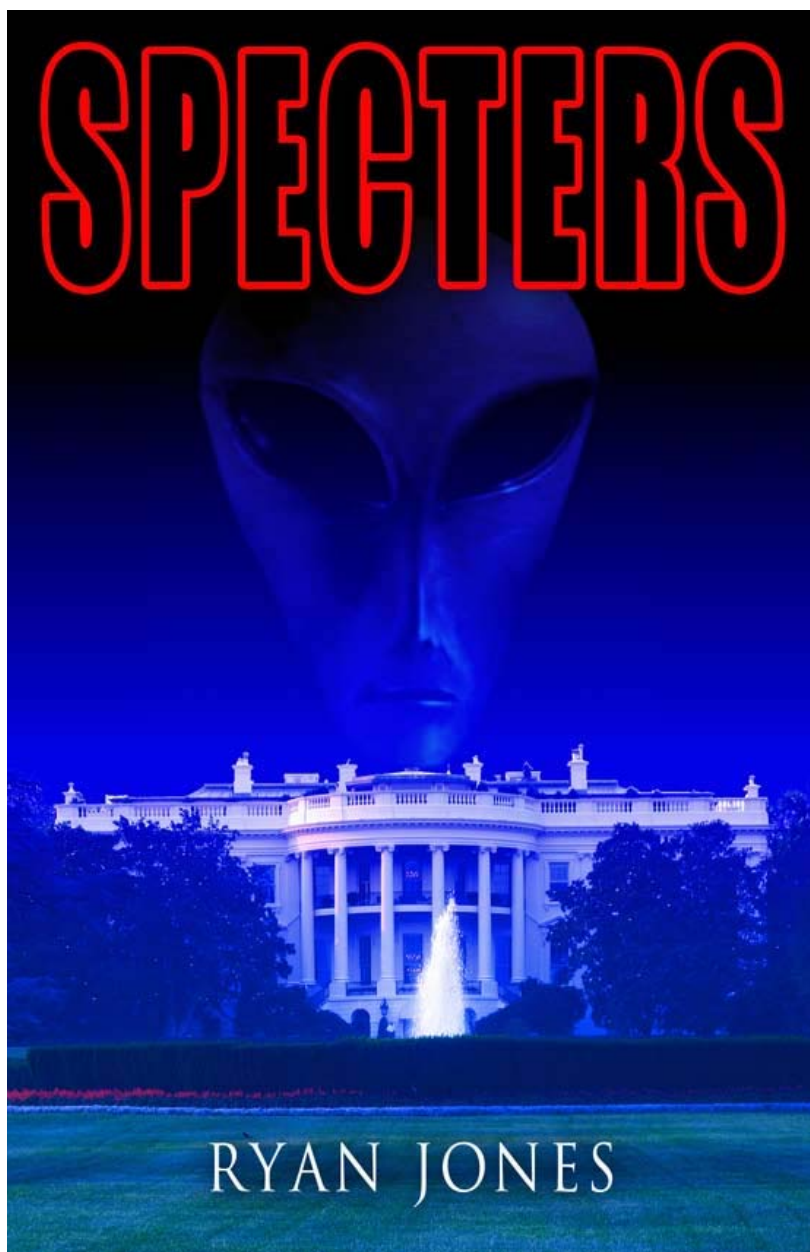


SPECTERS



RYAN JONES

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FIRE DANCE ENTERPRISES

SPECTERS

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**Firedance Enterprises
PO Box 6021
Chesterfield, MO 63006-6021**

ISBN 978-0-615-26198-0

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ISBN 1-931190-52-6

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To the woman who believes in me far more than I ever believed in myself, my beloved wife Carol; I give you my heartfelt thanks for sharing your life with me.

To my parents, Russell and Jerry Jones, for your persistent cheerleading.

To my dear friends Helen and Denny Carter and the Chesterfield Writer's Group for always honoring me as "the author in your midst" even when I felt more like a hack writer with an unlikely dream.

To Gregg and Pam Miltenberger, for teaching me about firearms, giving me a new hobby, and for being really good friends along the way.

To George White for the fighter pilot's perspective, and to "Dennis," the B-52 pilot whose UFO story forms the basis for the close encounter in chapter 2. Thank you for sharing your war stories with me.

To Amy Helvey my supervisor and Kevin Slattery my manager, thank you so much for your support and tolerance of my moonlight endeavors.

And thanks to all of you who refused to let DATASHARK be my first and last book by doggedly demanding another one of me, even when I was quite content to move on from this whole "writing thing." Many of you have already read SPECTERS in manuscript form when it was better known as "the book in the box." Without your unrelenting encouragement, the book you hold in your hands simply wouldn't exist. Thank you!

PROLOGUE

"We shall show mercy, but we shall not ask for it." - Sir Winston Churchill

MILLBROOK, NEW YORK

"Here it comes," the younger man said.

The gold Mercedes S600 emerged from behind the mansion. It wound down the driveway at a rapid clip. The windows were smoked glass, preventing the two men from seeing the driver.

"Arming now," the older man said, turning a key on the control pad in his gloved hands. A small red light indicated the system was in readiness. The Mercedes turned a bend in the serpentine driveway and disappeared from view.

They had planned this mission for weeks. They knew every detail of the grounds and the surrounding neighborhood from memory. Their position was well hidden, located in the dense shrubbery of the adjacent estate. From their vantage point they could see the house and much of the driveway. Most importantly, they could see the street in front. They knew the car would be pulling up to the gate. The private security guard would be opening it even now.

The Mercedes appeared again, rapidly accelerating. "Must be in a hurry," the older man whispered. They would have to be good shots on this one.

The younger man focused his binoculars on a particular spot in the street, where a road crew had patched a chuckhole with fresh asphalt the day before. Parked cars now flanked the patch, forming a chute that forced cars coming from either direction to pass through single-file. The Mercedes swerved slightly, aiming to thread that gap.

"Get ready." The younger man raised his hand and held it steady. They could hear the car's turbodiesel engine roaring as the Mercedes rushed into the trap.

The younger man's hand slashed toward the ground just before the car's front bumper crossed the asphalt patch. "Now!"

The older man depressed the large red button on the controller.

Two kilograms of plastic explosives detonated at the bottom of the chuckhole. For an instant the blinding flash blanked out the Mercedes. An expanding ball of superheated gases and debris exploded outward at supersonic speed. The shock wave rocketed out from the blast center in a misty white ring, striking the two men with a physical impact, as if it had slapped them in the face.

The force of the detonation threw the target vehicle into the air, its momentum still carrying it forward. The Mercedes tumbled end over end. When it landed it rolled once, then came to rest upright, badly mangled and burning.

Something was wrong.

If the assassination had gone according to plan, the explosives would have detonated directly underneath the passenger compartment, breaking the vehicle in two and cleanly obliterating the occupant. But the younger assassin had overcompensated for the vehicle's speed. The bomb had gone off under the engine instead.

Although the front end of the vehicle was in shreds, the robust construction of the Mercedes had left the passenger compartment relatively intact. They could see their victim slumped unconscious in her seat through the shattered windows.

The older man swore and pulled a Soviet assault rifle out of his satchel. He extended the folding stock and chambered a round. A perfectionist, he never left a job half-done. He placed the weapon to his shoulder, but the younger man forced the barrel down with his hand.

"No! Look!"

Although the bomb they had planted did not destroy the car, the firewall had been fractured. The flames from the engine compartment were now flooding under the dashboard. Their victim was wrenched from her unconsciousness when the flesh of her lower legs began to burn. She frantically flailed her arms, seeking escape from the wreckage, but the twisted metal held her body fast. She let out a piercing cry as the flames spread to her torso.

The woman's screams reached the assassins' nest. The older man pulled the younger killer's hand away from the rifle. He raised the weapon again.

"Don't!" the younger man warned. "You'll give away our position!"

"I'm a killer, dammit, not a sadist!" The elder assassin centered the iron sights of the AKM on the woman's head.

The flames roared about her. Each strand of her pretty dyed-red hair caught fire and lifted in wisps, as if blown by a breeze. The woman arched her back and shrieked.

The target and the sights remained stationary for an instant. The rifle bucked. A high pitched crack filled the air. The woman's head jerked once, then fell forward onto the heat-warped steering wheel.

The fire rapidly incinerated her corpse.

"C'mon," the younger man pleaded, "let's get out of here!"

The shock of the explosion had set off burglar alarms all over the neighborhood. Sirens whooped and wailed. Both men knew the exclusive nature of the community ensured a rapid police response.

Collapsing the folding stock, the marksman stuffed the still-smoking weapon into his satchel. Throwing the detonator on the ground, he followed his partner to the open manhole of a large storm sewer that ran under the property.

The two men tossed in their equipment and scurried down the hatch, pulling the cover shut after them. They emerged a few hundred yards away, behind a house whose occupants were away on business. The city sewer service van was parked in the driveway. The assassins loaded their equipment in the back and drove away. Police cars and fire trucks rushed past them in the opposite direction.

* * *

The FBI crime lab determined the plastic explosive used in the attack was Czech-made Semtex, probably from the same lot as a large shipment that had been made to Libya in 1995. They concluded the bombing was the work of a radical Islamic terrorist cell. The homemade remote detonator found near the murder scene and the cartridge from a Russian-manufactured rifle provided further confirmation. Although the victim's husband had numerous international business connections, no terrorist groups, Islamic or otherwise, made any serious claims for the attack.

Despite a massive investigation by the FBI and local law enforcement, the murder was never solved.

CHAPTER 1: NATIONAL ASSETS

FINAL EXAM

"The past is a specter that haunts men all of their days." - Anonymous

TEN YEARS LATER – PRESENT DAY

It was a cool spring evening in Washington D.C., but the air inside the van felt hot. It was not hot because of the temperature. It was hot because they were on a mission.

Joshua Culp knew the feeling well. He had the same feeling during his first parachute jump so many years ago. He had experienced it as an Army Ranger parachuting into hot landing zones in Grenada and Panama. He had felt it on his first job as an operative for the CIA, meeting with a new agent on a dark side street in Budapest. The feeling never changed.

Only the faces did.

He squirmed in the van's jump seat, trying to get comfortable. The chair was obviously designed for someone smaller than his lanky six-foot-one frame. Of course, Culp was not as limber as he used to be, either. A bead of sweat ran down his temple. He ran a handkerchief over his mostly-bald head, then patted down the remaining gray hair that circled the back of his skull like a laurel wreath.

Two young men sat in the front seats of the van. They looked tense and lost in thought. The team leader, a dark-haired hulk named Rick Szymanski, had the physique of a discus thrower and the mind of a chess champion. The slender young man next to him was Tom Koenig, an expert in electronics. Culp stared at them for a moment, with memories of his times in the "hot seat" washing over him. They were his star pupils at the CIA's Operative Training School at Camp Peary, Virginia.

Tonight was their final exam.

For the last year, the twelve students in Culp's class had undergone rigorous physical conditioning, training in setting up a successful intelligence campaign, and in the varied "black arts" of their chosen profession. Now he was allowing them to put their skills to use in the real world. Culp always tested his best students first, to give the rest something to shoot for.

Their target was a firm named Continental Export Company, or Conexco. Exporting businesses were always possible fronts for arms dealers, drug traffickers, and the like. Szymanski and Koenig's assignment was to find out if Conexco was "dirty." Culp already knew it was, but his students would have to find out for themselves.

For the last week, the pair had researched public information on the firm, tapped its phones, sorted through its garbage, and conducted surveillance from an adjacent building. Tonight they would execute the final phase of their

campaign, a break-in of the Conexco offices to plant bugs and photograph key files.

The security at the building was tight. If Culp's students could pull this one off, he knew they could probably handle any job the agency might throw at them.

After investigating several avenues of covert entry, Szymanski and Koenig chose the method Culp liked best--walking in the front door. The van with Verizon company markings pulled into a lot across the street and parked with Culp's window facing the building.

The observation window used an opening inset a few millimeters into the side of the van with a non-reflective coating over the glass. A square of thin fabric was stretched over this window, silk-screened stenciled with Verizon's logo and flush with the van's surface, making the window completely invisible from more than ten feet away.

Culp scrutinized the glass-paneled building through his binoculars. A single uniformed security guard was stationed at the door, his attention occupied by a newspaper. "Okay, fifth floor, I've got one light."

Koenig joined Culp in surveying the upper stories. "Let's see, who might that be?" He searched the building floor plan on his laptop computer. "Third window from the east end. That would be the offices of Magruder, Gorman and Tomasi, attorneys at law. I believe Mr. Gorman is working late again."

"Yeah, he's having trouble with his phones, too," Szymanski added.

"We'll have to take care of that for him. Which guard is on duty?"

Szymanski had the guard's schedules memorized. "Bernie Tollard has the night shift this week."

Koenig entered the rear of the van and picked up a headset from its computerized console. He punched in three sets of codes and hit the SEND key. He twisted a knob labeled INTERFERENCE to a high setting.

The first code was the telephone number of the cheesebox, or telephone relay. They had placed the device in the fifth floor telephone closet a few days ago. The second code instructed the cheesebox to call the security desk. The third code altered the origin of the call.

The security desk phone rang. Tollard answered.

"Hey, Bernie," Koenig said in a tired voice, "this is Gary Gorman of Magruder-Gorman upstairs. Listen, I have a proposal due tomorrow and my fax line is all screwed up. I've called the phone company and they're sending somebody out. Could you let them in when they get here?"

The voice sounded a little high for Mr. Gorman, but there was a lot of static. Tollard used his computer terminal to check who was still in the building. Magruder-Gorman was the only office still occupied on the fifth floor. Gary Gorman was listed as responsible for setting his office's alarms. Gorman's extension was listed as 2317. Tollard glanced at the number of the incoming call on his phone's display--"X2317."

"Okay, Mr. Gorman, your line does sound pretty bad. Do you want me to call you when they arrive?"

"No, that 's all right, Bernie, just send them up."

"You got it, sir."

Koenig broke the connection. "Let's roll."

The van stopped on the nearly empty parking lot a few minutes later. Culp gave the men a few parting words.

"All right, I want you two to handle this just like it was a real overseas assignment. If you screw up, you're going to be dealing with the real police and get thrown in a real jail. So watch yourself. He wagged a finger at them. "Remember, *just like the real thing.*"

The pair nodded.

Culp noted their calm demeanor. That calm would be put to the test as well. He returned his gaze to the observation window. He was the watcher, posted to give the team warning if anything went awry. Culp set his radio to the pair's frequency and started his scanner, monitoring police channels.

Szymanski and Koenig emerged from the vehicle and walked casually into the building.

Szymanski flashed his spurious phone company ID. "We're here to repair a line at..." he consulted the work order. "...Magruder, Gorman and Tomasi. Can you point us in the right direction?"

"Sure, fifth floor, turn left, second door."

"Thanks. Oh," Szymanski added, as if it were an afterthought, "and could you deactivate the alarm on the fifth floor phone closet? We may need access to the trunk line."

"No problem." Tollard keyed the proper commands into his terminal.

Szymanski waved, heading for the elevators. "Thanks. We'll give you a call if we're going to be over a half hour."

"No hurry," the guard said, smiling. "It's a slow night."

Once on the fifth floor, they went straight to the phone closet.

Szymanski opened his satchel and pulled out an aluminum tube, about a foot long. A thin blade-like probe protruded from the end. He inserted the probe into the phone closet's doorknob and pressed the switch on the Cobra Lockmaster. Quickly and silently, the Cobra applied pressures to the innards of the lock mechanism. Five seconds later the door clicked open.

Inside, their first action was to don surgical gloves. Culp had taught them to wear a thin cotton liner beneath the latex. Without the liners, sweat from their hands could cause a fingerprint to "bleed through," leaving evidence behind.

Both men retrieved night vision goggles and headsets from their tool bags. Szymanski spoke into the microphone, activating his transmitter. "Sorcerer, this is Hook, how do you read?"

Culp's reply was immediate. "Sorcerer reads you loud and clear."

Szymanski and Koenig set to work.

For the previous week they had established their cover, walking around the offices in their Verizon hard hats, checking lines and replacing a few “malfunctioning” phones with identical bugged versions. They had also located Conexco's alarm system in the fifth floor phone closet. The system was tied by the internal phone lines to the central security desk, which would respond if Conexco's office perimeter was broken.

Koenig carefully bridged this connection, so the wire could be reconnected after their visit. A second-rate burglar would have simply severed the line, but this was not a second-rate alarm system. Previous inspection had revealed that a second wire ran to the security desk, alerting the guards if the phone connection was broken, accidentally or otherwise. Bridging the phone wire maintained electrical continuity with the alarm circuit, without allowing the phone line to pass its signal. Koenig nodded to his partner.

They were ready.

Conexco's office was on the far end of the hallway, facing the front of the building. Szymanski snapped a specialized head on the Cobra tool, then gave Culp a heads-up. "Sorcerer, Hook is going in now. Let me know if anyone stirs."

"Roger, Hook."

The door to Conexco's office was secured with considerably more care than the Telco closet. Both the door lock and the deadbolt were equipped with FedSpec security locks, reputedly pick-proof because of a second group of lock pins set at a ninety-degree angle to the first. The second Cobra head used two synchronized probes, specially cut to “pass through” each other at the correct instant to tickle both sets of pins into submission. Thirty seconds after they began, Szymanski and Koenig were inside Conexco's portal.

The infrared occupancy sensors triggered when the two men entered the office. The fluorescent lights flickered to life. A dull beeping could be heard deep inside the suite, the alarm trying in vain to summon help over the dead phone line. Koenig closed the door behind him.

"We're in," Szymanski called over the radio. "Killing the lights now." He walked quickly to each sensor and flicked the override switch, plunging the room back into darkness. Both men flipped down their night vision goggles. They quickly scanned the lime-green image of their surroundings.

Koenig went to the alarm panel, set inside a closet with the copier. He had all the tools with him to force the alarm system into submission, but he had a feeling they would not be necessary.

He was right.

Next to the panel was an instruction sheet for the alarm system, stapled into the drywall. Koenig examined the sheet, even though he knew the specs for this particular model by heart.

The staple on one corner of the sheet was missing.

Koenig lifted the loose corner. Underneath, in a sloppy hand, numbers were scrawled in ball-point pen directly on the drywall:

911457

The LED display above the alarm keypad flashed.

PERIMETER INTRUSION

Koenig then typed in the code.

911457

SYSTEM DISARMED

Koenig smiled smugly. He flipped the office circuit breakers to make sure the lights stayed off, then went to work.

Their next moves were choreographed to minimize time spent on the premises.

Szymanski went straight to the president's office. If Conexco was involved in anything illegal, the information would be kept close to the top officers, not in the general files.

Finding no concealed safe behind pictures or furniture, he finessed his way into the desk. His training had taught him not to spend time sorting. If a document looked interesting, he had been told, photograph it for future analysis. Szymanski found three files that sounded promising:

CONFIDENTIAL
PRIVATE CLIENTS
SENSITIVE SHIPMENTS

He threw them on the desk and began photographing their contents using a digital camera with an infrared flash.

Koenig went to work installing bugs in strategic locations throughout the office. The first went into the conference room. He slipped cotton covers over his shoes and stood on the massive oak table to install the first transmitter above the suspended ceiling. Afterward, he moved the night vision device aside and inspected the table top with a flashlight. No footprints or flecks of lint. Nothing left behind.

The conference room was an important target, so he installed a second bug behind a Degas print on the wall. This device was a "sacrificial lamb." If Koenig detected a sweep being made for bugs, he would turn off the primary transmitter remotely, leaving the second bug as an easy target for any countermeasures expert to find. And his primary bug would go untouched.

He then distributed microphones in other key locations: the company president's office, the office manager's desk, and above all the break room. He knew this location was almost as important as the president's office for hearing the low-down about an organization.

The bugs transmitted on separate channels. Their relatively weak signals would be picked up by a receiver in the telephone closet and relayed by telephone to the team's remote listening post. With this arrangement, even if the bugs were discovered, the chances of their being traced back to the CIA would

be virtually nil. The relay box in the closet was locked and bore the appropriate telephone company markings to discourage tampering.

Koenig was almost through installing the last transmitter under the office manager's desk when Culp's voice broke in on his headset.

"Hook! Digit! You tripped something! The guards are on their way! *Pull out now!*"

Koenig had just enough time to jump up from under the desk before the door to Conexco's office burst open.

A wedge of light from the hallway spilled into the room. The flood of light almost blinded him, amplified a thousand times by his night vision gear. Two burly guards entered. From their silhouettes, he could see that the first guard held a pistol at the ready, while the second cradled a nightstick.

Koenig was unarmed.

Standing absolutely still, Koenig could tell their eyes were still adjusting to the darkened room. The second guard fumbled in vain with the dead light switches. Neither guard could see Koenig crouching behind a filing cabinet. His mind raced, searching for a way out. There was none.

He checked the area within arm's reach, looking for anything that might be used to his advantage. Twelve inches from his left hand was a heavy glass paperweight, the size of a baseball. He waited until the lead guard's head turned away, then grabbed the sphere and hurled it, letting out a yell to summon all his strength.

The guard whirled, whipping his flashlight around. The sparkling orb glittered in his beam. It caught him in the forehead with a sharp crack. He staggered back against a partition.

Koenig took two quick steps toward the guard. His right foot leapt from the floor, sweeping in a wide arc that knocked the pistol from the stunned guard's hand.

The gun clattered against the file cabinets.

Continuing his rotation, Koenig brought his left elbow back in a sharp jab against the guard's jaw. The contact was hard and quick.

The guard sagged to the floor.

The other man was already lunging at Koenig, lancing at his torso with the nightstick.

Koenig jumped back, knocking the thrusts aside with an open hand.

The guard charged, slashing at Koenig with a blinding combination of fists, feet and the two-foot-long baton.

Koenig's reflexes had been honed to a fine edge by Culp's training, but it was all he could do to fend off the guard's assault. He was slowly forced backward, away from the door.

A wisp of fear crept into his consciousness. *Who is this guy? And where the hell is Hook?*

The guard faked a kick to Koenig's knees, then lashed out with his baton. The weighted aluminum tube ripped through the air with a hiss.

Koenig countered the kick but missed the swing of the nightstick until the very last instant. Jerking his head away from the arcing club, he felt the blow crunch into his night-vision goggles, tearing them from his head.

Koenig hesitated, his eyes adjusting to the sudden darkness. The guard thrust the club into his solar plexus, the force of the blow knocking the wind from his lungs.

The guard followed with a groin kick, doubling Koenig over and sending him to his knees.

"Where's your partner?" the guard demanded, glancing cautiously to the left and right. When no answer came, the guard raked the club over Koenig's arm with a hard, well-placed stroke.

Koenig felt searing pain in his shoulder. The impact knocked him sideways. He put out his left hand to keep from going all the way to the floor. The force of the three blows was starting to make him fuzzy.

Where the hell is Hook? The world started to fade away. Koenig slumped to the floor, believing his partner had deserted him.

"Oh no you don't!" the guard growled. "Wake up!" He kicked the intruder in the ribs. When that failed to revive his captive, the guard drew back his baton. "Maybe a broken rib or two will bring you around."

A vise-like grip crushed the hand holding the baton, twisting his arm behind his back and lifting him off the floor. His scream mixed with the sound of ripping tendons. Like the ram on a pile-driver, the guard was slammed back to the floor and driven to his knees. He cringed, knowing what would happen next.

A hand flashed knife-edge into the base of the guard's neck. His vision filled with a blinding sheet of pain. He slumped unconscious to the floor.

Szymanski grabbed the guard by his collar and hauled him off Koenig's body. He thought angrily about throwing the man at the wall, but restrained himself. One of Culp's rules rang in his head. *The mission first, your partner second, your personal feelings not at all.* Szymanski threw the guard into an untidy pile beside a desk, then tried to rouse Koenig. It was no use. His partner was out cold.

"Sorcerer, Hook! Digit is down! Repeat, Digit is down! We are pulling out!"

"Hook, what the hell is going on? Report!"

"Negative Sorcerer! We are pulling out now, now, now! Meet me at the west fire exit!"

Culp knew better than to argue with the man on the scene. "Roger, Hook, west fire exit."

Szymanski knelt down and looped his arms around Koenig's limp right arm and leg. With a grunt, he heaved his partner's body onto his shoulders in a

fireman's carry. Stepping gingerly over the guards' sprawled forms, he then checked the hallway in both directions.

Clear.

He headed left, leaning slightly forward and sprinting down the hall, Koenig's loose limbs flailing. He knew he was leaving their equipment behind, equipment that would make the purposes of their break-in obvious to even the most inept investigator.

That couldn't be helped.

They had already failed their final exam. There would be no dispute about that. In minutes Szymanski and Koenig had just gone from the top of Culp's class to the bottom. He pushed the thought out of his mind and concentrated on making a safe--if not clean--getaway.

At the stairwell he had to slow his pace. He moved downward as fast as he could, but keeping his balance with the awkward load on his back was difficult. The sweat of exertion and anxiety stung his eyes.

When he finally reached the ground floor, he kicked open the fire exit, silently praying that Culp would be waiting. The door swung open wide. The alarm buzzer echoed loudly in the concrete enclosure. Szymanski stepped sideways to maneuver himself and Koenig's body through the opening.

And found himself staring into the barrel of a gun.

The man wore a dark blue suit. He gripped a silenced Heckler & Koch MP-5 submachine gun with gloved hands.

It was leveled at Szymanski's gut.

With Koenig's bulk draped over his shoulders, there was nothing Szymanski could do to defend himself.

"Stay quiet and get in the van!" the man ordered, motioning with the barrel of the stubby gun. Two other men stood close behind him, each wearing a dark jumpsuit and carrying a toolbox. He took one hand off the gun and spoke into a handheld radio.

"Okay, they're out! Hit it!"

Immediately the glaring light above the door faded to a dull orange glow.

Szymanski looked up at the office building. Other than the occasional glimmer of emergency lights, the structure was completely dark. They had cut the power. He gawked as the men with the toolboxes disappeared into the building.

The man in the suit gestured emphatically with his gun before joining his partners. "*Get in the van!*"

Szymanski complied, moving with a hesitant gait.

The rear doors of the van swung open. Culp was waiting for him. He helped Szymanski slide Koenig's inert form into the back.

Szymanski slammed the rear doors shut.

Culp looked Koenig over quickly. He checked the man's pulse and flicked a penlight across his eyes before pronouncing judgment.

"He'll be okay. We'll have one of the company doctors look at him when we get back. In the meantime, let's get the hell out of here!"

Culp wrestled through the van's tight confines to the driver's seat. In moments, the vehicle merged into the rushing anonymity of the nearest freeway. They continued for a long time in silence, the fresh air slowly driving out the tang of sweat and fear from the vehicle.

"I'm sorry, sir," Szymanski finally said.

Culp locked eyes with Szymanski in the rear-view mirror. "Sorry for what?"

"For botching the test! That was a real mess in there."

Culp shook his head and smiled. "I thought it was incredible."

EXCALIBUR

The Air Force controller worked his panel with his right hand and strangled his rubber stress ball with his left, all the while wishing desperately for a smoke. Even if base regulations hadn't forbidden smoking in the building, the sensitive equipment in the room wouldn't tolerate it. The Deep Space Surveillance Telescope in Socorro, New Mexico was one of the most sophisticated pieces of equipment in the United States' arsenal. An extremely sensitive digital telescope, the DSST kept watch over every satellite overflying the US. On a clear night, the images DSST could pull in were almost supernatural.

It was a very clear night tonight.

The controller remembered his first shift at the DSST. The exercise was tracking the Space Shuttle. To his astonishment, he was able to count the missing heat tiles on the spaceship's belly. He wasn't tracking the Space Shuttle tonight.

The DSST was on GRAYOUT status. Technically, the telescope was down for maintenance, so the operations staff was sent home. Then the senior staff was paged, and had to turn around and report back for duty. The site was running on minimum crew of four people tonight, to minimize the number of eyes--and mouths--present. Beside the controller sat the watch officer and the communications technician. Behind them was the systems engineer, manning a console normally staffed by three airmen.

The controller centered the crosshairs of the telescope on the dull-gray triangle in orbit. He clicked the trackball. Computers whirred. A torrent of data cascaded down his status screen. "I'm locked!" he announced, his voice revealing a lot more stress than he would have liked.

The communications technician beside him he had always thought of as pretty passed the information along without a trace of emotion. "PROPHET control, DSST reports lock on target." How she kept so cool at times like this was beyond him. The response was immediate.

"Roger lock, DSST. STONE, are you go?"

"Affirmative, PROPHET, STONE is go for launch." STONE was the callsign for the Ground Based Missile Defense facility at Fort Greely in Alaska. Ostensibly used for defense against ICBMs launched by rogue nations, the missiles at Ft. Greely had another use not mentioned in Air Force press releases.

A moment's pause. "STONE, you are cleared for launch in five."

"Roger, PROPHET, EXCALIBUR is go in five." Ft. Greely acknowledged.

The watch officer reached in his pocket and slid a bill toward the controller. "Twenty says this is another shot in the dark."

The controller didn't know whether the watch officer's smirk was real or contrived. But the burning sensation in his gut told him things his screen couldn't. "You're on!" he said in a hoarse whisper.

Five minutes later and 2500 miles away, the interceptor missile lifted off, its blazing trail arcing south towards the Gulf of Mexico.

"PROPHET, EXCALIBUR has left the STONE." The controller heard in his headphones. He smiled weakly. The callsigns for the evening had obviously been selected for that one line in mind.

Each of the three stages of the interceptor missile separated without incident and fell into the Pacific. Now clear of the atmosphere, the shroud on the warhead "bus" jettisoned. The bus fired its maneuvering jets, jinking from side to side as it released a trio of "kill vehicles" to follow their own trajectories toward the target.

"Warhead separation is complete," Ft. Greely reported. "All EXCALIBUR units locking on to target."

The watch officer tapped on the console. "Won't be long now. Let's see it!"

The controller dug in his hip pocket. This was one bet he would be happy to lose. He slapped a twenty dollar bill beside his superior's.

Suddenly the target moved. Never straying out of his crosshairs, the ugly gray spacecraft spun about, its flat face toward the incoming warheads. The center of the triangle flashed rapidly like a strobe light. "That's counterfire!" he rasped. "It's shooting back!"

The com technician's voice betrayed only the slight twinge of stress. "PROPHET, DSST reports counterfire from target."

The voice at PROPHET command was equally dispassionate. "Roger, counterfire, DSST. STONE, report telemetry."

The pause seemed too long for good news. The voice from Ft. Greely sounded crestfallen. "STONE reports negative telemetry on all EXCALIBUR units."

The watch officer took on a sportscaster's tone. "That's another Charlie Foxtrot!" he said, reaching for the pair of bills. He leered at the controller. "Watcha say we make DSST a 'not-for-PROPHET' organization so we can actually see our families once in a while?"

The controller's eyes hadn't left his screen. The target was moving again. "I have a bearing change! Target facing east now!"

Even as the technician beside him passed that information to PROPHET command, large holes were suddenly torn in the target, throwing streamers of molten metal into space. After several rapid-fire impacts, the image was blotted out by a blinding fireball. The controller swore, turning down the gain on the telescope before the delicate optics were damaged. When the picture stabilized, the target was gone. There was nothing left but an expanding sphere of glittering debris.

"Holy *shit!*" the controller breathed. He blinked at the screen, too stupefied to pass on the information.

The voice in his headphones jolted him from his trance. "DSST, PROPHET has lost contact with the target. Was it destroyed?"

He nodded dumbly, his eyes never leaving the screen.

Even Miss Composure's voice quavered slightly this time. "That's affirmative, PROPHET, the target was destroyed."

The voice at PROPHET command sounded jubilant. "Acknowledged, DSST! I'm passing a FLASH up the chain right now! Good work, team! Expect incoming commendations! PROPHET out!"

The watch officer slid the twenties toward the controller. "Well, looks like the first round of beers is on you!"

Soon the wreckage became too sparse for the radar to track. The telescope lost its lock, drifting away from the cloud of debris. The controller kept staring at his screen anyway.

"Beer?" he said, barely above a whisper. "I'm gonna need something a lot stiffer than that tonight."

THE ILLEGALS

Twelve students sat in the darkened classroom, their attention fixed on the video monitor. The drama playing out in black and white showed two shadowy figures entering an office, rifling files, and installing listening devices. Before the pair could complete their tasks, two security guards charged into the room. A fight ensued. When it was over, both guards and one of the intruders were unconscious. The tape finished with one of the burglars lifting his partner on his shoulders and dashing from the room. The screen dissolved into static.

The lights came on, making the students squint.

Joshua Culp stood at the front of the classroom with his arms crossed. He searched the face of each student, his frown lines emphasizing the angular features of his face.

"Well, that was...*interesting.*" He faced the pair sitting on the right side of the front row. "Care to add some commentary, gentlemen?"

Szymanski was uninjured, but Koenig's left arm was in a sling. Both men stared at the floor.

Szymanski spoke first. "We screwed up. I thought we caught everything during our security survey. Obviously, I was wrong." He looked up at his instructor. His bruised pride demanded answers. "Could you at least tell us how we were caught?"

Culp's cold blue eyes bore into him. "Sure, I'll tell you what happened. You were double-crossed. By me."

The pair stared at their instructor, the shock of betrayal sinking in slowly. "But...*why*?" Koenig finally sputtered.

"When you were investigating Conexco, did you find anything suspicious?"

"Sure," Szymanski said. "The amount of money their customers were bringing in didn't square with the amount they were spending. Their trash made us suspicious, too. They shredded everything. Everything. It made them look like they were hiding something."

Culp smiled. "You're absolutely right, Mr. Szymanski. They had plenty to hide. Conexco is a front company for the CIA. The money you couldn't account for was funding from the agency. Conexco is used to ship equipment and weapons to our operations all over the world. If you had been able to examine their files, you would have found out which officials in US Customs Service we've been bribing to look the other way. You actually came very close to the truth." Culp walked over and opened the door to the classroom.

"Every employee of Conexco works for the agency--the managers, the secretaries, even...the security guards. When you went in, I had a team waiting for you."

Two battered men entered. One had a bandaged head, a neck brace, and a badly bruised jaw. The other had his right arm strapped tightly across his body. A truss immobilized his shoulders to help heal a fractured collarbone. Both appeared to be in considerable pain. They glared at Culp's students.

The man with the broken collarbone pointed at Szymanski with his free arm. "If I ever run into you off duty, bud...."

Culp held out a restraining hand, suppressing a smile. "I'd wait until you heal up before you threaten any of my pupils, Mitch."

The man fumed in silence.

Koenig's eyes were wide. "But you still haven't said *why*, sir."

Culp frowned, as if the answer was obvious. "When the agency sends you on a job, Mr. Koenig, it could be anywhere in the world. You'll be working with other CIA agents and officers of other countries' intelligence services. People you've never met before. You may not even learn their names. In those situations, there are only two people you can trust. Yourself and your partner. Everyone else is an unknown quantity. Plan your operations accordingly."

Culp jerked a thumb at the blank video monitor. "That was quite a show you put on last night, gentlemen. It took our sanitation team almost two hours to clean up after you. *What were you two thinking?*"

Koenig looked at his shoes. "Well sir, you said to treat the test just like the real thing. I know if I was in another country under non-official cover, making sure my partner and I were not captured would be my top priority."

Culp walked to the chalkboard. He scrawled two words in six-inch-high letters:

ILLEGAL OPERATIONS

"The CIA runs over a hundred agents a year through Camp Peary," Culp lectured. "Most of those are going to their target countries under diplomatic cover--State Department, military attachés and the like. If they're caught spying, the worst that could happen would be a slap on the wrist and being thrown out of the host country. Diplomatic immunity protects them from any serious penalty.

"Because of your abilities, the twelve of you were separated from the other trainees. Your missions will always be under Non-Official Covers--NOCs. Illegal operations. You'll be going in as tourists, corporate employees, even missionaries." He glanced at the two Mormons. The squeaky-clean man and wife team were the antithesis of the public's image of spies. Hopefully foreign counterintelligence agents would feel the same way.

"If you're caught, we'll do our best to get you out through State Department channels. But realistically, there's not much the CIA can do for you. You'll be on your own."

Culp pointed at Koenig and Szymanski. "That's what I was hoping to illustrate with our two friends here. I was set to capture them, haul them back to Camp Peary, and let our staff interrogators go to work for a few days. Just to show all of you how *unpleasant* it can be if you're caught spying in some third-world country."

Culp smirked. "But Hook and Digit had different plans. They decided not to get captured in the first place." He nodded to his star pupils. "Good job."

His eyes roved slowly over the rest of the class. "I have two points to leave with you today. In the last year, the CIA has spent approximately two million dollars apiece on your training. You are *not* expendable. Each one of you is a national asset. So if things go to shit on an assignment, pack up and get your *asset* out of there. Treat the people who are trying to *catch* you as expendable."

He jerked his head toward the battered CIA security guards. "My second point is this--I take your training damn seriously. If you don't believe it, ask my two friends here. A broken bone in training may save your life in the field. Remember that when it's your turn to be tested."

Culp rapped his knuckles on the table. "We have a new standard, class. Make damn sure the rest of you are up to it. Dismissed."

The class and the security guards solemnly filed out. The students' nervous glances flashed between each other and the beat-up security

detachment. If the trainees had not taken Culp's final exam seriously before, they did now.

Culp placed a restraining hand on Szymanski's burly shoulder. "Hook, can you hang around for a few minutes?"

Szymanski noticed the two men who had slipped in the back during class. One was in his mid-forties, with gray hair and an expensive suit. The other was taller and younger, with straight blond hair that lapped over the collar of his black turtleneck sweater.

The pair fixed their eyes on him, striding to the front of the classroom. There was a tiger-like confidence in their gait. They nodded respectfully to Culp.

"Rick Szymanski," Culp introduced, "This is Mr. Hennesey and Mr. McCall. They have a proposition for you. Please give it serious consideration."

Szymanski's brow furrowed. "What about Digit?" After training with his partner for a year, he was reluctant to be separated from him.

"We'll find another partner for Mr. Koenig," Culp assured him. "The job these men are considering you for requires brains *and brawn*."

Culp smiled and clapped his young student on the arm. He left Szymanski alone to talk with the two strangers.