, and he grabbed for his sidearm. He lifted the heavy pistol and pointed at the closest one, the one who was already jogging toward him. He fired three times, forcing himself to aim with each shot.

The detainee ducked sideways each time, as if he were just stepping out of the way of the bullets. That was when Lourdes realized just how fast the asshole was moving. Time had slowed down, and even his racing heartbeat sounded like a dull, thudding bass line.

The detainee was on top of him so suddenly he didn't have a chance to breathe. The guy stank, but Lourdes didn't care about that so much after the detainee's thumbs sank into his windpipe and pressed down, *hard*.

Lourdes tried to raise the handgun again, but he couldn't feel his arm. Couldn't feel much of anything anymore. His vision was going black.

The last thing he saw was the detainee's eyes, staring down into his. Eyes that weren't human. They were black, solid black, like an animal's eyes.

The detainee leaned in harder with his thumbs, but it didn't matter to Lourdes. Sergeant Brian Lourdes, U.S. Army, was already dead. So he didn't see what happened next. He didn't see his killer's face split down the middle with a cruel smile.

{!DATELINE}

Fort Belvoir, Virginia: April 12, T+3:17

{/!DATELINE}

Three hundred miles away in an office cubicle, Captain Jim Chapel was trying not to fall asleep at his desk. It wasn't easy. It was too early in the year for air-conditioning, so the air in the office building at Fort Belvoir was still and lifeless, and the only sounds he could hear were the noise of fingers clacking away at keyboards and the low buzz of the compact fluorescent lightbulbs.

He sensed someone coming up from behind him and sat up straighter in his chair, trying to make it look like he was busy. It wouldn't do to have some civilian bigwig come in here and see him slouched over his desk. When the newcomer walked into his cubicle and leaned over him, though, it wasn't who he'd been expecting.

“So are you going to ever tell me what you did in Afghanistan?” Sara asked, her breath hot on Chapel’s neck. She laughed. “I’ll make it worth your while.”

Chapel didn’t move an inch. Sara—Major Sara Volks, INSCOM, to be proper about it—was leaning over his shoulder, theoretically looking at the same computer screen he’d been staring at all morning. It was displaying yet another memo about the technical details of a weapons system under development by a civilian contractor. He doubted very much she was interested in what it had to say.

Still, old habits die hard. In his head he matched up the required clearance to look at this memo with what he knew of her clearance. She was a major in INSCOM, the army’s Intelligence and Security Command. Which meant it was fine, she was more than qualified to see this, and he relaxed a bit.

Then he realized she was leaning over his shoulder, her mouth only about half an inch from his ear, and that she smelled really, really good. After that he didn’t relax at all. “You know I can’t talk about that,” he said. “Ma’am.”

Chapel moved office every few weeks as his job demanded, and every time he found himself a new cubicle he ended up having a new reporting officer—a new boss, for all intents and purposes. Major Volks was hardly the worst of the lot. She was capable and efficient enough that she didn’t need to yell at her people to keep them working. She was also an audacious flirt ... at least as far as Chapel was concerned. He hadn’t seen her make eyes at any of the other men in the office, and he was pretty sure he was the only soldier in the fort who got to call her by her first name. The way she spoke to him was ridiculously unprofessional and probably enough to get both of them written up and reassigned, if he’d wanted to make a stink about it.

Not that he minded. It didn't hurt that her regulation-cut hair was platinum blond, that she had big, soulful eyes and a body sculpted by countless hours in the fort's excellent fitness center. Or that she had a mischievous grin that made Chapel's knees go a little weak.

Up to this point she'd kept her comments suggestive rather than brazen. She'd asked him a lot of questions about himself, always prodding for information she had to know he couldn't give her—like his wartime record, and what exactly his job description was now. It was the kind of flirting people in Military Intelligence did because they spent so much of their time staying secret that even the hint of disclosure was exciting.

She'd also asked him what he liked to do when he went home at night, and whether he enjoyed Italian food. There was a nice Italian restaurant not a mile outside of the fort—the implication was clear.

So far he hadn't taken the bait.

“We are silent warriors, right?” she said, a hint of a laugh in her voice. “That's the creed of the MIC.” She leaned in closer, which he hadn't thought was possible before. Her shoulder touched his back. “All right. Keep your secrets. For now.”

Chapel was no shrinking violet, and he was sorely tempted. And this was definitely the moment. She'd opened a door—it was up to him to walk through. He could ask her out on a date and he knew she would say yes.

Or he could say nothing and keep things casual and flirtatious and harmless between them forever.

Initiating things would put his career at risk—his career, such as it was. A series of boring desk jobs doing oversight on weapons contractors until he retired on a comfortable little pension.

Go for it, he told himself. “I will tell you one secret,” he said. “I *love* Italian. And in fact, I was thinking—”

Was it possible she could lean in even closer? She was almost rubbing his back with her shoulder. “Yes?” She reached out one hand to put it on his.

His left hand.

Damn.

He felt her flinch. Felt her whole body tense. “Oh,” she said.

His left arm wasn't there anymore. He could forget that sometimes, because of the *thing* they'd given him to replace it. Some days he went whole hours without remembering what was attached to his body.

“It's ... cold,” Sara said.

“Silicone,” he told her, his voice very low. “Looks pretty real, right? They did a great job making it look like the other one. There's even hair on the knuckles.”

“I didn't know,” she said. “You didn't say anything ...”

“It's not a secret. Though I tend not to mention it until it comes up.” He lifted the hand and flexed the fingers for her. “State of the art.” His heart sank in his chest. He could pretend it was normal, pretend that there was nothing weird about his new arm. But he knew how it creeped people out. “Almost as good as the real thing.”

“Afghanistan?” she asked, her eyes knowing and sympathetic. He'd learned to dread that look.

The last thing he wanted was her pity. “Yeah. It’s not a big thing. Listen, as I was saying, I don’t have any plans tonight and—”

“I need to think about it,” she said. She stood up straight. She wasn’t meeting his eyes when she spoke to him, now. “Let me get back to you. Fraternization isn’t exactly permitted, after all, and—”

“I understand,” Chapel told her. And he did. This wasn’t what she’d been expecting. She’d been flirting with a professional soldier, a strong, vigorous man in his early forties with just a touch of gray at his temples. Not an amputee.

She turned to go, and he sighed in disappointment. This wasn’t the first time things had worked out this way. He’d had years to get used to the arm—and how people reacted to it. But damn, he had really hoped that this time—

“I, uh,” she said, and now she did look him in the eye. “I didn’t say no. I said, let me get back to you.”

“Sure,” he said.

She walked away. She looked angry. Like he was the one who had brushed her off.

Well, in a couple of weeks he would be reassigned to a new office, anyway. Probably one where his reporting officer was fat and bald and smelled like cheap cigars. And it wasn’t like it could have gone anywhere with Sara anyway, not with both of them hiding a relationship from their superior officers and hoping they never got caught.

He turned back to his computer and tried to make sense of the memo on his screen. He got about three sentences in before he realized he couldn’t remember which weapons system this memo related to, or why any of it mattered in the slightest degree.

Grunting in frustration he pushed himself up out of his chair and logged off from the computer. There was no way he was going to get any work done, not until he got his head clear, and that meant he needed to go swim some laps.

Just as he stepped out of the cubicle he heard the chime as his BlackBerry received a new text message.

“I cannot deal with you right now,” he told his phone, and walked away.

{!DATELINE}

Fort Belvoir, Virginia: April 12, T+4:02

{/!DATELINE}

When they flew him home from Afghanistan, one of the first thoughts through Chapel’s mind had been that he would never swim again.

He’d grown up in Florida, swimming in the canals with turtles and manatees. He’d gotten his SCUBA certification at the age of twelve and his MSD—the highest level of nonprofessional certification—by eighteen. He’d spent more of his youth in the water than on dry land, at least according to his mother. He’d seriously considered going into the navy instead of the army, maybe even becoming a frogman—in the end, he had only decided to be a grunt because he didn’t want to spend half his life swabbing decks. He had learned quickly enough that the army liked soldiers who could swim, too—it had been a big part of his being chosen for Special Forces training—and he had made a point of doing twenty laps a day in the nearest pool to keep in shape. It had become his refuge, his private time to just think and move and be free and weightless. He’d never felt as at peace anywhere else as he did while swimming.

Now that was over.

A man with one arm can only swim in circles, he'd thought. He had been lying in a specially made stretcher on board a troop transport flying into National Airport. He had spent most of the flight staring out the window, feeling sorry for himself.

His life was over. His career was over—he would never go back into the theater of operations, never do anything real or valuable again. No one would ever take him seriously for the rest of his life—he would just be a cripple, someone they should feel sorry for. He pitied himself more than anyone else ever could.

That had ended when he got to Walter Reed and started his rehabilitation. He'd been a little shocked when he met the man they sent to teach him how to live with one arm. The physical therapist had come into the room in a wheelchair because he was missing his right leg. He was also missing his right arm, and his right eye. He'd been a master gunnery sergeant with the Marines in Iraq and had thrown himself on an IED to protect what he called his boys. Not a single one of them had been injured that day. Just him. "Call me Top," he'd said, and he held out his left hand for Chapel to shake.

Chapel had reached automatically to take that hand. It had taken him a second to remember his own left hand wasn't there anymore. Eventually he'd awkwardly reached over and shook Top's hand with his right.

"See?" Top had said. "You're already getting the hang of it. You make do with what you've got. Hell, I should know it's not easy, but then, I never expected life to be easy. I know you army boys think life is one long vacation. In the Marines we have this thing called a work ethic."

“In the army we’ve got this thing called brains; we use that instead,” Chapel had fired back. When they both stopped laughing, there were tears in Chapel’s eyes. The tears took a lot longer to stop than the laughter. Top let that go. He didn’t mind if his boys—and Chapel was one of his boys now, like it or not—cried a little, or screamed in pain when they felt like it. “A soldier who can still bitch is a happy soldier,” Top had told him. “When they shut up, when they stop griping, that’s when I know one of my boys is in trouble.”

There had been plenty of tears. And plenty of screaming. The artificial arm they gave Chapel was a miracle. It would mean living an almost entirely normal life. It functioned exactly like a real arm, and it responded to his nerve impulses so he just had to think about moving his arm and it did what he wanted. It was light-years beyond any prosthetic ever built before. But being fitted for it meant undergoing endless grueling surgeries as the nerves that should have been serving his missing arm were moved to new places, as electrodes were implanted in his chest and shoulder.

If it hadn’t been for Top, Chapel was pretty sure he wouldn’t have made it. He would have eaten his own sidearm, frankly. But Top had shown him that life—even a life limited by circumstance—could still mean something. “Hell, I’m one of the lucky ones,” Top had told him one day while they were doing strength-training exercises.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Chapel said.

“Hell, no. Everything that he took away, God made sure I had a spare handy. There’s only three body parts you only get one of—your nose, your heart, and one other one, and I got to keep all those. Now, my little buttercup, shall we get back to work?”

It had taken a long time for Chapel to confess to Top what he missed the most. “I wish I could still swim,” he said. “I used to love swimming. I can’t get my magic arm wet, though.”

“So take it off when you go swimming,” Top suggested.

Chapel shook his head. “Won’t work. I mean, I guess I could kick my way around a pool if I had to. If my life depended on it. I could tread water just fine if I fell off a boat or something. But without two arms, I’m not going to break any speed records. I’ll never swim laps again. That was the main way I got exercise before.”

“I always hated swimming, myself,” Top said. “Never liked going in over my head and getting water in my nose. But okay.”

“Okay what?”

“Okay, starting tomorrow, you’re going to teach me how to swim with one arm and one leg.”

“I can’t do that,” Chapel said. “I don’t think it can be done. And anyway, I’m not a teacher.”

“So you got two things to learn with that big army brain of yours,” Top said. “As usual, the marine is going to have to do the hard part. And probably drown, too. Nothing new about that, either.”

Chapel had known exactly what Top was trying to do. He had wanted to shake his head and say that kind of psych-out wasn’t going to work on him. But he trusted Top by then, trusted him more than he’d trusted anyone before in his life. So the next morning they had gone down to the hospital’s swimming pool with a couple burly orderlies (who still had all their limbs), and Chapel had taught Top how to swim.

Top did drown, twice. Each time he was resuscitated, and each time he got back in the pool. He had to be dragged out of the water by the orderlies so many times they refused to help anymore and quit on the spot. Top put in a requisition for more orderlies, and they kept going. The results weren't ever perfect. Top swimming with one arm and one leg looked kind of like a drunk dolphin flopping back and forth in the water. He had a lot of trouble swimming in a straight line, and even one lap of the pool left him so exhausted he had to rest for an hour before he started again.

In the end, though, Top could swim. "I ever fall off an ocean liner on one of those celebrity cruises, I guess I'll be okay," Top had said, when he decided they were done. When he'd successfully swum ten laps, in less than eight hours. "Now, Captain Chapel. Sir. You want to tell me why we went to all this trouble? Sir, you want to tell me why I forced you to do this demeaning task, sir?"

"Because," Chapel had said, "if I can show an enlisted man like you how to swim, sorry sack of guts that you are, I can surely figure out how to do it with my own glorious and beautiful officer's body."

"Sir, yes, sir," Top had said. "Now get in that goddamned pool or I will throw you in."

Now—years later—Chapel was up to twenty laps at a time, in less than an hour. He would never do the butterfly crawl again, but he'd mastered a kind of half stroke that used his arm mostly for steering and let his legs do all the work. Fort Belvoir had a wonderful pool in its fitness center, and he availed himself of it daily.

There was no feeling like it.

The blood-warm water streamed past him, buoying him up like gentle hands. He didn't have to think about anything else while he swam—he just focused on his body, on his movements. His muscles moved in perfect concert, his arm and his legs snapping into an old familiar rhythm. His head turned from side to side as he drew in each breath and let it out again in a long, slow exhale. There was no better feeling in the world.

Thanks, Top, he thought, as he kicked off for the start of lap seventeen.

The last time he'd seen Top had been at the master gunnery sergeant's wedding, less than a year previous. Top had walked down the aisle with two legs and two arms—the only way anyone could tell he wasn't whole was that he was wearing an eye patch. Chapel had gotten to know Top's bride a little bit and she had turned out to be the toughest, most sarcastic woman he'd ever met. She needed to be if she was going to keep up with Top.

Lap eighteen. Chapel would have stayed in the pool all day if he could have. He needed to get back to work, though. The frustration and boredom of his morning and of Major Volks's rejection were gone, or at least he'd worked off enough of that negativity to actually start drafting some memos of his own.

Still. Maybe he'd shoot for twenty-five laps today.

Across the pool. Back. He kicked off for lap nineteen.

And then stopped himself in the water before he'd gone five yards out.

"Hello?" he said.

A man in a pin-striped suit was standing at the edge of the pool, looking down at him. He had a thick white towel in his hands and something else. A BlackBerry, maybe.

“Can I help you with something? Make it quick, though,” Chapel said. “I’m pretty good on the straightaways, but treading water isn’t exactly my forte.”

Anyone wearing that kind of suit in Fort Belvoir was a civilian, and Chapel had a bad moment where he thought the guy might be some kind of CEO from one of the corporations he was watchdogging. The buzz-cut hair said otherwise, though, as did the sheer bulk of muscle crammed into the jacket.

Chapel was trained in Military Intelligence. He’d studied all the different ways to put clues together, to draw conclusions from scant evidence. From just the look of this guy he knew right away that he had to be CIA.

The agency had tentacles everywhere, and there were plenty of them wrapped around INSCOM and Fort Belvoir. They tended to stay in other parts of the fort though, where Chapel couldn’t see them, and he’d always been happy about that. Military Intelligence and civilian spies never got along.

“Listen, if you just came to watch the freak go for a swim, that’s fine,” Chapel said, because the guy still hadn’t told him what he wanted. “But then I’ll just get back to it.”

The agency guy shook his head, slowly. And then he started to laugh. His whole body shook as he guffawed and chortled and chuckled.

Chapel swam over to the edge of the pool and dragged himself out. Water poured off him in torrents as he stormed around the side of the pool, headed straight for the laughing bastard. If fraternizing with Sara could cost him his career, punching out a CIA man could get him thrown in the brig, but at that moment he did not give one good goddamn. Nobody laughed at Jim Chapel like that.

Before he could land the punch, though, the CIA bastard lifted the BlackBerry he was holding and held it up at Chapel's eye level. Chapel saw that it was his own smartphone. The one he'd left at his desk when he headed for the pool.

The screen said he had twenty-seven new text messages, and three new voice mails. Chapel grabbed the phone and scrolled through the phone's logs. Every single message had come from the same number. There were e-mails, too, from a military address he didn't recognize, but he knew with a cold certainty they came from the same person who'd sent all those texts.

"When you didn't answer," the CIA man said, still burbling with mirth, "they sent me to come find you. We have to go. Now. The man who's been trying to contact you is not the kind of person you keep waiting."

Chapel stared into his eyes. They were hazel, green in the middle and gold around the edges, and they were full of laughter, still.

"Give me that," Chapel said, and grabbed the towel.

{!DATELINE}

Fort Belvoir, Virginia: April 12, T+4:03

{/!DATELINE}

Chapel read one of the e-mails for the third time, still not sure what the hell was going on. It went on for pages, but most of that was just boilerplate confidentiality statements—legalese describing what exactly would happen to anyone who forwarded or printed out the e-mail. Standard stuff for military intelligence. The only real content of the e-mail was a single line of tersely written text:

{EMAIL}

Report instanter DIA DX Pentagon for new orders. Reply to acknowledge.

{/EMAIL}

Chapel understood all that just fine. DIA was the Defense Intelligence Agency, the top level of the military intelligence pyramid. DX was the Directorate for Defense Counterintelligence and HUMINT—HUMINT being Human Intelligence, or good old-fashioned spycraft. DX was the group that used to give him his orders back when he was a theater operative in Afghanistan, but he hadn't worked for them for a long time—these days his work was handled directly by INSCOM, and he hadn't so much as spoken to anyone in the DIA in five years.

Technically, of course, he still had to answer all the way up that chain, and if somebody at the DIA wanted him to show up at their office and get new orders, he was required to do so. But what on earth could they want him for?

“You know anything about this, Laughing Boy?” he asked the CIA goon.

Laughing Boy shook his head. The very idea seemed to set him off on another chuckling fit. “I just do as I'm told.”

Chapel stared at the man. His involvement in this—even if it just came down to fetching Chapel when he wouldn't answer his phone—added a whole new wrinkle of weirdness. On paper the DIA and the civilian CIA worked hand in glove, but everyone in the intelligence community knew there was a permanent divide and lasting hatred between the defense department and the civilian intelligence organizations. They never shared anything with each other unless they were legally required to. If the CIA and the

DIA were working together, then that could only mean something really bad had happened and that rivalry had been put aside long enough to clean it up.

And somehow that meant they needed a one-armed captain from INSCOM to hold the bucket and the mop.

Chapel rubbed vigorously with the towel at the skin on the left side of his chest. Laughing Boy raised an eyebrow and Chapel grunted in frustration. “My skin has to be dry or the electrodes don’t work right. Do you mind? I need to get dressed.”

Laughing Boy kept giggling, but he stepped aside to let Chapel head for the locker room. Chapel sat down on a wooden bench inside and picked up the arm. It only weighed nine pounds—lighter than the original. Its silicone cover looked exactly like a real human arm up until you reached the shoulder, where it flared out into a pair of molded clamps. Putting it on was simplicity—he simply drew it over the stump of his shoulder until it fit snugly. The arm recognized automatically that it was on and the clamps squeezed down gently on Chapel’s flesh until it was locked into place.

As he did every time he put it on, he ran it through a quick check to make sure everything was working all right. He lifted the arm and then swung it backward, made a fist, and then straightened his hand out like he was about to deliver a karate chop. Finally, to check the fingers he touched each of them in turn with the thumb.

Living nerves in his shoulder and chest had been rewired to replace the ones he’d lost. Sensors in his new hand sent messages to those nerves through subcutaneous electrodes. The neurosurgery had gone so smoothly that now when Chapel touched his artificial thumb to his artificial index finger, he actually felt them rubbing against each

other. He could pick up a playing card with those fingers and feel the smooth coating of its lamination, or touch sandpaper and feel how rough it was.

He thought about what Top would say. *“There’s guys out there with two hooks instead of hands that learn how to make omelets in the morning without getting egg all over their shirts. You, my boy, are living in science fiction tomorrowland. Is it not a glorious thing to be living in George Jetson world?”*

“Sure is, Top,” Chapel said, out loud.

Jerks could laugh at him all they wanted for being a freak. Jim Chapel was whole. Top had taught him that. He was whole and vital and he could do anything he set his mind to. Whatever the DIA wanted him for, he was ready.

He dressed himself hurriedly and then tapped a message on the BlackBerry acknowledging that he was on his way. To the Pentagon.

Coming out of the locker room he found Laughing Boy waiting for him. “All right, you delivered your message,” Chapel said. “You can go now, I’m being a good boy.”

Laughing Boy shook his head and chortled a little. “Nope. I’m supposed to drive you there myself. Make sure you show up.”

“I know how to follow orders,” Chapel insisted. Laughing Boy didn’t even shrug. “Fine. We’ll go in just a second. I need to let my reporting officer know where I’m going—”

Laughing Boy shook his head.

So it was one of those kinds of briefings, then. The kind where you just disappeared off the face of the earth and nobody knew where you went. This was getting weirder by the minute.

Chapel sighed. “Fine. Let’s go.”

{!DATELINE}

Poughkeepsie, New York: April 12, T+4:04

{/!DATELINE}

Two hundred and fifty miles away, Lieutenant Barry Charles slapped the helmet of the greenest private in his squad. “We ran through this in the simulator just last month, remember? The train extraction—that’s exactly how we’re going to do this. Get all the nice civilians out of the car first, then we take down the target. Don’t let any of the nice civilians get hurt. Don’t let the target get hurt, at least not too much. We’ve got orders to bring him in alive. You children understand what I’m saying?”

The four men Charles commanded all saluted. In their body armor and protective masks they looked like a mean bunch of sons of bitches, Charles had to admit that. They were the best men the 308th counterintelligence battalion had ever trained, and they were ripped and ready.

“Then let’s take this train. By the book, soldiers!”

The men shouted a wordless response and swarmed toward the train. Command had signaled ahead and forced the train to stop ten miles north of Poughkeepsie, out in the sticks where collateral damage would be light. The train’s conductor had confirmed the presence of the target and told them which car he was in. Charles had been given only

the quickest of briefings on this mission—a picture of the target and a warning that the man he wanted was potentially armed and definitely dangerous, an escapee from a DoD detention facility upstate—but he had no doubt this was going to be a cakewalk.

“Unlock the doors now,” he called—he was patched in directly with the train’s own radio system and the conductor was ready to do as he said.

Looking up at the train now he saw the anxious faces of commuters and tourists staring down at him. He gave them a cheery wave to put them at ease and then turned to signal to his men. There were two doors on the train car, one at either end. He had four men—one to take the door, one to provide cover. Simplicity itself. He dropped his hand and the men hit the doors running, the pneumatic locks hissing open for them. The metal side of the train pinged in the morning sun. Through the windows Charles watched his men take up stations inside the train, covering each other just like they’d been trained.

There were a couple of screams and some angry shouts, but nothing Charles wasn’t expecting. Civilians started pouring out of the train car in a nearly orderly fashion. About as orderly as you could expect from citizens with no military discipline or training. Charles shouted for them to head as quickly as possible to the safety of a big box hardware store a hundred yards behind him, and they did as they were told.

“Lieutenant, sir, we have him,” one of his squad called. The voice in his ear sounded pumped up and excited. “He’s just sitting there, looks like he might be asleep.”

Talk about your lucky breaks. “Well, whatever you do,” Charles said, “don’t be rude and wake him up. Are the civilians clear?”

“Sir, yes, sir,” another of the squad called.

“I’m coming up. Just keep your eyes open.”

Charles got one foot up on the door platform and grabbed a safety rail. He let his carbine swing across the front of his chest as he hauled himself up into the airlock-like compartment between train cars. The door that lead into the car proper was activated by a slap plate. He reached down to activate it.

Hell broke out before the door even had a chance to slide open.

“Sir, he’s moving—” someone shouted.

“—does not appear to be armed, repeat, I see no weapons—”

“What the hell? What the hell did he just—”

The door in front of Charles slid open and he looked into a scene of utter chaos. A man with a scraggly beard had picked up one of Charles’s men, and as Charles watched, the target threw the soldier into one of his squad mates, sending them both sprawling over the rows of seats. A third squad member came at the target with his carbine up and ready to fire.

The target reached forward, grabbed the soldier’s arm, and twisted it around like he was trying to break a green branch off a tree.

Charles heard a series of pops like muffled gunfire, but he knew what they actually were—the sounds of the soldier’s bones snapping, one by one. A second later the soldier started screaming. He dropped to the floor, down for the count.

Charles started to rush forward, to come to the defense of his men, but he nearly tripped over what he thought was luggage that had fallen into the aisle.

It wasn’t luggage. It was his fourth squad member. Looking down, Charles saw the man was still alive but broken like a porcelain doll. His mask was gone, and his face was obscured by blood.

Lieutenant Charles looked up at the man who had neutralized his entire squad and for a moment—a split second—he stopped and stared, because he couldn't do anything else. The man's eyes. There was something wrong with the man's eyes. They were solid black, from side to side. Charles thought for a moment he was looking into empty eye sockets. But no—no—he could see them shining—

He didn't waste any more time. He brought his carbine up and started firing in tight, controlled three-shot bursts. Just like he'd been trained. Charles had spent enough time on the firing range—and in real life, live fire operations—to know how to shoot, and how to hit what he aimed at.

Human targets, though, couldn't move as fast as the thing in front of him. It got one foot up on the armrest of a train seat, then the other was on the headrest. Charles tried to track the thing but he couldn't—it moved too fast as it crammed itself into the overhead luggage rack and wriggled toward him like a worm.

Suddenly it was above him, at head height, and its hands were reaching down for him. Charles tried to bring his weapon up, putting every ounce of speed he had into reacquiring his target.

The *thing* was faster. Its hands tore away Charles's mask, and then its thumbs went for his eyes. **{/BM} {/!TSR}**