

**I CAN BREATHE AND SWALLOW AND FIRE A HANDGUN.  
I RESEMBLE A HUMAN BEING.  
BUT THERE IS NOTHING INSIDE ME.  
I'M FILLED WITH DARKNESS.**

# **JOHN TWELVE HAWKS SPARK**

**THE EXTRAORDINARY NEW THRILLER  
FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE TRAVELLER***

## **ABOUT THE BOOK**

### **FORGET WHAT YOU THINK IS RIGHT AND WRONG ...**

Jacob Underwood is not like other people.

He has Cotard's Syndrome. He believes he is dead. Which makes his job as a hired assassin neutralizing 'problems' for DBG, a massive multinational corporation, very simple. He carries out the task - and feels nothing.

Now a key employee has disappeared, taking with her priceless information that could destroy the company. Jacob must track her down. In previous assignments he has worked with cold, logical precision, but this time he has to confront a threat that he must first understand before it destroys him ...

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JOHN TWELVE HAWKS

# SPARK

A N O V E L

The Buddha has given me the gift of friendship with six women who are strong, creative, and righteous. This book is dedicated to Molly, Joyce, Susan, Pat, Tree, and Rosanna.

Death is not an event in life: we do not live to experience death. If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present.

—LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN,  
*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

# 1

FORGET FAITH AND uncertainty, rebellion and slavery. Forget beauty in all its forms. Forget ugliness, too.

Forget “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” and the Kaddish. Forget an army of notes marching across a sheet of paper that are transformed into the *Goldberg Variations*. Forget the Taj Mahal at sunrise and the Grand Canyon at sunset, Shakespeare’s sonnets, *War and Peace*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Forget the dabs of bright blue paint that became the eyes of Vincent van Gogh.

Forget the fingertip sensation of fur, velvet, a cashmere shawl, and a smooth green chip of beach glass. Forget the moist texture of raw meat and dry brittleness of dead leaves crushed in the hand.

Forget the taste of honey-soaked baklava. Ripe mango. Roasted garlic. Pickled herring. Licorice. Chocolate. Strawberry ice.

And smells—forget them as well. Crushed lilacs and the harsh scent of hot tar. A baby’s neck. Moist earth. Fresh-baked scones.

Forget the dead children from the Day of Rage and the speeches and sermons and memorial parks with names carved in stone. Forget every lesson from a teacher, every joke from a joker; every judgment from a judge.

Forget what your parents told you. Forget what you were taught as a child and what you learned on your own.

Forget what you think is right. And wrong.

Do all this and you might become me: a Spark contained within a Shell that stood in a doorway on Sixty-Second



Street in Brooklyn while a Russian businessman named Peter Stetsko attempted to park his car.

It was November in New York City—damp and cold. Death was present in the street, but there was nothing dramatic or sinister about my appearance. That night, I was neatly dressed in gray slacks and a V-neck sweater. In the outside pocket of my black raincoat, I carried a Brazilian-made semiautomatic pistol with skateboard tape attached to the grip. My Freedom ID card was concealed within a specially designed sleeve that made it impossible for the EYE system to detect my location.

A delivery van passed through the intersection, its tires hissing on the wet asphalt. I slipped on a phone headset and Laura whispered into my ear.

“Ten-Thirty-Three on Flatbush Avenue and Farragut Road. One unit responding.”

“Any police activity in Bensonhurst?”

“Checking ...” It felt as if Laura was a real woman looking up a message board or gazing out a window, but she was only a Shadow. Somewhere in the Internet, one computer was talking to another, checking the data on a Web site that provided live-time reports of New York City police and fire department activity.

“Nothing, Mr. Underwood.”

My target had rented a two-bedroom house that reminded me of something a child would build with plastic blocks. It had a low brick wall in front that guarded a patch of concrete, painted grass green. There were red aluminum awnings over the two front windows and the front door.

Since my Transformation, I am capable of a limited range of emotional responses: curiosity, boredom, and disgust. I had been curious if Stetsko could squeeze his Mercedes-Benz between a blue delivery van and a mud-splattered Toyota. Now I was bored with his cautious maneuvering and ready to complete my assignment.

A young woman wearing a sequined green nightclub dress was sitting in the passenger seat of the Mercedes. Because she was a witness, she would also have to be neutralized. I would start with a head shot for Stetsko through the side window, circle the car and deal with this secondary target, then circle the car again for confirmation shots. The sequence wasn't difficult, but it would make more noise.

"Any police activity, Laura?"

"Nothing."

A minute passed.

"Nothing."

When Stetsko pulled out again for another try, the woman got out of the car. Like a photon of light, her green dress shimmered down the sidewalk, passed through the gate, and disappeared into the house. At that moment, my job became simple, direct, and clear.

The Mercedes moved six inches back toward the curb and then stopped. Stetsko's head swung back and forth like a man watching a tennis match. He pulled the steering wheel hard to the right and the car made a squeaking noise.

Sixty-Second Street was dark and no one was on the sidewalk, but that didn't make me feel lonely or frightened. The rotting smell from a Dumpster appeared as a brownish-green color in my mind, but it didn't generate an emotional reaction.  $X = X$ . The world has no meaning aside from what is.

Across the street, Stetsko finally finished parking the car. He smiled, switched off the engine, and patted the steering wheel as if the Mercedes were a racehorse that had just survived a dangerous steeplechase.

"Show scanned photograph," I told Laura and my target's face appeared on the smartphone screen.

*Look right. Look left.* No one was in the street. I walked over to the car, held up the phone, and compared Stetsko's photograph to the reality in front of me. Then I raised my weapon and shot reality in the head.

## 2

I TURNED AWAY from my target, walked five blocks east to Gravesend Park, and tossed the gun into a storm drain. Perhaps one day a city sewer worker might find this artifact—rusty and covered with mud—but it would have no connection with my identity.

A few blocks from the park I waved down an unregistered cab and paid the driver cash to take me back to Manhattan. For the last two years, I've lived in the top loft of an industrial building in New York's Chinatown. My landlord, an older woman named Margaret Chen, likes the fact that I always pay in cash and never ask for a receipt. There were only three rules for the tenants in her building: no checks, no fireworks, and no slaughtering chickens.

Before my Transformation, I lived like an ordinary Human Unit in an Upper East Side apartment with cooking pots and self-assembled teak-veneer furniture. Nowadays I try to own only one object in each category: a chair and a table, a bed and a blanket, a cup and a spoon. The loft has been used as a factory space by different businesses, and some of them left obsolete equipment bolted to the floor or shoved against the wall. There's an industrial sewing machine with a black rubber drive belt, a drill press, and a piano-sized machine that used to stamp advertising slogans on pencils.

My living space is quiet and clean and unencumbered. None of the objects I possess trigger memories that are separate from their function. I own a cup that is only a cup, not something that reminds me of a trip to Italy.

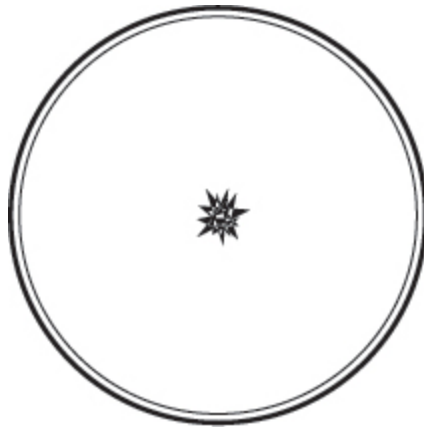
After locking the entrance door, I removed all my clothes and placed them in nylon bags. Everything worn that evening would be washed or dry-cleaned at a laundry on Mott Street. Within twenty-four hours, all the invisible burned and unburned particles from the fired bullets would disappear.

I took a shower, pulled on a sweatshirt and warm-up pants, and returned to the main room. Rule #4 states that I must supply my Shell with a minimum of two thousand calories a day, so I opened a bottle of a nutritional drink developed for the elderly called ComPlete, poured it in the cup, and mixed in a tablespoon of a coarse fiber supplement.

I have a good memory, but don't like to re-experience the past. If thoughts are not controlled, then each remembered experience becomes an alternative reality. When I thought about shooting Peter Stetsko, my mind brought up different details—the sound of my shoes walking across the street and the vision of the first bullet shattering the side window. But these memories didn't generate feelings of regret or happiness. I have a Spark that creates my thoughts.



The Spark is bright and pure and transcendent, but it's held captive within a Shell of flesh and bone.



The woman in the green shimmery dress and all the other Human Units walking around New York City feel emotions because their Spark is attached to their Shell.



But all my attachments have melted away. Yes, I can breathe and swallow and fire a handgun. In many ways, I resemble a human being. But there is nothing inside me. I'm filled with darkness.



I opened up a second bottle of ComPlete, then turned on my computer and spoke to Edward. Like Laura, Edward is a Shadow—a speech-recognition program connected to a computer with reactive intelligence. After you purchase and download a Shadow, you can pick their sex, age, language, and general personality. There are Shadows that can tell jokes, help you stop smoking, or say that they love you. You can spend the day chatting with a Shadow programmed to be a cute teenage girl or a Shadow who sounds—and acts—like your mother.

“Hello, Edward.”

“Good evening, Mr. Underwood.” Edward had a British accent and was programmed to be polite and formal. “How may I help you?”

“Please show *A Boy for Baxter*.”

“From the beginning, sir?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

*A Boy for Baxter* is a documentary film about a boy named Gordon who is given a specially trained service dog named Baxter. Gordon is a Native American child whose brain was damaged in utero when his birth mother drank alcohol and sniffed gasoline. He was adopted as a baby by Don and Pat Miller, a Quaker couple, with two other children. The movie begins when Gordon is eight years old. He throws toys at his sisters, tries to jump out of a car window, and pulls all the paint cans off a shelf at a hardware store. But Gordon’s

tantrums are the most spectacular part of the film. He lies on the floor, screaming and pounding his fists. When Pat tries to help him, the boy picks up a lamp and smashes it against the wall.

After several boring scenes where Gordon's parents talk to psychologists and cry, a service-dog agency agrees to see if the boy can live with a pet. This is when Gordon meets Baxter, a German shepherd, at a dog-training school in Oregon. During the weeks after I left the Ettinger Clinic, I watched one particular scene hundreds of times. Gordon is at the training school with his parents and two sisters, but somehow Baxter knows that he's supposed to be attached to this Human Unit. The dog's head tilts to the left, then tilts to the right, and then he jumps up onto a sofa next to the boy.

The rest of the film shows Baxter and Gordon together. When Gordon is worried or distressed the dog pushes him down, gets on top of him, and licks his face. If the boy lies on the floor screaming and curled up in a ball, the dog pushes his muzzle through the locked arms as if he is forcing open a puzzle.

I would like to own a service dog that would be trained to perceive the different emotions displayed by Human Units. The dog would bark or wag its tail or lick my hand to tell me what someone else was feeling. Together, we would be almost a person.

\* \* \*

The following morning I took another shower, drank a bottle of ComPlete, and wrote a message in soft language to Miss Holquist, the woman in charge of the Special Services Section. Miss Holquist is my supervisor. She picks my targets and pays me when I've completed an assignment.

// Made a successful presentation to the customer. No further meeting is necessary.



Later that day, my payment would be transferred to an account with a British-owned bank on the island of Malta. For my day-to-day expenses, I keep a few thousand dollars with an American bank that has ATM machines all over the city. Both banks require that you use an optical fingerprint sensor when you access your account. My real fingerprints would have been tracked back to my previous identity, but Miss Holquist solved that problem. When I changed my name, she gave me three “gummy” fingers made out of soft plastic. Each finger had the loops and whirls of an unregistered print that was probably taken from someone who lived in a jungle. If I pressed one of these plastic fingers against a sensor pad, my bank account appeared on a display screen.

Peter Stetsko’s death was mentioned two days later in a brief article in the *New York Post*. According to the police, Stetsko was an “investment consultant” to the Russian community in Brighton Beach. He had no criminal record, but had once been questioned at Kennedy Airport about the large amount of currency in his carry-on bag.

Now that my job was completed, I resumed my usual activities. I dropped off my laundry, bought a case of ComPlete, and dust-mopped the floor. I like watching sports on my computer—anything with continual activity that makes my eyes follow a ball. That night I spent three hours watching a Gaelic football match even though I didn’t understand the rules.

The next morning, I woke up at 6 a.m. An orange light glowed behind a line of buildings, and then the sun floated upward past rooftop water tanks. At 8 a.m., my computer beeped and Edward spoke softly into my earphone.

“Good morning, sir.”

“Morning, Edward.”

“I hope you’re feeling well, sir.”

“I’m functional.”

“There’s some new e-mail in your message box.”

Usually, Miss Holquist sends me e-mails with soft language through the public Internet, but this was coded information sent through the Darknet. I accessed the decoding software on my computer, typed in the activation key, and read:

// I realize that you've just finished a job, but we've received an emergency request to deal with a problem in Great Britain. Please let me know in the next 24 hours if you wish to accept or reject the assignment. HOLQUIST.

As usual, the message included the name and photograph of the target, his last known address, and the fee I would receive for the job.

I went online and did some quick research. The target was an Englishman named Victor Mallory who was the former CEO of a private equity fund called Endeavor Investments. Endeavor had gone bankrupt a year ago and now Mallory was being sued in several countries. I assumed that I had been hired by an investor who wanted a more direct means of expressing his annoyance.

Normally, I would be given a few weeks of free time before my next assignment. Miss Holquist's unexpected request made my Spark bounce around inside my Shell, so I decided to calm my agitation by visiting the pedestrian walkway that runs across the Brooklyn Bridge. Two granite and limestone towers hold a pair of massive cables that display catenary curves—a three-dimensional display of a hyperbolic cosine function. Attached to the curves is a web of diagonal and vertical cables that hold up the bridge platforms. When I stand at the center point and look outward, it appears as if the sky is divided into clearly marked sections. Randomness disappears, and I'm able to sort through my wayward thoughts and place them in different boxes.

\* \* \*

I walked down Worth Street to Margaret Chen's real estate office, gave next month's rent to her niece, and then headed south. There are sensors throughout the downtown area, so I took my Freedom Card out of the lead-lined sleeve and placed it in my shirt pocket. A sensor on a light pole detected my movements and the EYE computer registered the fact that on this particular day, at this precise time, an object carrying Jacob Underwood's ID passed through Thomas Paine Park. The park has a huge modern sculpture called *The Triumph of the Human Spirit*. It's surrounded by surveillance cameras so that antisocial elements don't throw garbage into the fountain.

About a third of the people in Manhattan have replaced their Freedom Card with a radio-frequency chip about the size of a vitamin pill. The chip is usually inserted beneath the skin on the back of the hand, and the procedure leaves a distinctive scar. Neither the cards nor the chips require an internal power source; they're read by electromagnetic induction. The chip is detected whenever you take the subway, enter a department store, or walk into a government building. The chips and sensors are always part of the equation whenever I receive an assignment to neutralize someone.

Collecting information from the Freedom IDs is just one aspect of the EYE program—a massive database controlled by the government. EYE gathers information from thousands of sources—web searches and cell phone calls, blog posts and credit card transactions. Every bit of information is stored in quantum computers, and then evaluated by the algorithms of the Norm-All program. Norm-All monitors the opinions of large groups of people, but it also determines each person's typical behavior. This normalcy perimeter is like an invisible circle that defines you—contains you. If you do anything significant outside the perimeter, your behavior triggers an Unusual Activity Inquiry that is sent to the police.

Although my day-to-day actions are limited and habitual, my work forces me to travel to different places and behave in unusual ways. Fortunately, Miss Holquist has friends in the Department of Homeland Security. When I lost my birth identity and was reborn as Jacob Underwood, the EYE system was told that I was a “CAP”—a Certified Anomaly Profile that lacked normal predictability. That meant that it was acceptable for me to pace back and forth on the Brooklyn Bridge, and not be red-tagged by Norm-All. Seagulls squawked and fought on a discarded bagel as I gazed at the cables that divided up an infinite sky.

\* \* \*

Every citizen on the bridge knew that the EYE system was necessary for a safe and secure society. And there was a specific reason for this new technology—the death and violence caused by the Day of Rage.

I was a patient at the Ettinger Clinic on the Day of Rage. Usually, news from the outside world isn’t allowed to enter the clinic, but the news reports overcame all obstacles. The first rumors were passed from the nurses and the orderlies to the cooks and gardeners and, finally, to the patients wearing pastel pink or baby blue track suits. Staff and patients never socialized together at the clinic, but that morning everyone gathered in the main dining room to watch the news. Dr. Morris Noland, the director of the clinic, sat on a bench between Big George, the second-floor day nurse, and Miss Garcia, the cook. Patients wandered around the room or stared at the television screen.

The first news flash was about bombs exploding at Eton College—the British school for boys near Windsor Castle. Those images of dead bodies and weeping parents were quickly followed by phone footage of an explosion at the Dalton School in New York City. As the day went on, more reports came in from France, Canada, Brazil, and Germany.

An unknown terrorist group had organized a simultaneous bombing attack on schools in nine different countries.

The television set stayed on all night, and I was there early in the morning when the authorities stated that a mysterious group called Day of Rage had claimed credit for the bombings. At this point, the paranoids at the clinic were cowering in their rooms while those patients with obsessive-compulsive disorders had invented private rituals so that the clinic wouldn't be attacked. When a woman in Ward Four had a panic attack and began screaming, Dr. Noland removed the television from the dining room.

A few days after the bombings, the world was given an explanation—and someone to blame. Danny Marchand was a brilliant young man with a French father and a British mother. When he was nineteen years old he obtained an engineering degree at the Pierre and Marie Curie University in Paris. He started working for a Dutch software company, and then got involved with the Final Wave movement. These fanatics believed in technological singularity—the inevitable development of a supercomputer that could rewrite its own source code. Eventually the computer would know all past knowledge and could predict future behavior. The supercomputer would be as omniscient as God and as inevitable as History.

When he was twenty-nine years old, Danny Marchand quit Final Wave and began to recruit people to join an underground organization. Some of his followers were anarchists or religious fanatics who believed in the End of the World, but most of the bombs were built and detonated for money by mercenaries affiliated with terrorist groups in the Middle East. No one ever found out what Marchand believed because he was killed three days after the school bombings during a police raid on his hideout in Normandy.

\* \* \*

I remained in the middle of the bridge, staring up at the cables as I tried to make a decision. Although I didn't need money at this particular moment, my assignments were difficult and they kept me busy. The Spark inside every Shell is restless. If we're bored, our hungry mind feasts on imaginary problems. It doesn't seem to make a difference if we are standing in the middle of a bridge or lying motionless on a hospital bed. When I was a patient at the Ettinger Clinic I once followed Dr. Noland upstairs to a second-floor room where they kept a patient named Donald Fitzgibbon. The patient's eyes were closed. His tall, frail body was attached to a respirator, a catheter, an IV tube, and two neural sensors. The room smelled of urine and the respirator made a faint wheezing sound.

"Is he really alive?" I asked.

"Yes, but he's experiencing something called locked-in syndrome. A CAT scan showed acute lesions in the pontine nuclei area of his brain."

"Is he thinking?"

"He's awake and conscious, but he can't deliberately move any part of his body." Dr. Noland shrugged. "Over the last few years, I've given an EEG examination to twenty-five normal people. Each time they hear a beeping sound they are supposed to imagine, in their minds, that they're either wiggling their toes or squeezing their right hand. Even though they aren't actually contracting their muscles, the EEG machine detects two different kinds of activity in their premotor cortex. The brain response for wiggling the toes is different from the one that occurs when we think about moving a hand."

"What does that have to do with Mr. Fitzgibbon?"

"I put some earphones on the old man's head, then switched on a recording that delivered the same two instructions ... squeeze your hand, then wiggle your toes." Dr. Noland glanced at me and grinned. "The EEG machine

picked up the same electrical flare in the cortex that occurs with an uninjured brain.”

“So he *is* thinking?”

“Yes. But he’s trapped within his skull.”

\* \* \*

My Spark is also trapped, but I still need to think about something. Neutralizing targets for Miss Holquist creates short-term goals that challenge my restless mind. After pacing on the bridge for an hour, I returned to my loft and sent an e-mail.

// I accept the new assignment. Please obtain necessary sales equipment. I will contact you when I obtain a mailing address.

“Go to the Web site for British Airways,” I told Laura. “Talk to the reservations Shadow and purchase a one-way first-class ticket leaving JFK airport on Wednesday morning.”

“And where are we going, Mr. Underwood?”

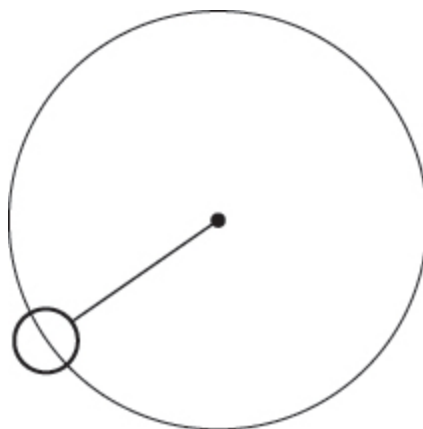
“London.”



# 3

I RENTED A short-stay apartment in North London and flew into Heathrow Airport two days later. The apartment was on the third floor of a modern building on Upper Street in Islington—the sort of place rented by foreign businessmen who didn't want to stay at a hotel. The first thing I did was cover all the mirrors with masking tape and newspaper, then I moved the living room furniture into one of the bedrooms, rolled up the white Berber carpet, and stuffed it into a closet.

London's energy surrounded me like a snowstorm. It felt as if bits of energy were drifting down on my head and clinging to my clothes. But I've learned one quick way to calm my agitation. I hammered a small nail into the wood floor and attached a length of cord. Closing my eyes and holding the cord with one hand, I paced out a circle.



The calm perfection of this motion centered me and helped my Spark adjust to the new environment. My check-

in suitcase contained a ten-day supply of ComPlete. I drank two bottles, and then went out to find my target.

Victor Mallory's London address turned out to be a town house in Knightsbridge. It had been seized by a bank and a for sale sign was attached to the outer railing. Using the name Richard Morgan, I called the phone number on the sign and arranged to see the house that afternoon. The estate agent for the bank was a plump woman named Darla. She had blood-red lipstick and dyed-black hair, and looked like a well-fed vampire. After searching through a ring of keys, she unlocked the front door and we entered the building. It was clear that no one had lived there for several months. The old newspapers and moldy clothes smelled like a grayish green color in my mind. Dead flies were scattered like dots of buzz on the floor in front of the windows.

Darla's heels clicked across the parquet floor and motes of dust rose up, swirling through a shaft of sunlight that cut through a gap in the curtains. "The bank is open to negotiation on the price," she announced. "But there will be no negotiation on the condition of the property."

I was looking for a phone number or an address that would guide me to my target's current location. The cage elevator didn't work, so we climbed up white marble steps to the master bedroom on the first floor. There was a slight indentation in the pillow where Mallory had once placed his head, but now the silk pillowcases and the linen sheets were covered with a thin layer of dust.

A guest bedroom and home office were on the second floor. I needed to search the office, but it was difficult with Darla watching me. Silently, we trudged upstairs to a maid's room and I gazed out the window at brick chimneys topped with soot-smudged crowns. "I need to get a sense of the place," I told her. "If you don't mind, perhaps I could spend a few minutes in each room ... alone."

Darla glanced around the maid's room. A stack of old magazines. Hair clips scattered on the dresser. "No problem

at all, Mr. Morgan. I'll be downstairs if you have any questions."

I stood in the maid's room, listening to her shoes tap-tap-tapping down the staircase. Then I returned to the office and searched through the shredded bits of paper in the waste bin. The drawers of the oak desk contained ballpoint pens and menus for takeout food. As quietly as possible, I hurried downstairs to the master bedroom, where I searched the night table and peered under the bed.

I dislike mirrors, but it's difficult to avoid them. I forced my eyes to look downward at the sink as my hands opened the bathroom cabinet. When the mirror was facing the wall I inspected the cabinet shelves and found a rolled-up tube of toothpaste and some nail clippers. But on the top shelf my target had left a prescription drug container with a physician's name on it. I dropped it into my suit coat pocket, stepped back into the bedroom, and surprised Darla.

"Thank you. I've seen enough," I said.

"Yes ... Yes ... Marvelous." But she held up her cell phone as if she wanted to call the police.

\* \* \*

There is something wrong with my appearance. Although the scars from my accident are hidden, strangers look away when they first encounter me.

The problem could be caused by my haircut. Because I won't let anyone touch me, I cut off all my hair with electric clippers on the first day of the month. I met the estate agent three days after this procedure and the stubble on my skull made me look like an army recruit or a chemotherapy patient.

It's important for my work that I appear as normal as possible. I don't want to be distinctive in any way. When traveling, I'll take phone photos of my fellow passengers sitting in the VIP lounge. Then I'll go to department stores in

New York and tell the salesclerk to find clothes that duplicate the costumes of these travelers. I usually wear dark slacks, a button-down shirt in solid colors, and black shoes. But the new clothes always hang loosely on my body as if they don't belong to me.

I take a shower every day (Rule #2) and then smear deodorant beneath my arms and splash aftershave on my face. The aftershave makes me smell like pine trees—the bright green needles brushing against my clothes as I hike through a forest.

I've learned to nod my head when someone speaks to me. I've learned to say "thank you" and talk about the weather. But there's something about me that makes Human Units uncomfortable.

When I was recovering at Marian Community Hospital, I saw patients brought in who were bleeding and unconscious, their legs and arms strapped together as if their body parts had detached and were about to fly off in different directions. A few weeks later, they were smiling and thanking everyone as a nurse wheeled them out to the front entrance. These patients were broken into pieces, and then had reassembled themselves.

But I haven't changed.

\* \* \*

When I returned to my apartment in Islington, I called the doctor whose name was on the pill container. I spoke to a receptionist and said that I wanted to pay a bill online. Using my computer, I visited the payment Web site and used "safecracker" software to enter the patient database. Victor Mallory's listed address was the abandoned London town house, but I found what I was looking for—a mobile phone number.

The rest was easy. Pretending to be the company that made his device, I sent a text message to Mallory's phone

asking him to install a system update. Twenty minutes later, he pressed the pound key, which linked him to a fake company Web site created by my employers. In three seconds, the Web site downloaded malware to Mallory's phone. Now I could turn on the device's microphone, monitor text messages, and access its GPS location.

A few minutes later, I was looking at a satellite image of a country estate in southwest England. Victor Mallory lived in an eighteen-room manor house built on a low hill and surrounded by an eight-foot hedge. There was a clay tennis court, a picnic pavilion, and an empty swimming pool. Now I had to figure out a way to pass through the barriers and kill him.

It was raining two days later when I rented a car and drove north to Gloucestershire. I had no idea where to turn left or right, but Laura helped me find the estate. If I said I was lost, she would answer, "Don't worry, Mr. Underwood. I know where we are."

Laura sounded like a calm, youngish woman—not your friend exactly—but the competent executive secretary back at the head office who always finishes her assignments on time. Some people buy software that creates an avatar for their Shadow, but I preferred the image in my mind. I decided that Laura didn't wear jeans and T-shirts when she was working, but a navy blue skirt and matching jacket. Her hair was short and black and she had bangs that cut a straight line across her forehead. Edward was very formal and polite. I pictured him with thinning hair and flushed cheeks, wearing a blue suit, white shirt, and regimental striped necktie.

Victor Mallory's estate was surrounded by a hedge that concealed a six-foot-high spike fence. Now that I was monitoring his cell phone, I realized that he never left this protective circle. CCTV cameras were mounted on steel poles at each corner of the lot, and a fifth camera was

attached to the intercom panel directly outside the electronically controlled entrance gate.

I had bought three solar-powered Sentinel cameras at an electronics supply store in New York City and decided to use two of them. The rain had stopped falling, but wind pushed against me, whispering in my ears. Moving quickly, I forced my way into a blackberry thicket, planted a tripod, and attached a Sentinel camera so that it was pointing at the gate. Then I returned to my rental car and drove to a dirt road behind the estate. An oak tree grew near the hedge and I attached a camera with the long-range zoom lens to one of the branches.

I activated the cell phones attached to the Sentinels and returned to London. There was a photograph of Victor Mallory on the *Times* database; he was a man in his late sixties with white hair and a saggy face. The next morning, I was sitting at the kitchen table when my target came out of the manor house with a golf bag, stood on the terrace, and hit a basket of balls onto the lawn. A bodyguard carrying an assault rifle followed Mallory down the hill as he picked up the balls and then returned to the terrace and hit them out a second time.

I still hadn't received a weapon, so I sent an e-mail to Miss Holquist:

// I have arrived in London and have obtained the customer's new address. Where is the equipment for the sales meeting?

She replied a few minutes later:

// We have encountered problems with our regular UK supplier. Continue with your preparations for the meeting.

Once I had set up the Sentinels I could sit in my apartment and watch live-time images of the estate on my computer. If I got restless, I would leave the flat and take my computer to La Boucherie—a North London butcher shop

turned into a café. It was a loud and echoey place, but if you bought a cup of coffee, the staff left you alone.

The camera attached to the oak tree photographed Mallory's daily golf ritual while the Sentinel aimed at the entrance gate showed who had permission to enter the estate. A gardener and a maid worked every weekday, but neither servant lived at the manor house. At approximately 11 a.m., a cook arrived with provisions. Unless there were guests for dinner, she left around 6 p.m. My target employed two full-time bodyguards—a heavyset man in his fifties and a younger man with blond hair. Each guard worked a three-day shift, and then caught the train back to London while his counterpart took over.

Mallory was vulnerable because he had a mistress—a young Asian woman who came up from London on Friday or Saturday, spent the night, and then left on an afternoon train. During these visits, the bodyguard on shift picked the woman up and dropped her off at the station. This meant that my target was alone for approximately forty minutes.

At the training camp, I was told that doors always open for a man wearing a hard hat and carrying a clipboard. People will allow you into a guarded sanctuary if you give them a logical reason for your presence there. Although I still hadn't received my weapon, I came up with a plan and began to accumulate the necessary clothes and fake ID cards. But there was one significant problem. I was born in America, but my plan required me to speak with a British working-class accent. I told Edward to search for acting teachers and dialect coaches in London, and he came up with a list of eighteen names. I needed someone who would accept cash and who worked with students in a building that didn't have CCTV cameras.

After some cross-checking, I picked a woman named Julia Driscoll. According to an acting Web site, Mrs. Driscoll taught students in Stoke Newington—a district in the borough of Hackney. She was not affiliated with any



teaching organizations and lessons were given at her home. The Web site showed an airbrushed black-and-white photograph of a middle-aged Mrs. Driscoll acting in a Shakespeare comedy called *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, but a check of the Internet confirmed that she was now in her seventies.

I called Mrs. Driscoll and spoke to her briefly. She had an actress's voice—very precise about the syllables, but somewhat grand in tone and rhythm. It didn't sound like she had many students because she said I could drop by her flat whenever it was convenient.

Early that evening, I took a bus to Stoke Newington and wandered around with my phone, trying to find Watkins Street. Stoke Newington had a lot of redbrick terraced houses with white window frames and gardens in the back. The buildings looked solid and solemn and old-fashioned—like rows of Victorian women glaring down at the graffiti on the fences and the trash in the alleyways.

I stopped outside a pub, slipped on the headset, and spoke to Laura. "Am I close to Watkins Street?"

"You are approximately eight blocks from your destination, sir. Continue south on Oldfield Road, then turn right at the corner."

"Is everything okay, Laura?"

"Of course, Mr. Underwood. I enjoy helping you."

When I reached Oldfield Road I heard a faint whirring sound—like one of the hummingbirds that darted around the garden at the Ettinger Clinic. I looked up and saw that a faint red light that resembled a human Spark was hovering over the neighborhood. It was a drone aircraft, a surveillance device used by police departments and government-approved corporations to monitor the activities of Human Units. Many of them had infrared sensors that allowed them to record images at night.

"So where am I now?" I asked Laura.

"Walk east two blocks, then turn left."