

Chapter One

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That day in February 2076, SeaTac and every other civilian airport in the world became a graveyard for the mammoth carcasses of dead machines.

Kay Zeldin usually worked on her book on Tuesdays and Thursdays, the days she didn't teach. On that Tuesday afternoon in February, the day when everything changed, she was writing the conclusion. She had been working since nine and had skipped lunch because in the process of summing up she had suddenly understood an important subtext she had not consciously grasped while writing the book's main chapters; consequently, she had lost all track of time. But her work came to a forced, violent halt when a collage of images began flowing over her screen and a smooth, cool voice that she assumed must be female said:

We from Marqueui, a planet light years distant from Earth, greet the people of Earth. We advise that you land all aircraft and cease operation of all electronically controlled equipment at once since, shortly after we have delivered this message, we will be blanketing the Earth and Earth's artificial satellites with an electromagnetic pulse. Marq'ssan intends to liberate, not dominate, Earth. Earth's most powerful government has for decades declared that it prefers the annihilation of the human species to the loss of its own power. To render such destruction impossible, our Blanket will disable this and other oppressive governments' electronic communications networks, as well as their most devastating weapon systems. It is Marq'ssan's hope that the Blanket will induce the most powerful humans to realize the importance of communicating and cooperating with us.

As the cool, mellifluous voice spoke, images of aircraft, satellites, nuclear warheads, and military bases played across the screen. Angrily



Kay sought to break her terminal's Internet connection. But the voice and images continued inexorably.

To facilitate communication and cooperation with Marq'ssan, we urge all the governments of the world—including those who are not members of the United Nations—to comply with the following instructions:

First, that each assemble a delegation empowered to negotiate.

Second, that this delegation be composed of three women.

Third, that governments be prepared to transport their delegates to locations we will designate for pickup in 48 hours.

Failure to cooperate with Marq'ssan will result in the destruction of property of value to those whose interests their governments most closely serve.

After the verbal message accompanied by the constant flow of the same collage of images was repeated several times in a dozen languages, the terminal went dead. *Liberate, dominate, yeah, yeah, yeah.* The damned politicians were always promising an end to system- and gate-crashing.

"Terminal on," Kay flat-commanded, but the monitor showed no sign of life. Certain that some new computer virus had been unleashed by an Internet terrorist who had hacked into the university's system, Kay mechanically repeated the command again and again. Finally she snatched up her handset and said, "Dial tone." But the handset, too, had gone dead. Disgusted, she gathered her things into her satchel and donned her rain parka.

The corridor outside her office was dim; the lights had apparently gone out. The door across the hall opened. "Mike, hey," Kay said, recognizing the back-lit silhouette in the doorway. "My phone and terminal are both dead."

"Mine too," he said.

Kay heard another door open. "Christ, the lights, too?"

"Paul, are your phone and terminal dead, like Kay's and mine?" Mike said.

"I suppose that means the elevators are dead." Kay looked up the hall, where at least some light came around the corner from the windows in the corridor elbow. There were no windows down at the other



end, where the concrete-enclosed stairwell lay. “Anybody have a flash-light handy?”

Kay had to use her feet and elbows aggressively to merge herself into the hot, dense mass of bodies in the stairwell. “Claustrophobia, anyone?” Mike said drily. Confident no one could see her, Kay rolled her eyes. Who cared about it being dark and crowded? What mattered was that for some reason the stairs were so jammed that progress down them was impossibly slow. “What is the fucking problem?” she said, half under her breath. After all, it was only four flights down to the main floor. Even if every person in the wing were exiting, it shouldn’t be taking *this* long.

“Any second now the lights will come on again,” Mike said. “I mean, how long can it take for the university to get its backup generator going?”

“Clearly the people who wrote the fire code knew they wouldn’t be around when this kind of scene came down,” someone said facetiously. A graduate student, Kay thought, trying to place the voice. “Another case of the arithmetic-challenged fucking up the world. But you’d think the engineers, at least, would have realized there aren’t enough stairwells in this building. Presumably *they* would have been able to add, subtract, and multiply. Which must mean, folks, that we’re now enjoying the consequences of yet one more example of the famous twentieth-century cost-cutting mentality.”

“If you don’t like the stairs, why don’t you get off them,” Paul said sharply.

“Yeah, the fewer people in this stairwell, the better,” Mike said.

“You guys are a real load,” the smart-ass said. “Scotty, beam me up!”

Kay was sweaty and irritated by the time she got outside. The soft, fine mist refreshed her, but it soon had her hair soaking.

A large crowd had gathered at the Kane Hall entrance to the stairwell of the underground parking complex. A woman weighted down with a half-dozen library volumes announced that the lighting in the stairwell was out and the auto-system offline.



“Which means,” another person said, “that it’s not just the university’s power grid that’s down, but the city’s, as well.”

“So hey,” said a young man with uniformly close-cut hair. “Does that mean there are aliens attacking Earth?”

“URI terrorists sabotaging the city’s infrastructure, more likely,” said a woman with Marilyn Monroe hair and make-up. “It’s not like they haven’t pulled this kind of stunt before.”

It would be a stiff walk to Queen Anne, but Kay was in no mood to sit around waiting for the power to come back online. She crossed Fifteenth NE on the pedestrian overpass, walked the short block to the Ave, and detoured north toward the University Bookstore, which she knew carried umbrellas. Why, if the shutdown had been caused by terrorist sabotage, hadn’t the terrorists claimed responsibility for it? Usually terrorists were eager to be credited with devastation.

Autos that had stalled and been abandoned by their drivers littered the street. The stores she passed were dark inside, and most had their doors closed and shuttered. The block before the bookstore, occupied mostly by game arcades and Asian fast-food joints, teemed with noisy, milling crowds of service-techs and teens. About half a dozen techies blocked the sidewalk, talking loudly and frantically about what sounded like problems with their retinal displays. The loudest voice, a woman’s, pierced the racket of too many people talking and gesturing at once. “It was eerie, you know, like, after that interrupt, there was suddenly just *nothin’*, man, just totally fuckin’ *nothin’*!” Kay felt uncomfortable wading into such a scene but did so with resolution, repeating again and again, “Excuse me, please, excuse me, if I could get by, please . . .”

The effort it took to push north against the crowd, especially given her growing belief that she would find the bookstore closed, began to feel dreamlike. She got about halfway up the block before she realized she was heading into some kind of fight in progress. “This arcade is closed, and I’m locking up,” a rough, angry voice shouted. “So just get the fuck out of here now, before I give you and you and you the trouble you little freaks just seem to be begging for. You hear me, kid? I said *move*.”



The crowd swelled and heaved in an unexpected, violent wave of movement, carrying Kay with it. There was a lot of shouting, and then three shots rang out. People screamed and shoved in terrified panic. “Fucking murderer!” a kid’s voice shrieked. “Bloodsucking killer!”

There was more shouting and then the sound of glass being struck and shattering. Kay barely heard the second volley of shots in the rising cacophony of voices. The crowd suddenly shifted and pressed her hard against the side of an abandoned auto. Kay struggled to free herself, but the people shoving into her were themselves being shoved. She thought she heard a voice amplified with a bullhorn, but its words were swallowed by the racket of the crowd. A few seconds later she heard a series of loud popping sounds. “They’re gassing us!” someone nearby screamed.

Kay’s last thought before she lost consciousness was that though she’d never been in a riot before, she knew that the aerosol couldn’t be tear gas since she had none of the symptoms she’d seen it cause in movies.

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The Seattle Police Department detained everyone they had trapped and gassed on that block of the Ave. Kay protested that she had been swept up in the riot willy-nilly, something she said they should be able to tell from her status and appearance, since almost everyone else arrested was either a service-tech or a student. But the officers hand-writing her ID number, name, address, and name of employer were in no mood for dealing with exceptions. They were stressed by having neither access to their data system nor a working reader for processing the magnetic strips on the detainees’ IDs. And they were concerned about further rioting and looting once night fell, should the power-outage continue. Kay understood all that without being told. But she felt indignant and anxious all the same, especially when they confiscated her satchel, allowing her to keep only her plastic ID and a personal squeeze bottle.

The tranquilizers they dispensed to detainees (with a high price placed on refusal) dulled the edge of her reactions, of course. By the time she had been marched into a steeply-tiered lecture room in Kane Hall and put into a seat in the near-dark, she was beyond caring. Her



nodding tranquillity notwithstanding, the experience was not pleasant. Her legs kept falling asleep, her bladder got uncomfortably full, and her water supply ran out. The display on her watch had gone dark, so she had no notion of the time. She considered whispering across the vacant chair to the service-tech on her left, whom she was sure was implanted, to ask him, but decided it would be better not to encourage conversation, lest it draw the officers' attention.

When National Guard arrived to replace the police officers, they brought more battery-powered lights and a larger and more frighteningly armed contingent of warders. They were thus able to take the detainees in shifts to the rest-room. Though Kay found it a relief to empty her bladder and stretch her legs and back, she did not regard the Guard's replacement of the police as a favorable development. They had the habit of randomly playing their lights over the detainees for closer surveillance. And the very fact that they had been called out raised a host of questions. Again and again Kay reviewed the sequence of events, from the interruption of her work to her arrest. The presence of the Guard implied there must be massive disorder in the streets, which in turn suggested that she could not expect to be properly charged and released on her own recognizance any time soon.

As the tranquilizer began to wear off, Kay grew frustrated and impatient. She sensed restlessness in the detained youth surrounding her and was wondering how long it would be before they would all be given another round of medication when a scuffle broke out at the bottom of the room, only a few steps from the door, in an area that was relatively well-lit. The Guard had been randomly picking individuals for rest-room breaks by shining their lights on them and saying, "You, there, move out to the aisle." Until now, no one had offered the slightest challenge to their control. Kay had a clear view down to the stage and the near end of the passage to the door, but the fracas happened so quickly she didn't catch exactly how it started. A boy began mixing it up with a Guardsman; the two of them engaged in a round of shoving and pushing, and then the kid threw a punch. Kay thought: Teenagers are such fuckwits. Especially male teenagers, whose blood raged notoriously with testosterone and other androgens. And more especially



these, who, regardless of the tranquilizers they'd been fed, had been forced to sit still and silent for hours, all the while each of them was likely listening to the most aggressive music available through their neural implants, getting them worked up emotionally, pumped up for action, whatever the cost.

Add to that, most of the Guard were young males, too.

"Take your fucking hands off me, zombie brain," she was sure the kid yelled— fighting words for Guardsmen, no doubt, ridiculing the exceptionally heavy neural enhancement that soldiers and law enforcement officers claimed to feel pride for.

The situation escalated when several kids in the front rows bounded forward to join forces with their peer. Kay, expecting all the Guard present to desert their positions and rush to join the fray at the front of the room, calculated the likely effects and consequences of such a move and whether there might be an opportunity in it for her. But none of the Guardsmen deserted their posts. She supposed they must have received orders not to do so over their otic implants. Instead, the commanding officer, stationed on the stage, raised his rifle and fired point-blank at a detainee at that moment climbing over the front row of seats. The detainee dropped. Only *then* did the CO shout, "Everyone freeze! Anyone who so much as *moves* is dead meat!"

The room chilled into surreal horror as each detainee implicated in the fracas was cuffed with his hands behind his back, marched onto the stage and, under a flood of lights for all to see, savagely beaten bloody with rifle butts, then bound to one of the rigid plastic chairs Guardsmen set in a line along the back wall of the stage. Kay had no idea how long it all took. By the time the beatings were over her bladder was again full, her nerves fraying, her head pounding with a sick headache. Only when she saw a pair of Guard dragging his limp, blood-covered body to the exit did she realize that she had forgotten about the kid the CO had shot.

Kay dropped into a sort of numbed daze, alternating between the desperate desire to be given a rest-room break and thoughts of how when she had been released she would describe, in writing, exactly what she had seen and understood of the detainees' fracas and the



Guard's retaliation. But rest-room breaks, apparently, had been discontinued. And soon the desire to void her bladder was all she could think of.

"Professor Kay Zeldin! Stand up please!" the commanding officer shouted. The sound of her name jolted Kay out of her daze. Warily, she struggled to her feet. "Professor Zeldin, will you please come to the front of the room."

Professor. Please. The politeness registered. Finally, Kay exulted, finally someone had gotten them to realize they had made a mistake taking her! She shuffled past the two detainees between her and the aisle and limped down the stairs. Her right foot was half-asleep. What a relief. At last she would be free of the nightmare. The situation in the room would probably get worse before it was over, she thought fleetingly, not sure how it could get worse but feeling certain that it would. It had all been a mistake. After she had retrieved her satchel she would demand they give her a properly sealed bottle of water and then run (not walk) to the nearest john. The bastards owed her.

The commanding officer met her at the foot of the stairs. "You are Professor Zeldin?" he whispered. "I'm so sorry for the inconvenience. Of course we had no way of knowing the Seattle PD had made such a mistake."

Kay reluctantly shook the hand that had shot the kid.

"Please, if you will come this way," the officer said, gesturing her to go before him. Still rather dazed, Kay walked through the passage leading to the exit, where a Guardsman was holding the door open for her.

The light in the corridor was bad, but she had no trouble recognizing him. Although he made frequent appearances in news venues, it had been twenty years since she'd seen him in the flesh. His thick, black hair, worn in the current executive standard style—razored well above his ears and sculptured long in the back over his collar—had silver streaks in it now, and he was wearing more jewelry than she remembered him favoring back then. But when her gaze met his, she felt the recognition down to her very bones.

"Zeldin?" he said, his voice as quiet and low-pitched as ever.



“Sedgewick.” Her throat was so parched her voice came out hoarse. As she shook the dry, beringed hand he held out, all she could think of was what a mess she must look.

“I’m glad to have found you,” he said. “When I discovered you hadn’t arrived home, I initiated a priority-one search for you, and the Guard managed to tap your whereabouts with commendable speed and efficiency. Considering the massive disarray, the shutdown of all processing and communications systems, I’m rather gratified by how creditably our security services are doing in the circumstances.”

This is unreal. “A search for me?”

He inclined his head. “But I imagine you’re hungry and thirsty after so many hours in detention.” His gaze shifted to the commanding officer, still at Kay’s side. “Thanks very much, Lieutenant, for your help. Zeldin, did you have any personal effects that were confiscated?”

Kay, reminded of the CO’s presence, felt a sickening jolt as she remembered the shooting. “A rain parka and satchel,” she said quickly. Nervously she fingered her empty squeeze bottle. Should she speak about the shooting now, or after they’d left Kane Hall? “And I’d like to use the rest-room,” she said.

A member of Sedgewick’s retinue (all of whom looked suspiciously like super-enhanced bodyguards) accompanied her to the door of the rest-room, which was as dark as an underground cave. She groped her way first to the toilet, and then to the towel-wipe dispenser. She wished she had her satchel so that she could at least yank a comb through her hair. She didn’t need to see the mirror to know herself a sweaty, wrinkled, unkempt wreck.

Feeling marginally better, Kay hurried back to what now seemed like bright light. One of Sedgewick’s beefy service-techs restored her satchel and parka to her. Sedgewick took her elbow and said that ground transport being difficult for the moment, he was getting around in an armored, EMP-hardened military chopper, which was awaiting them outside in Red Square. One of the service-techs, carrying a battery-powered lantern, led the way. “I’ve been lecturing in this building for years,” Kay said. “And many times in that particular room. I never dreamed it could be used as a jail.”



Sedgewick said, “We’re in disarray, Zeldin. Though it’s terrible to have lost all our satellites, I have to say it’s a blessing all the markets were shut down. If the terrorists had realized how much worse they could have done by leaving the communications satellites alone . . .”

They stepped into cool, damp night and were blasted with the backwash of the whirling helicopter rotors. The clouds had cleared. The enormous olive green chopper occupying the center of Red Square gleamed in the moonlight. Kay had never seen so many stars in an urban sky.

When she was seated and belted in, a service-tech handed her a fresh bottle of water. Since it was too noisy for conversation, Kay spent the ride staring down at the dark city below and out at the sky, so beautifully crusted with stars. She sensed Sedgewick watching her. It had been twenty years, and the two of them hadn’t parted on the best of terms. Their relationship had been emotionally futile and mutually destructive. She recalled how when he had first been appointed Chief of Security Services she had been furious and bitter at his success. The very sight of him in news venues had made her grind her teeth. Later, when her resentment had faded, she had felt a sort of detached amusement at having once known such a powerful person so intimately.

She had never mentioned the affair to Scott or to any of her colleagues or friends. It wasn’t a relationship she had ever wanted to acknowledge.

Kay realized they were flying above Puget Sound. There was too little ambient light to give her any real bearings. Where the hell was Sedgewick taking her, anyway? And *why*?

The chopper set down on a brightly lit roof at what was clearly a military base. Navy, she thought, judging by the number of large craft in its harbor. Certain they hadn’t crossed to the Olympic Peninsula and that their direction had been mostly north, she guessed it was the Everett Home Port.

A fresh-faced executive met them on the roof. Sedgewick introduced him simply as “Torricelli.” They descended one flight into a suite of offices plushly carpeted and furnished, and Sedgewick led her into a small dining room. “Coffee and food first, Torricelli,” Sedgewick



said, sending the executive running. Sedgewick gestured her to a chair at the table. “Everything’s a bit primitive, of course, but you’re probably so famished you couldn’t care less.”

Kay said, “I’d feel a lot better if I could wash my hands and face.”

Sedgewick pointed her at the rest-room. Kay was thrilled to find hot water in the tap and scented soap and towels. She scrubbed the old makeup from her face and applied fresh, then worked for a minute or so on her hair. She looked at her reflected image and scowled. Her tunic was hopelessly rumpled, of course. Apart from that, she thought, to Sedgewick her appearance must seem almost unchanged. A certain degree of visible aging was useful for men, but never had been and probably never would be for women. He might let his jet black hair get silvery, let his face acquire a few mature wrinkles around the eyes, but as with any normal executive or professional woman, the very idea of showing age was out of the question for her. Only service-tech women, unable to afford longevity treatments or cosmetic surgery, let their age show in their faces and bodies.

Kay returned to the dining room just as Torricelli, carrying coffee cups and a thermoflask on a silver tray, entered through the door at the other end of the room. “Coffee, Zeldin?” Sedgewick asked.

“Yes, please. They gave me a tranquilizer when they arrested me, and though it’s worn off, I’m so tired I’m verging on dopey.”

As Torricelli poured coffee for both of them, Sedgewick reached into his pocket and tossed Kay a foil-wrapped tablet. “Take it by mouth. We can’t afford any degree of dopiness tonight.”

How long it’s been, Kay thought. She once would have known better than to have made such a gratuitously stupid remark. She tried to smile at Sedgewick, but he was staring hard at her, in a way that made her too uncomfortable to meet his eyes. “Thanks, but I’m sure the coffee will set me right. I promise not to get dopey on you.”

“I want you bright and sharp, Zeldin. Don’t argue with me. Take the fucking tab.” His voice, though quiet, had gotten that edge in it she suddenly remembered so well. It worked on her like an old behavioral cue. Aware of how intently he was watching her, she dropped any thought of arguing and popped the thing in her mouth. He said,



“I suppose you’re split between being glad to be rescued from detention and wondering if I’m crazy for coming to you.”

His eyes were shining, as she remembered them doing mostly during sex. She looked away.

“I’m sure only you can appreciate how delighted I was when I learned I’d have to spring you. I figured it would make you pleased—or at least *grateful*—to see me. Believe me, I haven’t forgotten your parting words to me.”

Kay clutched the cup of coffee Torricelli had poured her. “The commanding officer shot someone not long before you arrived,” she said hoarsely.

“I’m glad to hear they’re on the ball. They’ve been trained not to fuck around in these kinds of situations. So tell me, Zeldin. Do you still feel murderous toward me?”

Kay’s head jerked up. Was he serious? (Did Sedgewick ever joke?) She said, “There was a certain amount of . . . acrimony when I left. It’s true that I felt . . . resentful. But . . . really. To say I felt *murderous* is a bit of an exaggeration.”

He stared at her. After about ten seconds, he said, “You could have fooled me.”

Kay ran her fingertip around the rim of her cup. “I am glad you rescued me,” she said lamely. “I keep telling myself you’ll tell me why when you’re good and ready.”

Torricelli entered with a tray of food, awkwardly served it, and left. “Fuel up, Zeldin,” Sedgewick said. Kay looked regretfully at the plate of salmon, fried potatoes, and poached eggs. She seldom had the opportunity to eat salmon, which she loved. But her appetite had vanished. Conversation with Sedgewick, she now recalled, had often had that effect on her. It was a chore to eat, but because Sedgewick was watching her, she made the effort.

They ate in silence until Sedgewick, stabbing his fork into an egg yolk, said, “So talk to me, Zeldin. Give me some idea of how you’re feeling about seeing me. I need to know if I’m right to think I can tap you for an important operation.”



Kay put down her fork. Even with food in it, her stomach was burning. “You know how long it’s been since I’ve worked for the Company,” she said. “I can’t possibly be useful to you in any job of importance. I’ve probably forgotten every bit of trade-craft I ever knew.”

“No matter. I’m not interested in recruiting you for something just any field officer could do. But you’re evading my question.”

Kay pushed her plate to the side and reached for the water. “Very well,” she said cautiously. “I feel surprised, not murderous. I feel wary. And I feel uneasy at your tapping me for an operation because I’m not used to working with executives and I like being my own boss.”

“Obviously in some things you haven’t changed,” Sedgewick said. “And *don’t* take that for a compliment. But we’ll let that pass for the moment. Your twenty years out of the game is all to the good for this operation. You’re a genuine academic with no current links to the intelligence community. Twenty years is long enough to make it nearly impossible to trace the connection.”

Kay said, “I’m sorry you wasted your time, Sedgewick. But I really think you should pick another academic. I don’t need the excitement.”

“You don’t need the excitement,” Sedgewick said sarcastically. “Well bully for you. The world we live in is falling down around our ears. After twenty cushy years, you don’t think you owe the system something?”

Kay bit back a retort about the life-styles and perks of executives. It was just like him to claim that she had been the one living a *cushy* existence. “So this job has something to do with the blackout?” she said evenly.

“Blackout? Is that what you’re calling it? Jesus God, woman, every bit of unprotected silicon on the surface of the earth has been sabotaged with a global electromagnetic pulse— and not just on the surface of the earth, but our satellites, as well. The only technology we have left is anything that happened to be underground or specifically protected against an EMP— not because we were ever expecting such a thing, but because EMPs are side-effects of nuclear explosions.”



Kay looked at him in astonishment. “I had no idea,” she said. “I thought . . . I thought, until the Guard showed up, that it was a very localized outage. And then I just assumed it was citywide— and then when you showed up, I assumed it was some kind of coincidence . . .” She remembered his saying something about massive disarray and markets shut down. The information had gone completely over her head, probably because she had been too strung out to be paying proper attention.

“The stimulant should be kicking in any time now,” Sedgewick said. “Maybe then you’ll get just a little more with it.”

Kay flushed. Compulsively she downed another glass of water.

Sedgewick said, “Did you hear the terrorists’ message before they delivered the EMP?”

“Yes. I assumed it was one of those Internet cranks.”

“You heard their demand that three women be sent as negotiators?”

Kay stared at him. “You’re not thinking—” *No and no and no.* She swallowed and tried again: “You’re not thinking of negotiating with them, are you?”

“Of course not. Though we’re definitely thinking of sending women to pose as negotiators.”

Kay grew aware of the dryness in her mouth, the cold sweat and prickling of her skin. All sounds, even the very quiet words Sedgewick spoke, were suddenly crisp and distinct in her ears. The drug had begun to work.

“I’d like to send you.” Sedgewick slid the last quivering pink morsel of the salmon he’d been served into his mouth.

Kay watched the muscles of his discreetly closed mouth work as he chewed, and her stomach heaved. *He was pissed as hell when I left him. Maybe he’s carried a grudge all these years and likes the idea of sacrificing me.*

“No comment?”

Kay shoved her chair back from the table and pulled her collar as far from her throat as it would stretch. “If you’re not planning to negotiate, then you could send anyone,” she said. “Tens of thousands of women work for the government already. Any of them could do



whatever dirty-work you've got planned. I can't think of a single reason you'd come all the way to Seattle to get me to do it."

"I told you earlier, I need your acuity and boldness, Zeldin."

"The old flattery trip," Kay muttered, aware of what a gullible fool he must think her.

"Is it possible? Is it really possible?" Sedgewick's tone was incredulous. "And here I thought the only conceivable obstacle to my recruiting you would be lingering personal animosity. But instead I find it's something I could never have imagined of *you*. Zeldin, Zeldin, Zeldin!" He shook his head. "The one thing I never took you for was a coward."

That stung. Kay looked him in the eye; her hands twisted in her lap. "Surely if it's so important, you want to send the best. I have no weapons training, no personal defense skills to speak of, and don't remember a thing about trade-craft—as I've already told you."

Sedgewick's gaze bored into hers. "What I want, Zeldin, are your analytical abilities, your powers of observation, and your short-term eidetic memory. I want to send you to collect information, so that you can come back and be milked. Now do you get the picture?"

Torricelli came in with another tray. He removed their plates and served them bowls of fruit, then placed a bottle swathed in thermowrap and two short-stemmed crystal glasses frosted with ice at Sedgewick's right hand. Kay looked down at the fruit. Peeled grapes, small melon balls, sliced peaches and kiwi, tiny strawberries, and pulpy bits of mango. Luxury food in any season.

"Oh come, Zeldin. False modesty was never your problem. You know that I know you're extraordinarily good at thinking on your feet, drawing connections, and piecing together disparate bits of data. You would have wound up behind a desk in DC if you hadn't quit—though your combination of talents made you a superb field officer."

Kay fingered her dessert spoon. Once she'd gotten Sedgewick and the Company out of her system, this kind of talk had vanished from her memory. But her sense of familiarity was overwhelming. Such conversations had a kind of rhythm of their own, replete with a certain set of forms, clichés, and jargon that made the outcome feel



inevitable. She looked at him. “You say *now* I was good. But I always believed your sole interest in making me an officer was for your purely personal convenience.”

“I would have had you in a dead-end desk job in my office if that had been true,” Sedgewick said. His eyes narrowed. “But let’s keep to the point, shall we? And tell me now, once for all. Can you really have turned into such a soft, flabby coward?”

Kay was shivering. A side-effect of the drug, she thought. “Do you know who these terrorists are?”

“Our first guess is that they’re probably a splinter group hived off from one of the usual bad guys. Arms of URI, the PRC, GOAS, or the SFS. Or possibly the Global Green Front, Militant Women of the World United, or People Against Nuclear Technology— though any of the latter are a real long-shot, considering the sophistication of the technology involved. One of your tasks will be to help us identify them.”

“Was the PRC hit? Or Islam, Africa, or any of the members of SFS?”

“You mean, so that we could rule out URI, the PRC, GOAS or the SFS? As far as we know from manned flyovers, they were all hit. What do your questions have to do with making your decision? Or am I to take it you’re in?”

In the game, he meant. Kay bit her lip. It all felt so damned inevitable. “I like my life as it’s been,” she said. She couldn’t stand to be thought a coward. He knew that. And he made the recruitment sound like a goddam dare. “If I take the job, it would be with the understanding that it’s not to interfere with my professional responsibilities. As it is, I’m just finishing a book. And . . .” She swallowed. His eyes were intense, waiting— and utterly certain of her decision, the bastard. “But I suppose that as long as everything’s shut down, all that’s on hold anyway. So . . . for the short-term, yes, I’m in.”

Sedgewick picked up the thermowrapped bottle and poured shots into the crystal glasses.

Kay wondered who she was trying to kid. Once in, it would be impossible to leave without his sanction. Why was she saying yes without even taking a night to think about it? What was wrong with her, giving him that much power over her?



“Here,” Sedgewick said, pushing one of the glasses over to her. “You used to like this stuff immensely.”

Kay took the glass and sniffed. Russian vodka, frozen to a syrup. “I shouldn’t,” she said. “Not after having taken the stimulant.” Not to mention the tranquilizer the Seattle PD had foisted on her.

“Oh, but you must,” Sedgewick said. He raised his glass. “To loyalty.”

Kay’s throat seized up. He was watching her, waiting—and daring her. Again. Trembling, she took the glass and raised it. “To loyalty,” she repeated, tossed down the shot, and spooned some fruit into her mouth.

“Torricelli!” Sedgewick bellowed. Kay pressed her napkin hard against her lips to stop their tremor. Sedgewick almost never spoke above his usual normal mumble. One always had to strain to hear him. His shouting sharpened the edge the situation had already put on her nerves.

Torricelli dashed in. “Sir?”

“Get me copies of the standard field contract and loyalty oath. Zeldin’s decided to sign on.”

She would be a contract agent. Of course. There’d be no escaping their precious chain of command.

“Another shot while we’re waiting?” Sedgewick said, reaching for her glass.

“I really shouldn’t,” Kay said as Sedgewick poured the second round.

“Bullshit. You always paced me beautifully.” Sedgewick pushed the refill back to her. “Your turn to make the toast,” he said.

She had never known him to just sip or knock back Russian vodka. He’d always made a fetish of toasting his way through the bottle, as if he were saying a liturgy in the church of his choice. Kay wet her lips. “To the confusion of the enemy,” she said, thinking she was being reasonably non-personal.

After Kay signed the loyalty oath (which hadn’t changed appreciably in the twenty-six or so years since she’d previously signed it), Sedgewick filled out the contract in triplicate, signed it, and had her sign it. Kay was not surprised when Torricelli took away all three copies.



Contract agents could become embarrassments to the Company. The less documentation agents had, the safer for the Company.

“So tell me, Zeldin,” Sedgewick said when they were alone. His eyes were shining again. “Do you still find it close to impossible to say ‘sir’?”

“What are you saying? That you want me to call you ‘sir’?”

His eyes positively glittered. “Don’t you think that if that’s what I wanted you would already have been doing it?”

With every second that passed, Kay remembered more about how Sedgewick tended to get his kicks in perverse ways. She said, “Is it too late for me to back out now?”

“You’d be disappointed if I let you,” Sedgewick said, pouring another round of vodka. “That much I can be sure of.”

Kay knew that drinking with him was dangerous. She said, “If there’s only two days’ time, should you really be keeping me up all night getting drunk?”

Sedgewick shoved her glass back to her. “Oh, but you must drink to the Good Life.”

She was well along from just the first two shots. Already it all seemed just a dream, incredibly unreal. Sedgewick, the global EMP, getting arrested, and seeing a kid shot by a man in uniform. All just a dream. And now she was getting drunk with a man she used to hate intensely and to whom she’d just signed over her life. It was more like a nightmare, really.

