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# IRRECONCILABLE DIFFERENCES

JAMES R. STRICKLAND

FREE EBOOK EDITION

*FLYING PEN PRESS SCIENCE FICTION*



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# IRRECONCILABLE DIFFERENCES

**JAMES R. STRICKLAND**

***FLYING PEN PRESS SCIENCE FICTION***



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## Foreword to the Electronic Edition

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This is a book.

After six thousand years of setting characters into stone, pottery, wax, animal hide, and hundreds of different forms of what we'd now call paper; after the rise of whole civilizations based around the idea of the written word preserved on paper; after the rise of libraries, bookstores, and great publishing empires; it comes to this: the physical media no longer matters. It never really did. What mattered was the writing, the information, the data, the story that those ink marks on paper carried. That hasn't changed. That's all here.

You, the reader, have choices now. You can read this book on a dedicated bookreader device. You can read it on a smart phone. You can read it on your computer. You can play it through text-to-voice. And of course, you can order it in the more traditional format, that artifact of paper, glue, and ink, from a fine bookstore near you. How the story gets delivered to you is now distinct from the story itself, and you can choose the form that makes the most sense for the way you live. No matter what format you choose, though, or even if you're reading this a hundred years from now, or a thousand years from now, with technology that doesn't involve eyeballs or even neurons, this is a book. This is a story. And that's what's important.

Please enjoy this book.

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# Acknowledgements

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For my father, Robert L. Strickland (1928-2007)

He read to me when I was young, and lived to see me published.

He was a writer.

For Megan, my niece, who is of the age.

And as always, for Marcia, without whom, not.

Novels aren't written in a vacuum. They are, in the end, social constructs, involving the author, the editor, the publisher, the author's friends and family, and of course, you, the reader. I'm grateful to all of the above, particularly the readers, but a few need special shout-outs.

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**Research:** I'm a civilian. I have never been part of any military organization more serious than the Boy Scouts, so I've had to construct the experience based on personal discussions, interviews, and the work of others. I am especially indebted to Anthony Swofford's *Jarhead* (2003), Christine Holmstedt's *Band of Sisters* (2007), and Rear Adm. Edward Ellsberg's *On the Bottom* (1929) and *Under the Red Sea Sun* (1946). Despite the huge separation of years among these books, the picture they presented was remarkably consistent.

The A&E network (History Channel)'s DVD series *Special Ops*(2003) were absolutely invaluable in the creation of the Information Warfare MOS, and in attempting to understand the special forces/special ops mindset. Information warfare, the term, comes from *Ghost in the Shell: The StandAlone Complex*. (2002).

I made extensive use of the websites *The Midnight Hour* (<http://midnight.hushedcasket.com/>), *Michael Yon's Online Forum*(<http://forums.grunt.com>), and the late Maj. Andrew Olmsted's blogs (<http://www.andrewolmsted.com/> and <http://blogs.rockymountainnews.com/denver/iraqiarmy/>) along with various public relations sites of the United States Marine Corps.

Any accuracy I may have achieved should be credited to these sources, and to discussions with the people listed above. The inevitable extrapolations, extensions, subversions, and just plain inaccuracies must be blamed on me alone.

I must also credit *Impact Acceleration: an Extreme Skydiving Experience* by Jon Jurist (<http://www.thespacereview.com/article/410/1>) for conveniently providing the numbers I needed for one scene. Col. Joseph Kittinger provided the inspiration([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph\\_Kittinger](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Kittinger)). One may also recognize the descendants of SpaceShipOne (<http://www.scaled.com/projects/tierone/>) in this book as well.

**Hardware/Software:** *Irreconcilable Differences* was written on several different Macintosh

computers, running several different versions of MacOS X 10.4 and 10.5, using Nisus Writer Express 2.7, and Nisus Writer Pro 1.0, and inevitably (unfortunately), Microsoft Word 12. Tunes provided by iTunes and iPod. Sandwiches by Panera. Coffee by Serano's. Visit [www.apple.com](http://www.apple.com), [www.nisus.com](http://www.nisus.com), [www.microsoft.com](http://www.microsoft.com) and [www.panerabread.com](http://www.panerabread.com) for more info.



# Prologue

---

I used to love my work.

Look over at Shin. His active-matrix chameleopolymer stealth suit blends him into the wall, so the security cameras can't see him. But his telemetry tells me where he is. Gives me an outline. I get on my heads-up display, relayed from my own suit's computer through the neurofibers that touch every nerve in my body. I can feel him, too. Like we're closer together than we really are. Like we're in a foxhole together in a war I never fought.

Look back at Hallock. She's crouched over, leaning against the wall while her deck has a quick chat with the building security system. Two other uniforms, one on each side of the hallway, cover us from behind.

“Hallock.” I send to her, over the gestalt.

“Almost got it, boss,” she says.

“Hurry. We've got a schedule,” I tell her.

She's silent another few seconds. “Got it. Jamming up surveillance ... knock, and it shall be opened for you.”

Give her a glance, then look forward again. The door buzzes, and I yank it open. Lead with the muzzle of my Martini-Dreyse 16mm rotary. Big slug. Armor piercing. Kicks like hell. Subsonic. Powdered metal rounds. Silent. But messy. The others follow me in. Keep to the walls, where we won't cast a shadow behind us that gives us away. Slither through the data center. Rack to rack. Cover to cover. I don't watch the others. They're pros. Best of the best. Even the uniforms. Some random desk guy walks right past me, and never sees me. Never hears me. I was never here. Interpol Covert Services is the the invisible hand, as Robert Neil would put it. Feel the adrenaline hit my brain. I used to love that feeling. It used to make me smile, knowing I was inside a high security data center, and that my team and I hadn't broken the surface tension, hadn't even made a ripple.

Not today, though. Desk guy tries to walk through Franks. He runs into him noisily, and backs away, looking stunned. “Security!” he yells. “Security!”

Short sound like a soft fart from my weapon, and desk guy collapses in a wet heap against the wall. Blood stain. The alarms go off. Shit. This just got complicated. We scatter, pressing against equipment racks and blending into them. “Shin. Get to rack 27. Hallock, lock this room down, but keep the codes handy for the fire door. We've got two minutes until dust off. Go. Now.”

I used to love the clarity. The immediacy of this work. When nothing else matters, except the mission, and getting out alive, in that order. Heart in my ears. Breath hissing through my teeth until they're cold. Focus. Concentrate. Keep situational awareness. Fight it against the fog of war. Against that coyote moment, when all you want to do is hold up a little sign that says “help me” or “mother” that invisible audience you carry around with you, to watch you star in your life. Keeping control over that. Keeping my brain going. Do the right thing anyway. I used to love that.

Security arrives. Body armor. Black. Of course it's black. Everybody likes black. It makes them feel invulnerable. ~~Stay tight to the equipment rack for a moment. My armor is showing whatever stupid motivational poster is hanging on the rack right through me.~~ Black makes you feel invulnerable. I know better. I'll take invisible. They fan out, searching for us, stomp of boots on the metal grate floor, frightened computer room personnel being herded to the doors. But they have to be careful. A stray round in here could cause more damage than we're trying to do.

Reach rack 27 with Shin. Rack 27. One of three financial data racks. High speed to the world of finance. The link where they'll be transmitting a short sale order to bankrupt UniComp, their competitor, whom they've been at war with for months. "Shin." It's hard not to yell in the gestalt. Optical com. Radiating RF in a place like this would let them track us. "Shin. Hook up. Do it now."

Shin looks at me. "Boss, security's in the room."

"Do it faster, that's all."

He looks at me only a moment, then gets back to work. Professionalism over the fear. He kneels by the side of the rack, and reaches around to the front. Connects an optical bridge to it. Plugs that into the deck in his suit.

"Hallock. Take care of security's com. I don't want them to know whether they're coming or going."

"We're pretty exposed here, Boss," she says. Calm as you like.

"One minute to dust off. We'll make it," I tell her. There's simply no other choice. We can't be here. We were never here. We can make a mess, but we can't leave evidence. And we count as evidence.

"Damn it," Shin says quietly. "Where is it?"

Tape my contribution to Shin's data rack, right on top of the rack's power conditioner. Set the timer.

"Thirty seconds, Shin."

"I know."

"Hallock. Stay on security."

"Will do," she says. Cool, that one. Calm. I've seen her stay calm in the gestalt, keep on working after she's been shot. Cold as ice, that one. Her, I'll miss. Her voice goes urgent as she begins talking to the guards, masquerading as one of them. Sending them running to other parts of the data center.

"Fifteen seconds, Shin."

"I got it. They're planning to send it right as the market closes. You were right."

Hallock says, "Shit. They just traced me. They're coming."

Grit my teeth. Running boots.

---

Shin's alterations to the transaction will do only one thing. Sell it ten minutes early. That's all it takes. I used to love that about combat infowar. Sometimes you don't even have to change the data, just change when it goes through, to change the whole tactical picture. Multiplication of force. The markets will have time to react. Our friends over at the Interpol Bureau of Investigation will have time to get their warrant for insider trading. Nerv will get the full treatment. And nobody will know Interpol Covert Services was here at all. Grit my teeth for another five seconds. "Now. Send it, and unplug."

I used to love this work. We dodge towards the fire door, keeping racks between us and the guards, as a bullet whistles past my hip into a power supply, which bursts into flames. My suit wraps the flames around me, visually, highlighting me for a moment. I pump a round into the shooter's helmet. Red mist sprays out from under the skirt of the helmet, and he drops in his tracks. Taylor and Franks open up on the rest of the security team. The rotary Martini-Dreyses make a sound like a zipper on a leather jacket. No louder. Gouts of flame. Bodies fall. Precision fire. Six steps down a flight of stairs to the fire exit.

My package in the data center goes off. Feel it. Explosive-driven piezoelectric cascade device. For just an instant, before the explosion destroys it, it produces electrostatic energy levels only one order-of-magnitude below a bolt of lightning. Right there, on the floor of the data center. The thunder reverberates down the hall as we make it out the door. Do a quick nose count. Two. One. Zero. Our dust off chopper makes its one and only pass, and we each snag one of the lift lines from it. Clip on. Try not to look down.

I used to love this work. But now I'm still gritting my teeth, my heart is still in my throat, and the adrenaline high is riding me like bad amphetamines as they reel us into the chopper and we fly back to base. Sag in my seat. Pull off my helmet and shake out my hair.

"Santana?" Voice in my head. He never calls me Rachel at work. A body'd think we hardly know each other. Even in the privacy of head to head, it's all business. I knew he'd call. We're back where it wouldn't compromise the mission, and he knows.

"Done, and done, Robert. Things got a little messier than expected."

"Did you leave any trace evidence?"

"What do you think?"

He pauses a second or so. "I think you don't like the limitations I put on your taste for mayhem Santana. But you need limitations. They keep you sharp. Focus your destructive tendencies where I want them. Limitations are what make you useful."

It's my turn to pause. To consider what he just said. And how many times since we've been married and since I've been working for him that he's said it. Eight years? Something like that. "No traces, Robert. All rounds discharged were powdered metal, and once the transaction went through, we ESD'd the whole data center."

“Good. Anything else?”

---

“Love you, Robert.”

He's quiet a moment. It always makes him uncomfortable when I say that to him. Especially where anyone else might hear. Always did. Which probably goes a long way to explaining why I bother anymore. “Right,” he says, finally. “Don't forget to report to Experimental, for your procedure.”

“Today? I thought we moved that back.” Experimental thinks they can use pervasive neurofiber nets to copy out our memories. But I have papers I need to pick up from my lawyer.

“It's only two-thirty. If you're not wounded, you don't get the rest of the day off. We can talk about this when you land,” he says. Yeah, but being shot at makes for a long day.

The last thing I think before they hook me up.

I used to love...

\* \* \*

Static. Then lights, camera.

**Loading...**

What?

**Carrier agent firmware (CAF) 0.35b2.1 Loaded.**

Oh. That. Experimental's big project.

**CAF0.35b2.1: Loading utility modules.**

But it must mean...

**CAF0.35b2.1: Loading briefing media.**

Lights.

Camera.

Action.

Cubicles. A cube farm. Office space. Probably the security camera feed. Okay. I don't know these people.

No control. Switch to their network context. Feel something come over the line. Just for an instant. Flicker of. Something. The packets are gone before I have the chance to look for them. Edited out. Erased from my experience. Like thinking something else, and suddenly being snapped back into

the present, because you thought you heard a touchtone in the distance, or the snap of an AK-47's safety coming off. I think. I thought. Something came by. And now it's gone. But something's going to happen. I know it is. It's already started.

Static.

Watch the static, quiescent. Like listening to white noise, where you can almost pick voices out of it, but you're never sure if they're your imagination, some random hallucination brought on by sensory flooding, or if they're real. Try to make sense of it. Watch. Listen. Feel it in my mind. Feel the sense of ... sense, as the whispers become louder, as everything grows clearer. Until nothing else remains.

Context shift. Surveillance video, again, it looks like. I scramble to pick up the change, like waking from a dream, when the moment you were in scurries away into the walls, like cockroaches when you turn on the lights. Back in the office. Ramp up. Come up to speed. Combat ready. Feel the heart pick up the beat.

Network interface lights flicker busily at each desk. The HVAC drones on, faithfully keeping the office at a comfortable twenty degrees Celsius. Inhale. Exhale. Nothing happens. This goes on for a few minutes. Inhale. Exhale. All twenty-seven of them breathe together, their eyes fixed on space beyond the monitors, most of which have gone into screen saver mode. Some expressions are completely blank, masks of flesh undisturbed by the motion of muscles beneath. On most, though, there's a little more. Watch one guy a moment. As he stares toward the blank monitor, there's a vaguely astonished horror: the expression of someone in a coyote moment, staring for his final fractions of a second into the headlight of an oncoming train, when there isn't even time to think, "Oh shit." All is quiet. All is peaceful.

Try to look around. I can't. It's just a playback, and I can't move. And something's coming.

Yeah. The lights go out, and my picture goes to infrared mode. If anyone notices, nobody does anything about it. I can't move. Only watch. The *ding* of the elevator arriving is also utterly ignored. Seven figures in body armor fan out in military precision. They're good. Precise. They systematically visit each cubicle, and in each cubicle there's a quick, loud stutter of sound, like a trash can being hit by hailstones. Flares of light. Red mist spraying upward out of the affected cubicles. Flare of light. Flinch at the first one. Less after that. The small-arms fire is all but deafening. Bodies and pieces of bodies hit the floor, desk tops, chairs, walls, keyboards, mice, and monitors, like snowflakes. Silent. Unheard. Lost in the firing.

The shooting stops. Sudden rush of quiet, normal sounds. The armored figures survey the damage silently, as though listening. All is quiet now, save the purr of the HVAC system, the inevitable whine of fans cooling electronics, and the sounds of something viscous dripping onto the floor. A streak of crimson blurs the security camera lens.

The lead armored figure looks at the others, and as a group they march back to the elevator. The door closes. *Ding*. And they are gone. It's over in less than a minute.

Burst of static, and the playback ends.



## CAF0.35b2.1: Entering interactive mode.

---

After a moment, I get my eyes open, and see.



# Chapter 1

---

She's groggy. Whoever she is. Her body's not cooperating.

I'm groggy.

We're coming out of our respective anesthesia together, I guess.

They hurry us into a car. The windows are dark, and we can't see. Handcuffed.

“Someone want to bring me up to speed?” The voice is strange. The mouth is strange. It takes me a couple tries to get the words out.

The Uniform in the passenger seat looks at me, and hands me plug ice. Software and hardware in one package, designed to plug directly into the jacks in my head. In her head. Into us. Take it. Deep breath with her lungs. It all feels strange. Fumble with unfamiliar hands. Take it. Feel along the back of an unfamiliar neck for the jack ports — at least they're familiar enough. Plug the ice in.

## **CAF0.35b2.1: Skeleton key mode established.**

The world drops away from me, and there are flickers of thought, like dreams when you first wake up, or when you just begin to fall asleep.

“Hello, Santana.” Familiar voice, all right. Hello, Robert.

“As I'm sure you'd deduced, you are now a carrier agent. You are software, essentially, based on the digital model we made of you two years ago. You are running on a pervasive neurofiber net implanted in a human being.”

I had guessed, in fact. He goes on. “Your host's name is Michelle Marie Blake. She is sixteen years old, and a member of the Salina 785s, a group of ... small-time hackers and hoods operating in and around Salina, Kansas. Your mission is to infiltrate their group, and analyze the local hacker ecology. You are looking for the perpetrators in the destruction of our intercept post in Topeka. We believe a new player is in the field, but it might also be an existing player with new blood. Either way we believe one or more of the Four Horsemen is involved. When you find them, destroy them. No survivors. No exceptions. When you have accomplished this mission, report back to the San Diego office for debriefing. My operatives in the area will be in contact, but do not attempt to contact them or this office, and do not discuss your mission with the agents who are driving you to the train station.”

Horsemen. Slow breath. Horsemen, huh? Are you just saying that to get my dander up, or is it true?

“Your memories are being augmented with the local knowledge you will need for this mission, including a general understanding of current law in the Canadian legal sphere and the Southern Canadian Provinces. Time is of the essence, Santana. You may create as much mayhem as you see fit so long as you preserve the undercover nature of this mission.”

And it is. His voice stops, and the car seat abruptly presses into my bottom again, and I'm aware of my breathing. Her breathing. Damn it. Stare at the uniform a moment. Nod. Unplug the plug ice and hand it to him. "Lock and load, eh?"

He nods. "Yeah. Good luck."

Nod slowly. "Thanks."

Look in the rear view mirror of the car. A shudder flickers through this body I'm wearing, but I don't know if it came from me, or from her. I can't see anything I recognize in the girl in the back seat. And yet as I move the eyes, they move in the mirror. The face tightens into the coyote moment stare as the feeling steals over me. Look away. Look away.



## Chapter 2

---

Belt into the seat on the train. Try not to look at the hands too much, but I can feel them shaking. Lean back into the seat. Close my eyes as the acceleration of the car presses me back into the cushion. Feel the car lurch as it merges with the main line, lurch again as it links up with the train. The lights flicker slightly as the car begins to draw power from the nuclear plant of the T1 locomotive pulling the train.

Leave my eyes closed afterwards. Let her calm down, in the hope that I'll relax with her. We're still pretty dopey with the meds, and it doesn't take a long time.

Breathe. Slow. Regular. She's finally asleep. The activity in her brain drops away quickly, and the only thing to hear is her breath. Deeper. Listen deeper. I can hear her heartbeat. Slow. Calm, at last. Her brain drops down, through the theta-wave, near-waking state like a hawk on a long dive, until it finally flares its wings and rides the ground effect of delta wave sleep and the occasional updraft of sleep spindles and K complexes. Don't ask me to make sense of it; I just work here. It's like her brain pulse. Slow. Steady.

Feel my neurofibers try to follow her to sleep. They're almost living nerves, these fibers I call my mind. Molecular cybernetics. They've had a strenuous day too. Ignore the need. Beat it back. I have a mission. I've got work to do. Watch.

In time, her brain catches a thermal, of sorts, stretches wings and flies upward within its own darkness. Her muscle tone fades away, muscles inhibited by REM sleep. But her mind's eye opens again to its own inner light. I stop watching from the outside, and slide into her mind. Try to ignore the blaze of ego, the young star of self that is the center of her universe. Blinding, even in sleep. Completely unaware of me. Unaware of my existence, or why it's important to me, or that I'm the central star in my own universe. A scorching hot, blue light. Why, oh why, did they put me in a teenager? I take cover in the shadows, around the periphery where the weird things are, the vague, nebulous fears and ambitions that only gnaw her in the space of dreams. Look up at her mind. Nudge gently. Make her dream the memories I need to see.

Michelle Marie (Micki) Blake, alias Hotwire, of the Salina 785s, dreams she is on her way to San Diego to get her jack installed. Sixteen years old. It shows. I'm jaded; the smell of ozone from the train's motors doesn't have that same sense of almost sexual possibilities for me that it does for her. To me, it smells like other things. Welding shop. Vehicle maintenance. Up-armoring. Absent friends. Fuck. Her brainwave state's affecting mine. Pay attention. I can't afford to dream.

They take her down at the Union Station platform, Los Angeles, California Technocracy, Real World (no zip code required) as she disembarks the Southwest Chief at its Western terminus. She climbs down the steps. Lights up a cigarette, and takes a deep drag from it. And they grab her. Micki flinches only a little, and lets the smoke out with a sigh as they put hands on each of her shoulders, flash Interpol IDs, and lead her away. "Please come with us, Ms. Blake." The voice is calm, almost gentle.

"Hey, no problem; I'll put it out," she says. Maybe she knows that smoking's illegal in the California Technocracy. The agent who spoke hooks her up anyway. Handcuffs her right wrist to his left. She can't see his eyes through the sunglasses. She does look, though. "Am I under arrest, or

what?" she asks. There's a casualness to it that she doesn't quite feel. But she's faking it.

---

The two agents look at each other a moment, as though a thought is passed between them, but say nothing. A quick glance to the back of one agent's neck tells Micki the reason. "Wireless head to head net. Pretty flash." Micki beams. The smile fades after a moment. Flash, maybe. But not good.

They board another train, a local—the Pacific Surfliner—together, and they lead her to a row of seats. "C'mon, guys. Don't give me the silent treatment. I got rights and stuff, you know."

The agent handcuffed to her says, "Please sit down, Ms. Blake."

She turns toward the seats, then abruptly pulls away, jerking the chain that cuffs her wrist to the agent's. "No. Fuck you," she says quietly, but firmly. "You either tell me what's going on, or I walk. You can't just..."

"All passengers, please take your seats. The train will be departing in a few minutes. This is the Pacific Surfliner, bound for San Diego. If San Diego is not your destination, please disembark now."

"Let me go!" Micki demands, when the automated voice of the train stops speaking.

The agent doesn't answer. He just grabs her wrist in his gloved hand, turns it upward, then slaps a patch she doesn't recognize over the veins in her wrist. "Wait," she says. Tears well up in her eyes and she feels her body start go loose. She sags into the seat after all. "Please..." but everything goes black just the same.

Her brain settles into delta wave sleep again, flying over the endless dark ocean of nothing and the gentle, insistent brain pulse. I have to wait for her, while her brain resets its chemistry. While it resynchronizes itself. While it acclimatizes itself to the presence of the neurofibers. And with them, me.

Updraft. Dreaming again. Give her another nudge. Her mind flies for me, and she dreams she is awake. Lives the memory again. Like being online, except the edges aren't so crisp, and things make less sense than usual. Not online, more like dreaming, within the dream. Voices. Drug haze. A sensation I'm all too familiar with. Something ... someone takes her by the chin, smell of latex, pressure, the bite of a needle in her neck. "Euthanize," she thinks. "Oh, God..." There's a gradual sucking feeling over the next few minutes, and her fragmented thoughts are unceremoniously pressed together and laminated there by something that makes her mouth dry and her heart race, which it continues to do for an improbably long time, given...

Not euthanasia then. Obviously. She licks her lips. Dry. How long? Long enough that she automatically tries to reach for the pocket where she keeps her cigarettes, so ... a few hours at least. Her hand fails to move. Time passes. The light is like looking into the guts of a star. Every time she tries to open her eyes, the burning brightness drives them closed again, makes her eyes water, blasts red light through her eyelids. She tries to raise her hand to shade them, and discovers that her hands are cuffed behind her back, in an indent in the table apparently designed for them. Her neck is still sore from the injection. Definitely not euthanasia. "I knew they wouldn't," she thinks. Confidence. Shade a moment. Someone, rubber-glove-hands again, pries each of her eyes open and shines a bright light into it. She jerks away. In moments, we're walking. She's walking. Okay. She's dreaming she's

walking, and I'm tagging along. But her memory is going disjoint, and I know that, once again, we're diving into the dark. I can wait. I have the time, yet.

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When her mind soars again, when the lights come on and the theater of dreams is open for business again, she's in a chair in a small room with a table, a glass of water, a chair, and a row of track light spots in the ceiling, one of which is aimed right at her chair. It makes her blink. The room is otherwise featureless except the door. No windows, no cameras that she can see, but she's sure they're there somewhere. She's right. She sits there and licks her lips, eyes the glass of water. Rubs her wrists where the handcuffs were. "You guys must think I'm stupid or something, if you think I'm going to give you a free DNA sample on that glass. You think I don't know how you work?" Silence. She forces herself to yawn loudly, and lets her head nod forward as though she's so bored she's falling asleep. They're sweating her. She knows it. And she is not about to play along. Save that she can already smell her armpits a little, and for the edginess, the nagging sensation that she should be doing something, but can't. The desperate need to fidget with her hands. They call it sweating you for a reason. Yeah. I know what's coming. Micki's hands twitch in real life. But they don't move much. She's dreaming. On some level, her brain knows it. I'm only watching. I can't change any of this. It already happened.

The door opens again, and a guy in a suit comes in and sits down, sets down a file folder, and takes off his sunglasses with elaborate ceremony. Gray hair, blue suit like the others, badge, hazel eyes, nice tan. I see him through her eyes first. Just another face, another suit. Bland features. She doesn't recognize him. Why would she? She's never seen him before. It takes me a moment. Shock of recognition? Yeah, you could call it that. I wonder if I ever managed to get used to life without that face in it. It's good to see him. Never a beauty, but ... habit.

Robert Milton Neil is calm. Calculating. Moreso than I remember. We see with the prejudices of our own minds, I guess. She sees just another suit. Just another authority figure, like a high school principal, perhaps. And because I'm looking through her mind, I see him that way too. I doubt he'd object, even if he knew. Robert likes to be underestimated that way. He smiles, and she looks at his teeth.

"Ms. Blake. My name is Robert Neil. I'm the director of Interpol Covert Services. I'd like to ask you a few questions." His voice is calm. Measured. Precise, each consonant formed with a slight click of saliva. Calm and professional. Absolute precision. Glittering coldness to him. Shiver of fear in Micki, at the memory. Flash of the stories she's heard about Interpol Covert. More importantly, she's taken the measure of the man. She knows now that she is in shark-infested waters. Good for her. Smart girl. What little bravado she'd mustered leaks away, and she nods silently. He hands her a tablet. Makes her watch the video: of the murdered office, the killers, the dead spattered in their cubicles. The one they woke me up with.

Micki blanches. "Fuck."

Neil nods, gravely. "I quite agree." He goes quiet as she watches. Watches her flinch as the people die. Finally, he continues. "Do you know what all of these people had in common, Ms. Blake?"

Micki looks at the pictures again. Chews her lip with nervous energy, and eyes the glass of water again. She takes a deep breath. "Besides being dead?"



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