

T.J.
BREARTON

DAY

THE
INTERNATIONAL
BESTSELLING
TITAN TRILOGY
BOOK III

BREAK

A GRIPPING THRILLER FULL OF SUSPENSE



THE STUNNING CONCLUSION TO THE TITAN TRILOGY

DAYBREAK

A gripping thriller full of suspense

(TITAN TRILOGY BOOK THREE)

T. J. BREARTON

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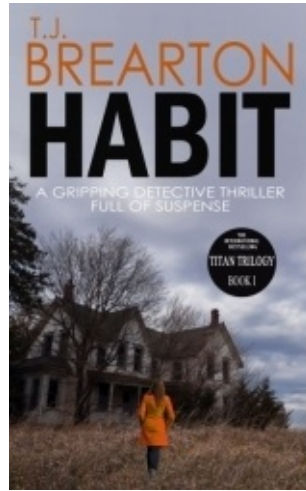
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TITAN TRILOGY: THE STORY SO FAR

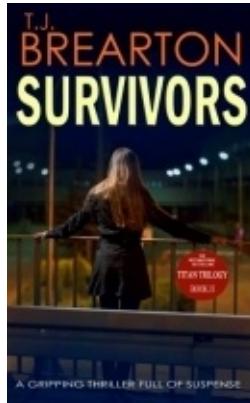
BOOK 1: HABIT

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Rookie detective Brendan Healy is on his first murder case. A young woman in a remote farmhouse has called 911 on an intruder and is killed. The clues lead Healy to several suspects, but when the victim's brother opens fire on the cops, the department is ready to close the case. Brendan persists with his own investigation, leading him into the world of human trafficking and an escort service which is used by government officials. Brendan tracks down the suspected killer, who is holding a child hostage. But the case is not yet closed, and another killer must be brought to justice.

BOOK 2: SURVIVORS



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The Rebecca Heilshorn case has drawn the attention of the Justice Department, and Agent Jennifer Aiken is going after XList, the escort service. When Brendan, having left the police force, learns about the death of an old friend, he comes out of hiding to investigate. His friend's death was not accidental, but connected to the same black market involving Rebecca. Brendan meets a woman named Sloane, who has secrets which could break the whole thing open. Jennifer Aiken is close to identifying the main force behind the human trafficking racket when she is kidnapped. Brendan is arrested while rescuing Jennifer .

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DEDICATION

For my wife.

“Tyranny confronts rebellion; each calls forth the other.
It is a double danger.”
– Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*

PROLOGUE / SIX MONTHS AGO

She said life with an addict was like living with a time bomb. For some reason this was what Brendan was thinking as he felt the gouge of the knee in his back, the hand clamped over his neck, pressing his face into the ground. You never knew when the addict was going to show up at the back door in the middle of the night reeking of booze, you couldn't be prepared for when their temper snapped and the poison forked out.

That was what Angie had said, years ago, when they were married.

And while it may have been true, what went unseen was the suffering beneath the defensive actions of the addict. The pain that led up to the breaking point. Because he kept it hidden. He hid it so well sometimes he lost it himself.

Which was the idea.

Cue, routine, reward. The basic equation of the habit. The formula that these animals in prison, these murderers and thieves on top of him, would never know about. They were mercifully free of introspection, most of them. Running on the three primary drives of the human condition: avoid pain, conserve energy, and pursue pleasure.

It was that last one that had them all hopped-up on neurotransmitters at the moment, the addictive release of peptides from their throbbing, massive prison-inmate glands washing through the cells of their body, washing through the cells of the state penitentiary, sucked up by the furious, deprived eyes of the cons clanging in their cages as they watched the fight taking place in the middle of Motchan Center.

The guards will come any second now. They'll break up the fight.

Some time ago, back before he'd lost his wife and child, back before nearly completing his own suicide, long before Rebecca Heilshorn was found dead in a farmhouse and was alive and turning tricks as a high-priced escort, Brendan might have believed his own desperate mind. The guards — who hated to be called guards, never call them guards to their faces — would rush in and take these three throbbing thugs piling on top of Brendan and throw them to the corners of the room, and punish them. Prison wasn't as bad as the rumors, right? It wasn't like the way it was in the movies; that was sensationalized. Prison was a part of the justice system, and there was oversight and responsible people and the rest was a bunch of hype.

Tell that to the guy shouting in Brendan's ear, his full weight on Brendan's back, making it impossible to breathe. *Go ahead and tell him. Before he snaps my spine.*

"How's that feel? Huh? You wanna dance on the blacktop? You little terrorist bitch? Feel good?"

No. It didn't feel good. It felt like a ton of molten lead had been poured over him and was hardening there, and he would be forever flattened to the ground. The air was crushed out of his lungs. If he could speak, he would tell them what he had already told them, that he wasn't a terrorist, he wasn't a traitor to his country; that this was an ugly rumor probably started by someone in the jail who was paid to start it. That the people who put him here wanted him to suffer every kind of torture.

Probably the guards had been instructed to stand down. There was no one coming

to help him. For that matter, there was no Seamus Argon to yank him out of the garage, pull him from the cloud of carbon monoxide. No Rudy Colinas to rush in with the State Police and save his life moments before it ended.

In here, he was on his own.

Brendan flexed every muscle in his body. He used his chest and his chin and his knees, and tried to buck the terribly large convict on top of him. It didn't do any good. The other two cons were working on his shoes; he could feel a tug and one of them — Velcro-fastened — popped off his foot. Then the other. A second later and they were pulling off the bottom half of his green fatigues.

Were they going to rape him? He couldn't imagine they would do such a thing right here, right in front of the whole block. Even perverted sex acts in prison were usually done with a little more privacy than this. If you were lucky, you got a meal first.

“You like that, cho-mo? Is this what you liked to do to them little kiddies? All you terrorists like them little kiddies . . .”

Brendan tried to speak. His face was mashed into the ground, his pancaked cheek interfering with his speech, but he managed to draw a thin breath as the weight on top of him shifted. “I never hurt a child.” It came out: *I nee-ah hoot a shy*. He realized as he spoke that his mouth was bleeding. A quick flick of the tongue revealed a blank spot in his teeth. One of his molars had been knocked out.

“Yeah,” the convict cooed. “Yeah, you liked that, *inmate*.”

His shoes gone, his pants gone, all that was left was his underwear.

* * *

Baker, one of the newer corrections officers who'd started after Brendan began his time, came jogging into the open area amid the cacophony of hoots and catcalls from the cell soldiers. As he did, two other guards suddenly appeared, as if some invisible force holding them at bay had at last released them.

They pulled the three men from Brendan and got him on his feet. Brendan bent and pulled his pants up, his entire body shaking, but feeling incredible relief. As Baker hauled him away from the scene, Brendan turned and looked back at the aggressors. The inmates watched him go; the guards who had suddenly materialized watched him too, their expressions not much different. Mocking.

“The Deputy Warden wants to see you,” Baker said as he hustled Brendan away.

* * *

“You've been here three weeks,” Deputy Warden Grimm said. Grimm was in his sixties and had a face to match his name.

“That's correct, sir.”

“Came in on November nineteenth.”

“Yes, sir.”

They were in Grimm's office. The space looked like the inside of a giant locker, with thick paint slabbed on slate-gray walls and an equally gray popcorn ceiling. There were three sets of file cabinets, a coffee percolator that looked a decade old, and a dying fern slumped in the corner. The one window in the room overlooked the Rikers Island complex through bars. The Deputy Warden had Brendan's file splayed out on his desk in front of him.

Grimm watched Brendan for a moment and then his eyes dropped to the papers in front of him. “You’re in here, still pending trial for first-degree murder.” His eyes rolled up. “Why are the other inmates saying you’re a nonce? Was there a kid involved?”

“I don’t know why they’re saying what they are.”

Grimm gave Brendan a hard look. “I think you do.”

“Sir?”

“I’ve heard about you. You have some story about how the government is messing with you. Drawing out your trial, keeping you here, making you sweat.”

Brendan said nothing.

“I don’t like that,” Grimm said. “I don’t like that at all. That’s what terrorists do, that’s where uprisings come from, everybody going against their government. It’s scumbag shit and I won’t tolerate it. You can be sure of that.”

Brendan didn’t argue. Better to let the man talk, say his piece. He still felt the cold shock of his assault. The convicts of Motchan Center had been shuffling back from jug-up. As the men were filing up the stairs and returning to their cells, one of the aggressors had tapped Brendan on the shoulder and started to talk to him. His name was Tony Laruso. He was built like a truck, Italian, from the Bronx, and had been a gang member since he was a boy. Brendan had been managing to keep a low profile, though he’d heard the rumors that he was a domestic terrorist; conjecture ranging from how he’d tried to blow up a hospital in Manhattan with babies in the building to how he was an assassin hired to kill a prominent, do-gooder doctor. He’d never found the source of the rumors, and rumors had been all they were, whispers and hard stares and cold shoulders, until Laruso.

Laruso had come in just last week. Brendan had overheard Laruso say to another inmate that he was only in for a short nap. He had been hit with a slew of racketeering charges, a medley of identity theft, fake IDs, passports and credit card fraud. In the cafeteria, he asked Brendan about his offense. Brendan didn’t know everything about jail etiquette, but you certainly didn’t talk openly about your crime, especially if you thought you’d gotten a bad beef, no matter what lies were told about you. So Brendan just said, “It’s complicated,” and Laruso had replied, “I don’t see nothin’ complicated about being a baby-killing fuckin’ terrorist.”

By the time Brendan had noticed that the rest of the cons were entering their cells, and the guards were looking over their shoulders as they disappeared, it was too late to get away, too late to do anything to save himself.

“I haven’t met with my lawyer for a while,” Brendan said to Grimm. “So I’m not updated on my case, sir.”

“Guy probably came to his senses and left.” Again, Grimm fixed Brendan with a look that suggested Brendan was more than just a burden, an unpleasant part of the Deputy Warden’s job, but a brush with complete filth. “Listen to me. I looked at your jacket. You copped to the whole thing.”

“Yes, sir.”

Grimm exhaled in frustration, sat back and rubbed his face for a moment, regarding Brendan with that same dull hatred.

“It’s not good what happened to you today, is it?”

Brendan looked back, unblinking. “No.”

“I didn’t think so; I didn’t take you for a puff tart. You’re an educated man, with a background in law enforcement. So you can appreciate when I tell you that this jail complex has an annual operating budget of eight hundred and seventy-five million. Holy shit, yeah? I’ve got a staff of nine thousand officers and fourteen hundred civilians to control an inmate population of thirteen thousand. Know how much we spend on each inmate annually?”

Brendan shook his head. He suddenly felt very far away from everything, as alone and adrift as the first night the cell door had slammed shut.

“One hundred and seventy thousand dollars. That’s right. Per inmate. Each year. A lot of people to be responsible for, and at quite a cost, don’t you think?” Grimm was in the habit of asking rhetorical questions. “Not only that, but we’ve got inmates serving sentences for up to one year, guys like Laruso, the one who was on top of you in the commons. We’ve got many men here pending transfer to another facility. And we’ve got men like you, awaiting trial, not granted bail by the judge. You’re just sitting here, your trial gummed up in bureaucratic bullshit. Costing me money, and your beef is going to take its sweet time getting to trial. You know what? You piss me off, Healy.”

Brendan felt a quick jolt in his stomach. He’d been keyed-up since the attack, the adrenaline still squeezing his heart, but with Grimm’s comment about being pissed off, he went from feeling tense and racy to a kind of nervous excited. The guards were being manipulated by the Deputy Warden. He suddenly felt sure that even if Grimm were getting pressure from outside the prison to make Brendan’s life hard — with Staryles behind it — something in Grimm’s demeanor read like he had his own demons pursuing him. Something other than the weight thrown by the CSS. Brendan felt the first small ray of hope, a dangerous thing to have in a place like Rikers.

Grimm was watching him. “You know, used to be that only the most hardened and dangerous criminals got sent up. But these days we got pansy first-time offenders doing mandatory terms . . . and with so many incarcerated in general — Jesus, over 1.6 million in the US — normally they luck out without encountering real violence. But Rikers is an older institution, not phased out yet, lot of traffic, lots of flux. It’s the northeast Chain Gang. I want you to remember that, Healy.”

His last sentence seemed to hang in the small room, as if inviting Brendan to challenge it.

Brendan nodded, and licked his dry lips. He was thirsty. His body was sore, his lower back aching from having Laruso on top of him, breathing into his ear. *You like that, cho-mo? Is this what you liked to do to them little kiddies?*

“You gotta get cleaned up,” Grimm said with an air of distaste. “Anyone from the outside, your lawyer, that Kendall detective from your beef, you tell them you slipped in the shower. Something. But what you’re not going to say is what happened to you this afternoon. Are we clear?”

“We’re clear.”

Grimm continued to clock him, hunting for any signs of bullshit. He was staring at Brendan so directly that Brendan started to feel self-conscious. The man’s lips parted. He took a breath. His eyes were cold, calculating. “As a former cop, you know how tough it is . . .”

The pause at the end of Grimm’s statement demanded an affirmation.

“Yes.”

“You know that you’re around the criminal element so much of your life. It can mess with you. It can change you, right? It changes most people.”

Brendan nodded. Something was happening, something was coming.

“You’ve got to do what you’ve got to do. You have to survive.” Grimm tapped the side of his head. Brendan noticed the man’s hands were like paws, the knuckles swollen, the fingers thick and calloused. “I’ve been part of the New York Department of Corrections for twenty-seven years. Heard it all. You, Healy, you’re going to stop this bullshit about how you got a bad break, about how some ridiculous conspiracy got you where you are. You hear me? The only thing that got you where you are is you. Your actions. That’s all you have. Action.”

Grimm tented his large fingers on the desk in front of him, and struck a sage pose, as if he were the chaplain and not the disciplinary officer and had just dispensed some wisdom. He turned and gazed out the barred window. He was silent for so long that Brendan started to think that there was no pitch, no opportunity or ray of hope, he’d been mistaken, this was just some sordid display of power, some pointless sermon. Then Grimm’s head slowly swiveled back, and his gaze bored back in.

“So now, the action you can choose, is to help me. You see what I mean?”

“Help you . . .”

Grimm’s face twitched, the upper lip curling ever so slightly into a sneer, as if the word *help* created more bad taste in his mouth. “Shut up,” he said, “and listen.”

Brendan was quiet. He listened. If anything, it was good just to be out of Motchan Center for a little while.

“We’re the second largest jail system in America,” Grimm said, “and we’re being investigated.”

Brendan raised his eyebrows, but stayed quiet.

“Let’s just say the New York City Department of Investigation has been looking into us for matters of violence and other illegal conduct. It’s shaping up to be a massive probe, an unprecedented joint, tactical search and operation. I’ve got so much pressure on me from the Commissioner and Corrections Commissioner right now, it makes Laruso look like your girlfriend lying on top of you in the park. I’m talking serious pressure. And I’m not going to go out like this. I’ve got two years until retirement on full pension. My wife and I are moving far, far away from here. I’ve been looking out over this island for too many years. Decades. And I can’t have it all come down around my ears at the last second, just before I get free. Because one thing about those of us who work in the jail system, Brendan; we’re in here, too. We’re caged, just like you.”

Brendan cleared his throat. “What can I do for you?”

CHAPTER ONE / TUESDAY, 8:58 AM

Jennifer Aiken took the stage in the Robert F. Kennedy building and everybody clapped. The auditorium seated over a thousand people with a main floor and the mezzanine. There were just about fifty people present but their enthusiasm made it feel like a stadium. She walked to the center of the stage and stood at the glass podium. She smiled at the group and felt generally good that she was at last back in DC, but it was hard to feel like a whole person. She'd lost something, and she knew it, and she wasn't sure she'd ever be able to get it back. Innocence wasn't exactly the right word, she thought, but it was close.

Three weeks in a hospital in New York. Three months of convalescing and physical therapy followed by a month of preparation and then two months in courtrooms and in offices with walls of glass overlooking the city. It was uncomfortable, at times, being that high up, and she wondered if she'd be forever scared of heights.

Back in the offices of the Justice Department — which smelled perpetually of new carpet, ink toner and perfume, washing her in nostalgia — Jennifer had prepared her presentation. She felt like she'd had to rebuild the XList case from near scratch. For two weeks, she'd had a small entourage with her, a gathering of assistants buzzing around. When she went somewhere it was in a veritable motorcade, with her own driver, bodyguards, lead and follow cars. The Attorney General was taking no chances with her; they said she was to be prized and protected.

Not for their lack of trying, Jennifer didn't feel prized. She felt older, she often felt tired, and part of her dreamed of faraway places. Places like Cotuit Bay in the summer, with its ivory stucco buildings and crushed shell walkways spread out beneath the overturned bowl of blue sky.

It seemed hopelessly beyond reach.

"Hello everybody, I'm Jennifer Aiken, special prosecutor with the Human Trafficking Prosecution Unit."

They had gathered near the front, an even split of men and women, all wearing sterling but conservative ensembles, average age about forty-five. As Jennifer surveyed them, a man in a dark suit stepped into the room through the back door, and leaned against the wall and watched her from beneath the mezzanine. She looked away from him, momentarily flustered.

"Let's get started." She used the clicker to call up the first slide. Jennifer's laptop was wirelessly linked to a projector hanging in the middle of the room. When she pressed the button a face appeared on the screen: pretty, with strawberry blonde hair, and a light constellation of freckles.

Rebecca Heilshorn loomed over them, her eyes filled with pain, her lips forming a sham smile. Standing on the stage, Jennifer's body was about the size of Rebecca's nose. The image had been cropped from a professional photograph, the kind still taken at a few department stores in rural areas. It had once stood proudly framed in Rebecca's house in the country. Jennifer had pulled it from the files.

"This is Rebecca Heilshorn, murdered at age twenty-seven."

She clicked the button and the image changed to a different young woman: dirty-blonde hair, sharp cheekbones and a square jaw. Beautiful, but tough.

“This is Sloane Dewan, twenty-eight, and quite the survival story.”

Another click.

“And this is a woman named Lana Mazursky. Whereabouts unknown.”

A third pretty face commanded the screen. Mazursky had an equally square shape to her features, while still feminine. Large eyes, dark hair pulled back with strands twirling around her ears. The more Jennifer looked at them, the more she saw how much Mazursky looked like her daughter.

She advanced to a slide which paired the faces of Sloane Dewan and Lana Mazursky side by side. “Lana is Sloane’s mother.”

Mother was the operative word. She imagined the scene as she’d pieced it together: a young Mazursky writhing in an alleyway as the rain poured down, giving birth. Seamus Argon later darkening the mouth of the alley when he heard the abandoned infant’s cries coming from a storm drain.

She gripped the podium with both hands again and gazed out over the expectant faces of the crowd. “These three woman have something in common. In unique ways, they’re each a part of the black market prostitution ring called XList. Lana there at the beginning, Rebecca in the middle of it, and Sloane a product of it. In my investigation, which started over a year ago, and which I recently resumed, I traced the evolution of XList from its origins to what it is now, a massive black market in the United States and into Canada and Mexico.”

Jennifer observed the man standing at the back. He pointed a finger at the door, and then turned and let himself out.

* * *

She studied him as he sat across from her in the back of the large SUV. The driver whisked them away down Pennsylvania Avenue, leaving behind the squat, gray Justice Department headquarters.

“I thought we were meeting later today,” she said. “You stalking me? Checking up?”

“Been a long time,” Rascher said. “That was a good presentation. Sorry I couldn’t stay to the end.”

She looked out the window as they sped down Ninth Street.

He tilted his head to the side, sympathy working its way into his eyes. “How are you feeling?”

She looked at him, perhaps too quickly, her gaze too sharp. She realized some part of her would have loved to boot him out the door and watch his body bounce down the road. Maybe get run over by one of the huge tourist buses circling the Smithsonian.

“I’m fine,” she said, debating on whether to say any more. If she should tell him how hard it had been since that day in Manhattan. That despite everyone’s sympathetic smiles, three different specialists and a physical therapist, she still dreamed of Jeremy Staryles at night. Or Agent Apollo, taking his own life in front of her.

No, she concluded that the simple *I’m fine* was sufficient.

“Jen, you’ve really pulled it together. And after all you’ve been through. It’s remarkable.”

“What I’ve been through? What about what they’ve been through? Sloane Dewan. Lana Mazursky. Heilshorn’s daughter. Brendan Healy.” She raised her eyebrows on the last name. “He’s the main reason I’m even alive right now.” She wanted to say more but held off. *Why wasn’t I protected? Why wasn’t I told the FBI was going to play possum while the Justice Department sent me into the lion’s den?*

Rascher looked at her like he was reading her thoughts. She felt irritated, as if it somehow made her a transparent person. She decided instead it was because she and John had spent three years together in law school. And that, like it or not, people didn’t really change. She thought she’d bring that up if the situation called for it. Surely John thought he’d come a long way and had changed since those days. Didn’t everyone think that?

“Hey listen,” he said in a voice she recognized. It was the same voice he would use after his temper flared and he’d yell and berate her, all the while telling her he was challenging her to become a more astute observer, a more critical thinker. A better person. She rested in the idea that men like him were a dying breed. That was harsh, she knew it was harsh — probably harsher than imagining him kicked out of a moving vehicle — but she couldn’t help it.

“Listen,” he said again, and shifted his weight. *Dear God, he’s going to put a hand on my knee.* But he didn’t. He said, “I stepped in because I had to. You have been in no condition. No one faults you for that. But there’s no sense in . . . I just don’t want you to think that way, that you’re always on approval now.”

“Of course I think that. It’s true.”

“Can we bury this thing between us?”

“That’s got nothing to do with anything.”

“If this is a conflict, us working together on this, we need to address that now.”

“It’s not a conflict.”

The problem is that in seven months you’ve done nothing with my task force except tell me to hold tight, she thought.

He raised his eyebrows at her. His irises sparkled a royal blue. His hair had thinned out, though, and this gave her some small satisfaction.

She wondered if she was being irrational. Overly negative. She chalked it up to the morning’s talk. She never much cared for getting up in front of people to speak. It had a way of desiccating her, her throat scraping through the words. And her headache had teeth in it. She needed to take one of her pills.

“Let’s forget it,” she said of their personal history.

He sat back and looked out the window, as if disappointed. Ninth Street became the expressway and cut past the Department of Homeland Security. It was all here. One building after the other in mostly off-white, tombstone gray, or pale, ecru colors. The curved architecture of the Housing and Development building in L’Enfant Plaza, the red brick of the Smithsonian Castle against the bright morning sky. And then they shot beneath the 750 Building, amber lights of the short tunnel flashing past like a strobe. Was he expecting something else from her? Some gushing about how great it was to have him back in her life? If so, it pissed her off. She couldn’t hold back any longer.

“What I want to know,” she said, “is how much you knew, how much anyone knew, of what was going on when I got sent up to New York to look into Alexander

Heilshorn.”

His eyelids flew back in a *Who, me?* expression. “Jen, you know that my hands were completely tied. I was only dialed-in to a small part of what was going on, and that was what I’d been doing for five years, and that was human trafficking, on my own cases. We’d barely shared a phone call in ten years until this happened. Anyway, what did we even have that would’ve suggested a link between Heilshorn and XList?”

“What did we have? We had the Oneida County Sheriff’s Department murder investigation. If we didn’t think there was any connection, then how — or why — was I privy to personnel files on ex-special forces like Ewon Parnell and Ursula Galloway?” She could see Parnell as he stood in front of her, the 9mm in her face, nothing in his eyes but her own ragged self, reflecting back at her. Agent Apollo. *Apollo Helios, God of plagues*. He’d turned the gun on himself. *Boom*. The shot echoed in her mind.

“That was a mistake,” Rascher said. “Wyn Weston was all over the place with his research . . .”

“I was working a whole other case and I didn’t even know it. I knew *something*, John, I knew that Heilshorn was into something even dirtier than money laundering, and that it has to do with where Titan’s money is going. But every question I’ve asked since then has been shut down.”

The mention of Titan seemed to suck the posturing right out of John Rascher. It would have been enjoyable to see, if she hadn’t felt the awful presence of it, too. Suddenly the roomy SUV felt claustrophobic, and she reached over and opened the window beside her as the tunnel flushed them out and back into the bright day.

They were both silent until she spoke. “I feel like I got hung out as bait.”

“No,” he said immediately, as if he’d been anticipating the remark. And he leaned forward and this time he did put his hand on her knee. She could smell the cologne he wore — *Christian Dior* — same as he’d worn in college. She glanced at his hand and he took it away. She dipped her head toward him and bared her teeth. “Hung out as bait to see what would come crawling out. And now that we’ve seen what came out, what are you doing about it?”

He sat back, the leather seat squeaking under his legs. “That’s not true, Jennifer, and you know it.” For a moment, he couldn’t meet her gaze. “But you’re right; we did learn some things,” he said.

“And it almost cost me my life,” she said.

“Well now, come on . . .”

Fuck you, she wanted to shout, but she bit her tongue.

Jennifer leaned over and got her bag. She took out her pills and a bottle of water. She hated the idea of taking them in front of Rascher, even if that was irrational, too, but she couldn’t wait any longer. The heat was rising within her, and her hands were starting to shake. As she swallowed she avoided his eyes by looking out the window. They were nearing the townhouse where she’d been staying for the past few years, recently standing at her window and staring out towards the construction of Gangplank Marina which seemed interminable, cranes forever scraping the sky, fences and gates surrounding everything. It felt like an apt metaphor for her life.

She tipped the bottle back and drank some more water. She felt more settled.

The SUV had driven past several blocks of townhouses and now stopped out in

front of the ones closest to the Washington Channel, the waterway partially hidden beyond the concrete roadblocks and piles of steel girders.

She put her bottle away in her bag and reached for the door handle. Rascher grabbed her wrist.

She opened her mouth to tell him to let go, but she stopped when she saw the dark look in his eyes. Rascher was all-business now, pleasantries — such as they were — dispensed with. “Jen, there’s a chance for you to find out what happened. And it might reveal where Titan’s money is going, which is what you seem most interested in—”

“What I’m most interested in, what I have been most interested in, is my *job*. To find out the role Alexander Heilshorn played in XList. To find out who is running it now. How to shut it down.”

He held up his hand. “It involves a domestic terrorist threat. A major one.”

She stared at him. She knew how his mind worked, how careful he’d been to deliver the news in such a way for maximum impact. But she was intrigued. “Okay. Where’s it coming from? Titan? Why would a giant multinational company fund domestic terrorism?”

He let go of her wrist and sat back. “We’re not sure. It’s complicated. The point is, let’s get to the bottom of it before something bad happens.”

She held his gaze for a moment, then took her hand away from the door handle. “First of all,” she said, “we’re not a counter-terrorism group. So you’re obviously leaning hard towards something already, and that’s why you’re here. We’re not spit-balling for old time’s sake; you want to recruit me for some dirty work. Fine. But I find it very interesting how I’d be any help illuminating a terrorist threat when all I’ve gotten from the FBI and my own Department over the past half a year — particularly when it comes to Titan — are sympathetic looks and instructions to chase my own tail until further notice. What could I possibly do for you?”

He folded his hands on his lap. His eyes retained that intent look. “The Justice Department and the FBI have been asked to work together with the Department of Defense on this. And there’s a Senate Select Intelligence Committee meeting in a week. This is big, Jen. What we’re looking at is Titan possibly channeling some XList revenue into a group called Nonsystem. They’re a revolutionary group. Libertarian-types. Hackers.”

“I’ve heard of them.”

“What we would like — what we feel is the best course to take here — is to smoke them out of hiding so we can see who they are, learn what they are planning, exactly. And since we have some overlap in the players; and you’re the biggest proponent of that — Staryles, Argon, Heilshorn — we have a parallel opportunity with the HTPU case on XList.”

She thought about this carefully. They were asking her to take part in a sting. Or, at least, find an in for a sting through her XList investigation. But Staryles was elusive, and Argon and Heilshorn were dead. Titan was massive and multifaceted. Money flowed from Titan into rat-holes where it disappeared, offshore accounts gobbled it up, slush funds, shell companies; it was a chimera. An entity too big to fail, too big to prosecute.

The kind she couldn’t resist.

“Alright,” she said.

His eyes seemed to clear and his mouth jerked into a tentative smile.

“One condition,” she said, halting the smile in its tracks. “I want to bring in Brendan Healy on it.”

“Healy? No way.”

“He’s the one who cracked open the XList case in the first place.”

“He’s in prison on murder charges. No.”

“John, I just spent an hour telling a group of people in a very nice way that we don’t know shit about how to take down XList after two years. You want to piggyback this threat on the XList case? Okay. Then I need a jumpstart.”

Rascher looked uncomfortable. He turned his head and gazed out the window at Jennifer’s housing complex, the marina beyond, white yachts bobbing in the slate blue water. She could sense him calculating. She thought she even caught a whiff of jealousy beneath the fug of his cologne.

“Alright,” he said at last. “But there’s no way the US AG or the Director are going to agree to that unless Harlan Doherty is there, at least. And I’m sure the New York City District Attorney will be interested — or harangue us if we don’t at least notify her. God, Jen.”

Fine, she thought. Whatever it took.

She offered a smile and slipped out the door. Before she left the SUV she leaned back in and said, “See you tomorrow.”

It was already time to go back to New York.