

Rob held out his hand for the binoculars and got out of the SUV. "Okay, let's move in closer and hope Doc Frankenstein didn't forget to tell us Maggie had security cameras." He leaned on the hood to steady his grip. "If anyone challenges us, we say we don't know it's private property and we've stopped for pee break."

"I could use one now."

"And if we don't see any activity, I'll go and knock on the door."

Mike stood twisting his lucky watch around his wrist. He was going to need it today. "Maybe I should do that."

"No, I'm lovable paternal Rob. You sound too posh."

"But if this kid watches a lot of movies, he probably thinks all English are bad guys."

"Yeah, you really should be over your national trauma by now. I'll just explain to him that we only wanted to keep Canada."

It was just a kid up there with a shotgun and some greyhounds, not Mossad. After taking a furtive leak in the undergrowth, Mike got back into the passenger seat and Rob retraced their route. The speed limit sign just before the turning loomed into view.

"Thirty seconds to abort this, Zombie."

Mike couldn't pull the plug now. "Go. Hang a right."

"Starboard ninety. Wheel on."

Rob turned without indicating and drove slowly up the track until a blur of brick-red and white began to show through a screen of trees. Mike tapped the dashboard. Rob steered off into the cover of some birches and came to halt. They could see the ranch now, a two-story painted timber building with dormer windows and a full-width porch.

"Christ," Rob muttered. "We're storming the Little House on the fucking Prairie."

Mike took out his wallet and put a hundred dollar bill in one of the cup-holders on the dashboard. "A hundred says it's Kinnery's wayward son, rejecting his father's freaky science to join a tree-hugging commune."

Rob fumbled in his jacket and shoved a hundred next to Mike's. "A teen computer nerd who's hacked into some blackmail material or industrial secret and he's holding it to ransom."

"I think I can see a pickup. Wait one while I take a look."

Mike got out and picked his way from tree to tree to get a better view. He didn't have to move far before he knew they weren't dealing with a pro. Maggie Dunlop might have been good at staying off the grid, but she'd obviously thought in terms of obscuring the ranch from view, not stopping ground assaults. Trees and bushes provided cover within fifty meters of the house, and there was plenty of dead ground. Even the exposed areas had outbuildings and other structures that would shorten the distance to ten meter sprints between cover.

The old white pickup was parked out front in the shade of a tree. That would be useful cover too. If Mike got a chance, he'd remove the plug leads to stop any hasty exits.

Nothing was moving except birds in the branches. He held his breath and listened. There were no voices or sounds of human activity, and no sign of the dogs. He went back to sit on the fender of the SUV.

"Give it an hour," he said.

Rob slid out of the driver's seat and stood looking towards the ranch house. "Maybe he's already made a run for it."

"Well, the pickup's there."

"What if he's not alone? Or he's got another vehicle and he's pissed off in that?"

They waited in complete silence for forty minutes. In all that time, only one vehicle rumbled past on the road behind them. Rob was getting fidgety. He kept moving his hand to his holster, his rehearsal habit.

"Okay, let's go on the intel we have," he said. "Time for the Rennie charm offensive."

"So what are you going to say? 'Hi Ian, you don't know us, but we're private security contractors, we want to know who you're hiding from, and by the way, are you the hideous, unnatural fruit of a monstrous experiment that defied the laws of God and man?'"

Rob adjusted his ballistic vest, unmoved. "Just go around the back and make sure he hasn't got company. Radio check when you're in position, okay?"

Mike was beginning to wonder if he'd imagined his time in the Guard. He was pretty sure he'd breached compounds knowing they were booby-trapped, or that he'd probably be greeted

by a burst of fire when a door crashed open. Today wasn't in that league. But this was his own country, and he realized this was probably as close as he'd come to knowing how a cop felt, where any of his neighbours could suddenly decide to finish him off.

Rob put in his radio earpiece and gave Mike a thumbs-up that left no room for failure.

"Let's get this done," he said. "We'll be out of here in an hour. Minus a werewolf."