

## PROLOGUE

John Clark didn't give a damn what anybody said—this was still Saigon.

He knew history, of course. Forty years ago the communists came down from the north and they took the place. They renamed it Ho Chi Minh City in honor of their conquering leader. To the victors the spoils. They executed collaborators and imprisoned unreliaables and they changed the politics, the culture, and the fabric of the lives of those who lived here.

It looked a little different now, but to John it felt the same. The cloying evening heat and the smell of exhaust fumes mixing with the pressing jungle, the incense and cigarette smoke and the spiced meat, the buzz of the stifling crowds and the lights from the energetic streets.

And the sense of pervasive danger, just out of sight but closing, like an invading army.

They could name this city after his sworn enemy from the past, they could call it whatever the hell they wanted, but to

the sixty-six-year-old man sitting in the open-front café in District 8, that didn't change a thing.

This was still *fucking* Saigon.

Clark sat with his legs crossed, his shirt collar open, and his tan tropic-weight sport coat lying across the chair next to him because the slow-moving palm-frond fan above him did nothing more than churn the hot air. Younger men and women swirled around him, heading either to tables in the back or out onto the busy pavement in front of the café, but Clark sat still as stone.

Except for his eyes; his eyes darted back and forth, scanning the street.

He was struck by the lack of Americans in uniform, the one big disconnect from his memories of old Saigon. Forty-odd years ago he'd trod these streets in olive drab or jungle camo. Even when he was here in country with the CIA's MACV-SOG (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam—Studies and Observations Group), he'd rarely worn civilian clothing. He was a Navy SEAL, there was a war going on, battle dress was appropriate for an American, even one in country working direct-action ops for the Agency.

Also missing were the bicycles. Back then ninety percent of the wheeled traffic on this street would have been bikes. Today there were some bikes, sure, but mostly it was scooters and motorcycles and small cars filling the street, with pedestrian throngs covering the sidewalks.

And nobody wore a uniform around here.

He took a sip of green tea in the glow of the votive candle flickering on his bistro table. He didn't care for the tea, but this

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place didn't have beer or even wine. What it *did* have was line of sight on the Lion d'Or, a large French colonial restaurant, just across Huynh Thi Phung Street. He looked away from the passerby, stopped thinking about the days when twenty-five percent of them would have been U.S. military, and he glanced back to the Lion d'Or. As hard as it was to divorce himself from the past, he managed to put the war out of his mind, because this evening his task was the man drinking alone at a corner table in the restaurant, just twenty-five yards from where Clark sat.

The subject of Clark's surveillance was American, a few years younger than Clark, bald and thickly built. To Clark it was clear this man seemed to be having issues this evening. His jaw was fixed in anger, his body movements were jolting and exaggerated like a man nearly overcome with fury.

Clark could relate. He was in a particularly foul humor himself.

He watched the subject for another moment, then checked his watch and pressed down on a button on a small wireless controller in his left hand. He spoke aloud, albeit softly, even though no one sat close by. "One-hour mark. Whoever he's meeting is making him wait for the honor of their company."

Three stories above and directly behind Clark—on the roof of a mixed-use colonial-style office building—three men, all lying prone and wearing muted colors and black backpacks, scanned the street below them. They were connected to Clark via their earbuds, and they'd picked up his transmission.

Domingo "Ding" Chavez, in the middle of the three, centered his Nikon on the man in the restaurant and focused the lens. Then he pressed his own push-to-talk button and answered

back softly: "Subject is not a happy camper. Looks like he's about to put his fist through the wall."

Clark replied from below. "If I have to sit here in this heat and sip this disgusting tea much longer, I'm going to do the same."

Chavez cleared his throat uncomfortably, then said, "Uh, it's not too bad up here. How about one of us take the eye at ground level, you can make your way to the roof?"

The reply came quick. "Negative. Hold positions."

"Roger that."

Sam Driscoll chuckled. He lay on Chavez's left, just a few feet away, his eye to a spotting scope that he used to scan to the north of the restaurant, watching the road for any sign of trouble. He spoke to the men around him, but he didn't transmit. "Somebody's grumpy."

Several yards to Chavez's right, Jack Ryan, Jr., peered through his camera, scanning the pedestrians on the sidewalk to the south of their overwatch. He focused his attention on a leggy blonde climbing out of a cab. While doing so he asked, "What's wrong with Clark? He's usually the last one of us to bitch, but he's been like this all day."

There was no one else on this rooftop other than the three Americans, but Chavez had been doing this sort of thing for most of his adult life. He knew his voice would carry through the metal air-conditioning duct behind him if he wasn't careful, so he answered back as if he were in a library. "Mr. C's got some history around here, is all. Probably coming back to him."

"Right," Ryan said. "He must be reliving the war."

Ding smiled in the darkness. "That's part of it. Clark's down in that café thinking about the shit he saw. The shit he did. But he's also thinking about running around here as a

twenty-five-year-old SEAL stud. It probably scares him how much he wishes he was back in the groove. War or no war.”

Ryan said, “He’s holding up for an old guy. We should all be so lucky.”

Driscoll shifted on his belly to find a more comfortable position on the asphalt mansard roof, though he kept his eye in his optic, centering now on the man at the table. “Clark’s right. It doesn’t look like this meet is going to happen, and watching this guy through a ten-power scope while he drinks his liver into oblivion is getting old.”

While Sam focused on the subject, Ryan continued following the blonde as she pushed through the foot traffic heading north along Huynh Thi Phung Street. He tracked her to the front door of Lion d’Or. “Good news. I think our evening just got interesting.”

Chavez followed Ryan’s gaze. “Really? How so?”

Jack watched the woman as she turned sharply into the restaurant from the sidewalk and moved directly toward their subject’s table. “The meet has arrived, and *she* is hot.”

Chavez saw her through his own binos now. “I guess it’s better than watching another fat dude slurp gin.” He pressed the push-to-talk button again. “John, we’ve got a—”

Clark’s voice crackled over Chavez, because he had the command unit on their network and could override other transmissions. “I see her. Too bad we don’t have any fucking audio.”

The men on the roof all laughed nervously. Damn, Clark *was* grouchy tonight.

# 1

**C**olin Hazelton made a show of checking the time on his mobile phone as the woman sat down. She was an hour late and he wanted to indicate his displeasure, even if only passive-aggressively.

She fixed the hem of her skirt and crossed her legs, and only then did she look up at him. She seemed to notice the phone and his focus on it, then she lifted the sweating water glass in front of her and took a sip.

Hazelton dropped his phone back into his pocket and drank down half of his gin and tonic. He had to admit she was every bit as attractive as advertised. It was virtually all his control had said about his contact tonight. Statuesque and blond, with mannerisms that transmitted refinement and poise. Still, Hazelton was too pissed to be impressed. Not pissed at her, exclusively, but generally angry, and he certainly wasn't in the mood to ogle his contact tonight.

That she'd made him wait a goddamned hour took even more of the luster off her splendor.

Before either spoke the waiter appeared. It was that kind of place, not like the dive bars and tea shops that populated the rest of this part of Huynh Thi Phung Street.

The woman ordered a glass of white wine in perfect French. Hazelton could tell it was her native tongue, but his control officer had mentioned this fact as well, between breathless comments about her almond eyes and her lithe body.

He assumed she was a former French spook, either DGSE or DCRI, although she also could have been from DST, which became DCRI in 2008. Virtually everyone Hazelton met with in the course of his work was a former intelligence officer, so this was no stretch.

She did not introduce herself, though he wasn't surprised by this. He had, however, expected some contrition for her late arrival. But she didn't mention it at all. Instead, she opened with, "You brought the documents?"

Hazelton did not answer her directly. "What do you know about the circumstances of the operation?"

"The circumstances?"

"The client. Have they read you in on the client?"

She showed a little confusion now. "Why would they do that? The client is not relevant to my brief."

"Well, let me fill you in. The client is—"

The woman held a slender hand up. Her nails were perfectly manicured, and her skin glowed with lotion. "When they don't brief me, I take that to mean I am not supposed to know." She looked Hazelton over. "You don't appear to be new to this work, so surely you understand this." Her French accent was thick, but her English was flawless.

He took another gulp of gin. "Sometimes it's best to know."

"Perhaps that is your philosophy. It is not mine." She said it

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with an air of finality. She wanted to move on. “So . . . do you have them or not?”

Hazelton spoke slowly and softly, but stressing every word through a slur from the alcohol he'd been consuming all day, both here and in the lobby bar back at his hotel. “*North . . . Fucking . . . Korea.*”

No response from the Frenchwoman.

He said, “You *did* know, didn't you?”

She did not answer. Instead, she replied, “You are very emotional, aren't you? This surprises me. I know you were given a rush assignment, someone took ill and they pulled out and then you were called over, but New York should know better than to send in an emotional traveling officer.” Below the table, Hazelton felt the tip of her high-heeled shoe as it ran along his leg, just next to his ankle. There was a time in his life when this would have excited him, but that was long ago. This was work; he knew she was just feeling around to see if he had a briefcase. Soon he heard her toe thump his case, next to his leg.

She said, “Slide it to me, please.”

The big American just sat there. He drummed his fingers on the table. Considering.

He expected to see frustration on her face, but she was oddly cool about his delay. After several seconds she repeated herself with no change in tone. “Slide it to me, please.”

He didn't know what he was going to do tonight. Would he pass the items or shred them and dump them in a river like fish food? The ramifications for each course of action had been weighing on him all day. But now a sense of composure came over him, and he heard himself say, “You know what? I didn't sign on to this job to be an errand boy for a bunch of murdering



psychos." Then, "There is other work to be had without stooping this low."

"I don't understand," the woman said, and while speaking she glanced into the street, a casual gaze. She looked bored, but Hazelton knew she was simply keeping an eye out for surveillance.

Hazelton waved his arm in the air angrily. "To hell with this. I'm out."

The woman, by contrast, displayed no emotion. "Out?"

"I'm not passing the documents on to you."

She sighed a little now. "Is this about money? If so, you will need to talk to New York. I have no authorization to—"

"It's not about money. It's about good and evil. That's completely lost on you, isn't it?"

"My job has nothing to do with either."

Hazelton looked at the woman with complete derision. His decision had been made. "Tell yourself that if you need to, but you're *not* getting these docs." He kicked the briefcase loud enough for her to hear it.

The woman nodded. A countenance of calm. Her detachment was odd to Hazelton. He'd expected screaming and yelling. She just said, "This will complicate things. New York will be angry."

"Screw New York."

"I hope you don't expect me to join you in your moral crusade."

"Doll, I don't give a damn what you do."

"Then you won't give a damn when I walk out of here and make a phone call."

Hazelton paused, the strain of his work and the travel evident on his face. "Call him."

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“He will send someone to take that case from you.”

Hazelton smiled now. “He might try. But like you said, I’m not exactly new at this. I have a few tricks up my sleeve.”

“For your sake, I hope you do.” The Frenchwoman stood and turned away, passing the smiling waiter approaching the table with the wine on a silver tray.

Jack Ryan, Jr., watched it all through his camera from the rooftop across the street. He couldn’t hear the conversation, of course, but he correctly identified the body language.

“If that was a blind date, I don’t think they hit it off.”

Ding and Sam chuckled, but everyone stayed on mission. They watched while the tall woman pulled a phone from her purse and spoke into it, then began walking north.

Driscoll depressed his PTT controller. “Clark? Are we staying with Hazelton or do you want someone on the woman?”

Clark replied quickly. “She was after whatever is in that briefcase, so that case is now part of our mission. Still . . . I want to know more about her. One of you go with the blonde. The others stay put, eyes on that case.”

Jack and Sam took their eyes out of their optics and looked to Chavez, between them on the roof. Chavez said, “I’ll stay. You guys fight over it.”

Now Jack glanced to Sam, who slowly put his eye back in his spotting scope to watch the subject. “Go.”

Jack gave a big smile; it was the brightest light on the rooftop. “I owe you one, Sam.”

He was up and moving toward the fire escape in seconds, putting his camera into his pack as he walked through the dark.

Sam and Ding watched while Colin Hazelton drained the last of his gin and tonic, then gestured for the waiter to bring him another.

“What’s he hanging around for? He’s got another shitty date?” Sam asked rhetorically. Downstairs Clark was thinking the same thing. His voice was gravel, all annoyance and frustration. “Looks like we’re stuck here for a fourth round of g and t’s.”

The drink came and Hazelton let the waiter put it on the table in front of him. He said something to the waiter; all three Americans watching across the street thought he was asking for the bathroom, because the waiter pointed toward the back of the establishment. Hazelton stood; he left his drink, his coat, and his briefcase; and he headed to the back.

It was quiet in all three headsets for a moment. Then Ding said, “John? That look right to you?”

Clark understood what his second-in-command meant, but instead of revealing what he was thinking, he put it as a challenge to Driscoll. “Sam? What do you see?”

Driscoll adjusted his eye in his scope, looking at the empty table, the coat over the back of Hazelton’s chair, the briefcase on the other chair. He looked at the other tables in the restaurant, the well-heeled clientele seated or milling about. After a moment his eyes went back to the briefcase. He said, “If something was so important in that case that he refused to pass it to his contact, why would he leave it unattended at the table while he goes to take a leak?”

Clark said, “He wouldn’t.”

“Then the case is a decoy.”

“That’s right.”

“Meaning . . .” Driscoll had it in another second. “Hazelton isn’t coming back. He suspects surveillance on the front so he’s slipping out a rear exit.”

Ding confirmed this with “The old dine-and-dash routine.”

Clark said, “Bingo. I’m going to head through the restaurant and come out the back. It’s a north-south alley, but his hotel is behind us. You two stay on overwatch and keep an eye on the intersections to the north and south. Unless he can teleport, we’ll pick him back up.”

In the tea shop Clark dropped a few wadded dong notes on the table, paying for a drink that made his stomach churn, then he grabbed his jacket and headed toward the Lion d’Or across the street.

He’d just stepped off the curb when he saw something that made him pull up short. He backed onto the sidewalk, then looked around in all directions.

Softly he spoke over the communications net. “Ryan. Hold position.”

Jack Ryan, Jr., had been moving up Dao Cam Moc, but on Clark’s order he stopped. “Holding,” he replied. He turned toward the alcove of a closed electronics retailer and pretended to window shop.

“What’s your location?” Clark asked.

Jack looked down to his phone to a map of the area. Tiny colored dots displayed the position of the four men on the team, or more precisely, the position of the GPS tracker each

man wore under the belt loop in the small of his back. Clark's green dot was two blocks to the southeast, still in the open-air tea shop.

Ryan said, "I'm two blocks northwest of your poz."

Over the earbud Clark explained himself. "I've got eyes on four unknowns on motorcycles approaching from opposite ends of the street. They look like a team."

A moment later Chavez, who was still on the roof with his camera, transmitted. "Black Ducatis?"

Clark said, "Roger that. They came from opposite directions and have different clothing, but it looks like they are riding identical bikes and wearing identical helmets. No coincidence."

Ding picked all four bikes out of the traffic below. It took him several seconds, because they were spread out. "Good eye, John."

"Not my first visit. I know when something doesn't look right around here. Jack, I want you to continue north of your poz. If he takes that alley all the way through the district you can get ahead of him when he comes out on Pham The Hien, but only if you double-time it. Watch for these bikers, don't let them catch you eyeing the subject."

Ryan was still pretending to look over a shelf of high-end cameras in the shop window. He felt the blood pumping through his heart for the first time on this trip. His boring evening was suddenly building in intensity.

Jack took off in a jog. "On it. I'll stay parallel to the bikers and get to the mouth of the alley before Hazelton exits."

Clark said, "Sam and Ding, do what you can to catch up to Ryan."

"We're en route," said Chavez. "A minute to get off the

# HO CHI MINH CITY—DISTRICT 8

*Kenh Doi*



PHAM THE HIEN

DAO CAM MOC

HUYNH THI PHUNG

ALLEY

ALLEY

**Lion  
d'Or**

roof, that puts us three minutes behind you, Jack. Keep it loose till we catch up.”

Colin Hazelton stepped out into the alleyway behind the restaurant and headed due north, his hands in his pockets.

He was well aware he'd just made a very costly decision. Costly because he wouldn't get paid for his work over the past four days, and costly because he'd lose his job for his decision to abort. But also costly because he'd left a three-hundred-dollar sport coat and a four-hundred-dollar briefcase behind.

All bad news for a man in the twilight of his work life who was also sixty thousand dollars in debt, and in possession of few marketable skills other than spycraft.

But in spite of this, for the first time all day, Hazelton felt a sense of peace. It even occurred to him that, despite the valuable property he'd left in the restaurant, at least he'd skipped out on his fifty-dollar bar tab, so he had to factor in that small win.

He managed a half-smile.

But it didn't last. He thought about the events that brought him here, to this dimly lit alley, to this decision, and his mood darkened to match the low light of his surroundings.

It had been a year now since Wayne “Duke” Sharps, director of Sharps Global Intelligence Partners, interviewed Colin Hazelton in his Upper West Side Manhattan office about a job in “corporate intelligence.” Sharps had made it clear to the ex-CIA officer that the work at Sharps Partners would be safe, low-key, and nonpolitical, but it would also require Hazelton coming to terms with the fact he would no longer be working for the United States. He would, instead, be working for a paycheck.

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Hazelton pushed back at this, insisting he'd never do anything against the red, white, and blue, but to that Sharps replied, "We don't operate against U.S. interests." He laughed at the thought. "We're not devils here at SGIP, we're just not angels."

That sounded fine to Colin Hazelton. He was ex-CIA after a career as an Air Force pilot. He bled red, white, and blue, yes, but the times dictated his actions. He'd made a string of speculative international investments in emerging markets, mostly in North Africa, and they had all gone belly-up during the unexpected events of the Arab Spring.

Hazelton needed the work, so he took the job.

And Sharps's promise of apolitical corporate intelligence work had proven true. For the past year Hazelton had not thought twice about his assignments or his clients.

Until this week, that is.

On Monday Hazelton's employer had rushed him to Prague to meet with a government official to pick up travel documentation for five individuals. There wasn't much exciting about this sort of thing; as an operations officer in the CIA, he'd secured alias travel for hundreds of agents around the world. Even working for Sharps this was not out of the ordinary; Hazelton had been involved in moving highly skilled foreign professionals who'd been unable to obtain U.S. work visas into the States. He saw it as a good thing; he was subverting American bureaucracy, not America itself.

Normally it was part of his job to inspect the documents. But not this time; for some reason, when the docs were presented to him in Prague they were sealed in a laminated pouch and his instructions were to deliver the package to a contact in Ho Chi Minh City, and then to return to New York.

He assumed the five sets of documents were for five Czech



professionals, and they would be heading to some other country via Vietnam, not the States, as that would be an odd connection from Prague. Hazelton guessed the travelers would be going to work in Japan, or Singapore, or maybe even Australia.

It was strange he wasn't allowed to see the documentation, but he let it go.

That was until last night on the flight over from Prague. With an hour and a half till landing, the burly American polished off a gin and tonic and began securing items in his roll-aboard and his briefcase. The laminated package full of docs was stowed under the fabric lining of his carry-on, but as he moved a pair of shoes to make room for his jacket, to his horror he realized there was a small tear in the lining of the case. He'd been using the luggage since the late eighties, and the secret compartment had finally given out. He tried to fix it, but this only made it worse. It was a rookie mistake for a spook, and Hazelton was no rookie, but he had been drinking, and that, along with Murphy's Law, had worked against him.

As he sat in his first-class seat he thought about going through immigration in Vietnam and he began to sweat. If his carry-on was searched at all he knew they would find his stash. But thinking it over quickly, he realized he couldn't remember a single visit to Vietnam where his person had been searched. If he removed the documents from the hidden compartment and simply stored them in a money belt around his waist, he'd be fine.

But to do this he knew he'd first need to remove them from the large square laminate package.

Hazelton took the document package into the lavatory, sat on the toilet, and tore it open with his teeth. Inside he found five plastic bags, each one containing a passport, a driver's li-

cense, some credit cards, and a folded letter. Despite a strong presumption he was not supposed to look, he began thumbing through the documents.

A flight attendant knocked on the door to the bathroom, telling him to return to his seat because the pilot expected unstable air ahead.

But Hazelton ignored her; all his attention was concentrated on the travel documents. He was not surprised to find the black diplomatic passports. They were not fakes, these were legit, although he assumed they had been altered somehow. He looked at each of the photos. Four Caucasian men and one Caucasian woman.

He couldn't be sure if they were Czech just by looking at them, but where they were from was *not* the issue.

It was where they were going. The letters in each person's possession were travel authorizations, given by the Czech government, allowing the diplomat holding the corresponding passport to travel to North Korea to work in the Czech consulate there.

*North Korea?* Hazelton had spent the last year doing corporate intelligence work for Siemens, for Microsoft, for Land Rover, and for Maersk.

*Now I'm working on behalf of the most brutal and repressive regime in the world?*

As he sat on the toilet, his shoulders slamming from one wall to the other with the turbulence, Hazelton decided these five individuals were nuclear scientists being snuck into North Korea. What the hell else could be going on? DPRK had been caught trying to move nuke experts before, and they had no major industry to speak of other than mining, which was handled almost exclusively by partners in China. He couldn't be

certain these were nuke scientists, of course, but he could damn well tell they weren't Chinese miners.

And he knew this wasn't some operation Sharps was running against the North Koreans. Duke Sharps wasn't in the business of taking on despotic regimes for noble aims. He worked for money, there was money in getting brainpower into North Korea, so that had to be what was going on here.

He closed his eyes and leaned back against the bulkhead of the plane, still sitting on the toilet. "Son of a bitch," he whispered to himself.

The fact Duke Sharps was shipping nefarious characters into the Hermit Kingdom of North Korea pissed Hazelton off, but the fact Hazelton was helping Sharps do it made him shudder.

Hazelton made it through airport immigration with the docs strapped to his midsection, and then an hour later he arrived at his hotel from the airport, salty remnants of dried sweat covering his body. He spent the afternoon in the lobby drinking, thinking about the money and the job and his need to make his financial problems go away, hoping against hope there was some sweet spot of inebriation he could find right as the time came to pass the docs off to the cutout here in Ho Chi Minh City so he wouldn't feel like he was doing anything wrong.

Now Hazelton knew . . . a half-dozen Tanquerays at the lobby bar and three more at the restaurant—more than a *pint* of gin—this wasn't even close to enough to washing away the stench of working for the North Koreans.

He'd balked tonight in the restaurant, refusing to give the docs to the gorgeous French spook, his cutout who would have taken them to the five travelers, probably lodged somewhere in the city. Then the French bitch had probably run off to tat-

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tletale to Duke Sharps, and now sixty-one-year-old Colin Hazelton found himself stinking drunk, staggering through a Third World back alley dodging whoever Sharps would send to find the dirty docs that Hazelton now held in a large money belt around his waist.

While he stumbled along he kept an eye out for any surveillance, but he didn't really expect anyone on him for a day or two. He planned on walking a couple blocks through these back streets to the Kenh Doi, one of several brackish canals that ran through the city, tying his money belt around a loose brick, and then dropping the five sets of dirty documents into the water. From there he'd head to the airport, he'd be on the first plane back to the United States in the morning, and he'd wait to get fired by phone, no doubt by Duke himself.

He'd go back to flying planes for a living. At his age and with his lack of recent flying time he might be able to scrounge some work flying beat-up cargo props in the Third World. He'd die before he paid off his debt, but at least he wouldn't be a bag man for the Asian Dr. Evil and his murdering minions.

Hazelton walked on. There had been a flurry of activity in the streets—this was District 8, full of French colonial architecture and active nightlife—but now he passed through the darkness in a commercial area near the canal. A restaurant worker carried garbage by him, and an old woman on a scooter putted through the alley.

As he made a left toward the water a pair of men on whisper-quiet black Ducati Diavel motorcycles rolled into the alleyway he just vacated, but he neither heard nor saw them, nor did he have any idea two more similar bikes were already positioned ahead of his route, and waiting for him to walk into their trap.

## 2

Jack Ryan, Jr., moved in the darkness, east on Pham The Hien. In front of him he saw Colin Hazelton appear from an alleyway across the street. Jack had expected him to turn to his left and head back to his hotel, but to his surprise the American in the white button-down shirt and loose necktie stepped into the road and began heading over toward Ryan's side of the street.

*Shit*, thought Jack. He kept walking, looking away from Hazelton and taking care not to alter his gait. He wondered for a moment if he might have been burned, but Hazelton didn't seem to pay any attention to him.

To Jack's surprise Hazelton stepped onto the pavement forty yards in front of him, then entered another narrow, dark alleyway. This would lead him directly to the Kenh Doi, an east-west canal that served as the northern border for District 8, and from Jack's study of the map of this district, there was nothing there but docks and houseboats and ramshackle apartment buildings.

Confused as to why the man wasn't going back to his hotel, Jack decided he would walk on a few blocks and then try to move up a parallel alley.

Jack picked up the pace, took a second to orient himself with the map on his phone, and then he spoke over the net. "This is Ryan. I've got the subject. He's moving north. Two blocks south of the water. Unless he's got himself a dinghy tied up somewhere, then he's going to run out of road here in a minute. I'm going to try to get ahead and see what he's up to. I'll move parallel to his—"

Jack stopped transmitting when, directly in front of him, two black Ducati bikes rolled out of the alley ahead and crossed the street. They were just a couple hundred feet behind Hazelton. Here in the quiet sector near the river they couldn't hope to remain covert from a trained CIA veteran.

Nothing about this looked like a surveillance exercise by the men on the bikes.

"Ryan?" Ding called over the network. "Did you lose comms?"

"Negative, I'm here. But a pair of Ducatis are here, too, and they are definitely following Hazelton. Not sure where the others are. This looks too aggressive for surveillance. I think they are going to confront him."

Driscoll spoke over the net now. "Unless they've got cars involved in the pursuit that we haven't spotted yet, they aren't planning on an abduction. This might be something worse."

Jack confirmed, astonished that the stakes of this operation seemed to be rising with each moment. "Holy shit, this could be a hit."

Ding broke into the conversation. "Hang on a second. Hazelton is supposed to be over here on a corporate intelligence

job. His last op was for Microsoft. Nothing we've seen indicates he has any concerns about a lethal adversary. A hit would be one hell of an escalation."

Jack saw the two other bikes now, entering Pham The Hien from the east and then racing past Ryan and separating. One turned into the alley that ran parallel to the east of Hazelton's path; the other turned into the alley to the west, the one Ryan had planned on taking.

Jack passed the road Hazelton took. He just caught a glimpse of the first two bikers as they turned between a pair of long two-story warehouses that ran all the way to the water's edge. He picked up the pace, thinking any confrontation would have to be soon, because Hazelton was running out of alley before the canal, and then he would have to retrace his steps back in this direction.

As he jogged to the corner to get a look between the buildings, he said, "I agree, Ding, but now four guys have him boxed in with nowhere to run. Something is about to go down."

Now John Clark came over the line. "I'm getting the car in case we need to make a hasty exfil with Hazelton. Traffic is tight, though. It's going to take me some time. Ding and Sam, get to Ryan's poz on the double. Jack, you do *not* intervene, no matter what. You are unarmed."

Jack replied softly now. He'd reached the corner and he was about to lean around to take a peek at what was going on. "Understood."

Hazelton approached the Kenh Doi, a dense blackness fifty yards in front of him. There were a few twinkling lights of District 5 on the far bank, but there was also a group of ware-

houses there, without much going on at this time of the evening. And this stretch of canal, though nearly in the center of the city, had next to no boat traffic at night.

His plan had been to tear up the documents to the best of his ability and then drop them in the Kanh Doi. They would separate as they flowed downstream, and they would be rendered useless to the North Koreans.

But he knew that plan was shot now, because of the sound of finely tuned motorcycle engines behind him.

He understood the bikers were here for him. They made no secret of their presence. And they weren't alone. He hadn't seen any more followers, but the slow approach from the men behind him gave the distinct impression they were waiting for someone else to get into position.

Colin Hazelton was drunk, but he was still perceptive; after all, he had been doing this sort of thing for a very long time.

And just like that, his suspicions were confirmed. A pair of headlights appeared in front of him, one coming up the riverside path along the docks from the east, the other from the west. They turned in his direction and approached at a steady pace.

They had him and he felt he knew who *they* were. They were more of Duke Sharps's men. That French bitch had had confederates here in town, and they'd swooped down on him not in days, as he'd anticipated, but in mere minutes.

The two bikes in front of him pulled up to within feet, and then they turned off their engines. The men kept their helmets on and their mirrored visors down. The pair behind had stopped twenty yards back, their soft motors reverberating confidently, announcing to Hazelton that he had nowhere to go.



He knew he was going to have to talk his way out of this.

Hazelton looked to the closest biker, taking him for the leader. He managed a little laugh. "Figured you wouldn't be in position till tomorrow. I underestimated the hell out of you guys."

None of the bikers spoke.

Hazelton continued. "Well done. New York sent you in early, I guess? They expected me to waver? I'm impressed. That's what we used to call 'anticipating surprise.'" He chuckled again, and repeated, "Well done."

The closest biker climbed off his motorcycle, and he stepped to within arm's reach. His mirrored visor gave the man the appearance of a robot.

Hazelton shrugged. "Had to make a stand. You get it, right? The client this time is the DPRK. I don't know if you knew it, but Duke is in bed with the worst people in the world."

The biker reached to his helmet and lifted his visor now. Hazelton was surprised by this a little—the man initially seemed content to keep himself masked—but Hazelton thought it possible the man was showing his face because they were acquainted. He knew Sharps hired a lot of ex-Agency assets, after all.

Colin Hazelton leaned forward a little to get a look at the man in the light, but as soon as he saw the face, he recoiled back.

He did not know the man. It was an Asian face. Hard. Cold. North Korean.

"Oh," he said. "I see." Then he faked another little laugh. "You ever had one of those days?"

"Give me the documents," the North Korean said.

Hazelton felt around on his body. He shrugged. "Would you look at that? I left them in a briefcase back at the—"

"The case was empty!" An automatic pistol appeared in the North Korean's right hand. Hazelton knew little about weapons, but he had no doubt it was real. The pair behind him began revving their engines, and the other man in front of him stood up taller on his bike.

After watching the entire confrontation, Jack Ryan, Jr., pulled his head back around the corner of the warehouse. He dropped down on one knee, and he tapped his PTT button. "This is Ryan with eyes on. All four followers are around the subject, and they have him at gunpoint."

Ding replied; it was clear from his breathing he was running. "So much for this being an easy corporate gig. Stay covert. We are on Tran Xuan Soan, about ninety seconds from you."

Jack said, "If this is a hit, Hazelton doesn't have ninety seconds."

Clark barked over the net now. "And if that's a hit you aren't stopping it unarmed. I'm en route with the car. Three to five minutes back." Through the transmission Jack could hear Clark honking his car horn at traffic ahead of him.

Ryan's impulse was to run headlong into the alley, but he knew Clark was right about his chances if this turned into a real fight.

But Jack had an idea. "I don't have to engage, John. I can try a diversion."

Clark replied quickly. "You are on your own, son. Use extreme discretion."

Ryan did not acknowledge the instructions; he was already looking at the map on his phone, formulating a hasty plan of action. He pulled his camera from his backpack and took a few breaths to ready himself.

The North Korean biker leveled the gun at the American's chest. He did not say a word.

Hazelton raised his hands slowly, panic welling within. "There is absolutely no need for that. I'm no threat to you. Let's keep this civilized, at the very least." The American looked around him. Through the fear coursing through his body he realized he'd put himself in a terrible situation. Had he not been three sheets to the wind he knew he never would have wandered down a dark street like this, especially while harboring concerns someone was after him.

Of course, had he known DPRK agents were on his tail, no amount of alcohol would have caused this breach of tradecraft.

The North Korean pulled the hammer back on his pistol. Hazelton stared into the black hole of the muzzle, not quite past the disbelief of what was happening. He'd never faced a gun, he'd never faced any real danger in his career other than an incident once when he was roughed up by street hooligans in Denmark, hardly comparable to his present circumstance. His mind was overcome with the terror of the moment, but he did retain the presence of mind to know he was beaten. With a cracking voice he said, "Money belt. Around my waist."

Just then the door to an apartment building opened twenty-five feet from Colin Hazelton's left shoulder. Two women stepped out carrying large bags, and they immediately glanced up at the men in the middle of the little street in front of them.

## FULL FORCE AND EFFECT

The North Korean turned his pistol in their direction, and they screamed, leaping back inside the building.

The North Korean heard a shout behind him, his man there alerting him. He looked up and saw the burly American running past them up the street, lumbering toward the water.

He fired up his bike, preparing to take off after the American; the other bikers revved their engines as well.

“Hey! Hey!” someone shouted in English a half-block behind at the corner of a corrugated tin warehouse. All four bikers turned to look and they saw a young white man with dark hair and a beard. He held a camera up in their direction. “Everybody smile!” The camera flashed a dozen times, strobing the men in the dim alley.

The two bikers closest to the cameraman throttled their engines and burned rubber as they turned around on the street, then began racing toward the white man with the camera. The leader and the man with him went off in pursuit of Hazelton and his money belt.

As he accelerated, the lead North Korean stuck his pistol back into his jacket, then reached to his waistband and pulled a long stiletto from a sheath.