

We Know

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Extract

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SPHERE

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I snapped awake at 2:18 am, the bloodshot numerals staring at me from the nightstand. For years on end, I woke up at this exact time every night, regardless of what time zone I was in. But after seventeen years, I had just started sleeping through the night. I had finally outrun the old fears. Or so I had convinced myself.

Remote sirens warbled in the night. At first I figured they were in my head, the soundtrack to the dream. But the distant wail got louder instead of fading. I hadn't awakened on my own.

I ran through what I remembered from the previous evening – the presidential debate had closed out prime time, and after the commentariat finished yammering, I'd fallen asleep watching a high-speed chase on the news. A guy in a beat-to-shit Jeep Cherokee, hauling ass down the 405, a legion of black-and-whites drawn behind him like a parachute.

I blinked hard, inhaled, and looked around. Same Lemon-Pledge scent of my third-floor condo. My sweat imprint on the sheets and pillow. Breeze rattling palm fronds against my balcony one thin wall over.

And a watery blue light undulating across the bedroom ceiling.

I sat up.

The TV, across the room on the steamer trunk, was off. But the distant sirens continued.

And then, along with the light on the ceiling, the sirens abruptly stopped.

I threw off the sheets and padded across the carpet, stepping over a discarded *Sports Illustrated* and sloughed-off dress shirts from the job I'd left a week ago. In my plaid pajama bottoms, I ventured into the all-purpose living room, heading for the balcony. The police lights had flickered through the locked sliding glass door. Halfway to it, I froze. At first I thought it was a trick of the mind.

A thick black nylon rope was dangling from the lip of the roof, its end coiled on my balcony. Motionless.

No longer groggy, I opened the sliding glass door and stepped silently out onto the balcony, rolling the screen shut behind me. My balcony with its Brady-Bunch-orange tiles overlooked a narrow Santa Monica street populated by other generic apartment buildings. Streetlights were sporadic. I confronted the rope for a quiet moment, then looked around, expecting who knows what.

Bulky shadows of cars lined the gutters. An SUV was double-parked, blocking the street. No headlights, no dome light. Tinted windows. But a huff of smoke from the exhaust pipe. A sedan, dark and silent, wheeled around the turn and halted, idling behind the SUV.

Terror reached through seventeen years and set my nerves tingling.

I squinted to see if I could make out a police light bar mounted on either roof. In my peripheral vision, the tail of the rope twitched. Before I had a chance to think, the roof creaked. A spotlight blazed up from the SUV, blinding me. A zippering sound came from above, so piercing my teeth vibrated. Then a dark form pendulumed down at me, two boots striking me in the chest. I left my feet, flying back through the screen, which ripped free almost soundlessly. I landed on my shoulder blades, hard, the wind knocked out of me. The black-clad figure, outfitted with a SWAT-like jumpsuit and an assault rifle, filled the screen frame with its bits of torn mesh. Even through the balaclava, the guy looked somehow sheepish – he hadn't seen me beneath the overhang before he'd jumped.

'Shit,' he said. 'Sorry.'

He'd made an expert landing, despite the collision, and was aiming the rifle at my face.

I gupped silently, a knot of cramped muscles still holding my lungs captive, and rolled to my side. He stepped astride me as I curled around the hot pain in my chest.

A hammering of boots in the hall matched my heartbeat, so forceful it jarred my vision, and then the front door flew directly at me, knocked from the hinges and deadbolt as if a hurricane had hit the other side. It skipped on end, landed flat on the carpet with a whump, and slid to within an inch of my nose.

As I writhed between the assailant's boots, fear gave way to panic. Three men flipped me hard and proned me out, my face mashing carpet, my front tooth driving into my bottom lip. Gloved hands ran up my sides,

checking my ankles, my crotch. More black-clad forms hurtled through the doorway, aiming assault rifles in all directions, a few men streaking off to the bedroom. I heard my folding closet doors slam back on their tracks, the shower curtain raked aside.

‘Nick Horrigan? Are you Nick Horrigan?!’

My chest released and I drew in a screeching breath. And another. I rolled onto my back, stared up at the one face not covered by a hood and goggles. Lean, serious features, a slender nose bent left from a break, gray hair shoved back from a side parting. The salt-and-pepper stubble darkening the jaw matched neither the neat knot of the standard-issue-red tie nor the high-and-tight hair-cut.

‘Are you Nick Horrigan?’

I nodded, still fighting to draw in a proper breath. A warm, salty trickle ran from my split lip down my chin. The other men – fifteen of them? – had spread through the condo, dumping drawers, knifing open the couch cushions, overturning chairs. I heard cutlery tumble onto the linoleum. My clock radio blared on – a jingle for anti-fungal ointment – then I heard someone curse and it abruptly cut off.

The gray-haired man frowned at me, then surveyed the others, radiating authority. ‘The hell’s the matter with him, Sever?’

‘I hit him in the chest when I rappelled from the roof.’ A faint Southern accent – Maryland or Virginia, maybe. The guy tugged off his hood, revealing a square face further accented by a military-looking flattop. He was much wider than the boss-man crouching over me. Younger

too – probably in his mid-forties, though his creased tan aged him up a bit. His bearing suggested he was the alpha dog among the jumpsuits.

The boss returned his gaze to me. ‘Nick Horrigan, born six twelve seventy-three? Son of Agent Frank Durant?’

‘Stepson,’ I managed.

He shoved a photograph in my face. A man shown from the chest up, wearing a blue blazer and the scowl of the unphotogenic. A wide mouth and slack lips lent him a slightly wild quality. His blond hair was slicked back, the camera catching furrows left by the comb.

‘What’s the last contact you had with this man?’

I said, ‘I don’t know this guy.’

‘Then you’ve been in phone or email contact with him.’

I caught a worm’s eye view of a man with tactical goggles peering into the empty Cup o’ Noodles I’d left on the kitchen counter. The photo moved abruptly in front of my nose again. ‘I told you,’ I said. ‘I don’t know who the hell he is.’

The boss grabbed my arms and tugged me to a sitting position. Over his shoulder, I could see my framed Warner Bros still, sitting shattered at the base of the wall. Yosemite Sam was looking back at me with an expression of matching bewilderment. Glancing down, I stared numbly at the boot-sized red marks on my bare chest. ‘Who are you?’ the man asked, pulling my focus back to him.

My voice still sounded tight. ‘You already know. I’m Nick Horrigan.’

‘No, I mean what do you do?’

‘I just left a job at a charity group,’ I said.

One of the guys behind me guffawed.

Another appeared in the doorway of my bedroom, holding my now empty nightstand drawer by the handle. ‘I got nothing.’

The boss swiveled to face a guy wandering the kitchen with a magnetometer. The guy shook his head. ‘Sorry, Mr Wydell.’

‘Okay.’ Wydell ran a hand through his gray hair. It fell back precisely into the side parting. His exacting demeanor fit his professional bearing – the sole suit among rugged operators. ‘Okay. Get him a shirt.’

A T-shirt flew from the vicinity of my bedroom, hitting me in the head.

‘Put this on. Let’s go.’

My Pacman shirt. Great. I tugged it on and two guys hoisted me to my feet. Figuring I’d want ID wherever I was going, I grabbed my money clip from the kitchen counter and stuffed it into the floppy pocket of my drawstring pajama pants.

‘Let’s go, let’s go,’ Wydell said. ‘You got sneakers, something?’

I stopped moving and the two men commanding me to the door stumbled into me. ‘Can you please show me a badge?’ I said, though I pretty much figured.

Wydell’s lips pinched. His hand darted behind his lapel, withdrew his commission book with its recessed badge. Hunched eagle and flag, rendered in gold. *US Secret Service*. His commission was behind plastic inside the leather book. *Joseph Wydell, Special Agent in Charge*.

He was from the Los Angeles Regional Office, which meant he wasn't on the protection detail of a particular politician, but oversaw general intelligence in Southern California. Why was the head of the Secret Service LA office on-site at a raid instead of waiting back in his air-conditioned office?

'What do you think I did?' I asked.

Someone handed him my sneakers and he thumped them against my chest. I took them. He hustled me out into the hall, Sever in front of us, another agent behind, one at each side. They held the diamond formation as we barreled toward the stairs.

Mrs Plotkin stood in her doorway in a white spa bathrobe, her copper hair heaped high, showing off white roots. She looked worried – one of her favorite expressions.

'Get back in your apartment, ma'am,' Sever said, the accent more pronounced now.

We were approaching fast, but she held her ground. 'Where are you taking him?'

'I'm okay, Evelyn,' I said, wiping blood from my chin.

'What did he do?'

'Out of the way, *now*.'

We reached her and Sever straight-armed her back into her apartment. Her head snapped forward and the glasses she wore around her neck on a beaded chain flew up, trailing her fall like the tail of a kite. As we whisked past I caught a flash of her, lying shocked on her fuzzy rug, glasses tangled in her hair, the door pressing against her side. It was just a shove, nothing drastic, but even a portion of a man's strength applied brusquely to a woman in her sixties had a certain grotesqueness to it.

I tried to stop, but the agents propelled me forward.

‘Hey,’ I said to Sever’s broad back, ‘let me at least make sure she’s okay.’

The agents all kept moving me along. No time for retorts or even threats. That scared me even more.

I stumbled down the stairs, trying to keep pace, nearly dropping my sneakers. The lobby was empty save the vinyl couches and smoky mirrors, and beyond, the street was lit up like day. Police cars, spotlights, men in dark suits talking into their wrists. A few spectators, hastily dressed, stood on the opposite sidewalk, straining on tip-toes, waiting to see who would emerge.

We burst through the doors and stopped. I hopped on one foot, then the other, pulling on my Pumas.

‘Cut the goddamned spotlights,’ Wydell said. ‘This isn’t a fashion shoot.’ The spotlights clicked off with a bass echo and suddenly the night was darker than it should have been. Wydell grabbed the arm of another agent. ‘Where is it?’

‘Almost here.’

‘It needs to be here *now*.’

I said, loudly, ‘Are you gonna tell me what the hell is going on?’

All of a sudden, a bass thrumming filled the night, as much a vibration as a sound, and then a Steven Spielberg glow came over the rooftops, turning the palms a fiery yellow. On the sidewalk, a little girl white-knuckled her father’s hand, her mouth open in sleepy disbelief.

A Black Hawk loomed into view, massive and somehow futuristic in this context, on my street. The wind from the rotors buffeted the crowd, snapped at the

bushes, pasted my clothes to me. Wydell's tie pulled clear of his jacket and stood on end. The helicopter banked and set down magisterially on the asphalt. The spectators stared at me expectantly.

Wydell grabbed my arm in a vise grip and started moving me toward the helicopter. The sight of that waiting Black Hawk finally broke me out of shock, or at least helped me catch up to myself, to what was happening. I jerked free. 'Wait a minute. You can't just *take* me. What's happening here?'

I had to follow him closely to hear his words over the noise of the rotors.

He was shouting. 'A terrorist has penetrated the nuclear power plant at San Onofre and is threatening to blow it up.'

I felt a sudden hollowness at my core, that rushing emptiness I'd felt only twice before: clutching stupidly at Frank while he died; and watching live footage as that second plane hit the tower.

'Okay,' I said. 'Jesus. But what's that got to do with me?'

Wydell stopped, poised, one leg up on the skid of the chopper. 'He says he'll only talk to you.'

The Black Hawk banked and I felt my stomach go through my throat. I bounced on a seat opposite Wydell and Sever, one hand wound in the cargo netting to keep me from tumbling onto the deck. I'd blown out the heel air pocket of my left sneaker and the plastic window on the outsole clicked every time I leaned hard on that foot to keep my balance. As well as the pilot, copilot, and two flight-suited crewmen, there were three other agents, all talking into radio headsets. Pelican cases were strapped to the floor, a few lids laid open to reveal all order of weaponry nestled in the black foam – sniper rifles, machine guns, grenades, even a torn silly-putty block of what I assumed was C4.

The night air was crisp in my lungs and the smell inside the helicopter was oiled steel and canvas. The bleeding from my lower lip continued, the taste lingering at the back of my throat. We bounced again, the wind fighting back, and a wave of nausea rolled through me. With scant comfort, I recalled hearing that a helicopter was the only machine that tried to tear itself apart every time it powered on.

Even in the midst of an emergency, Wydell had the

assurance of a veteran agent. Square posture. An elongated face, the forehead made prominent by a sharp widow's peak. No emotion in the dark brown eyes. The kind of man with a built-in confidence I resented and grudgingly admired, who could torpedo a stock price or send men to war and still doze off the instant his head hit the pillow. His lank gray hair, battered by the wind, had settled back into place except for a few wayward locks that looked incongruous. His radio headset dangled around his neck.

I waited until he looked over at me, then I said, 'We're facing a nightmare and you need me. I get that. But you couldn't just knock?'

'Listen carefully.' Wydell talked loudly to be heard over the constant rush of noise, his voice hoarse. 'This isn't about propriety. We've been scrambling since this guy started beelining down the 405.'

I asked, 'Why is the Secret Service even involved with a terrorist threat?'

'When the terrorist asked for you, LAPD ran your name,' Sever said. 'They found out your stepfather worked Caruthers's detail when Caruthers was Vice President and they pulled us in. They figured we keep tabs on agents' families.'

'Have you? Been keeping tabs on me?'

Wydell said, 'Let me make this clear – until we're one hundred percent certain that you're not this terrorist's confederate, you are.'

'And there's no way to make you certain,' I said. 'At least not right now.'

'That's right. We don't have time to question you more

thoroughly. In fact, we don't have any time at all.' He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, bringing those impassive brown eyes within a few feet of my face. 'He wants *you*, Nick. We need to know why.'

We swooped back over the freeway, rocketing forward on a tilt. Sever put out his foot to stop a sliding Pelican case. Stress and adrenaline had left me lightheaded, and the lurching helicopter wasn't helping settle me down.

'I'm completely in the dark,' I said. 'I have no idea who he is.'

Wydell shot a glance over at Sever, who looked skeptical. 'Then we're gonna act like we believe you so we can move forward.'

Wydell pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, fluffed it with a sharp snap, and offered it to me. I pressed it to my lip to staunch the bleeding.

He continued, 'LAPD tracked the terrorist to a house in Culver City. Shots were exchanged. He managed to escape in his vehicle and was pursued southbound on the 405 until he reached the San Onofre nuclear plant. He wrapped a note asking for you around a rock and threw it toward the barricade.'

The taste of blood was sharp at the back of my mouth. 'Tell me how to help.'

The copilot shouted something back to Wydell and he pulled his headset up, pausing to catch my eye and then nod at Sever. 'This is Special Agent Reid Sever. Squad leader for Protective Intelligence here in LA. He'll fill you in.'

Wydell then grimaced and let the earphones close over his head. He gripped the bud of the microphone, angling

it to his chin and speaking to whomever was on the other end: 'I'm aware of that, sir, but no one was expecting the pursuit to veer off into the nuclear plant. It's just a hundred yards off the freeway. LAPD managed to give a few minutes' warning to the guards, and they immediately set up a perimeter around the containment domes.'

Meanwhile, Sever unfurled a large scroll across his lap, tilting it so I could see. His thumb pinched a tiny LED light against the paper, illuminating a throw of blueprint. His voice was gruffer than Wydell's, lacking the polished edges that came with promotion.

'This is the blueprint of the power plant,' Sever said. 'The containment domes that hold the reactors are here.' A sturdy finger tapped paper. 'To the right. The reactors are housed inside these steel-and-concrete domes that could withstand a tank assault. Only problem is . . .' His lips twitched, a pinched smile that said nothing was funny. 'Only problem is, our boy veered *left*.'

'What's over there?' I asked.

Beside Sever, Wydell leaned back in his seat, still gripping the floating mike. He maintained the respectful tone for addressing a superior, but his face looked strained, the skin tight across his cheeks. I could see a pulse fluttering at his temple. 'The spent-fuel pool.' He paused, then said, 'A different building, that's correct, sir. Concrete blocks and regular sheet-metal siding. It's got negative pressure maintained by fans, but it's not even airtight, let alone rated for containment.'

He shoved the headset back down around his neck and sat for a moment, thoughtful. A band of sweat sparkled on his prominent forehead. He did not strike me

as a man who sweated easily. The Black Hawk veered sharply, but he just turned calmly and stared out the window, his canted nose catching shadows. The 405 was flying past outside, a white-and-red-spotted ribbon. Traffic was moving normally. That no one had bothered to order an evacuation only highlighted the range of the potential blast. All those headlights down below, even at three in the morning. All those people, oblivious that their lives were in the balance.

The Black Hawk straightened up again, the ground righting itself beneath us where it belonged. Wydell folded his hands, leaned forward. His tongue poked at the corner of his mouth. 'Let me lay out the facts,' he said. 'The pool is rectangular, about forty feet deep, built with five-foot concrete walls and lined with stainless steel. Under the high-density water are spent-fuel rods making up one of the greatest concentrations of radioactivity on the planet.' His voice remained steady, but he armed moisture off his brow. 'The pool houses ten times more long-lived high-penetrating radioactivity than the reactor core. It holds more cesium 137 than has been deposited by every atmospheric nuclear test ever conducted in this hemisphere. There under the water, it's relatively stable and harmless. If that water goes away, bringing the spent fuel to within a few feet of the surface—'

'Like from an explosion.' Despite the night air, my T-shirt was damp where it pressed against the nylon seat.

'Like from an explosion. Then the scenario changes dramatically. That pool would catch fire at north of a thousand degrees Celsius. A fire like that' – he shook his head – 'a fire like that cannot be extinguished until the

burning's done and the radioactivity released. It would render Southern California uninhabitable for half a million years.'

Sever lifted a cell phone from inside one of the Pelican cases and extended it to me.

'So,' I said, 'you need me to call and talk to him.'

Wydell said, 'We need you to go in there and deliver this cell phone to him.'

At first, I thought I'd misheard. 'I'll *talk* to him over the phone, bullhorn, whatever, but I'm not a trained agent. Someone who knows what they're doing should go in. What if I make a mistake? Five hundred thousand years is a long time.'

'He made it clear he'll see only you, and it has to be face to face. We're out of options here.'

When I swallowed, my throat clicked dryly. Why would the terrorist want to see me in person? Would he recognize my face but not my voice? Sever held the phone out to me again and shook it impatiently, but I kept my hands where they were. Wydell took it instead, put it in his lap.

I said, 'I thought we don't negotiate with terrorists.'

Sever said, quietly, 'We negotiate with terrorists every day.'

Wydell didn't seem to hear him. 'Facing this level of destruction? What would you do?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'I'm not the one with the policy.'

'Listen,' Wydell said, 'this guy's holding the cards. You claim you're not with him. That means you're with us. And your part of the mission is to get this phone in his hand. Just give it to him when we call. We've got the top

crisis negotiator in the state on scene already. Once we have comms, we'll take it from there.'

'What if I can't convince him to take it? What if he blows us all up first?'

Wydell nodded solemnly, pulling at the loose skin below his chin. 'I knew your old man. I bet we have a fighting chance, as long as you got a few of his genes.'

'He was my stepdad,' I said, 'so it's a safe bet I didn't.'

Wydell's dark brown eyes fixed on me. 'Frank Durant was a great man. Stepson or not, that gives you something to live up to.'

Instead of taking the phone, I released a shaky sigh and leaned back in my seat. A decision was inevitable. In the relative quiet, reality finally began to sink in, and with it, a bone-deep chill. What had I woken into? The dark flew by as we whipped along toward a nuclear plant and the terrorist inside.

I thought about what my stepfather would do. Frank Durant. Seventeen years dead. My hero, if such a word can be used anymore with a straight face.