

THE KATRINA CONTRACT

by

Larry Nocella

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PART 1
CUSTOMER SERVICE

In a cubicle in a dark room somewhere, a young woman pushed a blinking amber button on her desk phone. She forced herself to smile as she adjusted her headset microphone. She spoke English with the bouncing lilt of an Indian accent.

“Customer service agent twenty-five sixty-one. How may I help you?”

“Guns,” the caller urgently whispered. “They’ve got guns!”

He said something more but the words were obscured by a muted scuffling, as if he was stuffing his phone in his pocket.

Then silence.

The operator scribbled three words on her notepad.

Old. Male. American?

“Hello?” the operator said. “Hello, sir. How may I assist you today?”

A whoosh filled her ears, as the caller’s mouthpiece was uncovered. The caller was mid-sentence.

“-not sure how to use this thing. Is anyone there? Is this working?”

“Hello? Sir?” the operator said. “I will be glad to be of assisting today. The connection seems to be breaking. Can you get-”

“They’re storming the ship,” the man said, interrupting. “Men in masks. They’re taking hostages. Come get me. Now!”

“I will be glad to provide you excellent customer service today. However, I will be requiring your account number before I am able to process any request.”

The operator winced as a woman near the caller screamed.

“Oh, my God! They’ve got guns!”

“I told her that,” the man barked. “Hello? You there? Come get me right now!”

“Sir,” the operator said, “I am sorry but I need-”

The woman on the caller’s end screeched again, unleashing a sustained piercing squeal. The operator’s headset earphones peaked and ruptured into static. When the electronic equipment recovered, the woman on the caller’s end was yelling.

“-such a cheap ass! We just had to do it like this. You could have bought your own boat. You could have bought your own plane! You see what happens? You see!”

“Shut up!” the man yelled back. “I’m calling for help!”

“Sir,” the operator said, her eye on the script tacked to the fabric walls of her cubicle. “I want to provide you with exceptional customer service, but I am sorry and cannot hear you. Can you move someplace with more silence?”

“It’s my damn wife,” the caller said. “Are you coming to get me or what?”

“Sir, this is a private line,” the operator said calmly. “We require your account information. If you do not provide it, I will sadly be necessary to terminate this call so I may excellently serve other customers.”

“Don’t you dare hang up on me, you curry-munching cow-kisser. I’ll buy your whole damn village and burn it to the ground.”

The operator felt her cheeks burn as she ran her finger down her operator tip sheet, stopping at the line that said, ‘Customers may be angry, but you can always be respectful.’

“Sir, I am trying to provide you with top quality serv-”

The woman on the line screamed again, this time further away from the caller. “They’re shooting! They’re shooting!”

“Damn it, lady,” the man yelled into the phone. “Don’t you know who I am? I could buy and sell you a million times. Can’t you see the number I’m calling from?”

“Mister, it is possibly you are using a stolen phone. Provide your account number, please.”

“Hide in the closet!” the woman on the caller’s end said. “In the closet!”

The operator endured several seconds of scratching and grunting noises. Her eye caught the digital timer on her phone’s display flashing as it passed fifty seconds. The note taped next to the timer read, “Over one minute equals failure.”

“Sir,” she said, “your account number.”

“This is ridiculous! For how much I’m paying, you should-”

“Sir, without your account number-”

“Fine. Let me find it. I can barely see. Wait. Here it is. Seven nine seven six five two one. Now stop messing around and get me out of here. This is deadly serious. Life and death.”

The operator punched the numbers into her computer. The screen responded with a friendly window that said simply, “Verified. Confirm password.”

“I am pleased to tell to you that your account number has passed confirmation,” she said. “Now I will be needing your password.”

“More questions? Just send help. Do it now!”

“They’re close!” the woman on the calling end whimpered. “I think they’re on our deck. Oh, no! No! No!”

“Will you shut up? They’re going to hear you.”

“Your password. Sir?”

“Oh, let me think, it’s-”

A loud bang obliterated his words.

“I’m sorry sir,” the operator said, frowning at the phone timer, now well over one minute.

“There was a background noise. I couldn’t quite hearing you.”

“Sweetheart! It’s sweetheart!” he yelled before quickly dropping his voice to a whisper. “Please hurry. They’re here. They’re breaking in next door.”

The woman on the calling end was sobbing.

The operator typed in the password. Her computer screen responded with a form, most of the fields already were populated.

“Thank you, Mister Sinclair,” the operator said. “Your account has been activated. Now please can you give me details on your situation?”

“I’m on a cruise ship,” the man whispered. “The Sunset Mist. Terrorists are taking over. Guys with guns and ski masks. Now get me off this damn boat!”

“Our system has confirming your approximate locale via satellite GPS through your cell phone. Now I ask that you to do the needful and get to a safe pla-”

The line crackled and was silent.

“Sir? Hello? Sir?”

She waited.

Silence.

The operator grumbled to herself as she completed the computer form and then pressed enter to submit it.

“What a jerk,” she mumbled to herself. “I hope they find him in that closet.”

As soon as the words left her mouth, she noticed a tiny, blinking red dot in the corner of her computer screen next to the words “Call Recording.”

She flicked off her phone and looked over her shoulder as she slouched a little lower in her seat.

Nothing was going to save him. Nothing. He was going to die here.

They were trapped. The zip crack of a bullet exploded in his ear. He could hear his squad yelling to each other, but he couldn't make out the words. He could hear the enemy, speaking in their gruff language, and they were much, much closer. Rod crouched behind the rock and looked up to the moon.

It was full and beautiful.

"Probably the last time," he said to himself. The bullets were cracking closer now. He could barely hear anything but their whipping sound.

Running from cover was almost certain death, but staying until he was overrun was absolutely certain.

He chose almost over absolutely and launched himself down the rocky mountainside. Lines of light speared the dark as tracers arced past him in both directions, coming from his comrades and his enemies.

"Keep moving!" he yelled to himself.

Suddenly all the noise stopped. In the silence he heard a squeak. Like someone stepping on a dog's toy.

He was in the sun, dripping sweat, strolling a crowded market, when a woman wearing a black burqa walked toward him and stopped. That was strange, he thought. They never stopped. They always kept walking.

He saw the flash of silver as the blade drove for his chest. He reacted on instinct, grabbing her wrist, twisting it until it cracked and she screamed. He bent her broken arm back with both hands and stabbed her in the neck with her own knife.

She opened her mouth to scream, but only the rubber toy squeak sound emerged.

The boy, he had to be a boy, a face that young, that smooth, could only be a boy, not a man.

The boy tore open his vest, like a superhero. Underneath, instead of a colorful uniform, he was a mass of wires and explosives. The boy pointed at Rod, cursing in a language Rod didn't understand. People around the boy scattered, but Rod knew there was no time to run. He curled, twisted, holding his forearm over his head. It was the only protection he could reach in time. From the corner of his eye, he saw the boy disappear in a white flash.

The explosion sounded like a rubber duck squeak.

“Help us!” voices cried in the darkness, between the explosions. “Help us!” Rod couldn’t find them. His night vision goggles had been torn off. He stepped in something slippery that made a terrible moaning sound. He was in Hell. He was never going to get out. He was going to die horribly, like everyone around him. Nothing could save-

Squeak!

“Hayger!” North screamed. He could hear the horror in his own trembling voice. “Guys! Hayger’s down. It’s bad. Hayger. Come on, buddy!” North looked down at his friend, the man’s uniform darkened with blood the blood all over his chest. Hayger’s eyes were lightly closed, his mouth opening and closing, no sound coming out but a dry breathing-

Squeak!

Hayger was gone. North was alone, ducking between rocks, trying in vain to not kick up dust. The enemy was out there, stalking him. Nothing was going to save him. He was going to die. Die in this-

Squeak!

What the hell was that squeaking noise in the middle of this burning hot barren moonscape dump of a country?

“Daddy?” a young boy’s voice said.

Rod shook his head.

“Daddy?”

Squeak!

Rod opened his eyes.

The memories of blood and mayhem were gone. He was staring at himself in his bathroom mirror, scars crisscrossing his chest, water dripping from him, a towel around his waist. The steam in the air was clearing.

“Daddy? Are you okay?”

Rod looked down. His son Toby was at his side, tugging gently at the towel.

Why is Toby here? Rod wondered.

His son reached out and touched Rod’s massive fist with his finger.

“What are you doing to Mister Duck-Duck?” Toby asked.

Rod opened his left fist. The squashed rubber yellow duck toy let out an airy gasp, as if breathing a sigh of relief.

Toby took it from him and cradled the toy in his cupped hands until the rubber popped out to its normal shape. Then he threw his arms around Rod.

The horror in Rod’s mind dissolved. The blood and the dust, the stench, the tension and the fear melted away. They were all powerless against Toby’s feeble grasp and the supernatural powers of Mister Duck-Duck.

Rod knelt and hugged his son.

“Daddy,” Toby sighed.

“Hey, buddy,” Rod said. “I love you. Don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“I love you too, Daddy.”

He hugged his son, pressing his face into the boy’s neck.

If you only knew, kid.

When Rod could feel Toby squirming, he released him.

“How did you get in, buddy?”

“Mommy.”

Footsteps sounded on the carpeted stairs. Rod frowned. He stood and turned.

“Hey,” Carol said, abruptly.

“Hey,” Rod answered, just as terse.

“Why are you up so early?”

“Guy Barra’s on vacation,” he said. “I’m covering for him.”

“Real vacation,” she said, “or,” she made quotation marks with her fingers, “Special Vacation?”

“I don’t know,” Rod said.

Carol rolled her eyes.

“Barra. He the short one? Olive skin, dark bushy hair?”

“That’s him.”

“He’s kind of cute.”

Rod didn’t respond.

Toby sat on the floor and tossed Mister Duck-Duck from hand to hand.

“I let us in,” Carol said, “because I didn’t think you’d be up.”

“How did you get in?”

“I still have a key.”

“Oh.”

“You want it back?”

“I just didn’t know you had one.”

“Here,” she said, pulling the key from her key ring. “Take it.” She slapped the key on the sink counter.

“So, can you pick him up, too?” Carol said.

“Yeah, I got him.”

“Daddy,” Toby said. “Mommy said I can stay over.”

“Of course you can, buddy.”

“Yay! That will be the best!”

Carol pressed her lips together tightly. Rod smirked.

“All right, Toby,” Carol said, “Mommy’s going now.”

“Bye, Mommy.”

“Aren’t you going to give me a hug?”

Toby looked up at Rod. Rod met his gaze but didn’t say anything. He looked at Carol and shrugged.

“Come here,” Carol said, kneeling. “Give mommy a hug.”

Toby walked toward her, head down. He put his arms around her limply.

“You love mommy, don’t you,” Carol said, rubbing his back. “You love her, right?”

“Yes,” Toby muttered.

“All right,” Carol said, standing. “I’m out. Don’t forget to pick him up, okay? I’ve got plans for tonight.”

“Sure,” Rod said. “You’ll have to let yourself out.”

“Oh I’m good at that,” she said, laughing. Her cell phone chirped. She picked it up and was talking as she descended the stairs.

“Yeah,” she said, “I can do it. Is everyone going to be there? Just dropped the kid off. Freedom for one beautiful night.” She chuckled, slamming the door shut behind her.

Rod turned to Toby. “Hey, buddy, you want to go play while I get ready?”

“Yeah.”

Toby didn’t move.

“What’s up? Why do you look sad?”

“Daddy, can I stay with you?”

“Sure. You’re staying over tonight.”

“I mean, forever.”

“Don’t you like staying with Mommy?”

“She has friends over. They get loud. I can’t sleep. And they smoke. It stinks.”

Rod knelt by his son.

“Hey, I’ll talk to Mommy about that. Right now, we’re together. So let’s have fun before I take you to school, okay?”

“Okay!”

“And tonight, it’s nothing but pizza and movies.”

“Promise?”

“You got it.”

3

The worldwide headquarters of Redfire Advanced Security Solutions was a tinted-windowed monolith rising from a grassy field. The building and its manicured grounds appeared to have been assembled by extracting a skyscraper from the nearest city and dropping it into the middle of a golf course.

An enormous version of Redfire’s corporate emblem decorated the outside corner of the top floor. When the sun struck the polished silver stylized flame, the logo seemed to burn.

The even-cut grass at the base of the thirty-story tower was surrounded by a ten-foot fence topped with barbed wire. Regularly spaced along a paved walking path inside the fence were tall metal poles capped with flood lights and cameras.

Rod North steered his car away from the main entrance where four lanes of cars had backed up at the security booths, waiting to check in. He drove along a smaller road, following the “Security Employees Only” signs. The queue at this checkpoint was much shorter.

“I’m telling you, he’s complaining that he can’t sleep!” Rod yelled into his cell phone.

“Oh, that’s crap, Rod,” Carol said from the other end. “You’re still bitter because my lawyer kicked your lawyer’s ass.”

“You say that every time Toby complains to me. I don’t bring up the fact that you’re bitter because you didn’t get as much child support as you wanted.”

“I can always try again.”

Rod felt a pain developing above his right eye. “Carol, can you think of someone else first for once? Especially our son? He said you smoke and you have friends over late and it keeps him awake. I’m not telling you what to do, I’m telling you to tone it down when he’s with you, okay?”

“When I see him, I’ll ask him how he feels about it.”

“He’s obviously afraid to tell you. Do you know why that is?”

“He’s just shy.”

“I think he’s afraid you’ll yell at him.”

“He needs to lighten up. Where do you think he got that from?”

“Carol! He’s a kid! A child, okay?”

“Well, he’s got to grow up sometime. Are you sure you can pick him up tonight?”

“Yes. For the tenth time.”

“Good. Because I have plans. With the girls, and maybe someone else.”

“Well, I hope he’s patient.”

“Oh, he is,” she said, dragging out her words slowly.

“Are you trying to sound sexy? If you’re hoping to make me jealous, it’s not working at all.”

“Just letting you know that I’m having fun.”

“All I’m asking is that you take it easy when our son is around, okay? We’re not in our twenties or thirties anymore. You can still have fun, but Toby comes first.”

“Sure, Rod. Whatever you say. Always be good. Do the right thing.”

“Sorry I’m that way. I guess to you it’s a flaw.”

“Damn right it is, that’s why you were never any fun.”

“I’m at work now, Carol. Gotta go.”

Rod hurled his phone onto the empty passenger seat. It bounced up against the window, ricocheted into the dashboard and fell to the floor.

He pulled up to a barrier and held his company badge under the scanning laser.

“Hey, Rod,” the armed guard in the booth said, “how’s it going?”

North didn’t answer. The gate lifted and his car jerked forward with a squeal as he sped through.

* * *

After parking, North walked to the nearest entrance and swiped his ID badge across a small black panel. The panel chirped and the magnetic bolts behind the door released with a loud clack. He pushed through and waited for the door to latch behind him.

His steps echoed in the long unpainted concrete hall as he walked under a ceiling that alternated between fluorescent lights and black hemispheres hiding cameras.

He stopped at a door blocking his path and looked to his right through the reinforced glass. The guard on duty looked up at the clock.

“Hey, North. You’re early. Way early.”

“Yeah,” Rod said, opening the door. “Don’t remind me. I’m filling in for Barra.”

“I hear the line out there’s already backed up. Had a few call outs.”

“Great.”

The door buzzed as it unlocked.

* * *

Rod entered a small room lined with ten heavy-duty metal lockers on either side, a wooden bench down the middle. He opened his locker and stored his lunch, removing his automatic pistol. He checked the ammo and the safety before holstering the weapon at his hip.

He rested his right hand on the weapon and tapped the two photos on the back of his locker door. The largest was of him and Toby, arms around each other, at a baseball game. Toby’s cap was too big for his head and sliding down to the side. He held his plastic bat tucked under his elbow and a giant foam ‘We’re number one’ hand aloft.

Underneath that photo was a picture of the six men in Rod’s old military unit. Each of the muscular men were dressed in desert camouflage and posing with their heavy rifles. ‘Afghanistan Class of 2002. Iraq Class of 2004. Your Mom Class of 2006, sucker!’ was painted on the side of the helicopter they were leaning against.

Rod pulled a silver necklace from his locker. A small pendant the size of a quarter dangled from the end. Inside was a picture of him and Toby smiling into the camera.

This photo was less staged than the other. Toby was sitting in the tub, his lower body obscured by a layer of soap. He was looking up, his large brown eyes round, his skin wet, as if he was newly born. The smile on his face made Rod’s heart stutter. Toby held both hands above his head, palms up as if making an offering of the object resting on his fingers, his son’s favorite toy, Mister Duck-Duck.

Rod clenched the necklace in his fist and pressed his fist to his lips.

Rod felt his neck muscles loosen, the memory of Carol’s scraping voice dissolved.

He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. He held his breath, then exhaled.

He put the necklace on, tucked the pendant under his shirt then slammed his locker shut.

* * *

Back in the hall, he walked a hundred more steps to another door, used his ID to pass through and exited the drab grey into a colorful mixture of rainforest and shining black marble.

The lobby of Redfire Advanced Security Solutions' global corporate headquarters was split down the middle. Revolving doors connecting to the outside were separated from the elevators leading up into the building by a security desk and three metal detectors. Visitors were funneled toward the metal detection gates by the gentle curves of a low retaining wall that held the soil for a lush indoor forest. The air was kept humid to nurture the exotic ferns and flowers. The organic smell helped warm the coldness of the marble floor and walls.

An elderly woman sold coffee and pastries from a cart to employees waiting to pass through the security checkpoint. The ample foliage on either side of the large security desk served a dual purpose: it kept the atmosphere relaxing and the air refreshing, but its main purpose was obscuring the bulletproof floor-to-ceiling concrete and steel barrier behind it.

Except for security team members, who came in through the side doorway, anyone entering the building had to pass through this gauntlet to reach the elevators and the inside of Redfire World Headquarters.

The morning rush was on. Two queues extended back from the desk, each at least twenty heads deep. Five security employees were checking people in. This involved scanning their badges, stiff laminated cards that hung around their necks or were clipped to their suits. Security confirmed the photo on the ID matched the picture on the computer and the person presenting it, then beckoned them through the two active metal detectors.

The third metal detector was unused, closed off by a rolling gate.

The lines moved slowly. Rod sat behind the security desk, quickly glancing over a bank of black and white screens. From here he could see what every camera on the Redfire campus was seeing. Each screen held its image for ten seconds before automatically switching to another. A digital stamp in the lower right corner indicated the camera's location as well as the time and date.

“Hey, Rod,” an older security guard called out. His nametag read ‘Phelps.’ He took an ID from a young executive in a custom-fit suit and held the laminated barcode under a red laser. Phelps handed the ID back after the scanner sounded a friendly beep.

“Harold,” North said.

“You’re late,” Harold Phelps answered, scanning another ID.

“I’m filling in.”

“Yeah, well, me too. And I’m staying past quitting time. Barra is always on time when he picks up from my shift. And I’m never late when I take over from you.”

“Sorry,” North said.

“Sorry? Yeah, right. Then why does it always happen?” Phelps continued to scan badges as he spoke. “You’re never sorry. Of all the managers in the rotation, you’re the only one ever late.”

North stared at the camera monitors. The executives passing through were silent, watching back and forth as Phelps berated North.

“Come on, get up,” Phelps said. “You and I can take the third gate and make another line.”

North pushed himself up and began taking badges while Phelps powered up the metal detector and rolled the gate aside.

Suits started breaking off the other lines, moving to the newly opened entrance.

“You guys really need to have more gates,” the first executive in line said as he handed North his ID.

North grunted.

The suit chatted with Phelps.

“Working late, Harold?”

“Late for me, early for you.”

“You look busy as always.”

“Those acting lessons are paying off.”

The suit laughed and passed through the gate.

The next one was equally cheerful.

“How’s it going, Phelps?”

“Same old. Keeping trained monkeys out of a job.”

“Yeah, you and me both.”

North rubbed his hand over his face, fighting back a yawn. He took the next ID, scanned it and handed it back. The queue to their metal detector formed against the front of the desk as the suits continued to banter with Phelps. North glanced up. One of the suits met his gaze, blinked rapidly and stepped back, looking away.

No photograph failed to match its owner. No one carried or wore any items that set off the metal detectors. The ritual was choreographed and well-rehearsed and entirely unsurprising to anyone.

* * *

At 9:30 a.m. the rush ended and the lobby was quiet again.

“All right, fellas, I’m out of here,” Phelps said to the security team. “North is in charge.”

He walked briskly to the security exit and went through without another word, slamming the door behind him.

North was sitting at the bank of screens, watching them cycle through their different viewpoints. He stayed apart from the four other security guards as they joked among themselves.

“Some of these corporate chicks should have been models. I swear to. Mm.”

“If I was only a few years younger.”

“You’d still be too old for them.”

“Hey, where it counts, I’m still twenty-one.”

“I didn’t need to know that. Besides, your boyfriend said that’s not true.”

“I’d take those corporate chicks two at a time.”

“Yeah, right. You’d die of a heart attack.”

“Women today are like men. Get in, get out.”

“That’s just fine with me, honey.”

“You need a spanking!”

They all guffawed.

“Guys!” North yelled at them. “Come on. A little lower. Sound echoes in here.”

“Sorry, boss,” one of them grumbled. They whispered to each other.

“Besides,” North said, “it’s time to make your rounds.”

“Barra doesn’t make us go until ten.”

“Barra’s not here. I am. It’s almost ten anyway.”

The four shuffled out of the lobby to patrol the perimeter of the building. North stayed alone at the desk, checking a form on a clipboard as he confirmed through the cameras that each guard had arrived at his checkpoint and given the thumbs up through the video feed.

He had the radio on, the volume low, hearing but not paying any attention to the news.

* * *

North glanced at the clock. It was almost noon. The team would be finishing their rounds soon and then taking lunch two at a time.

One of the security screens caught North's eye. The stamp indicated it was a roof camera, but the screen was washed out as dust blew against the lens. North held down a button to prevent the image from cycling to the next camera's view.

The whiteout faded to show a helicopter, its rotors slowing. Two suits rushed forward to greet a third who descended from the chopper. They were all frowning, walking briskly, heads down. North couldn't hear what they were saying, but their hand gestures were urgent and quick.

"Hm," North mumbled. "Something's going on."

* * *

The security team returned from their rounds. North was about to tell them to pick lunch times when a woman spoke from behind him.

"Are you Roderick North?"

North turned to see a young lady, dressed in a dark business blazer and skirt. She had short black hair, her features vaguely Chinese. Rod guessed she couldn't have been older than twenty-five.

Harold Phelps was standing with her. He looked pissed off.

"Yes," North said. "I'm Rod North."

"I'm here with your replacement," she said. "I'm supposed to take you upstairs."

"Oh," North said. "Sure."

"I'll give you a moment to switch out," the young woman said.

Phelps stepped to the bank of screens and checked the clipboard.

North grabbed his cell phone and signed off on the papers, logging out of the system by scanning his badge.

Phelps grumbled out loud. "I had just gotten home and took my shoes off when I get the call to come back. They said I was needed to work another shift because no other supervisors are available. At the end of this, I'll be pulling over 24 hours."

“Now, Harold,” the young woman said. “Human resources is working on getting you some help as soon as-”

“Save it, young lady. So what gives, Rod?”

North didn’t reply.

Phelps persisted. “They said you were needed for something else.”

“I don’t know what this is about.”

“I think you do,” Phelps said, looking over his shoulder. The young woman was walking across the lobby toward the elevators, but he whispered anyway. “I was pretty sure about Barra, but I never thought you were ex-Special Forces. You’re big, but I think I could take you.”

North said nothing. The older man was blocking his way from the desk.

“Come on, North, you can tell me. I know what’s going on. I’ve been working here long enough to notice some guys get,” he made quotation marks with his fingers, “vacation.”

“I really should go, Phelps.”

“This is just your holding place, right? That’s why you don’t give a crap. Barra just does a better job of faking that he cares. He’s a stand-up guy. But this work is beneath you, is that it?”

“Phelps, let me past. I know you’re pissed about the shift, but that’s not my fault.”

“You work here until they need you for something else. A different kind of security. Bodyguards mostly, but I’ve heard rumors about the more sinister stuff, like knocking off a guy. Am I right? I might not be in your special club, but I’m not stupid. I notice things.”

“Goodbye, Harold.”

They brushed shoulders as North pushed past.

“I’ll take your silence as proof that I’m right,” Phelps said. He yelled across the lobby, “Tell me, North, what’s the quickest way to kill a man?”

North let the question bounce off his back. He caught up with the young woman, who was holding an elevator for him.

“Right this way, Mister North,” she said.

When he stepped into the elevator, she turned a key in the control console and pushed one of the buttons surrounded by a gold frame engraved with the words “Senior Executive Team Levels.”

“Scan I.D., please,” a pre-recorded voice said. The young woman leaned forward and swiped her badge across the control panel.

“Thank you,” the voice said.

The elevator ascended.

“I’m Ashley,” the young lady said, shaking North’s hand.

“Nice to meet you,” he said. “I’m Rod North. Call me North.”

“Of course, Mister North.”

“I’m guessing they haven’t told you anything other than to come get me?”

“That’s right.”

“So you have no idea what I’m going to be doing? Not a clue?”

“I don’t really even know what this is for.”

“Who’s your boss?”

“Mister Addison.”

“Addison? Never heard of him.”

“Everyone on my floor is relatively new.”

“Seems to work that way up there. Lots of turnover.”

“If he tells me to send an email, I do it. If he tells me to go pick people up, I do it. I don’t need to know the details. I just do my job. No questions asked.”

“A good survival strategy.”

“When I get to his level, that’s how I want my people to be. Just do what you’re told. If they need to know, I’ll tell them.”

“Or not. Because you’re the boss.”

Ashley chuckled uneasily. “I know, right?”

She looked around the elevator, avoiding his eyes. The ride continued in silence until the doors opened with a ping.

North followed her down the maroon-carpeted hall and into a small room with drab tan walls. Two office chairs faced each other across a table. There were no windows and no other furniture.

“Mister Addison wanted you to wait in here,” Ashley said.

“I know the drill. I’ve done this plenty of times. Ever notice this looks like an interrogation room?”

“Uh... I think it’s just supposed to be like private, that’s all. You can, um, have a seat. Mister Addison will be with you shortly.”

Rod sat down.

Ashley left and closed the door behind her. A key rattled in the doorknob from the other side. After the sound stopped, North tested the door handle and laughed.

She had locked him in.

“Like that would stop me,” he mumbled.

He checked his cell phone. No signal. A camera peeked at him from the corner of the ceiling. He waved to it.

“Real private,” he grumbled.

5

North moved to the other seat so he was facing the exit. He drummed his fingers on the table for only a few seconds before the doorknob rattled again.

A man wearing a dark pin-striped suit stepped in and locked the door behind him. His jacket’s gold buttons and cufflinks twinkled in the fluorescent light. He was carrying an unmarked manila folder. His face was tanned an unnatural orange-bronze that accented his blue eyes and manicured eyebrows. His gelled hair reminded North of the models from Carol’s fashion magazines.

The newcomer tested the doorknob to make sure it was locked. Then he finally turned and looked North in the eyes.

“Hello, Mister North,” he said. “I’m Redfire Account Executive Clarence Addison.”

North waited for him to say ‘Nice to meet you,’ but he didn’t.

“Okay,” North said.

Addison extended his hand over the table. North shook it, making Addison struggle a few seconds before releasing him.

“So, what’s this all about?” North asked. Addison unbuttoned his jacket and sat down. He pressed his fingertips together and leaned back in the chair, resting his right foot on his left knee. His shoes glistened in the harsh light.

“You’ll know what you need to when you need to.”

“All right,” North said.

“Your file indicates you’ve gone through this before.”

“Lots of times.”

“Some of the things I’m about to say you’ve undoubtedly heard, but I will be going over everything for the purpose of our records. Please note we are being recorded.” He nodded to the camera in the corner of the ceiling.

“Got to keep the lawyers happy,” North said.

Addison held up his hand. “This will go faster without interruptions.”

“I was just-”

“Time is critical. Now, I need you to confirm you’re aware this entire conversation is being recorded.”

North leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. “I am.”

“And are you aware this recorded conversation will be used in legal proceedings against you should you deviate from the contractual obligations of your employment?”

“I am.”

“And do you acknowledge that your employment contract with Redfire Advanced Security Solutions, Special Projects Division, stipulates that you will on occasion be promptly dispatched on highly secretive assignments that exploit your special talents?” Addison took a deep breath after he finished.

“I do,” North said.

“You’re an old pro.”

“I’ve been with Redfire for a while.”

Addison held up his hand. “Small talk is not necessary.”

“But you-”

“Mister North, may I continue?”

North stared at him.

“Or do you want to keep wasting company time?”

Addison pointed toward the camera as a reminder. “May I go on?” he said to North. “Is that okay with you?”

North’s eyes narrowed.

Addison continued. “This is your verbal notification that Redfire Advanced Security Solutions wishes to activate the portion of your employment contract relevant to clandestine activities. Pursuant to that end, only a select few Redfire employees, their identities known only to myself, are aware of this as yet unspecified task. For the purposes of extreme privacy for our customers, our executive team, excluding myself, but up to and including our chief executive officer, has not been and will not be notified of this task until it is complete or confirmed aborted or failed. Have you understood everything I’ve said so far?”

“Yes.”

“Sign.”

Addison slipped a stapled collection of paper from the folder and spun it around to face North. He pushed a gold-trimmed pen across the table.

“Careful with that pen,” he said. “It’s worth a lot.”

North leafed through the stack, not bothering to read the tiny single-spaced text. He flipped through the pages, signing next to the small red stickers.

“Wait a second,” North said, closing the packet. “You’re supposed to be explaining what I’m signing.”

“Waivers,” Addison said.

“And exactly what am I waiving?”

“As a veteran you should know.”

“I know you have to say it out loud if I ask,” North said, smiling slightly. “It’s part of my contract.”

“I’m trying to save time.”

North shrugged. “Remember we’re being recorded.”

Addison pressed his lips together tightly and exhaled through his nose.

“Fine,” he said. “You are waiving your right to hold Redfire and its representatives or stockholders or board of directors responsible for any damages or injuries, up to and including death, that you may sustain during your assignment. You also agree not to disclose any details of the assignment to any person or media entity. This includes immediate family, spouses and/or children. The contract you are signing is primarily concerning terms you’ve already agreed to as conditions of your employment. We’re simply getting another signature. To be sure.”

North resumed flipping through the pages. “Next you’re supposed to tell me what happens if I don’t sign. Come on now.” He set the pack of papers down again and smirked.

Addison frowned. He spoke fast and low, like a disclaimer at the end of a used car lot’s radio ad. “If you choose not to sign, your employment with Redfire will be terminated immediately and you will be sued for breach of contract. Redfire will seek all your back wages plus additional damages caused by your deceptive business practices.”

“Wow. You’re good. Some guys use a script.”

“Anything else?”

“Aren’t you going to inform me of my next of kin’s rights?”

“No,” Addison said abruptly. “That’s no longer part of the process. Now sign.”

North signed the last page and slid the packet across the table. Addison slipped the stack into the manila folder.

“Congratulations, Mister North,” he said. “You’ve been activated.”

“Am I still allowed one call?”

“Pen,” Addison said, his hand out, palm up, across the table.

“What pen?” North raised both hands. They were empty.

“Pen.” Addison said more firmly.

North grinned. He flicked his wrist and suddenly he was holding the pen. Using both hands, he placed it in Addison’s palm with exaggerated care.

“Technically,” Addison said, “because of the need for secrecy and efficiency, the phone call is at the account executive’s discretion. But I will allow it.”

He pulled a mobile phone out of his pocket.

“Only Redfire phones work up here against the signal blocking. Push the green button. You will have five minutes from the moment the first call connects until the phone is automatically deactivated.”

“Are you sure you want me to do this?” North said. “That’s five whole minutes of company time gone forever.”

“Remember,” Addison said, “no discussions of your assignment.”

North pushed the green button and held the phone to his ear. He looked up at Addison.

“Some privacy, please? Even people who are arrested get one call.”

Addison stood and unlocked the door.

“People who are arrested have more freedom. And they don’t get paid. Consider yourself lucky I’m letting you have this much.”

“Five whole minutes,” North said. “Oh, thank God.”

“You’re welcome.”

Addison closed and locked the door behind him.

6

Carol answered her desk phone.

“Hello. You’ve reached Carol Nor- ah, Carol Webster’s desk. How may I help you?”

Rod winced at the sound of her voice.

“It’s me,” he said. “I’m glad I caught you.”

“I’m at work. What’s up?”

“I only have five minutes.” He took a deep breath. “Look, you’ll have to get Toby from day care. Something came up at work.”

She was silent for a moment.

“Shit,” she said. “Not that. Rod, I have plans.”

“I can’t help it, Carol. This is my job.”

“What about your son?”

“Our son.”

“Rod, I’ve been planning this weekend for at least a month. Do you know how hard it is to get everyone together with their schedules?”

“All I’m asking is-”

“When will you be back?”

“I don’t know that, Carol. I can’t know.”

“That’s not helpful, Rod. What if I did the same thing? What if one day I just up and took off because it was part of my job? Damn it.”

“Carol, don’t be so selfish.”

“Me? Selfish? I’m not the one who is bailing out.”

“I’m not bailing out. I’m going to work.”

“Like Toby knows the difference.”

“Carol.”

“Rod,” she said, mocking his tone.

“You know I have to do this.”

“What? Go kill somebody? Can’t someone else do it? Can’t they just drop a bomb on whoever the guy is?”

“I don’t have much time.”

“You might not come back, right?”

“That’s right.”

“Well, excuse me if I don’t cry.”

“Carol. I don’t even know what to say to that.”

“Toby’s going to be heartbroken.”

“I’m doing this for him.”

“That’s what you told me too, way back when. ‘I’m making the world a better place.’ It never ends, Rod. You know what that means?”

“What?”

“You suck at making things better.”

She hung up.

Rod dialed the daycare.

“Hello, and thank you for calling-”

“Hi, this is Rod North. Toby North’s father. I need to speak with him. It’s very important and I don’t have much time.”

“It’s nap time, do you want me to wake him up?”

“Yes. Please. Hurry.”

“All right. Hold on.”

Rod watched the timer on the phone’s display count up. It was at three minutes, thirty seconds.

Thirty-one.

Thirty-two.

Thirty-three.

“Come on,” Rod said out loud, putting the phone back to his ear.

“Daddy?” Toby sounded slow, groggy.

“Hey, kid. You having fun?”

“I was sleeping. It was nap time.”

“Listen, buddy, I won’t be able to get you. Mommy’s going to pick you up.”

“What?”

“Mommy is going to get you, okay?”

“Why? Where are you going?”

“I have to do something for work.”

“What do you have to do?”

“Important stuff.”

“Like what?”

“Adult stuff.”

“If mommy gets me, can I see you for pizza and movie night?”

“I don’t think I’ll be home by then, buddy. We’ll do it later, okay? Some other time.”

“When?”

END OF EXCERPT

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