



The Deadly Fault

Book two of the Nimbus series

By C. P. Spencer

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To Paige, whose inspiration is unmatched.

1

NEW YORK CITY

The girl ran her fingers along the floor on which she was crawling in the pitch-dark. Her bare knees were raw from scraping over the floor's rough texture, but she ignored the pain.

It smelled musty and damp, so she presumed she was in a basement. She had no idea how she got there, or why she was there—the last thing she remembered was stubbing out a joint outside the shelter, because you couldn't smoke inside.

Then...nothing.

Her fingers skittered across a wall which felt jagged and chalky on her fingertips, like the lime and sand coating used on stone walls of old building foundations.

There has to be a window. If I can just find a window, I can get out.

She encountered an edge. Stretching as high as she could reach, she felt where the edge angled into what she guessed was an opening.

A window!

She was elated. If she used her feet as anchors into the wall, she could just get enough lift to get to the window....

She heard a shuffle close behind, and in a burst of energy, hoisted herself up to try to reach the window, but felt wood instead of glass. In a panic, she beat on the wood hoping to dislodge it.

"Unh unh uhn," a man's voice said from the dark.

She was still beating on the wood when the man closed his hands around her leg and yanked. She banged her head and elbow into the rough stone wall as she fell to the floor.

Instantly, the man was on top of her, his weight pinning her face down and grinding into her lower back. She tried to gulp in air, but it seemed like only dust and grit got into her lungs. A bright light suddenly lit the wall and floor underneath her, but before she could get a good look at anything, the man flipped her back onto her back.

She couldn't see his face. The light was coming from a headlamp he was wearing, and it was blinding her. He was now kneeling on her arms, painfully, and though her legs and feet were free, she couldn't kick because he was sitting on her torso.

"Feisty, I like that," he said right next to her ear. "It will make our time together so much more satisfying."

She saw the flash of metal as it came down next to her head. She tried to angle away from the object, but ran out of space quickly. She felt a sharp pain behind her ear, and then sound became muffled as blood rushed into the hole that was left from his removal of her ear.

She screamed, but the sound was cut off when the man shoved something deep into her mouth.

He repeated the slicing motion with her other ear.

"Now that's better," she could just make out what he said, though without her ears, and with the blood rushing inside, the sound was distorted. "I don't understand all that metal you kids pierce yourselves with. So disfiguring to the body."

She was still screaming, but the sound was coming out as a dull moan.

"Where else might you have piercings? I wonder..."

She felt the man move his right hand slowly down her body, past her stomach, then lower.

Oh god, no!

"Well, look what I found. What should we do about that?"

She scissored her legs trying to dislodge the man, and he laughed as he removed his fingers from her body. She heard a metallic clink, and the man had both of her hands shackled together. She heard another metallic sound as a chain was threaded into the handcuffs, and her arms were dragged upward as the chain was tightened by something mounted somewhere in the room. He slid off her body and grabbed her legs, cuffing her

ankles and using the same chain to drag her legs up so she was completely immobilized and exposed.

“Now, let’s see what we have to work with,” he said, bending his head and bringing the light closer.

2

WASHINGTON D.C.

Mark Trent was smiling. A huge, goofy grin that lit up his entire face with delight. He directed this dazzling look towards the white bookcases that were built into the white walls of his office. The bookcases matched his white leather desk chair, white L-shaped desk, round white table, and four white guest chairs. He liked the blankness the white furniture brought to the space, as though the lack of color helped keep distractions at a minimum when working out a problem.

And there were always a lot of problems to be worked out because Mark had a difficult job. He was a special type of operative, the kind that operated wholly in the shadows.

No longer affiliated with any of the known agencies, having walked away from the biggest one several years ago, he was now a member of an exclusive, completely off-the-books team that only handled missions of their own choosing. Mark had been overjoyed to discover this new team had no government ties nor oversight to interfere with their missions, and was further delighted to find out

that they had unlimited funds at their disposal. He felt it was the ultimate dream job of the intelligence community.

The team's funding was organized in a cyclic way. It came directly from the illegally or otherwise reprehensibly obtained monies seized from the targets the team eliminated, which in turn the team used to eliminate other targets. Mark was further relieved to learn that the team never used money that was earmarked for true charity or humanitarian endeavors if it came into their possession. However, the dark money that came from laundering, drug and weapon sales, and other malfeasance of the day was fair game.

As one of Mark's colleagues termed it, "we're the cops robbing the robbers."

Their public-facing jobs belonged to a cloud-based backup and recovery company known as Nimbus Services, LLC. When Mark had first joined the team, posing as the company's Chief Marketing Officer, he had been skeptical about their cover jobs and what the point of running a cloud backup company would be. It wasn't long before he saw the true value of what it brought to their table.

Nimbus used an automatic backup device that was installed onsite at a customer's location. This piece of hardware was welcomed by the customer using Nimbus' services, as it gave them the peace of mind that their data was being automatically protected with no technical efforts whatsoever on their end.

What the customer wasn't aware of, however, was that the device collected *all* their digital data. This included their VoIP phone calls, texts, emails, and every single keystroke on any system that was attached to the network where the device was in use. There was nothing Nimbus missed.

Further hidden from the customer was the AI-based software that operated on the internal Nimbus servers where all this collected data was forever stored. The Nimbus software's sole purpose was to continuously search for specific patterns and anomalies within the customer data it received, and alert the team to any findings that warranted further investigation.

Nimbus' mini NSA, as Mark liked to call it, worked tirelessly to sniff out all the dodgy activities and schemes people and corporations were up to, which would have remained hidden otherwise.

The best part was the unaware customers actually paid for the service that was spying on them.

The worst part was the system had been designed by the team's resident geek, Charles Zitmore, who constantly felt the need to remind the team that it was *his* unmatched brilliance in

this computing arena that was allowing *them* to do their jobs so effectively.

As if we would forget.

Mark couldn't believe how much had changed for him in the past five months, both personally and professionally. As he was sitting there grinning like an idiot, he reflected on what had brought him to this point in his career.

Mark's colleagues were mostly former operatives who had worked for various military branches or the Agency. David Endicott, the founder of Mark's present team and his former boss at the Agency, had left a very high position there to form this new team.

Mark had been estranged from David for three years after a previous mission went all the way wrong, even though they believed the mission had still been concluded successfully.

Unfortunately, it hadn't been resolved. Several months ago, the unknown loose ends of that three-year-old mission had come roaring back to haunt them. Mark's sister, Amy, was brutally murdered that past August by the remaining members of what the Agency referred to as the Lotus group.

In order to solve the horrible circumstances surrounding Amy's death, it forced Mark and David to work together once again.

Mark, along with his new Nimbus team members, corrected the mistake of the past and saved the world from the resurgence of Lotus' megalomaniac leader, Hans Kardoff. At the time of Mark and Kardoff's only in-person meeting, where Mark had personally removed Kardoff from the face of the Earth, the full extent of Kardoff's intentions had been revealed to be so unbelievable that Mark had a hard time believing any of it had happened at all.

One of the other and more personal cockups of that original failed mission had resulted in the death of an agent, Jennifer Main, with whom Mark had been deeply and romantically involved. He'd blamed David entirely for her loss and couldn't bear to keep working with him on that score alone.

Grieving, angry at the world, and generally burned out from the whole affair, Mark had quit the Agency and taken a special teaching position at a university in Washington, D.C.

This university offered an extremely clandestine program for evaluating and training future operatives. Mark figured maybe, just maybe, all his years as a top agent could be effectively used in this new way. He'd agreed to the position on a temporary basis to start, and for the first two weeks it felt like the change would be a good and permanent one. Even better, his brother Drew was on the permanent staff at the university, where he taught economics to excellent students who were one step below Ivy Leaguers.

It all seemed perfect, until it wasn't. It had even been time to make the decision if he would stay with the unsatisfying teaching position permanently or move on to something else when his sister Amy was killed.

But he didn't want to think about the past any longer.

The source of his ridiculously large smile was standing in front of the bookcase. Claudine Moreau, or Dina as he and everyone else called her, had replaced Jenny in his newly thawed heart.

The French beauty was smart, tall, athletic, and had the biggest, bluest eyes Mark could get lost in for hours. Her long, dark hair was silky and smooth, like a living curtain made of silk.

Mark also loved her voice. She sounded, as David, who was a classic movie fan and *Turner Classic Movies* channel addict, said, like the old studio movie actress Eleanor Parker. The sound was throaty, smooth, elegant, and vaguely accented.

More importantly, Dina was a hell of an operative, with her family background coming from a long line of gymnastics and acrobatic performers. Her mother, once a gymnast competing in the Olympics for France, was currently partnered with the Canadian-based Cirque du Soleil to train their acrobatic performers.

Dina herself had been training in this arena since she was a baby and could get in and out of any facility using her strong and flexible body in ways Mark, for all his strength and athletic prowess, couldn't hope to match.

"I see you've finally decorated." Dina gestured to a picture on Mark's desk.

He'd taken the picture as Dina leaned against a section of the Great Wall of China during the Lotus mission. In it, she was wearing a white sundress, her hair blowing behind her, with a huge smile plastered on her face.

Next to his favorite picture, one other memento of their time in destroying the Lotus group's organization sat on his desk. The object was a round glass paperweight filled with mercury that contained a Lotus flower floating inside; though the petals were shaped like fangs.

The only other item on his desk was his laptop, which he had clad in a white hard plastic case.

Mark came around the desk and kissed Dina, a short kiss that he wished they had time to make longer. "It's all I need, darling. Shall we head to the meeting?"

"Yeah, I suppose. Is something bothering you?" Dina asked.

"Are you asking because I've been smiling like the Cheshire cat?"

Dina's eyes narrowed. "No. It's what I see lurking *behind* the smile that has me concerned."

Mark shook his head. "Not really. I was thinking about the past a little. Nothing important."

"What's going on in your head is *never* unimportant."

"Well, this train of thought is. Come on, let's get a move on."

They left his office to head for the briefing in the conference room, which David had set for the usual nine a.m.

"I love when you wear that suit," she said, ruffling his hair into the style she liked best on him.

Mark grinned. Left to his own, Mark wore his hair in a short, pleasing style that parted to the left and flowed down on his forehead in a semi-old-fashioned style. He was six foot one inches tall, had thick brown hair, and dark brown eyes, all of which came together in a generic attractiveness that became *very* attractive to Dina when his hair was tousled.

His suits, like Dina's favorite blue pinstripe he was currently wearing, were his one point of vanity. He and his brother Drew favored custom-made three-piece suits, always worn with the Rolex watches their father had gifted each of them upon their graduation from college.

"Hold on. Detour to Nick's first," Dina poked Mark gently in the side.

Their colleague, Nick Sherpa, had the most wonderful specialty coffee machine installed in the bottom drawer of his desk. It had been custom-built in Turkey by a master craftsman, and was so special that Nick had forced David to install its own filtered water supply line.

Nick was already waiting for them, with both their coffees ready. For Mark, he had made a double espresso, and for Dina, her favorite vanilla latte.

"Another day, another human disaster to deal with. Wonder what it'll be this time?" Nick asked rhetorically as he pushed their coffees toward them.

Mark had known Nick since he was a young tween, being that Nick was David's nephew. Recently, Nick had been recovering from injuries sustained when he was kidnapped and tortured by one of Hans Kardoff's female bodyguards. The sling from his broken shoulder had been removed the month before, and while the shoulder was still stiff, he had been working it out at Mark's training gym in a cabin Mark owned in the Great Falls National Park.

There was a story behind that cabin that Mark hadn't told Nick or Dina about yet, but he promised when Nick was fully healed, he would.

Nick, like Mark, had brown hair, though his was always in a permanent state of dishevelment as no matter the haircut nor the products used to tame it, his hair spiked out in different directions all over his head. He was in his twenties, which would be young for being the excellent operative he was, but he had been shadowing his uncle since he was nine years old.

Throughout the years, starting when Nick was very young, David had honed Nick's brain well to the job, utilizing the intuitive and observational gifts Nick naturally possessed. Not a physical person, however, David had left Nick to his own devices to make his body ready to operate at its top ability. Nick had done so mostly successfully, but lacked the fine finesse that would take him from a really good operative to a master one. Mark had taken on the task to train Nick in this arena, and outside of his injured shoulder, he was making great strides.

As David had said for years, Nick was merely a decade younger version of Mark, and with every passing day, became even more like him.

"Anyone interested in a second round? Let me know now, because our resident geek has a presentation to make, which could take *all* day, knowing how he likes to drone on about Nimbus," Nick groaned.

"No, I'm good. You, Mark?"

Mark shook his head. He'd probably regret not caffeinating more in order to try to stay awake for the upcoming explanation for what Nimbus had found, but on the other hand, what Nimbus had found would be important.

Like Nick felt, it was the presenter of the information he objected to, not the actual information.

Nick finished cleaning the coffee machine and grabbed another espresso to take with him.

The three bundled into the conference room, where Nathan Brookman, their colleague who handled mission control, was sitting somewhat awkwardly in his orthopedic conference room chair.

Nathan had been a Navy SEAL until he broke his back some years ago. The injury had forced Nathan out of the field and onto a desk, specializing in intelligence. Then David came calling a little over a year ago, and Nathan jumped to join this new team because David promised he would be in charge of all the missions' planning and control.

Mark winced at seeing the position Nathan was sitting in, as he knew the back pained Nathan quite frequently. Mark knew Nathan was so relieved not to have been paralyzed in the

accident that he didn't care about the pain, so that was something at least.

Nathan, like Mark and Drew, favored custom-made suits, though his reasoning was his six-foot-eight-inch frame, which couldn't be fitted off the rack. He had kept his dark hair, just beginning to gray at the temples now that he was close to forty-six years of age, military short, and his perfectly manicured nails shone very white against his dark skin.

"Back looks bad today," Nick remarked, sliding the espresso on the table toward him.

"Not horrendous, but it's been better. Thanks for this," Nathan said, holding the cup up as a toast before he took a sip.

Nathan's mission control skills were outstanding, but he brought something even more valuable to the team. Nathan ran a group of informants that he called the Watchers. The well-paid Watchers were a worldwide group of bellmen, bartenders, car park attendants, tour guides, hotel employees, delivery drivers, mail carriers, janitors, and even hospital staff that Nathan had cultivated to be his eyes on the ground. They were regular civilians doing regular everyday jobs. But they saw everything.

He had formed the idea for creating the group years ago while on a leisure tour of Belfast with his late wife, Loretta, just before she died of cancer. Their tour guide had slowed the car in front of a bar they were driving past and mumbled that someone was going into the bar who shouldn't have been. Their guide said it with such a chill that Nathan knew it spelled trouble for the man entering the bar.

That experience had spawned the idea for the Watchers, and he had been growing the network steadily for years.

Mark's thoughts unfortunately turned to Charles Zitmore. Known as Captain Doomzdae, or Apokalypz as his online game persona displayed, Charles was known to the team as The Zit. This was entirely due to his past habits of being appallingly filthy and smelly.

The Zit also had a fondness for wearing T-shirts brandishing disgusting images and sayings. His filthy Sherpa-related images and jokes mocking Nick's last name had tormented Nick to the point that Nick had once gathered some of The Zit's prized gaming statues and lit them on fire in a trash can right on the conference room table in the middle of a briefing.

It was Nick's deal with The Zit that if he kept his personal self, clothes, and speech clean, no other objects would be ruined. So far, the ploy had worked, and The Zit was keeping it together in a way the team could tolerate. He still had the long, greasy-looking

hair. However, it no longer smelled like wet sweat socks that had been left in the bottom of a closed locker for three years.

Now if they could just curb The Zit's propensity to call each team member names, as well as stop the unfunny sex-based jokes he wouldn't quit making, they'd have a fairly normal colleague.

David had found The Zit when the uber nerd had solved a complex puzzle that the NSA had posted on the dark web. By some miracle, David had grabbed him before the NSA did and had apparently made The Zit an offer he couldn't refuse to work with the team he was building.

As part of this sweet deal, The Zit lived on the entire top floor of the Nimbus Services building on a permanent basis, and had taken the bottom two floors for nothing other than data storage for their cloud-gathered data processing.

The Zit was making noises about taking over floor three any day now, and maybe David would actually let him. However, the fourth and fifth floors were off-limits. The team had all their offices and the conference room located on those floors of the six-story building and no one was giving those up without a fight.

As much as Mark disliked the nerd, The Zit's computer hacking skills and Nimbus' clandestine data sniffer provided the team with more instantly usable intel than any of the other Agency's knowledge bases combined.

Combining the tech with the observations of the Watchers made the Nimbus team virtually unstoppable.

Mark was surprised to see that The Zit was already seated at the conference table, which was unusual because he ordinarily ran late to meetings. The nerd was furiously typing on his laptop, and to Mark's relief, was wearing a *Mass Effect* game T-shirt that was thankfully clean and didn't have an off-color saying attached to it.

Actually, Mark didn't know for *sure* if it was off-color or not. There was some pink jellyfish-looking character and the words "*This One says eat my eezo, Elcore*" on it. Having never played the game himself, it could have been filthy or not.

There were also three other people in the conference room already: Maddie Allen, now Maddie Trent as she had married Mark's brother, Drew, two weeks before, and Thelma Morrison, the team's receptionist and office manager. Thelma was actually a bit more than that, Mark amended, but she didn't plan or run the actual missions with them.

At the present time, both of the women were hovering over a seated man who was new to the team.

The man was early middle-aged, tall, with dark, curly hair, light tan skin, and a bushy black mustache that was so exaggerated it came off looking like a disguise. He looked like he would have been quite nice-looking had it not been for the comical mustache, but it covered so much of his lips that it was hard to tell what he would actually look like if it were removed. Mark had to look away from it, in fact, as it was trembling along with the movements of his head as he nodded at what Thelma and Maddie were saying, and Mark thought he might actually let out an involuntary chuckle because it looked so ridiculous.

So he focused on Maddie instead. To Mark's assessment, Maddie was an attractive woman, with a sunny and upbeat personality who always looked on the bright side of things. And, like all the other operatives on the Nimbus team, Maddie was outstanding at her job. She handled research for the team and kept them on the straight and narrow like any good project manager would.

Maddie had recently been fighting against weight gain as she wasn't very tall and his brother Drew loved to cook. Unfortunately, everything he made was delicious, so even a slight amount of extra helpings went right to her figure.

Drew didn't care and told her to let it go, and Mark hoped she *would* let it go, as their sister, Amy, had dealt with a dreadfully unhappy marriage to a man that required her to keep as trim as possible. Amy, like Maddie, was not tall or naturally thin, so it had been a miserably impossible task to stay runway model thin when she'd been alive.

Both Mark and Drew agreed that no matter what, happiness was better when it didn't come on the heels of forced starvation, and Drew's cooking made everyone who sampled it very happy.

Thelma was the recipient of Mark's attention next. She affectionately called Mark by the nickname Scarecrow because he reminded her of the main character from the nineteen-eighties TV show *Scarecrow and Mrs. King*. It was a leftover from their old days at the Agency, and he'd always liked the way Thelma warmly viewed him; especially because he'd sometimes acted in a way that would not invite the soft touch.

Thelma was a small woman, her head not coming above Mark's chest, and was at least ninety if she was a day. Her hair was a mottled gray and not yet all silver, and was scraped back into her customary low bun. She always said she'd retire when it finally turned solid white. More than once, Mark wondered if she colored it grey so she wouldn't ever have to make the retirement decision.

She had, in fact, been put through a forced retirement from the Agency due to her age, but David snapped her up immediately. She was an incredibly organized person that handled all office tasks to perfection, keeping the team on track at all times.

It dawned on him that he'd known Thelma for many years, but knew very little about her personal life. It wasn't that they weren't friendly enough to talk about personal things, it was just that Thelma didn't bother to do so. Or maybe it was Mark that hadn't bothered. Either way, even though they didn't waste time with unnecessary chit-chat, Mark still considered Thelma a friend he could trust.

Mark was always amazed that for all her chain smoking, which like right now never stopped, Thelma never smelled of stale smoke. To Mark, she smelled rather of lilacs instead.

Mark also couldn't figure out how the impossibly long ash of her cigarette never fell off as she performed every task, including eating and possibly even sleeping with the damn thing hanging out of the corner of her mouth.

Right now, the ash was teetering dangerously close to Carlos's forehead as she gave him instructions for the key fob that would provide entrance to their secure office. They were the same as those she had provided Mark with when he first joined the team.

"You flip this cover and press the button for the floor you want to go to, and then once there, press the door you want to open. If the system goes down, there's a manual key system. The key comes out of the fob, just like a car, and there's a key box in the lobby under the pad's post in the first-floor lobby. Just pull it forward and your key will open one of the stairway doors. All the other doors in the building have their manual locks hidden on the left side of the door frame. Just slide the frame out like this," she walked over to the doorway to demonstrate, then slid it back in place before tossing him the fob.

"Thank you, Thelma," Carlos said with a slight audible Spanish accent.

Santos had been through a difficult time recently, due to the Lotus group situation. Strangely, the whole mess brought a full-circle moment to his existence. Santos' parents were Mexican citizens and had been in Washington D.C. when he was born, so the former detective had dual citizenship for both Mexico and the United States. Santos had spent a great deal of time in the United States growing up since his father was an engineer in the energy industry who worked on a mutual Mexico/USA power project and travelled to D.C. frequently. The family had occasionally lived in D.C. for months at a time, and Santos had always planned to stay in D.C. after he graduated from American University.

He did so, for six fulfilling years.

Mark knew from a late-night conversation with the man that the field of law enforcement had interested him from when he was a small child. When he was six years old, he and his father watched Steve McQueen's *Bullitt*, and Santos fell in love with law enforcement at that young age.

After university, Santos enrolled at and was graduated from the Washington D.C. Police Academy with honors, then worked his tail off for four years, first making detective in the robbery division before transferring to homicide in his fifth year.

His superiors thought he could be fast-tracked to captain, even Chief of Police someday, but Santos wasn't interested in taking the political path. He liked investigation too much.

Then Santos' mother got sick with cancer, and his father couldn't cope with the loss after she died. So he stayed in Mexico to help his father, resigned from the D.C. police, met his wife, Margareta, and was raising two children, Jacqueline and Carlos Jr. when his path crossed with Mark's.

Santos had been the lead detective on the case of Mark's sister's murder in Mexico, and during the course of the investigation, his own family became a casualty of the Lotus group's Mexico-based activities.

Mark had recognized the high observational intelligence in Santos and asked him to return to D.C. and join the team. Because Santos no longer had any family left to keep him in Mexico, and had always preferred his time in the United States as he identified with the culture more, he agreed.

Santos was still expressing concern to Mark about what he could bring to the organization, but Mark assured him it was his excellent brain and observation skills that were invaluable.

Mark and David's only concern was that the former detective was grieving deeply for his lost family, as expected, but he'd been drinking to such excess that he passed out almost every night and was hung over every morning, which was not expected. They hoped a new mission would help Santos break this alarming self-harm before it became a permanent state.

Finished with Santos, Thelma spotted the pained look on Nathan's face.

"Bumble Bee, do you want some Advil?" She knew Nathan didn't like to take heavy narcotics, but would accept the occasional over-the-counter when the pain was too terrible to bear.

"Already took 'em, I'll be okay. Thanks though," Nathan declined with a warm smile.

Thelma nodded and was about to say something else when a hissing, sliding sound came from the direction of the conference

room door. She screeched out an alarm and jammed herself as flat into the wall as far from the door as she could.

David stepped over an enormous iguana that was entering the room along with him. The iguana was almost six feet long from head to tail, orange and gray striped in color, and fully displayed perfect spikes that ran all along its back. The creature looked like a living, breathing Godzilla.

“Why do we have to have that awful thing in the office?” Thelma screeched.

“Señor Jefe is not a thing, Thelma, he is a beloved member of Carlos’ family and we welcome him to our little family with open arms,” David said almost in baby talk, reaching down to touch one of the iguana’s spikes.

Mark swore Señor Jefe looked back at David with the same affection in his reptilian eyes.

Their team leader was a tall man, with a trim body, a head of thick gray hair, thick eyebrows, and possessed a face lined with wrinkles that ran both horizontally and vertically.

To Mark, David looked more like he should have been on a ranch somewhere wearing a Stetson hat and cowboy boots, minus the drawl of course, as David had the Boston Brahmin accent that spoke of, correctly, old money.

Unfortunately, before David’s eighteenth birthday, his family had run out of the old money. Then he married Nancy, whose family had *not* run out of their old money, so luckily for him, he was able to continue living a wealthy life.

Nancy appeared to be the perfect partner for David. Her entertaining skills were top-notch, and matched only by her outstanding skills of decorating and maintaining their beautiful home as fitting a top head of one of the agencies.

Mark had always been under the impression that David adored his now-deceased wife. Over the years, Mark had made many misjudgments about his former boss, and this was yet another. While he had it correct that something was off about Nancy’s interpersonal relations with him and the other team members on David’s original team at the Agency, he’d completely misjudged David’s relationship with her. According to Nick’s eventual confession about the situation, it turned out Nancy was a vicious narcissist, who’d made David’s personal life a misery. David himself had yet to speak of it, and Mark wondered if he ever would.

“Well, don’t expect me to feed it, no matter that it’s named and whatnot,” Thelma hissed as she slid along the opposite wall from the creature, who was settling on the floor between Carlos and

David. She successfully escaped from the room unscathed, all the while muttering to herself about the vile creature.

David gestured toward The Zit. "Charles has discovered an interesting company that I believe warrants our attention. Charles, I turn the floor over to you."

The man pulled the van into the depression in the curb that served as the start of the driveway, and put it in park with the engine still running. It was a beautiful sunny morning, the kind where people stopped and had coffee and breakfast outside, which meant a lot of people were out and about on the street.

Perfect. The more people around, the less suspicious a delivery looked.

He stepped down from the van and walked to the locked gate, pulling a set of keys from his pocket to open it. He rolled the gate open and nodded to a street sweeper who was passing by as he did so.

Humming, he got back into the van, pulled into the delivery area of the building, and circled the van around so the back faced the delivery door. He left the gate open.

Without looking around, because it was always best to look like you belonged doing whatever you were doing when you were up to no good, he opened the back of the van and rolled out a ramp, hooking it onto the edge of the van and checking to make sure it was secure. Taking out the key ring again, he opened the delivery door that was next to the roll-up garage door of the building.

Every movement was done with a casual stance that said, *move along, there's nothing interesting to see here*. However, his heart was beating hard with both elated excitement as well as the fear of being caught.

He hopped into the van's back and unhitched a wheeled hand truck that was lashed to its side wall. Still humming, he rolled the hand truck to a shrink-wrapped stack of boxes that were sitting inside. He pushed the box stack just enough to slide the tray of the hand truck underneath, and dropped the boxes back down onto it. Angling the hand truck back, he rolled the stack to the ramp, and casually pushed it down to the open door. He left both the van and the delivery doors open.

The squeaking of the hand truck's wheels as he pushed the bundle inside the building was obnoxiously loud, but there was nothing to be done about that now. He made a mental note to make sure to oil the wheels before making his next delivery.

He stopped at a maintenance door marked, "Warning! High Voltage, Licensed Entry Only," and opened it. He turned the cart

around and entered the room backwards. This time, he shut the door.

Moving to the brick wall opposite that of the electrical cage, he donned a pair of heavy work gloves that were sitting on a granite-topped work table in the room, then pulled a crowbar off a hook on the wall.

He wedged the flat side into a particular spot on the bottom of the wall. Satisfied that he had the right spot, he gave a hard tug, and part of the wall slid out towards him. He grabbed the wall with his fingers and pulled it out. The familiar musty smell of old dirt and the odor of something else, something much stronger, assailed his nostrils.

Most people would run from such a pungently unpleasant smell, but he inhaled deeply, relishing it.

The inside of the false brick wall panel had larger boulders attached to it. They were dirty and matched the surrounding boulders and earth that made up the foundational separation between the building he was in and the building next door. There was a hole, just large enough to jam something through that would allow the object to drop directly to the subbasement of the building next door.

Sometimes when the opening was exposed, he could hear water trickling. On those occasions, the humidity of the dank dirt and rock composition made the air thick, and it seemed like the space itself was alive. Today, however, it was dry, and he felt a small disappointment because he preferred the wet.

The engineering on the wall was absolute perfection. Once it was closed, no one would ever see the seam, neither from the front nor the back nor even the sides. Also, no one would see the hole he had so lovingly made that gave him direct access to the next door building's basement as the false wall took care to visually fill that space in as well.

He had cleverly added a Teflon skid system to the bottom of the wall panel, again invisible to the eye, but one that let the wall slide with little effort, leaving no visible marks on the floor.

He turned his attention to the boxes on the hand truck. He slit the entire stack open from the top to the bottom with a knife, and the shrink wrap and box edges neatly fell away from what they were hiding.

He trailed his hand slowly down his chest while looking at the body of the girl he had so carefully removed the piercings from.

"God, you're so beautiful," he whispered.

He embraced the girl's body like a lover, then pulled her off the hand cart. He placed her feet on top of his, then danced her around to the opening in the wall.

Sadly, and with one last look at the beauty he created, he let the body slip into the hole and listened for it to hit bottom. She did, with a small splashing sound.

So it isn't totally dry. That's nice.

He slid the false wall back in place, replaced the crowbar and gloves in their proper locations, then stacked the opened cardboard boxes neatly back onto the hand truck. Leaving the room, he made his way further down inside the building to the trash incinerator. He opened the door and threw the box remnants inside.

He was humming again when he wheeled the empty hand truck back outside and into the van.

3

“President Howard,” Brenda Warren raced to keep up with the swiftly moving man, “The Vice President asked for a face-to-face with you this afternoon. If you skip impromptu questions, you’ll have fifteen minutes between the end of the press conference and the gym if you’d like to fit him in.”

“No can do, Brenda, it’s my second press conference, and as you advised, I don’t ever want to be seen as dodging the press. And I’m not missing my swim,” he said, looking at his press secretary.

“So you do listen to me about something after all,” she replied with a flat-sounding tone. “I’m impressed you’re not shirking the press, but there is one more thing.” Her eyes gave his body a once-over.

“You’re going to complain about the suit, aren’t you?”

Brenda continued to take in President Howard’s appearance. The hair was fine, graying at the temples, and worn closely cropped as he was showing signs of baldness at his age of forty-three. His well-proportioned and well-toned body was five foot ten inches tall, and the perpetual tan from outdoor sports such as tennis, fishing, and golf gave him a healthy-looking glow.

The problem today was much the same as it had been since he won the election by a historic landslide four months ago. It was the suit.

"It's messy. You look...."

"The public likes me like this," he interrupted. "It makes me relatable, another off-the-rack guy instead of some rich asshole. It's a *good* thing, Brenda."

"It's fine for the US, but you'll need to step it up when we go abroad. The pictures will look terrible next to Cardone and Muritako, especially."

The Italian President and the Prime Minister of Japan were greatly admired for being fine dressers, and Brenda was always worried about the image.

The President stopped walking, turned, and put his hands on Brenda's shoulders as he faced her.

She resisted the urge to recoil away. The White House staff were, overall, quite affectionate with one another; one got that way working together for twenty of every twenty-four hours, but Brenda didn't like it coming from the President. It wasn't so much that he was the President, it was something about the way his eyes slid all over her as he touched her. The look was lewd, and yet completely impersonal at the same time.

She thought it was just her, until Callie Dawson and Germaine Hall, two of the President's female Secret Service detail, mentioned they thought he looked at all the women on staff as a piece of meat.

Not, however, meat in the way men can refer to women as a piece of meat, but rather the animal kind that you throw on a stove or a grill. Germaine had explained Howard had the same unemotional but excited expression like her grandfather used to have when he gutted and prepared the meat from a deer or wild boar he'd shot.

Callie, less colorful in her description, simply said his eyes were soulless. Dead looking, like shark's eyes.

Up until her conversation with Callie and Germaine, Brenda had rationalized that the President's behavior was because he had just lost his wife, pregnant with their unborn child, to the recklessness of a drunk driver. It made her consider that maybe he was just awkward with her at the present time because she was a woman. After all, he hadn't done anything or said anything specific to warrant these types of feelings.

Brenda loved her position and was trying her best to get beyond this and not react so strongly. Yes, she and the other women all *had* the feelings. But it could *still* be an issue with his being uncomfortable around women in a general way.

However, this very morning she had overheard two of the male Secret Service men talking about the odd way the President stared at them, and any progress she'd made towards excusing his behaviors as awkwardness with women was lost. Thank heavens the rest of the people in the country, who'd turned out in record numbers to vote for the grieving former senator, didn't see him as they did.

"For the three hundredth time, I'm not worried about this. Even when I stand next to that other clotheshorse, François. People need to see I'm worried about the *issues*, not about *myself*. It should be a dream come true for a press secretary, a man who people see, simply by the sight of his suit, *cares*."

He dropped his hands from her shoulders to start moving toward the press room again.

The relief she felt when his hands were removed was palpable.