



SEKRET MACHINES

From the
imagination of

with *New York Times*
bestselling author

TOM DELONGE
A.J. HARTLEY

BOOK 1

CHASING SHADOWS

Sekret Machines Book 1: Chasing Shadows
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*This book is dedicated
to my children, Ava and Jonas,
as we are all trying to build
a better world for
the next generation.*

**SEKRET
MACHINES
BOOK 1
CHASING
SHADOWS**



ALAN

Safid Kuh, Central Afghanistan, September 2014.

MAJOR ALAN YOUNG CHECKED THE HARRIER II PLUS' Heads-Up Display, put a few ounces of pressure on the throttle with his left hand and adjusted the trim with his right thumb. Far below the Harrier, the arid mountains of Afghanistan's Hindu Kush range rose and fell away, invisible in the darkness as the plane banked to starboard.

Deep in those mountains, a MARSOC team was already on the ground, working to secure an asset from a remote rebel base. Alan knew what he needed to know to complete his mission and was not interested in knowing more. It hadn't always been so, but he had learned the

discipline of incuriosity, a gift, his old flight instructor had been fond of saying, that kept on giving.

You don't need to understand the nail to be the hammer.

How many times had Alan heard that? A hundred? A thousand? And he heard it now, felt it in his bones with the hard, cold certainty of truth beyond faith. He had his mission, which, God willing, would be uneventful, a routine patrol in support of ground operations. If it became anything more than routine—and when you're pulling four hundred knots at altitude, nothing is truly routine—then something had gone wrong.

Alan had been flying AV-8Bs—Harriers—for eight years, three of them in Iraq and the last two in Afghanistan, the culmination of his twelve years as a Marine. He'd flown dozens of sorties and never seen a bogey, but that was hardly surprising. The enemies he'd faced had no air power to speak of. It was their GBAD systems and shoulder-fired SAM missiles you had to watch for.

And over-confidence.

But Alan had that under control. He'd let it out again once he'd returned to base, but until he was RTB, but there was no place for that *Top Gun* swagger up here. In ancient Rome, he'd once read, a legionary who put the lives of his comrades in jeopardy through cowardice, stupidity or some other disciplinary failure would be beaten to death in front of his unit. That seemed about right. Unquestioning loyalty to your superiors and to your comrades and the discipline to act upon it regardless of the circumstances was the frame, the purpose of your skills, your life. Alan Young

happened to fly a \$30 million airplane, but in his heart, he was simply a Marine.

The lead Forward Air Controller on the ground was Sgt. Barry Regis, a great bull of a man who had once—long ago and a world away—been the heart of an offensive line which had protected Alan when he had played quarterback for Monroe High back in North Carolina. Go Redhawks! It was a long and deep friendship that crossed lines of class, color, rank, and branch of service. Regis was also a pilot but, like other FACs, he was serving a ground tour and seemed to have found his calling. He joked that he'd done so because he was too big to fit into the cockpit of all but the most luxuriant of aircraft.

“The Air Force wanted me,” he once told Alan, “but they woulda had to slather me up with butter and jimmy me into the F-16s.” He made squelching, oily sounds with his mouth and made a show of running his huge, dark hands over his body.

There would be no jokes tonight, not until they were back at Camp Leatherhead.

With Regis was a twelve man Marines Special Ops team with three objectives: infiltrate the enemy base and eliminate all resistance by capturing or killing its leader; locate and recover a pair of computer hard drives; and, most challenging of all, locate and extract a captured US operative—alive. Even with all his emotions iced for flight, that last task left a knot in Alan's gut.

It was hard enough getting a team into a secure facility, but to do so undetected, before some zealous insurgent

could run back to a holding cell and put a bullet in the head of his captive, was next to impossible. The team had HALOed in shortly after moonset and had spent the last three hours making their approach on foot and in silence. The closer they got, the more dangerous it was. If they were detected even thirty seconds before they were in position, all that planning and preparation would be for nothing.

Alan circled twenty kilometers from the LZ ready to throttle up at the first sign of trouble, but otherwise content to patrol the night sky, where the roar of his engines wouldn't alert enemy sentries, until Barry Regis called him in. In the Air Force, he might have flown strike missions—fly out, drop your ordinance and fly back on schedule—but that was not how the Marines worked. Alan was flying tactical Close Air Support, like the “taxi rank” Typhoons and Tempests called in to deal with stubborn Nazi armor at the end of World War II. You got close to the combat zone, and waited for the call. It made Alan feel a little like one of the black buzzards back home, in the sky above the woods of North Carolina, drifting aimlessly until the scent of death brought it swooping down . . .

Regis' voice came in over the radio. “Black Eagle, you there?”

“Copy that, Rattlesnake,” said Alan. “What's your status?”

“Five hundred meters southwest of the facility. Still undetected. Insertion teams are performing final weapons checks. Closing in two mikes.”

“Roger that, Rattlesnake,” said Alan. “Be right there.”

So saying, he tipped the Harrier hard to the port and squeezed the throttle, feeling the pressure on his head and chest as the plane leapt forward. As he reentered level flight, Alan flicked on his fire control station and scrolled through the available munitions. The Harrier Mark II, as well as being unique in the Marine air force in its short takeoff and vertical landing capacity, could be armed with bombs, missiles and guns suited for a variety of targets in the air, on the ground, or in water, and could rain down all manner of hurt on anyone unfortunate enough to find themselves in the pilot’s sights. But you didn’t carry bombs if you were going into a dogfight, and you didn’t carry air-to-air missiles when there was no possibility of running into enemy air power. Civilians thought the Harrier, also capable of vertical takeoff, could also hover, hanging in place like a helicopter gunship over the battlefield, but it couldn’t. You got in, high and at speed, and then you got out.

Alan checked his navigation display. It was a moonless night. He was flying entirely on instruments, so that though he could sense the motion of the plane, it was weirdly directionless, something like being in an elevator. Intellectually, you know what’s going on, and your body knows *something* is happening, but a part of you is still very slightly surprised when the doors open and you’re on a different floor. Sometimes pilots flying in dense cloud cover or darkness emerged upside down, their senses baffled by the strange combination of solitude and sensory deprivation.

Which is why you don't rely on your eyes when you have state-of-the-art computer systems to tell you when you're upside down.

Old pilots romanticized the glory days of propellers and non-fly-by-wire mechanical controls and peering around to see if anything was about to blow you out of the sky, but Alan would take his APG-65 radar, his forward-looking infrared sensors and his AN/AAQ-28(V) LITENING targeting pod, thanks very much.

He doubted he would need them tonight. When the MARSOC team was done, they were to be reclaimed—with their recovered human and technological assets—by four Night Hawks, two of which were MH-60L DAP models packing the fire power of a battleship. The rebel position—base was too grand a term—was a huddle of cinderblock and mud brick buildings nestled on a mountain slope so steep it was nearly a cliff face. There was a warren of tunnels and caves beneath the buildings, a perfect place to hold prisoners and engage in secret meetings. It was too rugged and too remote to reach with serious armor, which meant the insurgents would have to rely on whatever weapons they could carry. There was a small tabletop plateau, about a hundred meters from the compound, which would serve as an LZ for the Night Hawks. The enemy would be looking to make landing difficult, and that was where Alan came in.

Dropping fast from fifteen thousand feet, the Harrier rode the night air like a dragon, all fire and peril. He was cruising at three hundred knots and keeping the angle of

bank to a minimum, but the Harrier was a notoriously finicky bird to fly, those wings requiring a firm hand and constant concentration even when you weren't trying to direct the multi-nozzled exhaust ports. All jet fighters were fast, but the Harrier was easier than most to lose track of, and if you "got behind" the aircraft, as the pilots said, you were lost.

Alan mentally checked off the plane's available munitions—Paveway laser guided bombs, a couple of AGM-65 Maverick air-to-ground missiles, two heat-seeking Sidewinders, and a 25mm cannon in a pod below the fuselage. It was a formidable arsenal. If he stopped to consider it, Alan might find a moment to pity those he was about to target, but it would not stay his trigger finger for even a fraction of a second. He had his orders. There were men on the ground who needed his support.

He'd learned at his preflight briefing that the asset's name was Morat, a deep cover operative who'd been captured with classified information and technology on his person. He was being held, according to signals intelligence, at this remote location by an enemy who would soon spirit him away to a new location, where they would torture him for what he knew, then execute him. The strike team had been assembled hurriedly, in hope of getting Morat out before the enemy realized what they had stumbled upon. Both SIGINT and HUMINT indicated these were not goatherds turned half-assed freedom fighters but seasoned Mujahedeen. It would be a mistake to assume they didn't know what they were doing. Even goatherds

had cell phones and computers, and access to information and communication systems unimaginable only a few years ago. The billions of dollars of tech that kept his Harrier in the air didn't protect him from the terrible knowledge base which was the Internet.

"Black Eagle, this is Rattlesnake," said the radio. "Sentries eliminated. Team positioned to enter facility. No indication we've been detected. Lighting up LZ GBAD targets now."

"Roger that, Rattlesnake," said Alan. "Black Eagle on course to engage. Stay clear of target."

Alan dropped his heavy NVGs over his eyes and saw, ahead in the darkness, two infrared lasers, invisible to the naked human eye. He swung the Harrier hard to port—performing the hiccupping breathing pattern as he felt the aircraft pulling Gs—then began his bombing run.

Ten nautical miles to target.

Alan shifted fractionally, squeezing out some of the tension that was building in his back and performed a final systems check. Directly ahead, washed by the pale glow of starlight, he could just make out the cliffs of the rebel hide out. There were three points of non-infrared light on the ground.

Fires.

It had started.

"Black Eagle, this is Rattlesnake. Enemy engaged. You are good to go."

Distantly, hollowly, Alan could hear the flat rattle and crack of gunfire over the radio.

“Roger that, Rattlesnake.”

The Falcon view from drone intel had shown a single sandbagged machine gun nest overlooking the LZ. It was quite possible that whatever troops were manning it had RPGs or shoulder-mounted rocket launchers, either SAMs or US-made Stingers captured from Afghan allied troops. As Forward Combat Controller, Sgt. Regis—Rattlesnake—was Alan’s eyes on the ground, targeting the emplacement with pinpoint accuracy. Alan came roaring in from the south, releasing his laser-guided bombs from two clicks out.

“Ordnance away, Rattlesnake. Keep your head down.”

The explosions lit the night like a massive flare, but Alan paid no attention, lining up the Harrier for another run, waiting for word over the radio and checking his FLIR for signs of movement in the combat zone.

Nothing.

The flash of the bomb had illuminated the sharp lines of the terrain, the cliffs with their warren of caves and the surface buildings showing bright green geometric shapes through the night vision goggles, but moments later it was all lost in fire and smoke and darkness. Alan waited, listening, feeling the pressure of his G suit as he pulled the plane around.

The radio crackled at last.

“Nice hit, Black Eagle,” said Regis’ voice. “Target destroyed. That’s an all clear for the recovery team.”

Alan permitted himself a sigh of relief.

“Black Eagle to Rattlesnake and Dragonfly 6,” he said. “Your LZ is secure. Repeat. LZ is secure.”

“Roger that, Black Eagle,” said the lead helicopter pilot. “Helo 1, ETA in twelve.”

Alan began to trace a lazy arc over the combat zone. Barring surprises, his work was done, though he couldn’t relax until he was back at Camp Leatherneck. For the next two minutes, all was quiet below, then the radio came back to life.

“Yeah, this is Rattlesnake,” said Regis, and Alan could hear the smile in his voice. “We have the human asset. He’s ready for a beer but is otherwise in good shape. Enemy resistance has been reduced to nil. Still searching for technical asset.”

“Good work, Rattlesnake,” said Central Command.

“I’ll watch your six until Dragonfly 6 gets his ass over here,” Alan added.

“Thanks for that, Black Eagle,” said the helicopter pilot. “We are on schedule. MARSOC finished early. Not our fault if some people are a bit over-efficient. Nine minutes out.”

“Beers are on you, Dragonfly 6,” said Alan. “All good here.”

But as soon as he said it the radio spat again.

CentCom again.

“Black Eagle, we have bogeys incoming from the northwest. Three helos.”

From the northwest?

“Come again, CentCom,” said Alan with steely calm, thumbing his radar to air-to-air mode. “Helos from the northwest?”

“Confirmed,” said CentCom. “Ten clicks away. Look like MI-35s. Could use your attention ASAP.”

Alan could see them on his screen now. As CentCom ordered the helos to prepare to engage, his mind raced.

The MI-35 was a variant of the Russian MI-24 attack helicopter, an updated version of an older aircraft used by a host of international powers, though where they’d come from, Alan couldn’t imagine. More troubling was how they had approached unseen. AWACs should have picked them up ages ago.

“Roger that,” said Alan, pulling the Harrier around onto an attack vector. “Coming in hard. Dragonfly 6—hold your position until we’ve cleared the LZ of hostiles. Any chance of getting those MH-60L DAPs in fast?”

“Still six minutes away,” said the Night Hawk leader.

Which was at least four minutes too long.

“Understood,” said Alan. “Preparing to engage.”

The hesitation was only fractional but it spoke volumes.

“Roger that, Black Eagle,” said the Night Hawk leader over the radio. “Show ’em who’s boss.”

He had maybe seventy seconds to determine who they were and what they were doing there. He checked his FLIR, but the blips that had been there only moments before had gone.

“CentCom, this is Black Eagle. Bogeys no longer registering on air-to-air systems. Please advise.”

Another momentary pause.

“Copy that, Black Eagle,” said the voice over the radio. It was carefully neutral but Alan thought he heard a note

of confusion. Even alarm. “Estimated time to intercept last known coordinates?”

“Fifty seconds at current speed.”

“Roger that, Black Eagle. Maintain course.”

“You have them on radar, right?” he pressed.

A fractional hesitation. “Negative, Black Eagle. We’ve lost them, too.”

Which meant what? Some kind of stealth tech they hadn’t anticipated?

Back at Central Command, there would be shouting, earnest phone calls, analysts huddling around monitors. Alan ran through his weapon systems checklists but he couldn’t keep his mind entirely on the *how* of what would happen next. He hadn’t expected this. No one had. The Taliban had no air power. ISIS had some captured Russian and Chinese and American equipment, but no training on how to use any of it, and last he’d checked, ISIS was in Afghanistan in token numbers. Alan scrolled through his munitions, thinking fast.

And now the unidentified helicopters below him were back on Alan’s FLIR, three of them, exhaust ports belching heat. The one upside was that since the Night Hawks weren’t on hand, he could use his Sidewinders, assuming there was enough heat coming off those enemy choppers for the missiles to grab onto.

The radio crackled with static, the channel opened for a second, then closed again. The Harrier hurtled through the Afghan night.

Intercept in thirty seconds.

The radio came back to life.

“Black Eagle this is CentCom. Green to engage. Repeat, engage all bogeys in LZ. Clear the area.”

“Roger that, CentCom,” said Alan.

He banked the Harrier hard to the port side, selecting a Sidewinder missile, targeting the closest helicopter, thumb over the release button.

There was a brilliant flash of light, hot at the center and cooler at the edges, but no sound of any explosion. Stranger still, the light did not dissipate. For a second, Alan was blind. He flipped his NVGs up, unsure if he'd fired without meaning to, or if he'd been fired upon. As his eyes grew accustomed to the glare, he saw that the light hung motionless, like a midday sun, perhaps one nautical mile to starboard.

All three helicopters were suddenly, terribly visible in the light of . . . whatever it was. As he circled, Alan could see them all clearly, hovering like great mosquitoes, suspended in the unnatural glow.

Without another thought, he pressed the trigger button to release the first Sidewinder. Nothing happened.

What the hell?

Alan pressed the trigger again, without result. He tried retargeting the system, but the missile wouldn't lock. He engaged the 25mm cannon and pointed the Harrier at the target, but when he pressed the trigger, there was silence.

He stared in horror.

“Complete weapons systems failure,” he said. “I cannot engage the helos. There's something out here, jamming my electronics. Repeat, I cannot engage bogeys. Rattlesnake.

You have to get your men into cover. Dragonfly 6, LZ is not secure. Hold your position.”

“Copy that, Black Eagle,” said the Night Hawk leader, “but we can be there in three minutes.”

Too late.

“Negative,” said Alan.

“Can you repeat that?” said the helicopter pilot. “Not sure I copy.”

“I don’t think your weapons will work any better than mine. There’s something . . .” Alan began, shielding his eyes from the orange white glare of the sphere suspended to his right. “None of my weapons systems are functioning. I have an unidentified bogey in visual range. CentCom—are you seeing this? Configuration unknown. I think . . . I don’t know,” he managed. His hand had developed a tremor, and he felt the unfamiliar tingle of panic. “I think it’s disrupting my weapons systems.”

And then the unidentified helicopters swung away from him, angling to face the huddle of buildings that now cast hard shadows in the strange fiery light of the sphere.

“Bogey locking on your position!” Alan said. “Rattlesnake, get your people out!”

“Black Eagle, engage!” said the voice of Central Command. “Fire all weapons immediately!”

“Unable to comply,” said Alan, overwhelmed with dull horror. “Systems down. I’m sorry . . . I just can’t . . .”

And then the missiles began raining down from the three enemy helicopters, and in the strange terrible light that hung like an unholy star in the black Afghan sky, Alan saw it all.

2

JENNIFER

Luve, Swaziland, Present Day

JENNIFER QUINN STARED AT THE AMERICAN WOMAN IN outraged disbelief.

“You can’t do that,” Jennifer said. “You are not allowed.”

“I have spoken to the school principal, and he feels that it would be confusing to the girls,” said Mavis. She wore a prim smile that Jennifer wanted to slap off her face.

“Confusing?” she echoed, gripping the table edge until her knuckles went white. “What is confusing about condoms?”

She slammed a foil packet onto the table between them. Mavis averted her eyes but spoke in a maddeningly even tone.

“You are attempting to politicize this event,” she said.

“AIDS *is* political,” Jennifer shot back. “Rape is political. Pressuring girls into marriage is political.”

“It is not the place of Peace in Action to interfere with local custom and beliefs.”

Jennifer gave a hollow laugh.

“This isn’t about local customs. This is about your own prudishness!” she shot back. She was losing it, she knew, and it would only make things worse, but she could not hold back the anger that had been building over the six weeks she had spent in Swaziland. “This is about sex, Mavis. I know you don’t want it to be, but it is, and refusing to talk about it is not helping anything. Hell, even the government knows it! When you cross the border from South Africa, there are boxes of free condoms at the customs and immigration checkpoints!”

“This event is supposed to be about female empowerment,” Mavis returned, still placid, still secure.

“Exactly!” Jennifer shot back. “And that’s not something you get with a few posters or *girl power* sing-a-longs. And it sure as hell isn’t something you get, reciting poems about ‘Our Lord and Savior.’ Peace in Action is not a religious organization, and you need to stop using social activism as an excuse to preach your damn beliefs.”

Mavis’ composure buckled. “You may think you are better than us, Miss Quinn, but I will not tolerate that kind of language in my office.”

“That kind of language?” exclaimed Jennifer. “We’re trying to build a culture where girls don’t get beaten into

prostitution or die of every known STD on the planet, and you're offended by my language? You know what, Mavis? Fuck you and your holier-than-thou attitude. I don't think I'm better than anyone, but I am paying for this event, and we will not only give out condoms—we will demonstrate their correct use. So I suggest you go down the market and buy a box of cucumbers. Hell, you can even eat one.”

She knew, as soon as she said it, that something wasn't right, and not just because she'd finally called the poisonous old bitch on her sanctimony. Mavis smiled, not her usual serene and beatific smile, mimicking the smile on the plaster saint that looked down on her desk, but a smile expressing something smaller and harder: a bitter satisfaction, that was almost amusement.

“Well, there's the thing,” she said, sitting back.

Jennifer waited, but, when Mavis said no more, prompted her. “What's the thing?”

“You say you are paying for this event,” said Mavis, “but that's not strictly true, is it? Your father in England is paying for the event.”

“Same difference,” she said.

“As it turns out,” said Mavis, enjoying herself, “not so much.”

“Why? What do you mean?”

Mavis' smile widened until she looked like one of the crocodiles sunning on the riverbank not half a mile from where they now sat. She fished a note pad from her drawer and made a point of consulting it.

“Your father has terminated all fiscal support for this project,” she said. “I spoke to him personally, warning him that this might jeopardize your position here since it has been, as I am sure you are aware, somewhat vexed.”

“And?” Jennifer prompted again, keen to get this over.

“Apparently,” said Mavis, “and believe me when I say that I really can’t imagine why, he wants you to come home.”

JENNIFER MARCHED AWAY FROM THE THATCHED HUT AND stopped, breathless, under a devil thorn in the gathering dusk, and released the tie around her chestnut ponytail so that it broke in a ragged wave around her shoulders. She was wearing khaki shorts that left her long, tanned legs bare from thigh to calf, her feet encased in sturdy boots. She thumbed open another button of her sky blue safari shirt and wafted the fabric, sweat running down her chest. Overhead, a flight of royal ibises rehearsed their raucous calls, and somewhere, she heard, first, the roar of an automobile engine, and then the call of a hippo. Further down the road, she could see the children in their uniforms making their way home after school, chattering in Siswati, some of them laughing and jumping about with the kind of childish delight she rarely saw in England these days. Her rage faltered, and she was struck with a sudden sadness that felt like failure. She snatched her cell phone from her pocket, then remembered she would have no signal out here. She would have to drive to Mbabane, just to talk to her meddling father. The thought of the drive on narrow, uneven roads in twilight, pausing for cattle and warthogs in

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the road, and then his smooth, patronizing tones when she finally reached him, made her anger spike anew.

This is so like him . . .

She cursed loudly, a stream of furious invective that made some of the kids down the road strain to hear what the funny white woman was shouting about. When she felt suitably chastened, she took a long breath, restored the ponytail to keep her hair out of her face, and climbed into the Jeep.

3

EDWARD

Hampshire, England, Present Day

EDWARD QUINN PLACED THE PHONE ON THE EDGE OF his polished mahogany desk and considered it. She wouldn't call. Not yet, at least. Possibly not at all. He rubbed his face, feeling the jowly flesh move. He had put on weight over the years. He didn't know when exactly. It had just happened, like a slow poisoning, all those years sitting in boardrooms, eating foie gras and drinking port. He avoided mirrors now, not so much disgusted by his own swelling bulk as disappointed with the loss of who he once was.

That was why Jennifer wouldn't call back. She could pontificate about the evils of capitalism, but he sensed in

her, lately, less moral outrage and more of something simpler, a disappointment in him for not being the father she had once believed in. It used to make him angry, but now, slowing with age and afflicted by all the persistent little ailments that came with it, he felt only loss. And sadness.

It was time to do something about it.

She had no right to be indignant, he reminded himself, lighting a cigar. She had been raised wanting for nothing and had been sent to the best possible schools, where she had flourished. He had given her everything. Too much, perhaps. It had all come so easily for her, and now, almost a decade clear of her Oxford graduation, she was still drifting from one save-the-world project to another, without focus or any larger sense of purpose. Certainly she was smart, and strong, and clever. She worked tirelessly. He couldn't deny her that, pouring every ounce of her heart and soul into whatever she was doing, as if nothing on the planet was more important, but then she would read about a new endangered species, or a virulent disease, something that needed saving or preventing, and she would walk out and get on the next plane to South America or Africa. She could do so because he made sure she could, providing her with a constant stream of funds from the various businesses he owned, money she so despised. He had never thought her a hypocrite, but he would be lying if he didn't say that there were times when he thought that she had also disappointed him. She had so much talent. So much energy and resourcefulness. Scattered like crumbs before pigeons.

But dwelling on it would avail him nothing.

Quinn turned to his desktop computer and accessed his protected files with a series of complex passcodes. “Protected,” the hackers he had hired to break in had remarked. That was an understatement. He had employed a deep encryption system based on lattice reduction and other forms of asymmetrical algorithms, linked in chains and separately coded by independent operators, none of whom knew what the rest were doing. It was, he was confident, more secure than the Bank of England, the British government and MI-5 combined, which was just as well, because leaking the contents of his hard drive to the press would bring all three down at a stroke.

He scanned his accounts: hundreds of millions of pounds, billions. His investments were solid, like continents, great sprawling rafts of money spreading from one side of the earth to the other, sustaining much of what lived on the surface. But from time to time the entire mass would buckle in a great tectonic shift, erupting and reforming in ways that changed the world.

Today would be one of those days.

Continents moved at their own pace, according to their own rules. Money, for all its chaotic energy, could, with a firm hand, be made to do what you told it.

Edward Quinn had such a hand and could, with a few keystrokes, alter the fate of the entire planet.

This had been true for a long time. He had known what his money was capable of doing for twenty years or more without it unsettling him unduly. But then Anne—his wife, his one true love, his confidante in all he could

safely share—had started losing weight and suffering from inexplicable fevers. Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma, the doctors had told him. He hadn't known what the words meant, a fact that shocked him almost as badly as the diagnosis itself. So he had learned everything there was to learn about non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma, because that was how Edward Quinn met adversity: with knowledge, and expertise, and, of course, with money. He'd learned to speak fluently about B-cells and to nod with understanding when his consultants used words like "immunoblastic" or "lymphoplasmacytic," and he'd written checks that would have paid off the national debt of small nations.

None of it helped. After a struggle lasting two years, the girl he had first met half a century ago collecting shells on Brighton Beach, his sweet, beautiful, perfect Annie, was gone. Edward was left with a rambling mansion full of servants whose names he didn't know and a daughter who never called, except to ask for money for some new cause. There was more, of course. More stuff. More things. More money. None of it seemed to matter much.

There was his work, of course. Not the corporations on whose boards he sat, the companies who listed him on their mastheads. His real work. But lately, even that had started to trouble him. He lay awake most nights now, thinking, remembering, regretting.

Something had to change. The Board wouldn't like it, and it was going to be the hardest battle he had ever fought—which was saying more than most people would ever know—but it had to be done. It was time.

Jennifer would help. Maybe not consciously or deliberately. He might not be able to tell her everything until the worst of it was over, but her presence at his side would make all the difference. That, too, would be a battle, but if Edward Quinn couldn't wrangle his own daughter, it really was time for him to . . . what did the Americans say? *Hang it up?* Something like that.

She would understand, eventually. He was almost sure of that. After all, the work had been good once. They had lost control of it, allowed it to turn into other things, but it had been good at the start. He still believed that. Sometimes it was the only thing keeping him going.

There had been that one day, when she was small, when she had come into this very room and found him studying what he thought of simply as "The Project." There had been a chart on the wall that she should not have seen. She had stood in the doorway, a little girl of nine or ten, staring, her head cocked to one side, trying to make sense of what she was looking at before he whisked it away. He wondered if she remembered. Perhaps. It was time to show her the rest.

The intercom buzzed.

"Yes?" he said.

"Your helicopter is approaching, sir," said Deacon, Quinn's private secretary-cum-butler. Quinn checked his Roger Dubuis watch—a spectacularly expensive piece he liked because he could see all the inner workings through its silicon casing—and sighed. It was a thirty-seven minute flight to the office in central London.

"I'll be right there," he said.

He looked at the framed photograph of Annie and Jennifer on the corner of the desk, the two of them in shorts and T-shirts after some mother/daughter 10K, both holding their medals and beaming. He had only put it there last week, after a lifetime keeping work and home as far apart as was possible. Too late, perhaps. Certainly for Annie, though he felt in his bones that she would approve of what he was about to do.

Quinn logged off and shut down his computer. He had just shut his briefcase when he heard the door snap closed behind him. He hadn't heard it open. Quinn was surprised when he turned.

The figure in the doorway was pointing a long-barreled pistol at him. "You?" he gasped.

"Hello, Edward."

"How did you get in?"

"I'm good at getting into places people don't want me to. You ought to know that."

"And you like to keep things between friends," said Quinn. "Though the gun doesn't look especially friendly."

"I wasn't planning to use it."

"Then why do you have it?" said Quinn.

"If it becomes necessary, I'll use it, but I thought you jumping out the window would be more poetic."

Quinn glanced to where the smoked, bulletproof French windows opened onto the balcony. It was only a four-story drop, but it would achieve the results his visitor seemed to want.

"And what makes you think I would do that?" he asked.

The visitor moved to the desk and, eyes still on Quinn, turned the pistol onto the photograph of Jennifer and Anne.

Quinn's composure evaporated. He was dead, he knew, but he would not give up his daughter.

"If you touch Jennifer . . ." he began.

"You'll what?" asked the visitor.

"Why would you hurt her?" Quinn asked, hating the crack of desperation that snuck into his voice. "This has nothing to do with her."

"Exactly. And I'd like to keep it that way. And if you sign this little note I have prepared for you, and then step off your very fine balcony, that's how things will stay."

The visitor placed a single sheet of paper, a suicide note written in flowing blue-black ink. Quinn glanced at it, admiring how it was meticulously forged, with what looked like his own Cartier fountain pen, in his own hand. They were always so careful.

"What assurance do I have that if I do as you say, you won't kill her anyway?"

"Why would I? As you say, this has nothing to do with her. She's merely a bargaining chip. Something that gives me an edge in negotiating. You, of all people, should respect that."

Quinn let go of the attaché case and considered the window. In the same moment, the intercom came back to life.

"The helicopter is here, sir," said Deacon.

The visitor raised the pistol to shoulder height and was sighting down the barrel into Quinn's face. Edward gave a fractional nod.

“I’ll be right down,” he said.

He signed the letter. As he sat back again, he knocked over the little wooden lion Jennifer had given him for Christmas when she was ten. He considered it for a moment, then put it carefully down. Pausing only to pick up the photograph of his wife and daughter, which he clutched to his heart with a surge of sadness, he stepped toward the window.

He opened the French windows and stepped out into the English air, damp and cool, gazing down at the mansion’s gravel forecourt below, wreathed in a mist that was almost rain. He did not look back toward the visitor with the pistol, or down to where his broken body would soon be found by a shrieking maid, but instead gazed out into the gray air, seeing nothing. His hands gripped the photograph, and as he stepped up onto the ornamental balustrade, he whispered to them.

“Sorry. I tried. Too late, I’m afraid. But I tried.”

4

TIMIKA

New York, Present Day

IT WAS TYPICAL. OF COURSE TRAFFIC WOULD BE BUMPER to bumper on a morning when she had a Skype interview from the office, first thing. Timika eyed her fuel gauge uneasily.

“Don’t give up on me now,” she warned Dion’s moldering Corolla. The car had taken to burning oil at twice the usual rate, blowing out great clouds of blue, acrid smoke behind her.

“You’ve gotta get that POS fixed,” she had told Dion the night before. “It’s gonna die and leave me freezing by the curb.”

“If it’s such a piece of shit car,” Dion shot back, “why not take the subway like everybody else?”

“Yeah, God forbid you should break out your wallet for anything you can’t stick in your PlayStation,” Timika had shot back, staring her boyfriend down until he wilted and his eyes slid back to the TV. “That’s what I figured.”

They were supposed to be going to Atlantic City for the weekend. Her idea. She’d pick him up after work and they’d be on the road by six, assuming that the car survived the day. If it didn’t, or something else happened to screw up their trip, and if she got the message that Dion was relieved, things were gonna go down hill in their Mt. Kisco apartment faster than the crappy little car was ever likely to manage.

The Corolla sputtered, stalling. She gave it a little more gas, watching in the rear view mirror as another cloud of black smog plumed out behind her.

“Jesus, lady,” said the cab driver who was sitting alongside through his window. “What are you burning in there—napalm?”

“That’s hilarious,” she spat back. “You should be on stage.”

He made a face, and Timika urged the Corolla forward a few feet so she wouldn’t have to look at him. On the west side of Union Square, she saw blue lights flashing. In front of a café, the sidewalk had been partly cordoned off with yellow crime scene tape. A pair of uniformed police officers were standing around doing nothing, as far as she could see. The traffic slowed to a crawl so that drivers could rubberneck, but there was nothing to see.

She leaned across to the passenger side, brandishing the ID in her wallet.

“What’s going on here?” she called to the closest cop as she crawled by.

He stooped to look into the car and rolled his eyes.

“Figured it would be you, Mars,” he said. “At the precinct, they call you the Question Girl. I can’t think why.”

“Well, thinking never was your strong suit,” she replied.

His name was Officer James Brown, and boy hadn’t she given him a hard time for that in high school. His phone number was still on her contact list from when she’d organized their tenth reunion.

Hey Jimmy boy, you feel good? Like you knew you would?
Still funny.

“Old guy got mugged,” said Brown. “Your crackpot website got a crime beat now?”

“Just a concerned citizen,” she said. “He okay?”

“You’ll have to ask St. Peter,” said the cop. Another comedian.

“Here? At this time of day?”

“Another beautiful day in the Big Apple. You wanna move up? You’re holding up traffic.”

“Yeah, I’m the one holding up traffic,” Timika returned. “You wanna get these cars moving? Some of us have to get to work.”

The cop just rolled his eyes and shrugged. *What am I supposed to do about it?*

“Yeah,” Timika growled back. “That’s what I figured.”

She drove to the parking garage on East Sixteenth Street and swung by an ATM to pick up the five hundred bucks that was her share of the rent. Five minutes later, she

was tearing up the stairs to her office, shedding her jacket as she ran up the stairs. The office was a couple of tiny rooms above a vegetarian restaurant, next to the classical façade of the New York Film Academy on Seventeenth Street. It was cheap and functional, an address that hinted at prosperity, seriousness and class. It also meant that she was able to include, on her website, a shot of the Union Square subway entrance, with a shallow dome and hat-brim ring that made it look like a classic flying saucer.

Timika bypassed the coffee pot with an effort of will and settled in front of the computer monitor in the one corner of the office that looked like an office, as opposed to one of those crazy lady apartments where no one throws anything away and the cops only go in when the corpse smell alerts the neighbors. It was the professional corner. The Skype corner.

She checked her appearance on her webcam—she was wearing her brassiest wig for maximum effect, a mop of glossy ringlets flecked preposterously with gold.

Her business card read “Timika Mars—Freelance Investigative Journalist and Blogger.” She was also the host of Debunktion.com, a podcast and website dedicated to exposing (and ridiculing) urban myths, pseudo-science, conspiracy theories of all kinds, and what Timika grouped together as “mainstream superstition.” She had pages on everything from the Loch Ness monster and the JFK assassination to miraculous statues of the Virgin Mary in Mexico. Though she wasn’t getting rich off it, the site was one of the most visited of its kind, and

the advertising revenue was steady. *The Huffington Post* interview she was about to do would surely boost her visibility. Her staff was a part-time tech support guy called Marvin whose brilliance with computers was matched only by the amount of weed he smoked, and Audrey Stanhope, who Timika likened to both a bloodhound and a pit bull when it came to sniffing out and chasing down stories. The metaphor worked, Timika thought, because she could also be a royal bitch when it came to negotiating with advertisers.

“Goddamn it,” she muttered. The wig looked fabulously outrageous, but she had a coffee stain on her sweater. She was already two minutes late for the interview and didn’t have time to rinse it out. She pulled the detachable fur collar off her scarlet coat and arranged it around her neck, trying to decide if it worked as some kind of quirky fashion statement. It looked like a pair of weasels were mating on her shoulders, but it covered the stain. “Oh, what the hell.”

She logged into her Skype account and waited for the call to come through, scanning her e-mail on a second computer for links to various news stories, one featuring blurry pictures of Bigfoot, another showing some suspiciously two-dimensional English fairies, and a brace of other idiotic stories too obviously faked to merit *debunktion*. That was what she called it. A ludicrous, bombastic and eye-catching word that had become her trademarked website title, something sure to come up in the imminent Huff Po interview.

The interview began well. The host, a perky but shrewd-looking blond woman named Nicole, lofted softball questions and Timika knocked them out of the park: “How long have you been running the site? What was the first case you wrote about? Tell us about some of the more elaborate hoaxes you’ve uncovered? Why do you think people are so quick to believe implausible things?”

Timika was calm and confident:

“Two and a half years.”

“The Essex crop circles, which turned out to be the work of two drunk teenaged boys using a tractor and some towable farm gear.”

“Well, there was the time the bankrupt owner of a Virginia lighthouse wanted to draw tourists by inventing a series of ghostly apparitions. I’m telling you, Nicole, this thing read like the script for a *Scooby Doo* episode. And he would have gotten away with it too, if it weren’t for us meddling kids . . .”

It was only the last question, why people want to believe in things that obviously aren’t real, that gave her pause. Timika trotted out some familiar ideas about why people who live boring lives are drawn to mystery and conspiracy, and then Nicole, hinting at a bitterness she hadn’t shown thus far, asked how Timika felt about spending her life destroying other people’s harmless fantasies.

Timika paused for just a fraction of a second, adjusting to the unexpected jab, then answered. She said she felt fine about it, thank you, Nicole. She added that some of the things people believed in weren’t harmless at all, and some

were quite possibly dangerous, and that even harmless delusions were manifestations of a larger culture that had reduced science and objectivity to a kind of he said/she said debate in which no one person's authority or credibility was valued above anyone else's. The opinion of an eminent physician, archaeologist or environmental scientist was worth no more than that of anyone with access to a twitter account, and sometimes the opinions of accomplished scientists carried less weight than those of people who were famous models or athletes or actors on a sitcom.

Nicole seemed satisfied with Timika's answer. In hindsight, Timika felt the woman was attempting to goad her into saying more, because it made for better footage, not because she disagreed with her. Even so, she was rattled at the end, and when the interviewer wrapped things up with "And can I just say that I love your hair and that fur drape! So fun!" Timika wasn't sure if she was being mocked.

Guess we'll see when it goes live, she thought. Welcome to life in the spotlight.

Well, if it brought in some more revenue, it was worth it. She didn't need the *Huffington Post's* endorsement to know she was doing good, necessary work. She was glad they'd asked her, *Why do you do this?* It forced her to answer it for herself, something she hadn't really done before.

She approached the day's work with a new buoyancy that even Audrey's whining about her sorry personal life and how the people at Fox News got paid more than she did could not dampen.

“What’s that thing around your neck?”

Marvin had finally shown up and was peering at her, leaning with one hand on her desk like he wasn’t sure of his balance.

Timika snatched the fur off and tossed it onto her jacket.

“Nothing,” she said. “I was covering a stain.”

“Right,” said Marvin, nodding with greater seriousness than the remark justified. “Got it.”

Timika wrinkled her nose. “You stoned, man? Because I told you about coming to work like that.”

“No, no,” said Marvin, dropping into a bizarre half crouch and putting his hands up in a half-assed surrender pose as he always did when he felt threatened. “Swear to God. It’s just, you know, passive.”

“Passive?”

“Yeah—my roommate had the bong going this morning, and I may have caught some of the collateral vibe, you know?”

Timika gave him a dubious frown. “You up to installing the new firewall?” she asked.

“Totally,” said Marvin. “Well within my powers. I’ll have it done before you can say ‘firewall.’” He paused, reflecting upon this. “But you might wanna not say it for, like, two hours.”

“Deal,” Timika said.

“Oh, and there’s a package for you,” he added, producing something about the size of a shoe box, wrapped in brown paper and tied with thin twine. “The Doorman

just handed it to me. He said an old guy came by before you got in.”

He placed the parcel on Timika’s desk. Her name was written in unsteady block capitals in magic marker. There was no return address or sign that it had been through the post.

Not everyone was a fan of what the office produced. She usually received belligerent explanations in the mail, rather than actual hate mail, but she’d had her share of death threats from people angry because she’d picked apart or ridiculed the assumptions they considered true or even sacred. She held the package gingerly, weighing it.

Too light for a bomb, she thought. But not for anthrax or ricin or—more likely—talcum powder, which would shut the office down until they could get an all clear from the health department.

“I’m gonna open this outside,” she said, fishing scissors and rubber gloves from her desk drawer.

“You want me to come with?” Marvin asked. Audrey, Timika noted, was making no such offer and eyed the parcel warily.

“Nah, I’m good,” she answered. “If I’m not back in five minutes, call in the hazmat team.”

Marvin looked unsure. “Is the number in your Rolodex thingy?” he asked.

“I was kidding, Marvin,” said Timika, picking up the package and stalking out of the room with a pointed look at Audrey.

“Hey,” said the reporter with a better version of Marvin’s hands-up defensive gesture. “I just work here. You don’t pay me enough to get blown up.”

“Yeah,” muttered Timika as she pushed through the door and into the stairwell, drawing her scarlet raincoat tight to her body. “That’s what I figured.”

She didn’t really believe the package was dangerous, but she crossed to the square across the street and chose a bench away from two old people who were exercising their dogs. She opened the parcel carefully, donning the rubber gloves and slitting the paper, then turning the box upside down at arms’ length. No telltale white powder trickled out. When she lifted the lid, she found only a notebook. It was blue, hardbound, with a cloth cover stained with age and use. Inside the cover was an envelope, thick with heavy stationery covered in spidery script.

“Dear Miss Mars,” the letter began. “I hope to be talking you through the contents of this book in person since there is much to be explained, but in case I am not able to, I wanted you to understand something. The contents of this book are extremely important. I am confident that it will change your life and your sense of many things. It is also extremely dangerous. There are people who would kill me to prevent you from reading it and may attempt to kill you for doing so. For that I apologize. I will trust your judgment as to whether you will take that risk, though I am confident in my regard for your sense of ethical responsibility. Read. Investigate all I have to say. Check it. Subject it to your most rigorous ‘debunktion,’ then call me. My time

is short, even if no one tries to make it shorter. Until then, I am sincerely yours, Jerzy Aaron Stern.”

His name was followed by a phone number.

Timika wasn't sure what to make of it. It screamed conspiracy theory nonsense—especially the paranoid hinting about lives in danger, which was one of the major hallmarks of the genre—but the writing itself gave her pause. It was an old man's writing, unsteady, but sophisticated, as was the phrasing. Most of what she received was a train wreck of small and capital letters, third-grade spelling and text-message punctuation. This felt . . . different.

She opened the notebook, carefully, feeling its age and startled to find that it contained more of the same long-hand script, though the penmanship looked younger, more confident than the letter she'd just read. There were pages and pages of it, occasionally broken by little sketches and diagrams. It was clearly a journal, all entries carefully dated. She flipped to the front and caught her breath. The first entry, laid out in blue ink, the desiccated pages stained and smeared with dirt or even old blood, was labeled Kraków, Poland, 1939.

No way.

“You okay there, Timika?”

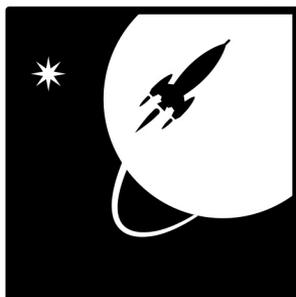
She looked up to find Marvin standing over her.

“You look kind of spooked. You need me to call those hazmat guys or something?”

She hesitated, staring at the first entry. “You know what, Marvin?” she said at last. “I'm really not sure.”

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