



THE WINDOWS WERE black with soot. Tendrils of smoke seeped from the edges of the flat roof and wove themselves together, like a dark shroud rising into the night. *A single story industrial building — after ten, no lights on — probably no one inside this late.* It wasn't conscious thought, just something Fitz and Donny instinctively knew, just as they knew from the smell, colour and density of the smoke that the fire inside was well established.

The door was cool to the touch. The fire hadn't reached the front of the building yet. Donny pulled his hand back and drove the K-tool over the lock cylinder. He grunted and heaved. The cylinder popped neatly out of the door. He inserted a screw driver into the hole and pried the bolt back.

"Nice work," Fitz nodded.

"Some old guy taught me that a few years back," Donny grinned as he put the tools down. Fitz ignored the remark. They donned the face pieces of their Self Contained Breathing Apparatus and turned on the air tanks on their backs. Cool, fresh air flowed into the masks.

Fitz reached for the door, then paused. "Remember, the water main's shut down. No sprinklers inside, and Moose is going to have to drag the suction all the way back to Cherry Street to catch a hydrant."

"Lucky us." Donny bent to pick up the 38 mm attack line. Until the hydrant was hooked up they would have only the water they carried in

the truck's tank, barely three minutes' worth — maybe a little more if they used it sparingly.

“You ready, Wedge?” Fitz asked.

“And if I said no?” Donny replied.

“I should have canned you when you were a probie.”

“You should have thought of that twenty years ago.” Donny's laugh sounded tinny and hollow inside the mask. Both men felt the familiar surge of adrenalin. “Let's kick this thing in the teeth.”

They instinctively stepped to the side as Fitz pulled the door open, giving the fire a fresh supply of air. Dark smoke billowed out into the night. They stepped inside and were swallowed by the blackness. Once again they were blind men, guided only by touch. They groped their way down the corridor, the heat increasing as they went. The sound of their own breathing inside the SCBA was loud in their ears.

The corridor turned left and the heat grew more intense. They dropped to their knees. It was a couple of hundred degrees cooler near the floor. They still couldn't see anything but they knew they were getting closer to the seat of the fire.

Fitz held the mic of his radio to his face piece. “Pumper 6 Captain to Pumper 6, charge the line Eddy.”

“On its way.” Eddy pulled open a valve on the pump panel at the side of the truck. The hose running into the building surged and snapped as a hundred psi of water rushed through the line.

Donny opened the nozzle and aimed the stream towards the unseen fire that lay ahead. The heat only increased, as water turned to steam. “Feels like a pretty good fire load up ahead, Fitz; I'm not sure we're going to knock it down with this 38.”

Fitz keyed his mic. “Pumper 6 Captain, we're going to need a second line in here.”

“I'm at the hydrant now,” Moose panted over the radio. “As soon as it's hooked up, I'll bring in a 65.”

Fitz turned to Donny. “Let's move up and at least put a dent in it.”

The pressure in the hose made it stiff now. Donny and Fitz grunted, dragging it along as they inched their way down the corridor. The heat was building rapidly and they began to see a dull glow ahead of them in the murky haze. They could hear the sirens of arriving trucks.

“Pump 7 on scene,” the radio crackled. “Aerial 7 on scene.”

“Pumper 6 Captain to Pumper 7, the main body of the fire’s at the back of the building. Bring a line around to the rear and see if you can find a back door, OK, Scooter?”

“Roger, Fitz.”

“Aerial 7 Captain to Pumper 6 Captain, we’re heading to the roof, Fitz. We’ll cut some holes and ventilate some of that smoke and heat for you.”

“Thanks, Billy. It’s getting pretty hot in here.”

“We need that second line. I’m medium rare already,” Donny commented.

“Moose will be here in a minute. Move up and see if you can lob that stream in a little deeper.”

They crawled towards the orange glow.

“Jeez, I got an open door, Donny. It’s burning in here too. Swing the line over and give it a wash.”

Donny turned towards Fitz. He could see a hazy orange rectangle, the outline of a doorway with fire beyond. Donny swung the nozzle and sent the stream of water through the doorway. The orange glow faded but did not completely disappear.

“I’m going in, Wedge,” Fitz said. “Maybe I can find a window to bust out, get rid of some of this heat. You keep the fire from coming down the hall.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Fitz. It’s getting too hot too fast. I think this thing was set up.”

“I’ll be OK. You just protect that hallway. Trust me, I’ve done this before.” Donny could hear the smirk in Fitz’s voice even if he couldn’t see his face.

Reluctantly Donny turned back as Fitz disappeared into the room. The torrent of heat pouring down the hallway was almost unbearable now. Even lying flat on his belly, it stabbed through the layers of his bunker suit. He aimed the nozzle down the corridor, swinging it in a tight arc, hoping vainly to blunt the merciless thrust of the heat.

At the time everything seemed to happen at once, though when he tried to remember it later, it all seemed to flow with the slow, relentless momentum of a glacier.

Tongues of fire began to ripple through the smoke over Donny's head. "Angel fingers," they were called. They were an indication that the fire was about to flash over, become a raging inferno that nothing and no one could survive. He swung the nozzle over his head as he rose to pivot on one knee.

"I've got a body. Shit, Donny, I've got a body," he heard Fitz call.

Moose's voice sounded over the radio. "I've got the 65. I'm coming in the door now, Cap."

"It's gonna flash, Fitz! We gotta bail!" Donny wasn't sure if he actually said it or only thought it. He lunged back towards the doorway.

"Chief 41 on scene, assuming command. Pumper 6 Captain, give me... Oh my God!"

The world blossomed in brilliant yellow. There was a dull roar punctuated by the sound of breaking glass, as flames leapt hungrily from a dozen windows. The air inside seemed to clear as the fire consumed the smoke and everything else in its path. As he fell, Donny thought he glimpsed two forms in the side room, one kneeling over the other, two beings of living flame.

His last memories were of sensations, not images. The first was a torrent of cool water, like Niagara Falls itself was pouring over him. The second was of being hauled helpless from the angry jaws of the beast by some great irresistible force.

THE SUITE'S LIVING-ROOM window looked south over the arc of parkland that made up the Toronto Islands surrounding the harbour. The pale green haze of spring swathed the trees. Beyond, the blue expanse of Lake Ontario sparkled to the horizon.

A naked man stood before the window, moving elegantly through the final postures of the Wu form of Tai Chi: turn body, double lotus swing; curve bow, shoot the tiger; step up and pound down... He was at once focused and relaxed. He moved with purposeful grace, his mind clear, his body centred.

In his mind he was not in the hotel room, but out there, balanced on the air itself, drifting with the clouds, yet ready to stoop and strike at will.

He was lean and fit, with no trace of the slow decline into middle-aged decay. His muscles moved smoothly and powerfully, from the tight bulge of his calves, through the firm round buttocks, to the deep, powerful chest and broad shoulders.

He was an attractive man, but not in the pretty boy sense; his features were in fact rather ordinary, with the exception of his vivid green eyes. It was more of an overall impression, the poise with which he carried himself and the confident strength that shone from those green eyes.

A knock sounded at the door as he completed the final posture.

“Room service,” a voice called.

He moved to the bedroom and covered himself with a terrycloth robe, then answered the door.

“Your breakfast, Mr. Hubbard,” the waiter announced, pushing a trolley into the room.

Yes, he was James Hubbard. At least that was what it said on the driver's licence and credit cards in the wallet he retrieved from the nightstand. He tipped the waiter and moved to the table where the dishes had been set.

He felt refreshed and invigorated. He always felt good after the

successful completion of a job. He was a man who took both pride and pleasure in his work, and it was deeply gratifying when all the planning and details finally came together.

He flicked on the TV, tuned to the local news and poured himself a coffee. He reviewed the previous night in his mind as he ate his breakfast.

He had found Youssef Aziz sitting at his desk with his back to the office door, absorbed in the technical schematic on the computer screen in front of him and stroking his beard, more salt now than pepper. The office around him was a scene of creative clutter, with books and scientific journals stacked haphazardly on shelves and paper spilling out of filing cabinets. Beside the desk was a large workbench. The equipment on the bench seemed to be either partially assembled or disassembled, he wasn't sure which and it didn't matter.

Over the workbench was a window that looked out over the main assembly area. It was hard to see in the dim light, but he could make out a stack of wooden pallets just beyond the window. Perfect.

Aziz whirled in his chair when Hubbard cleared his throat. His eyes first widened in surprise, then narrowed when he saw the gun.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" Aziz asked. His English was clear, but he spoke with a heavy accent. He started to rise from the chair, but Hubbard motioned with the gun and he sat back down.

"What do you want?" There was fear in the old man's eyes and in his voice. It was not the new fear of sudden surprise, but an old fear, rooted deep in the past, a fear that echoed with the midnight knock and the windowless grey room with a light that never went out. It was the fear of a man who knew the true meaning of the word "torment."

Hubbard wished he had more time — time to cultivate and savour the exotic qualities of that fear. But there was too much to do and a schedule to keep. Business was business.

He stepped into the room, set down the case he carried in his other

hand and opened it. Wires led from the machine inside to two palm-sized adhesive pads.

The machine looked like something from a clinic or hospital. Aziz thought he recognized it. He also recognized the look in the eyes of the man with the gun. He had seen that look on the men in the windowless grey room with a light that never went out. He felt a sour taste rising in his throat.

“Take off your shirt,” Hubbard instructed.

Aziz hesitated. Hubbard stepped up to him and ran the barrel of the gun lightly across the old man’s lips.

“Don’t make me angry,” he said softly. “I know how to hurt you. You understand that, don’t you? Yes, I thought so. Now take off your shirt.”

The old man did as he was told. Hubbard handed him the pads and told him to attach one to his chest just below his left nipple, and the other to his right shoulder.

“You are a doctor?” The question was ridiculous and they both knew it. Only Hubbard laughed.

“No, but you’re right. This is a defibrillator. At least it used to be. Normally it’s used to start people’s hearts. I’ve modified this one slightly.”

Comprehension and sudden terror crystallized in Aziz’s brain. As he gripped the arms of the chair to push himself up, Hubbard touched one of buttons on the machine.

Aziz felt the blinding surge of energy arc through him. His eyes rolled back in his head as his whole body arched and stiffened. He collapsed back into the chair and began panting.

“Hmm, good, that was just a test. Now, are all the plans for the system on your computer there?” Hubbard’s finger hovered over the button.

The old man’s brow was beaded with sweat. He struggled to swallow his fear. “You work for her? Tell her to go to hell.”

“Wrong answer.” Hubbard increased the power and pushed the button. The old man arched again and made gurgling sounds. “I can easily double or triple the power without killing you. Now, are all the plans on your computer?”

Aziz clung weakly to the chair for support. “Everything important is on the computer.”

“And all this?” Hubbard asked, indicating the piles of paper.

“Research notes, prototypes. The blue and green folders on the desk are the final version.”

“What about backup copies?” Hubbard asked. Aziz shook his head.

“Sorry, Youssef, but I don’t believe you.” Hubbard pressed the button several times. Aziz jerked like a marionette in the hands of a child. “I could always take the machine to your house and ask Leila. Maybe she’d be more helpful.”

“No, please, leave my wife alone,” Aziz said thickly. He had bitten his tongue badly, and a stream of blood and saliva ran from the corner of his mouth.

“The backup!” Hubbard demanded.

“My computer at home. That’s all, I swear.” There was a look of desperate pleading on Aziz’s face. “I have money. I can pay you. Please leave us alone.”

Hubbard ignored the offer. “And the password?”

“H-two-salaam, both the same.”

Hydrogen peace — how cute, Hubbard thought. He entered the password on Aziz’s computer. It didn’t work. He increased the power on the “defibrillator” and stabbed at the button. The old man gave a strangled cry as his bladder and bowels emptied themselves.

“The password, Youssef. Give me the password or I swear to God I will light you up like the Fourth of July.”

“I told you,” Aziz gasped “The ‘S’, make the ‘S’ a dollar sign.”

This time it worked. Hubbard shut down Aziz’s computer and adjusted a few settings on his machine.

“I wish we had more time together,” he told Aziz. He meant it quite sincerely. “But you know the pressures of the working day. Goodbye, Youssef.” He smiled and pushed the button once again.

The old man’s body rose out of the chair. It seemed to levitate for a moment before crashing heavily to the floor. Hubbard pressed the button several more times and Aziz’s body thrashed like a freshly landed fish in the bottom of a boat. Then it was still.

Hubbard took a set of tools from his jacket pocket and removed the hard drive from Aziz’s computer. He put the hard drive and the blue and green folders into his satchel. Then he picked up a stack of loose paper and carried it to the assembly area next to the office. He crumpled the paper and stuffed it into the stack of wooden pallets. Returning to the office, he stuffed more paper into several of the plastic components on the workbench.

Finally he bent over, removed the electrical pads from Aziz’s body and packed up his machine. He hummed a little tune as he put the old man’s shirt back on him and buttoned it up.

With a flourish, he produced a Zippo lighter from the dead man’s ear. He flipped the lighter open and thumbed the wheel. A tiny shower of sparks rushed toward the wick; the flame fluttered to life and swayed seductively. Hubbard smiled at the dancing flame.

The lighter vanished with a wave. Another gesture and the lighter reappeared in Hubbard’s other hand. The flame danced to life once more, only to disappear again. Aziz’s face was fixed in an expression of permanent surprise. The dead were not an enthusiastic audience, but at least they were attentive. They didn’t suffer from the distractions of the living. Aziz’s unseeing eyes stared as Hubbard rose and sparked the lighter one more time.

It only took one, one tiny spark. The flame leapt greedily to the crumpled paper.

Hubbard shut the back door, locked it and removed his picks. He moved back into the darkness at the rear of the property. From there

he fed the fire and it grew quickly. He watched the firefighters arrive, but it was too late. The fire blossomed in its full fury. It no longer needed his help.

Sadly, it was time to go. He picked up his things, climbed the back fence and walked away, past the empty lots and warehouses.

He would have liked to walk the other way, to go back and watch the fire devour the building, watch the firefighters vainly trying to quench the flames. That was an amateur mistake. Instead he walked to his car and drove to the hotel.

There it was in front of him now, on the TV. The image of flashing red lights and flames soaring into the night sky drew him back to the present. He turned up the volume.

“... was totally destroyed. One firefighter was killed and another seriously injured. A second body was also found in the rubble. No identities have yet been released. Fire Chief Allan Stevens said...”

A small gasp escaped from his throat. A firefighter killed, another badly burned? He felt himself growing hard, but he pushed the thought away. Whatever pleasure the unexpected news might bring him, he needed to think.

He got up, walked to the coffee table and picked up the Zippo lighter. He had never smoked, but the lighter was something he had treasured since his teens. It had been one constant in his life. It was a gift from his father — the final gift.

He flicked open the lid. Sparks sprayed from the wheel and the flame was reborn. The lighter vanished and reappeared as he passed it from hand to hand, marvelling at the sparks and the dancing flame. The ritual calmed him.

In the end, he decided, the news should not be a serious problem. It could even be a benefit. The death of the firefighter would distract attention from Aziz's death. That was a good thing. His planning had been meticulous. He had left no traces — none that the sheep running the investigation would recognize, anyway. They would follow their

usual path, perform their usual tests, and conclude that the fire was an unfortunate accident, a tragic collision of circumstances.

That was the real magic.

He moved to the bedroom and got dressed. The hard drive and paper files he had removed from Aziz's office were already packed into his carry-on. The clerk at the front desk wished him a good day as he checked out.

The taxi sped towards the airport and James Hubbard vanished into thin air.

THE FAMILY HAD gathered, as they always did, to celebrate her birthday. Catherine watched her grandchildren frolic in the pool with happy abandon.

"Watch me, Gramma!" the youngest cried as she launched herself from the diving board, landing with an enormous splash.

"That was a tidal wave!" Catherine exclaimed as the child spluttered to the surface. She enjoyed their boisterous energy, in moderation of course. She missed the energy of her youth.

Catherine's own grandfather had come to America from England with a single sovereign in his pocket. From that he had built a successful business he named after that single coin. Her father had grown the business, transforming Sovereign into a major corporation. She in turn had taken Sovereign onto the world stage. In many ways she was at the peak of her powers. Around her stretched the impeccably manicured landscape that was one of the many fruits of her labours. It was the sort of estate most people would know only from TV and magazines.

She was at an age when most people were retired, or at least thinking about retirement, but that was a concept Catherine couldn't comprehend. The idea of enforced idleness revolted her. And to whom would she pass the reins? Certainly not to her children; their only talents seemed to be spending money and running up legal bills.

When she graduated from high school, her father had given Catherine a Jaguar E-type convertible and a copy of Machiavelli's *The Prince*. It was a watershed moment. She had enjoyed the car, but Machiavelli had changed her life. His simple, pragmatic views on the acquisition and exercise of power independent of morality were the touchstone to which she always returned.

Catherine surveyed her grandchildren. The younger ones splashed noisily in the pool. The older ones, college age, were sunning themselves on the other side from her. Which, if any, she wondered, might be a fertile bed in which to plant the seed?

Her reverie was interrupted by the approach of a neatly dressed young man. "I'm sorry to bother you at home, ma'am, especially today."

"I assume it's something important, Brendan," she stated, looking at him pointedly over her sunglasses.

"It's the Aziz matter. I thought it best to speak to you in person rather than over the phone." He glanced towards the children.

"Ah," she said. Catherine turned and beckoned to the young woman sitting a few yards away. "Carmela, take the children inside for ice cream, please. I think they've had quite enough sun for now."

Once they were alone, Catherine gestured to a chair beside her chaise. "Well?"

Brendan turned the chair to face her and sat. "It's been concluded. We just received the hard drive from Aziz's office computer as well as several key paper files. There's more at his home. I'll arrange to collect that as soon as possible."

"Very good. Send the material to Dr. Patterson for analysis. No one else is to see it but him. I want his report by the end of the month at the latest."

"Certainly." Brendan smoothed the crease in his pants, a gesture that Catherine had learned to recognize meant he had unpleasant news. "There was one, uh, complication. A firefighter was killed and another was badly burned."

“Oh, that is unfortunate.” Killing Aziz didn’t bother her. It was regrettable, but she had destroyed lives and careers before, even driven one man to suicide. And when one did business with third-world regimes, one could hardly claim to have clean hands. Catherine had tried every method of persuasion she knew, but Youssef Aziz had proven unreasonable, to say the least. In the end she had resolved to move swiftly and ruthlessly. It was the first time she had resorted directly to this sort of service, but she looked on it as simply one more tool in her arsenal.

The firemen were a different matter. At minimum it was a waste, and worse, it would draw unwanted attention. She had once seen a man disfigured by severe burns, his face barely recognizable as human. She shuddered at the memory.

She took off her sunglasses and stared hard at Brendan. “You assured me that this man was a professional. This seems rather sloppy.”

Brendan cleared his throat. “He feels it actually might work to our advantage. The death of the firefighter will focus the investigation in that direction and away from Aziz.”

Catherine tapped her fingers on the arm of the chaise. There might be some merit in that notion. Now in addition to the coroner, there would be labour inspectors, health and safety committees, workers’ compensation and who knew what other agencies, all scrambling to make recommendations and justify their own existence. The more bureaucrats that were involved, the muddier the true picture would inevitably become.

“Very well,” Catherine said at last, “but we need to keep a close eye on this. I need to know immediately if anything starts to go amiss.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Catherine watched him leave.

Every venture contained an element of risk, and this was no different; the stakes were simply higher. But if it paid off, it would transform her company from a mere player on the world stage into a dominant power. It would bear careful watching. Information, she knew, truly

was the key to power. Brendan would arrange for the normal monitoring of events. In the meantime, she decided, it was time to call in a few IOUs.

She picked up her phone and called a number in Washington. “I’d like to speak to the Senator, please... I don’t care. Tell him it’s Catherine Rockingham calling.”