

Dead Minus One
Chapter 4
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From the moment Jesse Fowler killed “Gator” Griffin, General William Claggart hadn't stopped. There was already an emergency meeting scheduled, what with a dead President, a four year old assassin that hasn't said more than four words before he died., and now Saudi Arabia was a sheet of glass courtesy of whoever was running Russia.

Then the Russian intelligence leader calls him and asks for help. In that strange code the two nations had spoken in since Cuba, just in case someone was listening in.

“Hell in a handbasket, and other weird crap.”

“Sir?”

Melissa Trown had been sitting opposite Claggart for fifteen minutes. Her conservative brown suit did nothing to hide a beautiful woman of Irish descent, hair shoulder length, and serious eyes. The eyes waited for William Claggart, Director of the National Security Agency to stop his latest tirade.

“Are you ready, Bill?”

The only other person alive right now to call the Director Bill was Claggart's wife. But Melissa Trown was that special, and that good.

“Okay, “ said the general, “what else do you have?”

“We had to work like hell to break this code, the encryption was fantastic, something I've never seen from the Russians. But we got the phone conversations between Moscow, where the Defense Minister was, and from Tetaschevo. They seemed to be enjoying the whole thing. Here's the transcript.”

She handed the sheets over. The General read them once, then again. Then he leaned back in his chair, and dropped the sheets into the small shredder by his desk.

“They *are* crazy over there. And their President endorses it, and let's it happen. Yet Yevtushenko asks for help.”

“Different camps going on. Possible coup? Military taking over. Maybe....”

This is why Melissa Trown had stayed through three different directors. She thought miles ahead of them, planned and probed future history from today's information, and knew the right people.

“What else do you have,” the General asked, pulling her back from wherever she goes.

Melissa checked her notes.

“Normal communications with Moscow, usual encryption and then suddenly yesterday a whole new level, like I told you, was coming over the main military lines to Tetaschevo. This was level 12, Bill. “

Claggart understood. Encryption came in levels of difficulty, each level containing conundrums of words and letters build to confuse and defy. But puzzles were meant to be solved. And that was why the big black glass building at Fort Meade, Maryland existed. Thousands of employees to listen and record, computers, and supercomputers to hold that information for brilliant mathematicians like Melissa Trown to hear what was there. Broadcasting of all kinds from the smallest radio station to the Internet and on to diplomatic and military communications. All were fair game to the National Security Agency.

Even level 12.

“There was one other Level 12 call. From Moscow to Vladivostok.”

“From?”

Melissa could not hide a smile.

“Not from the Kremlin. From a small apartment near Troitskaya street. Ivana Turgenev, works for the Ministry of the Interior. A secretary. And she called a place in Vladivostok, a business called Седьмой Сын.”

“What?”

Melissa repeated. “Seventh Son.”

“Jesus.” said the General. He looked down at this polished desk for a moment.

Melissa stopped her smile. And she had a feeling she wasn't going to smile anymore.

There was an old clock, a gift from President Griffin on Claggart's appointment, on the wall and the minute hand moved closer to the hour of two p.m.

The General had to meet the new President, and the Vice Presidential nominee before the first security briefing of the new administration. From wherever he went in his mind at Melissa's translation, Claggart then inwardly returned and looked at her with intense brown eyes.

“Come on. It's time”

The ride to Washington was quiet. After enough years at the NSA you figure if you can hear them, they can hear you so you never said anything or cranked the radio up and mouthed words. For now they sat and looked out at the Maryland countryside as their driver took them to the nations's capital.

Washington remained a tourist mecca despite more troops that were very visible, and barricades that stood guard. The city was still beautiful. Melissa turned to see the spot where President Griffin had met his end. A public memorial of flowers, candles and teddy bears could be seen from the road. They sped off to the White House, where the flags flew at half mast

They stopped at the Northwest Appointment Gate and presented ID, were let out at the West Wing, and were greeted by other military men. They moved down the corridors of the West Wing, treading even softer, it seemed, as the Griffin family was still in residence and the new President was using as few offices as possible. That would change.

They were ushered to the secure meeting rooms one floor down. Melissa saw a room filled with intelligence and military types at every chair. The Intelligence Community was a federation of executive branch agencies and organizations that worked separately and together to conduct intelligence activities necessary for the conduct of foreign relations and the protection of the national security of the United States. The CIA, FBI, Homeland Security, as well many Defense organizations, including the National Security Agency were members.

This, thought Melissa, is a very smart room. And a very quiet one. They took their seats, Claggart in the front, Melissa behind him and to the right, as were many other aides to the power brokers in the front chair. Only one chair was empty. Then the door to the far right opened.

“Ladies and Gentleman, the President.”

They stood and President Hale walked in. Tall and good looking, silver hair on a slightly weathered face. Blue suit with the required flag on the lapel. He took them all in for a moment and then invited them to sit

“I want to thank everyone for coming at this short notice. I know we have the President's death on our minds,, but we need to discuss the Russian situation. I had a very unenlightening discusssion with President Salgutov a few hours ago who pretty much told me to kiss his ass. Now believe it or not I never got around to meeting him, that was Gator's, President Griffin's baby. I did other things. But in any briefing, I've never heard of Salgutov being like that I was waiting for him to start banging his shoe on the table.”

He looked around the table at military and non military types listenting intently.

“Well, anybody got anything here? I know I'm the new guy, but feel free to speak up.”

“Mr. President, “ said the CIA Director, “what we have on Salgutov is a relatively fair, by Russian standards, politician who came up with Gorbachev, and stayed true to democratic priciples through Putin. He was always well favored by your predecessors. Little scandal, nothing really surprising. Until this.”

Hale nodded.

“And the Defense Minister?”

“Same thing, sir. Worked his way up. I have briefing papers for both.”

An assistant took the papers, walked them down to the President's place, handed them to an aide, who placed them to the President's left. Melissa marveled at the coreography. Hale glanced at the papers for a seond and then turned back to the room.

General Claggart spoke up, and played a copy of the Moscow- Tetaschevo phone call. That was all he played. The President listened, and read a translation. He thanked Claggart, sighed, and rubbed his nose.

“What happened?”

A representative from the National Reconaasiance Office spoke up and, using a remote, parted the walls behind the table. Three large video screens were built into the wall. Each was blank and then each was filled with the same picture. A picture of a Russian missile launch vehicle. Each of the silos on the truck were empty.

“This was taken one hour after the launch. As you can see, the area seems deserted.”

“Except.” said the President.

“Except for the bodies, sir”

Melissa leaned closer, as did half of the room. Near the truck, seeming like a child's stick drawings, were two figures. One was sprawled like Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man, the other on its side with its knees brought up.

“ That's what we saw for quite a while. Approximately six hours later, the facility was clean.”

A new picture replaced others that had shown the launch sight. This time the bodies had disappeared, the truck as well. Only some tire tracks remained.

“So they killed those men?” asked Hale, “the ones who did the launched?”

“All we know is there are, or were, two dead men at the site of a nuke launch, Mr. President. Now there's not.”

Hale pursed his lips.

“I know technology has taken over much of the intelligence community, but do we by any chance have bodies in Russia who can give us a real view of what's going on?”

“Yes, we do sir,” said CIA. He passed over a list of names.

“Not a lot here.”

“We're in the process of making adjustments, sir. We have most of our humint in the Middle East, but with Saudi Arabia... we've lost contact with many of them.”

That took a minute to sink in. The NRO Director used the break to close down his pictures, following some quick shots of the Saudi destruction, and the flow of refugees north into Kuwait, Iraq, and Jordan, and south into Yemen and Oman.

“Radiation levels are being monitored.” said the Navy. “Pretty lethal around Riyadh, but tolerable levels in the west. Pilgrims still want to visit Mecca and Medina. We've seen some boats going from the Sudan across the Red Sea to land right on Saudi soil. The UN can ban travel all it wants, but this has been going on for over a thousand years... We're not exposing our people to it anymore than humanly possible.”

“I'll ask the Secretary of State to coordinate all humanitarian efforts, especially radiation poisoning. When he's not busy with Russia”

The conversation turned to further help for the area, once things settled down, if they ever did. Melissa listened and took notes, but her concentration was shaken when she saw Claggart nod for a second at a General across the room. She didn't know the man, a squat, balding man who seemed to be from the Department of Defense intelligence group (DIA). The man hadn't spoken. He just nodded back.

The meeting went on, always returning to Russia, and the need for more intelligence, and Saudi Arabia and the need for relief. Melissa could hardly believe what President Hale had on his plate in his first days in office. But he seemed up for the task, if anyone could be.

Two hours later the meeting broke up with assignments given, opinions taken, some fears calmed. Claggart stood with the rest as the President, after profuse thanks, left to tackle other challenges. Some headed to the doors, others stood around to talk or to be talked to. Claggart moved from group to group, talking about various areas where the Intelligence Community could work together rapidly.

Melissa followed Claggart, noticing they were moving toward that one General, still residing near the far wall, calm as a Buddha, speaking to no one, and no one even acknowledging him until...

“Bill” said the diminutive, for a military man, General. His voice was quiet, nearly a whisper.

“Carl” said Claggart. “You heard from Hill?”

“No.” The man's face registered no emotion.

“All right. Tonight, at the Cell.”

The name plate on the small General's left breast read Selznick. So General Carl Selznick said nothing further, just nodded at Melissa. Claggart seemed to notice his assistant for the first time.

“Melissa could you excuse us please?”

“It's fine, Bill”, said Selznick. “I'll be in touch. Ma'm.” With that, the General turned to the left and gracefully made for the door.

Claggart and Melissa followed him out the door. Aides were already making the room spotless for the next meeting. She'd heard something about a briefing for the new Vice President.

Claggart and Melissa didn't speak until they were in the car.

“Carl Selznick is an old friend.”

Melissa filed that under things she might need to know. The General seemed troubled, even more since the Intelligence Community meeting.

“Anything I can do help, General?”

Bill Claggart sighed.

“We'll talk.”

The call came at eleven thirty. She was awake and staring out the window.

“Pack your bags. You're going to Russia.”