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Cold Kill

Written by P. J. Tracy

Published by Michael Joseph

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Cold Kill

P. J. TRACY

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PROLOGUE

1957

Confine a dozen scientists and engineers to a seemingly endless desert of hard-packed sand with no recreational diversions and, inevitably, they will design and build a golf course.

"This is not just any golf course, Donald," Arthur kept insisting. "This is Augusta, a near-perfect replica of the first nine holes, minus the grass and the water hazards, of course."

"Both of which are somewhat critical components to any dandy golf course, wouldn't you say?"

"Stylistic details, Donald, a matter of preference. Tennis is played with equal enthusiasm on lawn and on clay. Think of this as golf's version of a clay court. I think it's ingenious, really."

"We could really use some caddies and a clubhouse."

"I'll give you that."

Arthur always dressed in the plaid knickers and cap of his hero, Bobby Jones, which looked especially ridiculous in the deserted New Mexico hinterlands. But that was the charming thing about Arthur—in his knickers and cap he *was* at Augusta, on the Masters course Bobby Jones had built, and he made you believe you were right there with him.

Donald Buchanan and Arthur Friedman played the makeshift course almost every morning while the rest of the men slept. Most of the scientists preferred to work through the chill of the desert night and sleep through the most brutal heat of the day, but Donald and Arthur were paced to a different clock.

"I have an idea," Donald said as he lined up his drive.

"Jesus Christ, the last time you said that, you and Teller damn near blew up half the world."

"That is a ridiculous exaggeration."

"It could still happen. Nice drive," Arthur said as he watched a golf ball sail up into the dry air against a backdrop of blue sky and mountains. "So what's this idea of yours?"

"A bomb that doesn't kill anybody."

"That defeats the purpose of a bomb, doesn't it?"

"Not necessarily. If you could invent something that would destroy infrastructure—power grids, delivery systems for weapons, communication, transportation—the enemy would be crippled with no cost of human life. The world would never again see the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki."

"Without infrastructure, there are no resources, no order, no money, and nothing to buy with money even if you had cash in hand.

Anarchy would fill the vacuum and people would die anyhow. Friends and neighbors would end up killing each other over a crust of bread or a vial of penicillin."

"Perhaps. But the death toll would be minimal in comparison to a multimegaton atomic bomb."

"So you're seeking a more moral weapon."

"I'm seeking a less morally repugnant one. Infrastructure can be rebuilt but humans cannot."

"And how do you propose to invent such a device?"

"I don't know yet. But the electromagnetic pulses the bombs generate intrigue me."

"You need a nuclear detonation to create an EMP substantial enough to be an effective weapon, which is exactly what you're trying to avoid."

"Yes. But there has to be a way to generate EMP without a nuclear detonation. And if we could harness something like that, perhaps miniaturize it and selectively direct it . . . It's something to think about, anyhow."

"Indeed. But for the time being I'd think about what you're going to do with that nice drive you just made, because it landed in a sand trap."

They both laughed, because the whole damned golf course was a sand trap.

By the time she was nine, Alice had moved five times. She had been too little to remember the first two moves, but the last three were sharp in her memory.

It was always the same. Father would come home one night and tell them all that in two weeks, they were going to live in a wonderful new place with a bigger house, a nicer town, and better schools. Alice and her brother and sister, older by five and six years, all would start crying because they knew they would never see their best friends again, and then Father would send them from the table before they finished their dinners because crying was not allowed.

Father was very strict about a lot of things, like not crying, but he was never mean, like Melinda's dad, who had slapped Melinda's face once when Alice had been *right there*, watching. If Father sent you from the table he always brought snacks up to your room later, and by the time you woke up in the morning he was smiling and gentle again.

"Come into the living room, Alice. We'll have a little talk, just me and you." He sat in the big brown recliner Mother hated because it didn't go with the white floral sofa, and patted the footrest for Alice to sit on.

She hitched up the legs of her pedal pushers just above the knees, because that's what Father did when he sat down in pants, and for some reason it always made him smile to see her doing it. She sat obediently, almost reverently, before her father, big eyes eating him up, little mouth open in breathlessness. Father-daughter talks were rare in this house and almost exclusively disciplinarian, like when her older sister was caught smoking or using mascara. But Alice never did anything wrong, so she wasn't afraid; just excited.

He handed her a well-thumbed paperback novel, the kind her mother removed from the bookcase and hid in a closed cabinet of the buffet whenever guests were expected. "These are trash," she'd told

Alice's father, "and totally inappropriate for a child." Alice remembered that day because her mother had raised her voice, and she'd never done that before.

Ever since, only big fat books with no pictures on the cover were permitted in the bookcase. Alice read every one her father gave her, even though she had to look up an awful lot of words in the battered Webster's dictionary, but the best days were when Father went to the cupboard of the trash books and selected one for her to read. They all had pictures of bad women on the cover. You could tell they were bad because they wore bright red lipstick and blouses that bared their shoulders and showed the tops of really big bazoomies. There was just such a picture on the cover of this book, but instead of a man pulling on the woman's arms, she was running from a really big fire.

"Don't show your mother this book."

"I won't."

"Don't show anyone this book ever. Not your mother, not your sister or brother, not your friends. Hide it in a very safe place. Even after you grow up, you must keep it hidden. It's our little secret. And remember the part about the generator—I marked it for you. Read it again and again until you have it memorized. Is that clear?"

"Yes sir. But what's a generator?"

"It's a machine that makes electricity. You can use it to run things in case the power goes out."

"Oh. Okay. I'll memorize that part."

"All right. Run along now."

Two days later, she and Mother drove Father to the airport. He had to travel a lot for his job, and he always had a briefcase handcuffed to his wrist.

Alice loved going to the airport. Everything echoed in the big spaces with their tiled floor. She always wore her patent leather shoes, even though the buckles pinched her feet, because they made hard clicking sounds, just like the high heels the stewardesses wore. Her brother and sister stayed home, but Mother always took Alice with her. She was the baby, and the last time Mother had left her home with her siblings, they'd locked Alice in the hall closet for the whole time she was gone.

Father always squatted down in front of her and held her by the shoulders when he was about to leave. This time it felt like he might actually hug her, but it didn't happen.

"Are you reading the new book?"

Alice nodded. "I'm halfway through . . . but it's a little scary." She peeked around her father to make sure Mother wasn't listening. "It's just a story, right? Nothing like that could ever really happen, could it?"

"No, of course not." He looked away for a moment and touched his stomach the way he did when he had a tummy ache. "But read it all anyway."

"I will. I already memorized the part about the generator."

Father beamed at her. "That's my good, smart girl." And then he kissed Mother and walked out the door to where the plane was rumbling, propellers turning. Alice watched him trot up the metal staircase and disappear.

After Father got on the plane, Mother always took her to the counter where the stools twirled and the food was delicious—grilled cheese sandwiches that tasted way different from the ones they made at home. "That's American cheese. We use Velveeta," her mother explained. "I think Velveeta tastes better, don't you?"

Alice nodded dutifully, although she didn't think that at all.

There was a big window opposite the counter so you could watch the planes take off and land. When they heard the rumble of the engines on Father's plane get louder and louder, they both looked up.

"Can I go wave at the window?"

"*May* I go wave at the window, and yes you may."

Alice leaped off her stool and trotted to the window, her head tipping back as she watched the plane rise higher in the sky.

There was a terrible, loud noise that shook the window under Alice's hands, and she saw a big yellow and orange and black flower of fire bloom against the sky where Father's plane had been.

Five men were sitting around a large table in a darkened room. None of the men knew the names of the others. They referred to one another only by numbers. Some of them were fidgeting, all of them were pointedly avoiding eye contact with any of their compatriots, except for the man at the head of the table. He was watching everyone, noting their demeanor, reading their expressions, assessing their level of discomfort at being part of this group. This day, more than any other since they were selected, would test the limits of their courage and loyalty.

The mission had already been approved by them all, but planning was a far cry from execution. You never knew who was going to break until they were tested.

He placed one hand on the black rotary telephone in front of him, fingers loosely curled and perfectly relaxed. A few men started at the strident ring when it finally came. "Zero," he said into the mouthpiece. It was the only name he would have as long as he managed this

project, which would be until he was unable to perform his duties. At that point, he would be replaced by another.

He listened for a moment, replaced the heavy receiver gently back into its cradle, then folded his hands in front of him. "The mission is complete. The plane is down. There were no survivors."

ONE

PRESENT DAY

Sixty years later, the large table and the darkened room still existed in a mansion in upstate New York, but the five men who had originally held court there had been replaced three times over. Some had died of natural causes over the years, others not so natural—if you outlived your usefulness on this panel, you outlived your usefulness on earth. They still referred to one another by numbers only, just as their predecessors had, but everything else had changed dramatically over the decades.

For instance, the current five were now sitting in an observation deck in a much larger, adjacent ballroom that had been renovated into an apotheosis of technology—banks of monstrous supercomputers whirred and hummed, lovingly tended by a small, carefully selected

cadre of America's brightest minds. At the moment, they were chattering quietly in nervous excitement, their eyes fixed on the digital countdown clock hanging above an enormous flat screen that showed aerial photos of various cities around the world.

The third-generation Zero had only been a part of this elite group for fifteen years, and yet he had seen the astronomical rise of something miraculous, something that had been a mere pipe dream of a man named Donald Buchanan. According to the countdown clock on the wall, two minutes would tell them all if that pipe dream would cross over from the realm of science fiction to reality.

"T minus ten seconds to Operation Silver Dune Alpha Test," a voice from the computing floor called out, and the room went silent and still—no one moved, no one spoke, no one breathed.

It took a few moments, and then every person in the room burst into applause as a section of the screen went dark.

"Detroit is now off-line," a voice dutifully reported, as if the men in the observation deck couldn't see that for themselves. "Permission to restore?"

"Granted," Zero replied.

TWO

Chuck Spencer settled into his first-class window seat, pulled down his tray table, and started unloading his briefcase. These were the last of his father's effects to be sorted through, and the three-and-a-half-hour flight from L.A. to Minneapolis would give him just enough time before he met Wally tonight.

When the miscellaneous pile of papers and old photographs started to tower and slip, he put the rest of the contents on the empty seat next to him. It wouldn't be empty for long with the plane fully booked, but the papers might discourage his unknown seatmate from bending his ear. Clearly he was a busy man who shouldn't be disturbed. See all my papers?

Grousing his way uncomfortably through his early sixties, Chuck was annoyed by a lot of things now that never annoyed him before. And this plane was one of them. A 757? An A320? Whatever. This

one's entrance was in the front of first class, so you got to watch every passenger file by as they boarded, never knowing which one would take the seat next to you. Would it be the tremendously fat man wearing far too much—what was that? English Leather? Did they still make that? Or maybe the elderly woman who had a tissue tucked into the sleeve of her cardigan, which meant she was probably carrying bird flu or some other potential pandemic. He breathed a silent sigh of relief when she passed by, rewarding her with a friendly smile for having the decency to fly coach.

One of the last stragglers to board was a pretty woman definitely young enough to be his daughter and perhaps young enough to be his granddaughter. She had a sweet face and an obvious case of nerves. Her eyes were darting this way and that, probably making note of the emergency exits and any potential terrorists she might have to subdue mid-flight.

She slowed, then stopped to stand next to the empty seat Chuck had cluttered with his paperwork, and gave him a timid smile.

Chuck smiled back and started gathering up his papers. In the ever-capricious lottery of air travel, this lady was the jackpot as far as seatmates went. She was thin and would take up no room at all, she was attractive and seemed quite shy, she didn't smell like English Leather, and she wasn't coughing or sneezing or carrying tissues up her sleeve. "Sorry about the mess."

"No worries." She sat down abruptly once he'd cleared the seat. "I'm Lydia Ascher," she mumbled at her lap, frantically trying to fasten her seat belt.

"Chuck Spencer."

She was obviously terrified of flying, and that could go one of two ways. Nervous fliers either went dead silent during takeoff and pulled up on their armrests as if they could hold the plane up with the sheer force of their will, or they chattered like magpies and looked you straight in the eye and pretended they weren't on a plane at all. The latter was the worst-case scenario for anybody who valued solitude of any kind, even on a crowded plane, as Chuck did.

He stole a crafty, peripheral glance at his seatmate, trying to assess her demeanor so he could form an isolation strategy if need be.

Since she was just sitting there rigidly, staring at the seatback in front of her, Chuck figured her to be one of the silent types who suffered their terror alone, and thank God she wasn't investigating the puke bag. He relaxed a little, then turned his attention back to his papers.

A few minutes later, he realized he was completely distracted by a creeping guilt. This poor thing sitting next to him was clearly fighting off demons, and he was just sitting there doing jigs in his mind because she was mute. And really, what could be so bad about having a conversation with a pretty young woman if she chose to engage in one, especially if it helped calm her nerves?

Chuck finally decided to breach the silence, for better or for worse. "Don't worry, it'll be a smooth flight. No weather between here and Minneapolis," he reassured her.

She turned her head slowly to look at him, as if she were afraid any sudden movement might tip the plane on its side. "It's that obvious, huh?"

"Only to anybody who pays attention, but your secret is safe with

me, because nobody pays attention to anything but their phones anymore."

She let out a great sigh and leaned back in her seat. "Isn't that the truth."

Chuck let the comment hang, and she didn't pursue it, which was fantastic. When a flight attendant announced that the doors were being closed for takeoff, he leaned back and closed his eyes. Just as the plane began taxiing and he was starting to nod off, he felt a light hand on his arm.

"Thank you, by the way."

Chuck straightened from his dozy slump. "Uh . . ."

"Oh my gosh, I'm sorry, I woke you up."

"No, no," Chuck insisted in classic sleep denial. He'd never understand what compelled most humans to deny they'd been wakened. Phone call at four in the morning? No problem. Hell no, I wasn't sleeping, what can I do for you?

"Yes, I did, and I'll shut up. I just wanted to thank you for trying to make me feel better."

"I'm sorry it didn't help," Chuck finally said earnestly, looking down at her white-knuckled grip on the armrests.

She gave him a sheepish look. "I'm pretty hopeless."

"Is there anything that distracts you?"

"A stiff Bloody Mary would distract me."

He was surprised to find himself chuckling, even more surprised to be enjoying this little conversation with a complete stranger, another of his later-in-life peeves. "We can take care of that once we're airborne. What can I do for you between now and then?"

She let out a shaky sigh. "Well, you could tell me your life story."

"Trust me, reading the in-flight magazine is a lot more interesting than my life story."

Lydia let out a breathy giggle, part anxiety, and maybe, Chuck thought, there was a little mirth mixed in, too. "I don't believe that for a minute."

"Then you haven't seen this month's edition. You can now buy a seven-foot gargoyle statue for your lawn for two hundred dollars."

She looked at him in disbelief. "Really?"

"Really. Are you interested?"

"I'm only interested in what kind of person would *want* a seven-foot gargoyle statue in their garden."

Chuck was pleased to see that Lydia seemed to be relaxing. It made him feel good; paternal, even, in spite of the fact that he had no children of his own. And then the pilot came on the PA and announced, "Flight attendants, prepare for takeoff," and the poor girl gave him a look of pure, crystalline terror.

"I hate this part the most," she whispered, her voice all apologies. "My grandfather died in a plane crash. On takeoff," she blurted out.

Chuck's thoughts slammed to a halt and he suddenly felt a little panicky himself. He'd never actually met anyone who knew someone who died in a plane crash. No wonder she was terrified. And how did you respond to that? He could lecture her on the physics of flying, how it worked, why it was so safe, but that would probably just make things worse. She was in the red zone already. "It's going to be okay," he said lamely.

Lydia just nodded, her wide eyes fixed straight ahead.

"Lydia? Why don't you tell me *your* life story."

Chuck had no idea what had made him say such a dangerous

thing, but apparently it had been the right thing. She seemed to calm a little as she began speaking to the seatback in front of her, and by liftoff she was making eye contact with him, and he knew both her parents were deceased and she lived on a small lake an hour from Minneapolis.

By the time the aircraft had banked over the Pacific and turned toward the country's midsection, he found out that she was a successful artist who was returning home from some important gallery visits in L.A., and her posture seemed much looser, almost normal.

Somewhere over Nevada, Chuck realized he was genuinely enjoying himself despite the fact that the conversation was one-sided. They ordered Bloody Marys and the serpentine route of their conversation somehow ended up on the topic of her mother's childhood, and that was the moment the lopsided conversation grew another leg. As she was listing every city that her departed mother had lived in as a child, ten cities in ten years, to be precise, Chuck's jaw went slack, because he had lived in every one of them.

Good God. His own childhood was a mirror of this girl's mother's. He probably went to grade school with her. What kind of odds were we talking here? "This is really weird. I lived in all those towns at about the same time your mother did," he said.

When she didn't reply, he turned to look at her. She was staring at the clutter of paperwork on his tray table, her eyes wide and her mouth open. He quickly looked down at the tray table, hoping there wasn't a nude centerfold in the pile. He didn't see anything offensive at first glance. Maybe she was just having a fear-of-flying seizure or something.

Finally she reached over and pulled a photograph from the middle of the pile. "Where did you get this?"

"It belonged to my father." He pointed to one of the men in the photo. "That's him, and the rest are some guys he worked with about fifty years ago. Why?"

She shook her head in disbelief and pointed to the man standing next to Chuck's father. "Because that one is my grandfather."

"What?"

"That man right there. He was my grandfather. The one who died in the plane crash."

Chuck gave her a skeptical look. "Whoever it is might look like your grandfather, but I guarantee it isn't. There were only eight men in the world who even knew about this project, including the President. See? That's President Eisenhower at the end of the line."

"I know. I have this very same photograph at home. These were the men who supervised the manufacture of the hydrogen bomb."

Chuck just stared straight ahead for a moment, sorting through all the calculators in his brain, estimating the odds of being seated next to one of the very few people in this world who would know who the men in that photo were. "I never knew any of this until my dad died six months ago and I started going through his things."

"Your dad never told you?"

"I hadn't seen him in years. When I started cleaning out his house, I found this mess"—he gestured at the stack on his tray table—"and a whole lot of other records. Up until that moment I never knew what my dad did for a living. I always thought he was an engineer."

Lydia raised her brows. "The project's been declassified for a couple decades now."

"Like I said, we didn't see each other. We didn't talk. It was kind of a weird childhood."

"So was my mom's. Let me guess. Your dad traveled all the time with a briefcase handcuffed to his wrist. You moved every year or so, and men in suits came and talked to all your little friends, asking if you ever told them what your father did, right? And all you knew was that he was an engineer and worked for American Iron Foundry."

Chuck closed his eyes. "Jesus. That's exactly what it was like. This is unreal. Wally's never going to believe this."

"Who's Wally?"

"A new friend. When I did a little research on the Web and found out what Dad had really been doing all those years, I started a website dedicated to finding other descendants of those eight men, or maybe even some of the original men still living. Just for fun, you know, like going on Ancestry-dot-com. Kind of a strange mystery I wanted to follow. Wally and several others found my website and signed into my chat room. He lives in Minneapolis. That's what I'm doing on this flight. We're getting together tonight. And suddenly, I find myself sitting next to another descendant. It's kind of freaking me out."

Lydia smiled. "It is pretty unreal." She reached into her purse and pulled out a business card. "Give me a call and let me know how your meeting with Wally went. If you're going to be in town for a while, maybe we can all get together."

"I have a better idea. Why don't you come along tonight? Hell, the three of us have more in common than a lot of siblings."

Lydia was tempted, but clearly not as obsessed with the past as

Wally and Chuck, maybe because she was a generation further down the line. "The thing is, I've been away from home for ten days, and I am truly whipped. Tomorrow? I could come into the city and meet you both for lunch, say around noon?"

"Terrific." He scribbled on a cocktail napkin. "That's my cell and my hotel. Give me a call when you're close and I'll meet you in the lobby."