DECEPTION POINT

BOOK EXCERPTS

AUTHOR'S NOTE: THE DELTA FORCE, THE NATIONAL RECONNAISSANCE OFFICE, AND THE SPACE FRONTIER FOUNDATION ARE FACTUAL ORGANIZATIONS. ALL TECHNOLOGIES DESCRIBED IN THIS NOVEL ARE REAL.

FORWARD

"If this discovery is confirmed, it will surely be one of the most stunning insights into our universe that science has ever uncovered. Its implications are as far-reaching and awe-inspiring as can be imagined. Even as it promises answers to some of our oldest questions, it poses still others even more fundamental."

- President Bill Clinton, in a press conference following a discovery known as on August 7th, 1996

PROLOGUE

Death, in this forsaken place, could come in countless forms. Geologist Charles Brophy had endured the savage splendor of this terrain for years, and yet nothing could prepare him for a fate as barbarous and unnatural as the one about to befall him.

As Brophy's four huskies pulled his sled of geologic sensing equipment across the tundra, the dogs suddenly slowed, looking skyward.

"What is it, girls?" Brophy asked, stepping off the sled.

Beyond the gathering storm clouds, a twin-rotor transport helicopter arched in low, hugging the glacial peaks with military dexterity.

glacial peaks with military dexterity.

That's odd, he thought. He never saw helicopters this far north. The aircraft landed fifty yards away, kicking up a stinging spray of granulated snow. His dogs whined, looking wary.

When the chopper doors slid open, two men descended. They were dressed in full-weather whites, armed with rifles, and moved toward Brophy with urgent intent.

"Dr. Brophy?" one called.

The geologist was baffled. "How did you know my name? Who are you?"

"Take out your radio, please."

"I'm sorry?"

"Just do it."

Bewildered, Brophy pulled his radio from his parka.

"We need you to transmit an emergency communiqué. Decrease your radio frequency to 100 kilohertz."

"One hundred kilohertz? Brophy felt utterly lost. Nobody can receive anything that low. Has there been an accident?"

The second man raised his rifle and pointed it at Brophy's head. "There's no time to explain. Just do it."

Trembling, Brophy adjusted his transmission frequency.

The first man now handed him a note card with a few lines typed on it. "Transmit this message. Now."

Brophy looked at the card. "I don't understand. This information is incorrect. I didn't—"

The man pressed his rifle hard against the geologist's temple.

Brophy's voice was shaking as he transmitted the bizarre message.

"Good," the first man said. "Now get yourself and your dogs into the chopper."

At gunpoint, Brophy maneuvered his reluctant dogs and sled up a skid ramp into the cargo bay. As soon as they were settled, the chopper lifted off, turning westward.

"Who the hell are you!" Brophy demanded, breaking a sweat inside his parka. And what was the meaning of that message!

The men said nothing.

As the chopper gained altitude, the wind tore through the open door. Brophy's four huskies, still rigged to the loaded sled were whimpering now."At least close the door," Brophy demanded. "Can't you see my dogs are frightened!"The men did not respond.As the chopper rose to four thousand feet, it banked steeply out over a series of ice chasms and crevasses. Suddenly, the men stood. Without a word, they gripped the heavily laden sled and pushed it out the open door. Brophy watched in horror as his dogs scrambled in vain against the enormous weight. In an instant the animals disappeared, dragged howling out of the chopper.

Brophy was already on his feet screaming when the men grabbed him. They hauled him to the door. Numb with fear, Brophy swung his fists, trying to fend off the powerful hands pushing him outward.

It was no use. Moments later he was tumbling toward the chasms below.

CHAPTER 1

Toulos Restaurant, adjacent to Capitol Hill, boasts a politically incorrect menu of baby veal and horse carpaccio, making it an ironic hotspot for the quintessential Washingtonian power breakfast. This morning Toulos was busy-a cacophony of clanking silverware, espresso machines, and cellphone conversations.

The maitre d' was sneaking a sip of his morning Bloody Mary when the woman entered. He turned with a practiced smile.

"Good morning," he said. May I help you?"

The woman was attractive, in her mid-thirties, wearing gray pleated flannel pants, conservative flats, and an ivory Laura Ashley blouse. Her posture was straight-chin raised ever-so-slightly-not arrogant, just strong. The woman's hair was light brown and fashioned in Washington's most popular style-the anchorwoman-a lush feathering, curled under at the shoulders...long enough to be sexy, but short enough to remind you she was probably smarter than you.

"I'm a little late," the woman said, her voice unassuming. "I have a breakfast meeting with Senator Sexton."

The maitre d' felt an unexpected tingle of nerves. Senator Sedgewick Sexton. The senator was a regular here and currently one of the country's most famous men. Last week, having swept all twelve Republican primaries on Super Tuesday, the Senator was virtually guaranteed his party's nomination for President of the United States. Many believed the senator had a superb chance of stealing the White House from the embattled President next fall. Lately Sexton's face seemed to be on every national magazine, his campaign slogan plastered all across America. Stop spending. Start mending.

"Senator Sexton is in his booth," the maitre d' said. "And you are?"

"Rachel Sexton. His daughter."

How foolish of me, he thought. The resemblance was quite apparent. The woman had the senator's penetrating eyes and refined carriage-that polished air of resilient nobility. Clearly the senator's classic good looks had not skipped generations, although Rachel Sexton seemed to carry her blessings with a grace and humility her father could learn from.

"A pleasure to have you, Ms. Sexton."

As the maitre d' led the senator's daughter across the dining area, he was embarrassed by the gauntlet of male eyes following her...some discreet, others less so. Few women dined at Toulos and even fewer who looked like Rachel Sexton.

"Nice body," one diner whispered. "Sexton already find himself a new wife?"

"That's his daughter, you idiot," another replied.

The man chuckled. "Knowing Sexton, he'd probably screw her anyway.

"When Rachel arrived at her father's table, the senator was on his cellphone talking loudly about one of his recent successes. He glanced up at Rachel only long enough to tap his Cartier and remind her she was late.

I missed you too, Rachel thought.

Her father's name was Thomas, although he'd adopted his middle name long ago. Rachel suspected it was because he liked the alliteration. Senator Sedgewick Sexton. The man was a silver-haired, silver-tongued political animal who had been anointed with the slick look of soap opera doctor, which seemed appropriate considering his talents of impersonation.

"Rachel!" Her father clicked off his phone and stood to kiss her cheek.

"Hi Dad." She did not kiss him back.

"You look exhausted."

And so it begins, she thought. "I got your message. What's up?"

"I can't ask my daughter out for breakfast?

"Rachel had learned long ago her father seldom requested her company unless he had some ulterior motive.

Sexton took a sip of coffee. "So, how are things with you?"

"Busy. I see your campaign's going well."

"Oh, let's not talk business." Sexton leaned across the table, lowering his voice. "How's that guy at the State Department I set you up with?"

Rachel exhaled, already fighting the urge to check her watch. "Dad, I really haven't had time to call

him. And I wish you'd stop trying to—"

"You've got to make time for the important things, Rachel. Without love, everything else is meaningless."

A number of comebacks came to mind, but Rachel chose silence. Being the bigger person was not difficult when it came to her father. "Dad, you wanted to see me? You said this was important."

"It is." Her father's eyes studied her closely.

Rachel felt part of her defenses melt away under his gaze, and she cursed the man's power. The senator's eyes were his gift...a gift Rachel suspected would probably carry him to the White House. On cue, his eyes would well with tears, and then, an instant later, they would clear, opening a window to an impassioned soul, extending a bond of trust to all. It's all about trust, her father always said. The Senator had lost Rachel's years ago, but he was quickly gaining the country's.

"I have a proposition for you," Senator Sexton said.

"Let me guess," Rachel replied, attempting to refortify her position. "Some prominent divorcee looking for a young wife?"

"Don't kid yourself, honey. You're not that young anymore."

Rachel felt the familiar shrinking sensation that so often accompanied meetings with her father.

"I want to throw you a life raft," he said.

"I wasn't aware I was drowning."

"You're not. The President is. You should jump ship before it's too late."

"Haven't we had this conversation?"

"Think about your future, Rachel. You can come work for me."

"I hope that's not why you asked me to breakfast."

"The senator's veneer of calm broke ever so slightly. Rachel, can't you see that your working for him reflects badly on me. And on my campaign."

Rachel sighed. She and her father had been through this. "Dad, I don't work for the President. I haven't even met the President. I work in Fairfax, for God's sake!"

"Politics is perception, Rachel. It appears you work for the President."

Rachel exhaled, trying to keep her cool. "I worked too hard to get this job, Dad. I'm not quitting."

The senator's eyes narrowed. "You know, sometimes your selfish attitude really—"

"Senator Sexton?" A reporter materialized beside the table.

Sexton's demeanor thawed instantly. Rachel groaned and took a croissant from the basket on the table.

"Ralph Sneeden," the reporter said. "Washington Post. May I ask you a few questions?"

The senator smiled, dabbing his mouth with a napkin. "My pleasure, Ralph. Just make it quick. I don't want my coffee getting cold."

The reporter laughed on cue. "Of course, sir." He pulled out a mini-recorder and turned it on. Senator, your television ads call for legislation ensuring equal salaries for women in the workplace...as well as tax cuts for new families. Can you comment on your rationale?"

"Sure. I'm simply a huge fan of strong women and strong families."

Rachel practically choked on her croissant.

"And on the subject of families," the reporter followed up, you talk a lot about education. You've proposed some highly controversial budget cuts in an effort to allocate more funds to our nation's schools."

"I believe the children are our future."

Rachel could not believe her father had sunk to quoting pop songs.

"Finally, sir," the reporter said, you've taken an enormous jump in the polls these past few weeks. The President has got to be worried. Any thoughts on your recent success?"

"I think it has to do with trust. Americans are starting to see that the President cannot be trusted to make the tough decisions facing this nation. Runaway government spending is putting this country deeper in debt every day, and Americans are starting to realize that it's time to stop spending and start mending."

Like a stay of execution from her father's rhetoric, the pager in Rachel's handbag went off. Normally the harsh electronic beeping was an unwelcome interruption, but at the moment, it sounded almost melodious.

The senator glared indignantly at having been interrupted.

Rachel fished the pager from her handbag and pressed a preset sequence of five buttons, confirming that she was indeed the person holding the pager. The beeping stopped, and the LCD began blinking. In fifteen seconds she would receive a secure text message.

Sneeden grinned at the senator. "Your daughter is obviously a busy woman. It's refreshing to see you two still find time in your schedules to dine together."

"As I said. Family comes first."

Sneeden nodded, and then his gaze hardened. "Might I ask, sir, how you and your daughter manage your conflicts of interest?"

"Conflicts?" Senator Sexton cocked his head with an innocent look of confusion. What conflicts do you mean?"

Rachel glanced up, grimacing at her father's act. She knew exactly where this was headed. Damn reporters, she thought. Half of them were on political payrolls. The reporter's question was what journalists called a grapefruit-a question that was supposed to look like a tough inquiry but was in fact a scripted favor to the Senator-a slow lob pitch that her father could line up and smash out of the park, clearing the air about a few things.

"Well, sir..." The reporter coughed, feigning uneasiness over the question. "The conflict is that your daughter works for your opponent."

Senator Sexton exploded in laughter, defusing the question instantly. "Ralph, first of all, the President and I are not opponents. We are simply two patriots who have different ideas about how to run the country we love."

The reporter beamed. He had his sound-byte. "And secondly?"

"Secondly, my daughter is not employed by the President; she is employed by the intelligence community. She compiles intel reports and sends them to the White House. It's a fairly low-level position." He paused and looked at Rachel. In fact, dear, I'm not sure you've even met the President, have you?"

Rachel stared, her eyes smoldering.

The beeper chirped, drawing Rachel's gaze to the incoming message on the LCD screen.
-RPRT DIRNRO STAT-

She deciphered the shorthand instantly and frowned. The message was unexpected, and most certainly bad news. At least she had her exit cue.

"Gentlemen," she said. It breaks my heart, but I have to go. I'm late for work."

"Ms. Sexton," the reporter said quickly, before you go, I was wondering if you could comment on the rumors that you called this breakfast meeting to discuss the possibility of leaving your current post to work for your father's campaign?"

Rachel felt like someone had thrown hot coffee in her face. The question took her totally off guard. She looked at her father and sensed in his smirk that the question had been prepped. She wanted to climb across the table and stab him with a fork.

The reporter shoved the recorder into her face. "Miss Sexton?"

Rachel locked eyes with the reporter. "Ralph, or whoever the hell you are, get this straight. I have no intention of abandoning my job to work for Senator Sexton, and if you print anything to the con-

trary, you'll need a shoehorn to get that recorder out of your ass."

The reporter's eyes widened. He clicked off his recorder, hiding a grin. "Thank you both." He disappeared.

Rachel immediately regretted the outburst. She had inherited her father's temper, and she hated him for it. Smooth, Rachel. Very smooth.

Her father glared disapprovingly. "You'd do well to learn some poise."

Rachel began collecting her things. "This meeting is over."

The Senator was apparently done with her anyway. He pulled out his cellphone to make a call. "Bye, sweetie. Stop by the office one of these days and say hello. And get married, for God's sake. You're thirty-three years old."

"Thirty-four," she snapped. Your secretary sent a card."

He clucked ruefully. "Thirty-four. Almost an old maid. You know by the time I was thirty-four, I'd already—"

"Married mom and screwed the neighbor?" The words came out louder than Rachel had intended, her voice hanging naked in an ill-timed lull. Diners nearby glanced over.

Senator Sexton's eyes flash-froze, two ice-crystals boring into her. "You watch yourself, young lady."

Rachel headed for the door. No, you watch yourself, Senator.

CHAPTER 2

The three men sat in silence inside their ThermaTech storm-tent. Outside, an icy wind buffeted the shelter, threatening to tear it from its moorings. None of the men took notice; each had seen situations far more threatening than this one.

Their tent was stark white, pitched in a shallow depression, out of sight. Their communication devices, transport, and weapons were all state-of-the-art. The group leader was code-named Delta-One.

He was muscular and lithe with eyes as desolate as the topography on which he was stationed.

The military chronograph on Delta-One's wrist emitted a sharp beep. The sound coincided in perfect unison with beeps emitted from the chronographs worn by the other two men.

Another thirty minutes had passed.

It was time. Again.

Reflexively, Delta-One left his two partners and stepped outside into the darkness and pounding wind. He scanned the moonlit horizon with infrared binoculars. As always, he focused on the structure. It was a thousand meters away-an enormous and unlikely edifice rising from the barren terrain. He and his team had been watching it for ten days now, since its construction. Delta-One had no doubt that the information inside would change the world. Lives had already been lost to protect it...

At the moment, everything looked quiet outside the structure.

The true test, however, was what was happening inside.Delta-One reentered the tent and addressed his two fellow soldiers. "Time for a fly-by."

Both men nodded. The taller of the them, Delta-Two, opened a laptop computer and turned it on. Positioning himself in front of the screen, Delta-Two placed his hand on a mechanical joystick and gave it a short jerk. A thousand meters away, hidden deep within the building, a surveillance robot the size of a mosquito received his transmission and sprang to life.

CHAPTER 3

Rachel Sexton was still steaming as she drove her white Integra up Leesburg Pike. The bare maples of the Falls Church foothills rose stark against a crisp March sky, but the peaceful setting did little to calm her anger. Her father's recent surge in the polls should have endowed him with a modicum of confident grace, and yet it seemed only to fuel his self-importance.

The man's deceit was doubly painful because he was the only family Rachel had left. Rachel's mother had died three years ago, a devastating loss whose emotional scars still raked at Rachel's heart. Rachel's only solace was knowing that the death, with ironic compassion, had liberated her mother from a deep despair over a miserable marriage to the senator.

Rachel's pager beeped again, pulling her thoughts back to the road in front of her. The incoming message was the same.
-RPRT DIRNRO STAT-

Report to the Director of NRO stat. She sighed. "I'm coming, for God's sake!

With rising uncertainty, Rachel drove to her usual exit, turned onto the private access road, and rolled to a stop at the heavily armed sentry booth. This was 14225 Leesburg Highway-one of the most secretive addresses in the country.

While the guard scanned her car for bugs, Rachel gazed out at the mammoth structure in the distance. The one million square foot complex sat majestically on 68 forested acres just outside D.C. in Fairfax, Virginia. The building's façade was a bastion of one-way glass that reflected the army of satellite dishes, antennas, and rayodomes on the surrounding grounds, doubling their already awe-inspiring numbers.

Two minutes later, Rachel had parked and crossed the manicured grounds to the main entrance, where a carved granite sign announced:
NATIONAL RECONNAISSANCE OFFICE (NRO)

The two, armed Marines flanking the bullet-proof revolving door stared straight ahead as Rachel passed between them. She had the same sensation she always had as she pushed through these doors...that she was entering the belly of a sleeping giant.

Inside the vaulted lobby, Rachel sensed the faint echoes of hushed conversations all around her...as if the words were sifting down from the offices above. An enormous tiled mosaic announced the NRO directive:

Enabling U.S. global information superiority, during peace and through war.

The walls here were lined with massive photographs-rocket launches, submarine christenings, intercept installations-towering achievements that could be celebrated only within these walls.

Now, as always, Rachel felt the problems of the outside world fading behind her. She was entering the shadow world. A world where the problems thundered in like freight trains, and the solutions were meted out with barely a whisper.

As Rachel approached the final checkpoint, she wondered what kind of problem had caused her pager to ring twice in the last thirty minutes.

"Good morning, Ms. Sexton." The guard smiled as she approached the steel doorway.

Rachel returned the smile as the guard held out a tiny swab for Rachel to take.

"You know the drill," he said.

Rachel took the hermetically sealed cotton swab and removed the plastic covering. Then she placed it in her mouth like a thermometer. She held it under her tongue for two seconds. Then, leaning forward, she allowed the guard to remove it. The guard inserted the moistened swab into a slit in a machine behind him. The machine took four seconds to confirm the DNA sequences in Rachel's saliva. Then a monitor flickered on, displaying Rachel's photo and security clearance.

The guard winked. "Looks like you're still you." He pulled the used swab from the machine and dropped it through an opening where it was instantly incinerated. "Have a good one." He pressed a button and the huge steel doors swung open.

As Rachel made her way into the maze of bustling corridors beyond, she was amazed that even after six years here she was still daunted by the colossal scope of this operation. The agency encompassed six other U.S. installations, employed over 10,000 agents, and had operating costs of over ten billion dollars per year.

In total secrecy, the NRO built and maintained an astonishing arsenal of cutting-edge spy technologies-worldwide electronic intercepts, spy satellites, silent embedded relay chips in telecomm products, even a global naval-recon network known as Classic Wizard...a secret web of 1456 hydrophones mounted on seafloors around the world, capable of monitoring ship movement anywhere on the globe.

NRO technologies not only helped the U.S. win military conflicts, but they provided an endless stream of peacetime data to agencies like the CIA, NSA, and Department of Defense, helping them thwart terrorism, locate crimes against the environment, and give policy-makers the data needed to make informed decisions on an enormous array of topics.

"Rachel worked here as a gister." Gisting, or data-reduction, required analyzing complex reports and

distilling their essence or "gist" into concise, single-page briefs. Rachel had proven herself a natural. All those years of cutting through my father's bullshit, she thought.

Rachel now held the NRO's premiere gisting post-Intelligence Liaison to the White House. She was responsible for sifting through the NRO's daily intelligence reports, deciding which stories were relevant to the President, distilling those reports into single page briefs, and then forwarding the synop-sized material to the President's National Security Advisor. In NRO-speak, Rachel Sexton manufactured finished product and serviced the customer."

Although the job was difficult and required long hours, the position was a badge of honor for her...a way to assert her independence from her father. Senator Sexton had offered countless times to support Rachel if she would quit the post, but Rachel had no intention of becoming financially beholden to a man like Sedgewick Sexton. Her mother was testimony to what could happen when a man like that held too many cards.

The sound of Rachel's pager echoed in the marble hall.

Again? She didn't even bother to check the message.

Wondering what the hell was going on, she boarded the elevator, skipped her own floor, and went straight to the top.

CHAPTER 4

To call the NRO Director a plain man was in itself an overstatement. NRO Director William Pickering was diminutive, with pale skin, a forgettable face, a bald head, and hazel eyes, which despite having gazed upon the country's deepest secrets, appeared as two shallow pools. Nonetheless, to those who worked under him, Pickering towered. His subdued personality and unadorned philosophies were legendary at the NRO. The man's quiet diligence, combined with his wardrobe of plain black suits, had earned him the nickname The Quaker. A brilliant strategist and the model of efficiency, The Quaker ran his world with an unrivaled clarity. His mantra: Find the truth. Act on it.

When Rachel arrived in the director's office, he was on the phone. Rachel was always surprised by the sight of him; William Pickering looked nothing like a man who wielded power enough to wake the President at any hour.

Pickering hung up and waved her in. "Agent Sexton, have a seat." His voice had a lucid rawness to it.

"Thank you, sir." Rachel sat.

Despite most people's discomfort around William Pickering's blunt demeanor, Rachel had always liked the man. He was the exact antithesis of her father...physically unimposing, anything but charismatic, and he did his duty with a selfless patriotism, shunning the spotlight her father loved so much.

Pickering removed his glasses and gazed at her. "Agent Sexton, the President called me about a half hour ago. In direct reference to you."

Rachel shifted in her seat. Pickering was known for getting to the point. One hell of an opening, she thought. "Not a problem with one of my gists, I hope."

"On the contrary. He says the White House is impressed with your work."

Rachel exhaled silently. "So what did he want?"

"A meeting with you. In person. Immediately."

Rachel's unease sharpened. "A personal meeting? About what?"

"Damn good question. He wouldn't tell me."

Now Rachel was lost. Keeping information from the director of the NRO was like keeping Vatican secrets from the Pope. The standing joke in the intelligence community was that if William Pickering didn't know about it, it hadn't happened.

Pickering stood, pacing now in front of his window. "He asked that I contact you immediately and send you to meet with him."

"Right now?"

"He sent transportation. It's waiting outside."

Rachel frowned. The President's request was unnerving on its own account, but it was the look of

concern on Pickering's face that really worried her. "You obviously have reservations."

"I sure as hell do!" Pickering showed a rare flash of emotion. The President's timing seems almost callow in its transparency. You are the daughter of the man who is currently challenging him in the polls, and he demands a private meeting with you? I find this highly inappropriate. Your father no doubt would agree."

Rachel knew Pickering was right...not that she gave a damn what her father thought. "Do you not trust the President's motives?"

"My oath is to provide intelligence support to the current White House administration, not pass judgment on their politics."

Typical Pickering response, Rachel realized. William Pickering made no bones about his view of politicians as transitory figureheads who passed fleetingly across a chessboard whose real players were men like Pickering himself- seasoned lifers" who had been around long enough to understand the game with some perspective. Two full terms in the White House, Pickering often said, was not nearly enough to comprehend the true complexities of the global political landscape.

"Maybe it's an innocent request," Rachel offered, hoping the President was above trying some sort of cheap campaign stunt. "Maybe he needs a reduction of some sensitive data."

"Not to sound belittling, Agent Sexton, but the White House has access to plenty of qualified gisting personnel if they need it. If it's an internal White House job, the President should know better than to contact you. And if not, then he sure as hell should know better than to request an NRO asset and then refuse to tell me what he wants it for."

Pickering always referred to his employees as assets, a manner of speech many found disconcertingly cold.

"Your father is gaining political momentum," Pickering said. "A lot of it. The White House has got to be getting nervous." He sighed. "Politics is a desperate business. When the President calls a secret meeting with his challenger's daughter, I'd guess there's more on his mind than intelligence gists."

Rachel felt a distant chill. Pickering's hunches had an uncanny tendency to be dead on. "And you're afraid the White House feels desperate enough to introduce me into the political mix?"

Pickering paused a moment. "You are not exactly silent about your feelings for your father, and I have little doubt the President's campaign staff is aware of the rift. It occurs to me that they may want to use you against him somehow."

"Where do I sign up?" Rachel said, only half-joking.

Pickering looked unimpressed. He gave her a stern stare. "A word of warning, Agent Sexton. If you feel that your personal issues with your father are going to cloud your judgment in dealing with the President, I strongly advise that you decline the President's request for a meeting."

"Decline?" Rachel gave a nervous chuckle. "I obviously can't refuse the President."

"No," the director said, but I can."

His words rumbled a bit, reminding Rachel of the other reason Pickering was called The Quaker. Despite being a small man, William Pickering could cause political earthquakes if he were crossed.

"My concerns here are simple," Pickering said, "I have a responsibility to protect the people who work for me, and I don't appreciate even the vague implication that one of them might be used as a pawn in a political game."

"What do you recommend I do?"

Pickering sighed. "My suggestion is that you meet with him. Commit to nothing. Once the President tells you what the hell is on his mind, call me. If I think he's playing political hardball with you, trust me, I'll pull you out so fast the man won't know what hit him."

"Thank you, sir." Rachel sensed a protective aura from the director that she often longed for in her own father. And you said the President already sent a car?"

"Not exactly." Pickering frowned and pointed out the window.

Uncertain, Rachel went over and gazed out in the direction of Pickering's outstretched finger.

A snub-nosed MH-60G PaveHawk helicopter sat idling on the lawn. One of the fastest choppers on earth, this PaveHawk was emblazoned with the White House insignia. The pilot stood nearby,

checking his watch.

Rachel turned to Pickering in disbelief. "The White House sent a PaveHawk to take me fifteen miles into D.C.?"

"Apparently the President hopes you are either impressed or intimidated." Pickering eyed her. I suggest you are neither."

Rachel nodded. She was both.

Four minutes later, Rachel Sexton exited the NRO and climbed into the waiting helicopter. Before she had even buckled herself in, the craft was airborne, banking hard across the Virginia woods. Rachel gazed out at the blur of trees beneath her and felt her pulse rising. It would have risen faster had she known this chopper would never reach the White House.

CHAPTER 5

The frigid wind battered the fabric of the ThermaTech tent, but Delta-One hardly noticed. He and Delta-Three were focused on their comrade, who was manipulating the joystick in his hand with surgical dexterity. The screen before them displayed a live video transmission from a pinpoint camera mounted aboard the micro-robot.

The ultimate surveillance tool, Delta-One thought, still amazed every time they powered it up. Lately, in the world of micro-mechanics, fact seemed to be outpacing fiction.

Micro Electro Mechanical Systems (MEMS)-microbots-were the newest tool in hi-tech surveillance..."fly on the wall technology" they called it.

Literally.

Although microscopic, remote-controlled robots sounded like science fiction, in fact they had been around since the 1990's. Discovery Magazine had run a cover story in May 1997 on microbots- featuring both flying" and swimming" models. The swimmers-nano-subs the size of salt-grains-could be injected into the human bloodstream a lá the movie Fantastic Voyage. They were now being used by advanced medical facilities to help doctors navigate arteries by remote control, observe live intravenous video transmissions, and locate arterial blockages without ever lifting a scalpel.

Contrary to intuition, building a flying microbot was even simpler business. The aerodynamics technology for getting a machine to fly had been around since Kittyhawk, and all that remained had been the issue of miniaturization. The first flying microbots, designed by NASA as unmanned exploration tools for future Mars missions, had been several inches long. Now, however, advances in nano-technology, lightweight energy-absorbent materials, and micro-mechanics had made the flying microbots a reality.

The true breakthrough had come from the new field biomimics -copying Mother Nature. Miniature dragonflies, as it turned out, were the ideal prototype for these agile and efficient flying microbots. The PH2 model Delta-One was currently flying was only one centimeter long-the size of a mosquito-and employed a dual pair of transparent, hinged, silicon-leaf wings, giving it unparalleled mobility and efficiency in the air.

The microbot's refueling mechanism had been another breakthrough. The first microbot prototypes could only recharge their energy cells by hovering directly beneath a bright light source-not ideal for stealth or use in dark locals. The newer prototypes, however, could recharge simply by parking within a few inches of a magnetic field. Conveniently, in modern society, magnetic fields were ubiquitous and discreetly placed-power outlets, computer monitors, electric motors, audio speakers, cellphones- it seemed there was never any shortage of obscure recharging stations. Once a microbot had been successfully introduced into a locale, it could transmit audio and video almost indefinitely. The Delta Force's PH2 had been transmitting for over a week now with no trouble whatsoever.

Now, like an insect hovering inside a cavernous barn, the airborne micro-robot hung silently in the still air of the structure's massive central room. With a birds-eye view of the space below, the microbot circled silently above unsuspecting occupants -technicians, scientists, specialists in countless fields of study. As the PH2 circled, Delta-One spotted two familiar faces engaged in conversation. They would be a telling mark. He told Delta-Two to drop down and have a listen.

Manipulating the controls, Delta-Two switched on the robot's sound sensors, oriented the microbot's parabolic amplifier, and decreased the robot's elevation until it was ten feet over the scientists' heads. The transmission was faint, but discernible.

"I still can't believe it," one scientist was saying. The excitement in his voice had not diminished since his arrival here forty-eight hours ago.

The man with whom he was talking obviously shared the enthusiasm. "In your lifetime...did you ever

think you would witness anything like this?''

''Never,'' the scientist replied, beaming. It's all a magnificent dream...''